

PARTY GIRL, *Inc.*



Destiny Wallace

Red Rose™ Publishing

Party Girl, Inc.

By

Destiny Wallace

Dedication

*To my husband, who is my
best friend and inspiration.*

*Thank you for the support, the
pep talks, and the kids.*



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ISBN: 978-1-60435-210-8
Cover Artist: Celia Kyle
Editor: Lara Parker
Line Editor: Shara Azod

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Red Rose™ Publishing
. www.redrosepublishing.com
Forestport, NY 13338

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Chapter One

Ebony Harris shoved a stack of contracts into the manila folder labeled “*Cricket Crane*”. *Little Miss Trust Fund*’s wedding reception was well on its way to perfection. Ebony was beyond excited about that account. Cricket was a tall, blonde debutante whose father owned over half the real estate in Hillsdale; including the mall, the movie theatre, and at least one office building in the downtown business district. James Franklin Crane was the definition of loaded and had spared no expense on his oldest daughter’s wedding.

Cricket was marrying another *Trust Fund Baby*, David Preston. Ebony hadn’t bothered trying to find out too much about him. *His* family wasn’t paying her, they hadn’t ventured from their Hampton Estate to take part in any of the wedding business. At least that was what Edie, the wedding planner had told her.

Ebony never imagined she’d be working with the upper crust of society when she’d started her party-planning business. She had just wanted to show her father that her Hospitality degree would be of perfectly good use in the real world. She’d rented a tiny office and taken out an ad in the Yellow Pages with her graduation money.

Now, four years later, she was an official success. The Crane-Preston

reception would put her in all the right circles; the ones that paid the most money. Everyone in Hillsdale high society would be in attendance, and even if she didn't get any business from them, the Cranes had two more daughters that they would probably marry off at some point. All she had to do was make sure Cricket's reception was perfect, and they'd come back to her for the next wedding.

Ebony glanced at her slim white gold Movado watch and hurried out of her office.

"Jenna," she said to her secretary, "I'm headed over to the country club for the Crane-Preston set up. Call me if anything comes up."

Jenna was a slim brunette with large gray eyes and a great smile. Ebony thought Jenna was the best possible secretary. She was always in a good mood and had a wonderful tendency to be slightly obsessive-compulsive. Ebony never had to look for a file or phone number. Jenna kept everything in perfect order and at their fingertips.

Jenna nodded.

"Just make sure your phone is on!" she called as Ebony left.

Ebony paused in the hallway, pulling her slim red phone from her oversized red Coach bag. It wasn't turned on; she depressed the power button until her kitten screen saver flashed to life. It was amazing how she could be so flighty and yet she made her living organizing the minute details of other people's most

important events.

Ebony smoothed her black dress, a vintage Gautier, circa 1970. It was strapless, with a fitted satin bodice, *Lord knows, she certainly had enough boobs to hold it up*, a slim black ribbon around the waist and full gathered chiffon skirt that fell just past her knees. Her passion for a bargain led her to many such finds in the thrift shops around town and in the city.

She pulled out a compact to check her face. Her appearance was her most immediate marketing tool. She wasn't *invited* to the party, but she still had to look good. Ebony had a dark honey complexion with dark, coal-black eyes framed with long, equally dark lashes. She kept the makeup to a minimum, partly because she had never been taught how to apply the stuff, and partly because she didn't have time to waste painting her face. She stuck with what she knew eyeliner, mascara, and lip gloss.

She piled the file, purse, and herself into her six year old black Audi TT. The wedding ceremony started in thirty minutes and fifty minutes after that, the reception was to start. Ebony had no time to lose. She gunned her car as soon as she was safely out of the downtown business district.

The country club was so exclusive; Ebony thought she'd have to give blood to get past the gate guard. She already had one strike against her, being black.

She handed over two forms of identification and the pasty, staunch guard

eyed her warily. After a few minutes, Ebony was fuming. “Look, I’m not trying to play golf here; I have to set up for the Crane-Preston reception.”

His watery brown eyes continued to glare at her like he wasn’t buying her story.

“You wanna explain to Cricket Crane-Preston why her wedding reception has been ruined?!” Ebony said through clenched teeth.

The guard handed back her driver's license and business card and waved her on. Ebony resisted the urge to flip him the finger out her window as she drove down the tree lined drive that led to the clubhouse.

Ebony rushed into the grand ballroom and smiled in relief when she saw all of the tables had been set up exactly to specifications. There were lavender square table cloths over the crisp white ones on the thirty round tables and the large rectangular head table at the front of the room. Ebony dropped her purse and folder on the head table, pulled out her Bluetooth head set and began dialing.

Cake: “Lori, its Ebony. I’m calling about the Crane-Preston wedding cakes...yes, I saw the pictures you sent in the e-mail and they look great...he’s setting up the five tiers when he gets here? Well, he’d better be here in ten minutes if he expects to have enough time...yeah, call me back.”

Caterer: “Luke, please tell me you’re in the kitchen right now...oh...wonderful. Yes...one hundred and thirteen chicken, one hundred and

two fish, and ninety-eight vegetarian. Make sure you have plenty of champagne...that's the only drink that won't be at the bar...get them all on ice immediately and send some people out here to set these tables. I've got the seating charts right here...we've got a half hour as of now. Tell them to hurry."

Band: Monsieur Albreck, *Comment allez-vous?* *Oui. Bon...* Is the orchestra going to make it on time? Monsieur Crane was adamant about *your* string quartet playing through dinner. You must be here in five minutes to be set up in time! *Oui...oui. Oh, magnifique. Cinq minutes! Voyez-vous bientôt!"*

Deejay: "Dorian, its Ebony. Your booth is all set up, but it's empty. Where are you...at the gate? Tell that fat bastard you're here for the Crane-Preston wedding and you're late!"

Cake: "Hello? Lori, thank goodness you called me back. Where is he? There's a line at the gate...security? Shit! I'll call you back."

Ebony practically ran to the front office. A thin older man with wisps of white hair was sitting at the desk looking bored out of his skull. Ebony crashed into the office without even the semblance of grace and barked orders just as she had been doing to everyone else.

"Call the guard shack and tell that power-hungry ape that he is holding up the Crane-Preston wedding and he needs to let those people in immediately!"

The old man picked up the ancient black rotary phone to call off the rent-a-

cop. She beat feet; clad in black Carlos Santana Cavalier pumps, she loved the tiny strap and buckle across the front, they reminded her of Mary-Janes, and the breathing holes kept her feet from swelling as she ran around like a crazy person.

Deejay: Dorian? Good. Get your ass in here and set up immediately.”

Cake: “Lori? Wonderful! He’ll have plenty of time to assemble the cake then.”

Band: “Monsieur Albreck? *Je suis très désolé. C’est un idiot. Oui...oui. Magnifique!*”

Caterer: “Luke! Where are the waiters? Why aren’t these tables set? I said to send them five minutes ago. They’d better be here in the next ten seconds or I’ll...”

A group of ten waiters in tuxedos scurried into the ballroom arms full of crates that contained the dishes and silverware she’d pored over for days before finally choosing.

“It’s about damned time,” she muttered snatching the seating chart from the folder. “Ten places at each table and watch the centerpieces!” she called at the penguins as they scattered. The last thing she needed was iris, jasmine, and baby’s breath all over the platinum trimmed Waterford place settings.

Caterer: “Luke! Where are the napkins? There should be seven boxes of perfectly folded lavender napkins to be set on each chair. No, we can’t wait for these guys to be done...do it in conjunction...as in now. Tell them to hurry!”

Ebony sighed and glanced around the room. Something was missing. The balloons! *Ack!*

Florist: “Bill...yes...the centerpieces *are* perfection. Yes. Yes. I love them too, but where are the balloon pillars? I am supposed to have purple and white balloon pillars here and I don’t have them! You’re on your way? Quickly, puh-leeze! I’ll see you in a minute then. I *am* calm Bill! I love you too, Bill.”

Who has the time for the coaxing of one’s florist’s ego? Ebony had no time, ever, but there was always time to keep her ingenious florist, Bill Mauricio owner of the best flower shop in town, happy.

She scurried around the room triple checking the placement of the posters of the happy couple; both tall and blonde with perfect smiles and skin. Ebony wondered momentarily if rich people bred their children for excellence instead of just getting knocked up like everyone else. She made sure the silverware was spotless, and glared at the too-slow cater-waiters when they finally arrived with the boxes of linen napkins folded like swans.

Ebony’s blood pressure returned to its normal level once everything had been accomplished. It took less than twenty minutes for the band, deejay, tables, and twenty-two balloon pillars to be set up around the enormous room. Ebony reclaimed the seating chart and dropped each name card onto the appropriate plate when the cater-waiters had finished setting the tables.

Duane, the baker, had arrived and set up the five-tiered wedding cake. The monstrosity had white fondant icing with piles of purple roses, purple pansies, and white daisies between them. A perfect blonde couple stood on the top tier looking down at everyone in that ballroom. The groom's cake was somewhat modest, only two layers, with white fondant and deep purple piping. The cakes were both vanilla under the fondant, a perfect match for the happy couple, very, very vanilla.

The party guests began arriving at exactly four o'clock in the afternoon. At first, Ebony hovered near the door, making sure everyone saw the purple and white signs that directed them straight to the ballroom. She clutched her clipboard to her chest and watched the valets drive by in the Lexus, BMW's, Cadillac's, and a Bentley.

Ebony blinked at the Bentley. That was an incredible car. There was something about that big bodied, black sedan with chrome accents and twenty-two inch rims that was so damned sexy. She stared, mouth slightly open, as a hulking figure got out of the driver's seat.

The driver was at least six foot four, with dark brown hair. He squared his shoulders, very, very broad shoulders, and handed the valet the keys. Ebony stared as the driver pulled his cuffs straight and touched the knot in his tie. His suit was flawless, a three button gray pin-striped Boss suit with a gray and yellow striped

tie and a pale blue dress shirt. It had to be custom made; anyone with shoulders that wide couldn't buy off the rack. Ebony eyed his shoes, pointy shiny, black alligators. She licked her lips that had suddenly gone dry, and felt her heart rate pick up.

He caught her eye as he approached her and Ebony snapped her mouth shut. He smiled and winked. She hugged the clipboard against her breasts and tried to look away. His gaze was cool, maybe it was his pale blue eyes, or the fact that he'd shown alone to a wedding reception. He was probably on the prowl for drunken bridesmaids or remorseful ex-girlfriends.

God, she thought, I want to sit on his lap!

Ebony shook her head hard. She was working! It was completely inappropriate for her to stand there lusting after one of the party guests! She turned on a narrow heel and hurried back to the ball room. She had to make sure the bartenders were on their hustle. The party had officially started.

Everything was set in motion when the newly married couple arrived. Ebony checked off each thing on the list as it happened. The grand entrance, the father-daughter dance, the best man's toast, each father's speech, a beautiful dinner sound-tracked by the best violinist, cellist, and viola players that had been flown in from Morocco. The groom threw the garter and the bride threw the bouquet. That was the last thing on Ebony's schedule. She could finally take a

breath.

She slipped out of the ballroom and glanced around for a quiet, low traffic spot so she could silently celebrate. She'd pulled it off...the party of her life. Everything had been perfect, from the cream colored chair covers to each flawless strawberry perched on the rim of every Waterford champagne flute.

After clacking down an empty hall, she tossed the clipboard onto a red velvet settee and sunk into the plush cushion. She was tired and her head was buzzing from all the noise. She placed her hands over her eyes and let her elbows rest on her knees. If the party didn't go on too much longer, she could be home in two hours.

"You don't seem to be having any fun," a deep voice said, slightly echoing in the empty corridor.

Ebony jumped to her feet and pasted on her "work" smile, the polite smile that was just the slight upturn of the corners of her mouth. It said she was interested but not overly eager. It had taken her four meetings to perfect it and she was quite proud to have it in her repertoire. The smile faltered when she saw that it wasn't Mr. Crane or anyone else that she'd dealt with before standing in front of her. It was in fact, the god of a man that had stepped out of that Bentley and caught her staring at him.

"Uh...uh..." Where had her words gone so quickly? Before he'd decided to

converse with her, she had quite an expansive vocabulary! Now, she couldn't think of anything to say.

"It's a party," he said gesturing toward the ballroom. "You seem to be the only one that's not having any fun."

Ebony watched his face. He was older than her, probably close to forty with a deep tan and his pale blue eyes had slight wrinkles in the corners. He ran a hand through his chestnut brown hair and she noticed that there was a touch of gray at the temples. She touched her hand to her collarbone and sighed.

Damn, he was fine.

"I...I just throw the party," she said finding her voice. "It's not supposed to be fun for me."

She suddenly felt the need to straighten her watch, run a hand over her skirt, and return to her collar bone. She felt ridiculous. This man was filthy rich, and he was talking to her! She'd seen those gorgeous women at the reception, literally dripping with diamonds. Why was he in the hallway, with *her*? She'd almost had to take out a loan to afford the Movado watch she was wearing.

He leaned closer to her and she caught a whiff of his cologne...Burberry London. She'd bought it for her father for Christmas four months before. Smelling it on the immense man did not put her in mind of her father, though. She was getting so hot and bothered that she had to lick her lips...they'd gone dry again!

“It’s such a shame that you can’t appreciate your own work, especially when you’re dressed like that.”

Ebony felt her eyes start to shut. He was too close, and he was flirting with her. He radiated heat and cologne and put her in the mind of sex. *God, sex, what was that? It had been so long since....* She couldn’t think straight, she was going to break into a sweat at any moment. “I’m not...I’m not dressed like anything.” She attempted to shrug.

“Please,” he said putting a hand on her bare shoulder, “you look so beautiful; you should be the life of the party.”

Ebony gave a nervous chuckle and picked up her clipboard. “Trust me; I am the life of the party.” She tapped the clipboard and side-stepped away from him. “I get paid to throw a good party.” She pulled a business card off the clipboard and held it out to him.

He took it with a wink. “I’ll give you a call...” he glanced at the card, “Ms. Ebony Harris.”

She nodded.

“I’m Brock Huntington,” he said extending a large mitt for her to shake.

“Pleased to meet you,” Ebony practically whispered slipping her hand into his.

He brought her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss onto the back. “The

pleasure is all mine.”

Ebony felt like she would faint...just like in one of those old movies. Being in the presence of Brock Huntington had literally caused her to swoon. She had never felt as abandoned as she did when he let her hand slip from his and turned to return to the reception. She could hear that the party had picked up and deejay Dorian was cranking up the Black-Eyed Peas mix he’d promised to include in his set.

Ebony returned to her seat on the settee and sighed. She was still shaken but she had to pull herself together and go make sure the dinner plates were being cleared.

Ebony was startled when her phone rang at nine-thirty. She had just said goodbye to the Luke, the caterer, who didn’t venture from the kitchen until the party was long over. Ebony pulled her phone from her purse before she slung it over her shoulder and almost jumped when the thing rang in her hand.

“Ebony!” Jenna said with a dramatic sigh. “Finally, I’ve been calling you for almost an hour!”

“Oh,” Ebony said slapping a palm to her forehead. “Sorry, hon. I left the damned thing in my purse. What’s up?”

“This guy called. He said to give you a very important message.”

“Oh, my God!” Ebony gasped. “Hold on let me get a pen.”

“You won’t need it. He just said to tell you that he’d call you on Monday morning to schedule a get-together.”

Ebony frowned. “What?”

“He said his name is Brock Huntington.”

“Oh...” Ebony felt slightly dizzy. “He said he wants to schedule a get-together?”

Jenna giggled. “Oh, yeah...and it didn’t sound business-related at all. Is he related to the Huntingtons that paid for the science building on the college campus?”

Ebony’s mouth was suddenly dry again. “I don’t know, Jenna. Look, I’ve got to get home. I’ll call you tomorrow or something.”

“Okay, hon. I’ll talk to you later.”

Ebony drove home slowly. What should have been a twenty minute drive took almost an hour. She was dead tired and didn’t want to get a ticket for missing a stop sign or something, but she was also thinking.

Had Brock called her office from the reception? That seemed kind of an odd thing to do. Get-together was a date, right? He could have just asked her out right there. Maybe he didn’t want to be seen talking to “the help” in front of all his hoity-toity friends. Speaking of which, was he from the Huntington family that bought the building for the college? It would make sense considering what he drove and how he dressed.

Ebony put all the food Luke had packed up for her in the refrigerator. She barely pulled off her dress before she collapsed into her bed. She was way too drained to maintain consciousness a minute past eleven that night.

Chapter Two

“Party Girl Incorporated,” Jenna sang into the phone as Ebony walked past her on Monday morning. The two had barely finished their first cup of coffee when the phone chirped. Ebony ran into her office to be at her desk if Jenna patched through the call.

“Mr. Huntington on line one,” Jenna said just before Ebony’s stomach tied itself in knots.

She’d convinced herself that he’d have lost interest in her after Friday night. In fact, by the time she got out of bed on Saturday morning, she was trying to find a way to forget about him. She tried not to think about how he’d towered over her five foot six inch frame and the way he made her mouth dry while making other parts of her wet.

“Ebony Harris,” she said when she picked up the line. “How can I help you party?”

Brock laughed.

“Good morning, Ms. Harris. I’m calling to arrange a dinner.”

Ebony blinked. *Is he serious?*

“Or a lunch...coffee...let me know if I’m being too forward here.”

Ebony giggled. *Ack! She was giggling like a middle school-er. Pull it together, girl!*

“Well, Mr. Huntington. Your offer is a bit forward. May I ask what this meeting pertains to?”

Brock cleared his throat. “Well, I had a wonderful time at that party this past weekend but I had the feeling something was missing. I wanted to discuss it with you.”

Ebony swallowed another giggle. “Something was missing?”

“It must have been obvious to you that I was in attendance alone.”

“So you were missing a date? That’s what was missing from the party?”

“Exactly.” She could hear the smile in his voice.

“Well, Mr. Huntington that is not exactly something the party planner is responsible for arranging. It sounds like you need a different kind of service.”

Brock laughed a deep guttural laugh that made her smile. “I certainly don’t need that kind of service,” he said after he recovered. “Will you have lunch with me?”

Ebony crossed her legs against the sudden pulse in her womanly parts.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly.

Brock promised to be there at noon and Ebony almost panicked at her wardrobe. She usually dressed casual for work and today was no different. She had a pair of Levi dark wash skinny jeans, they’d been next to impossible to find

considering most jeans didn't make it over her hips and ass to fit her slender waist, and a red button up Anne Klein shirt with tiny white polka dots. She liked the short gathered sleeves and wore a matching headband over her hair, which she had worn down, letting it fall to her back in large barrel curls. She was dressed for a picnic in the park, barely for a day at the office, and certainly not for a lunch date with a millionaire (*billionaire?!).*

"You don't have time to go home and change!" Jenna said when Ebony made a break for the door. "The Davenports will be here in twenty minutes for their first meeting."

Ebony frowned. "You're right. I can't reschedule that meeting. Ms. Davenport didn't sound very compromising on the phone."

Dorothy Davenport had gotten in touch with the agency for her daughter's Sweet Sixteen party. She'd heard great things from Mrs. Crane during the reception planning and was insistent on a meeting as soon as possible.

Jenna tugged on her braid that hung over her left shoulder. Her gray eyes darted to the phone before she walked over to where her boss stood with her hand still on the doorknob.

"Why are you going home to change in the middle of the morning?" Jenna asked folding her arms.

"I'm going out with Brock for lunch."

Jenna's gasp was a bit overly dramatic. "Shut up!" Her face broke into a giant grin and she hugged Ebony so hard she almost tipped them both over.

"Oh God, Jenna. It hasn't been that long since I've had a date."

"It's been almost a year," Jenna said folding her hands in front of her.

"Besides, that's not why I'm so freaked! I Googled Brock Huntington and he is very much from the science building family! His family comes from old money, they've got houses everywhere and Brock is some uber-businessman that just keeps the money rolling in. He's out of this world rich. He lives in the city but has a house here!" Jenna grabbed Ebony's hands. "He has a house on The Hill!"

Ebony's stomach lurched and she felt like she'd lose her coffee. "The Hill?" Houses up there were more than just expensive. Those homes were in a position to do the same as their owners, look down on the rest of Hillsdale. She'd only been on The Hill once, for a meeting with the Crane family at their mansion. "Oh God, Jenna. He lives on The Hill? I have to go change." Just as Ebony reached for the doorknob again, it turned. Jenna retreated to her desk as Dorothy Davenport stalked in, followed by a smaller, thinner version of herself.

Dorothy was tall, of course, with long white-blonde hair and emerald green eyes. Her face was shiny from Botox injections, her lips were plump from collagen, and her sapphire blue eyes were slanted from face lifts. Ebony could see how she had been beautiful at one time, before all the anti-aging surgeries, and the

oversized breast implants. Dorothy was just as thin as she was tall and wore a very spring-time mint green Prada pantsuit with a beige Chloe Paddington bag.

Her daughter, Mindy, was an exact replica, minus the plastic surgery tells. Her peaches and cream complexion was flawless and she was even thinner than her mother. She had on a pale yellow Nicole Miller halter dress. Ebony was impressed by the fact that she carried a back pack; obviously she wasn't skipping an entire day of school just for this meeting. She was taken aback by the fact that it had *PRADA* emblazoned in red across the front.

Ebony led them to her office and wasn't even able to open her mouth before Mindy began talking.

"So," she said tossing her incredibly blonde hair over her shoulder. "I want an Alice in Wonderland theme. I want it at the country club...of course...and people dressed up as the White Rabbit and the Queen of Hearts. I want blue and green table cloths with some kind of funky flower arrangement on every table. I want a dance floor and a Mad Hatter table with a giant tea service but with punch instead of tea. I want cookies that say 'eat me' and I want pocket watches as party favors and –" Mindy paused to take a breath and Ebony jumped at the chance to speak.

"That sounds like a great party idea, Mindy. All of it seems doable, except maybe the talking cookies" *-work smile-* "and it'll be great. I have a great florist. I can

arrange a meeting with him. Do you have a budget you'd like to stay within?"

Dorothy laughed, well, maybe it was a cough, but it somewhat resembled a laugh. "There is no budget for this party," she said with a smile. "Her daddy will spare no expense."

"Of course," Ebony said holding onto that work smile just a bit longer than necessary.

Mindy droned on for the next forty minutes about invitations, guest list, VIP guest list, transportation to the party, a stretch Hummer so the entire VIP guest list could arrive with her, and spent an agonizing ten more minutes on the specific decorations she wanted in the ballroom. Ebony's mind flashed back to the wedding reception and she caught herself almost daydreaming about Brock. Luckily, it was at that exact moment that Mindy had to catch her breath so Ebony didn't miss any information she needed to go with what she'd already scribbled on her yellow note pad.

Dorothy Davenport looked almost bored as she sat beside her daughter studying her impeccable French manicure and nodded occasionally. "Look," she finally said interrupting her clone mid-sentence, "I've got a hair appointment to get to and Mindy has to get to school some time today. Just take the information we've given you so far and come up with an estimate. I'll send the figures to my ex-husband and we'll meet again later in the week."

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Ebony said standing to walk them out of the office. The sooner she got Barbie and Skipper out of her office, the sooner she could get home and change, and the more likely it was she’d make it back in time to meet Brock.

Jenna watched Ebony speed walk to the door and hold it open for her exiting clients and bit back a laugh.

“Jenna, forward my calls to my cell. I’m going home to change.”

“You can’t do that,” Jenna said unable to hide the amusement in her voice, “Mr. Huntington called while you were in your meeting and said he was leaving his office early and he’d be here to pick you up at eleven.”

Ebony groaned and plopped into a chair. Her waiting room wasn’t very impressive, just a six by six area in front of Jenna’s desk, but the leather loveseat she’d put there made it comfortable. The entire area; loveseat, coffee table with an array of magazines, and two potted ferns, was mostly for show. Ebony never made her clients wait.

“Eleven? That’s in fifteen minutes. I’ll never get home and back in time.”

“I know,” Jenna said pulling her hobo bag from her bottom drawer. “That’s why I said ‘*You can’t do that*’. He’s probably on his way right now.”

Ebony pressed the heels of her palms against her eyes and groaned. “I’ll just have to go to lunch looking like a bum.”

Jenna had been applying a fresh coat of Frosted Sugar Plum lipstick but paused to give Ebony an once-over. “You don’t look like a bum. That outfit is perfectly suitable for lunch. Just because he’ll be in an Armani three-piece doesn’t mean you should be too. Where is it written that the man can’t dress up for the woman every once in a while? Why is it that we’re the ones that have to put in all the work?”

Ebony dropped her hands and watched Jenna put away her compact and lipstick. “Really, Jenna? Why are you reapplying your make-up then?”

Jenna rolled her gray eyes. “He might have a friend or a brother that wouldn’t mind taking out a single secretary just to get a break from the aristocracy.”

Ebony couldn’t help but to laugh. It was easy for Jenna to say that stuff about dressing up, she was so pretty, she could walk out of her house in a sweat suit and still have guys drooling all over her. Ebony had always told her that the office was casual. Jenna’s idea of casual that day was a pale blue tunic top over freshly pressed white linen pants with a pair of silver Kate Spade strappy sandals. She could have easily pulled off a last minute lunch date in that ensemble.

Jenna finished primping just as the door opened and Brock walked in. He didn’t even notice the waiting area to his right. It was partially hidden by the open door. He headed straight for Jenna’s desk. Ebony watched her assistant go

through the same thing she'd experienced the first time she'd seen Brock. Jenna's eyes grew wide as her jaw got slack. Her freshly shined lips formed a perfect "O" as Brock approached her desk.

"I'm here to meet Ms. Harris," Brock said as Jenna blinked rapidly.

Damn, Ebony thought, *Jenna called it on the Armani suit*. It was black with gray pinstripes so thin, from a distance the suit just looked black. Ebony was staring at the way the hair at the base of his neck curled over the collar of the white shirt he was wearing when she realized that Jenna was pointing at her.

Brock turned to face her and smiled. Ebony flushed. She must have looked like an idiot sitting in her own waiting room.

"I hope you're hungry," Brock said walking over to her. "I'm taking a three hour lunch and I plan to enjoy it very much."

Ebony frowned. "I might have a meeting this afternoon. I don't know if I can do a three hour lunch."

"Your schedule is completely empty this afternoon," Jenna piped up.

"Good to know," Brock said as he extended a hand to help Ebony off the couch. "That means both of you can have an extended lunch."

Ebony nodded and watched Jenna retreat into her office and come back with her purse. "Have a great lunch," she muttered to Ebony just before Brock put his hand on her back to pilot her out of the office. Ebony glanced back to see Jenna

waving and smiling like an absolute dork.



Ebony threw back her second martini, (she hadn't even ordered her food yet), and reveled in the warm feeling the liquor sent from her belly to her fingers and toes. *Nothing like a bit of gin to ease the nerves.*

Brock had driven them in a teal Lexus LS 450, she'd felt a twinge of loss for not getting a ride in the Bentley, to a tiny eatery with large bay windows that offered spectacular views of the park, the Mercury Café.

She was surprised that he picked such a "normal" place. Ebony had been there herself quite a few times; the food was wonderful but a bit over-priced for her tastes. There was something to be said for good food at a low cost. She knew of at least five Mom n' Pop eateries in town that had wonderful food without impeding on a budgeted life style, or sacrificing an "A" sanitation grade.

"You were so quiet on the ride here," Brock said pushing his half glass of brandy. He'd been nursing it and the sweat from the glass was making a cluster of rings on the white tablecloth.

Ebony giggled. *Ack! Damned booze!* She'd have to put a stop to these giggling jags she got whenever Brock was around. "Sorry, I'm just nervous.

"Why?" he asked catching her uneasy glance with in his cool blue stare.

"Well...you're..." *so rich, so sexy*, "um...you."

Brock shrugged his massive shoulders. "I'm the one that asked you out, I should be the one trying to impress you."

"Ha!" Ebony said a bit too loudly. "You're pretty impressive in your own right." She felt her face get hot. "I mean you're this big business man from a prominent family."

Brock smiled, loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "It seems like you've done some research."

Ebony's cheeks were bright red. "Actually, Jenna took it upon herself to Google you."

"I'm flattered, but completely uninterested in what Google has to say about me. Why don't you tell me about yourself after we order?" Brock beckoned the waitress with a slight flip of his hand.

Ebony fidgeted with her menu. She was starving. The only thing in her stomach was what was left of that cup of coffee and she was in desperate need of solid food. Her mind wrestled with the idea of ordering a large, satisfying meal and demolishing it in front of him. She gnawed on her self-consciousness as he ordered a rib eye cooked medium, salad, sweet potato fries and another brandy. She felt just a little glutinous as she ordered fettuccine Alfredo with grilled chicken breast and bruschetta.

As soon as the waitress left, Brock gazed at her until she began talking

about herself. She gave him the skeleton of her life story; twenty-eight, only child raised by her father after her mother passed when she was five, she loved to read, but didn't get to do that very much lately since her life was slowly being consumed by her work. She loved having her own business, though, it gave her power. It was hers and it was successful.

Brock watched her, intentionally quiet as Ebony emerged. She'd started off describing herself in shy quiet tones, shrugging every so often, but had come full circle by the time her business became the topic of conversation. She leaned forward, her dark eyes and bright smile full of pride, her voice strong and even. She wasn't nervous anymore; she didn't pick at her clothes or play with her empty martini glass. She stilled her hands and smiled so big, her eyes narrowed.



Brock was taken. He was supposed to go back to the city the next day. He knew he should have driven in and slept in his apartment that night so he wouldn't have to commute in the morning, but he wasn't ready to leave Hillsdale. He turned over finding a cool spot on his satin pillow and looked out the window. It was pitch black outside and his bedroom offered just a glimpse of the lights in the city below. The lack of distraction was conducive to sleep, but he wasn't sleepy.

His mind was reeling. His time with Ebony played through his mind over

and over.

They'd had a leisurely lunch in which he'd been unable to stop staring at her as she devoured her food. She'd tried to be mannerly at first, but she must have been distracted by hunger. After the first bite, she decided against twirling the pasta with the spoon and just wrapped it in ribbons around her fork. The utensil was so full; it took her two bites to clean it.

The Alfredo sauce clung to her full lips and he stirred every time she licked it off. She offered him some of her bruschetta. He'd taken two; she popped the other four into her mouth one after the other pushing arrant tomatoes back onto the pieces of bread so as not to lose any. She ordered a third martini, she licked sauce from her fingers, and she rolled her eyes as if in ecstasy every third or fourth swallow; she was amazing. He'd almost been too distracted to eat and felt a bit foolish having the waitress wrap up half his steak and almost an entire order of fries.

He'd begged her to walk in the park after their meal. She'd wrinkled her nose, but conceded. As they stood by the pond, he watched her begin to fidget. Her nerves must have been coming back.

"What's wrong?" Brock asked seeing the beginnings of a frown on her golden-brown face.

"This is so strange," she said gazing at the half-a-dozen swans sunning in

the still water. “I’m taking a three hour lunch, to eat heavy food and walk through the park. It all feels so...French.”

Brock smiled. “That’s not such a bad thing. You can learn a lot from the French. They know how to enjoy life...slow down every once in a while. Work hard and take a three month holiday.”

“I could never...” Ebony practically whispered, “I work all the time! A three month vacation is just crazy.”

“Maybe,” Brock said gazing at the swans. “How about we do something completely American and throw my left over *pommes de frite* at the birds. They’ll be fat and happy just like any red-blooded American bird should be.”

Ebony laughed and turned to watch him unbind the aluminum foil swan he was holding. He liked her laugh; it was small and light, a slight breeze moving through a delicate wind-chime.

They threw bits of sweet potato at the birds and they sprung to life immediately. They bobbed to retrieve the food before it sank into the water, honked at each other in refusal to share, and finally abandoned the water to mill at their feet as the two of them dropped the fries onto ground in front of them.

He’d dropped Ebony back at her office at one-thirty that afternoon. The rest of the day had been a blur. He’d holed up in his home office and taken a few business calls in between daydreams of this woman. She’d driven him to

distraction.

He hadn't even felt that familiar disdain that lodged in his chest when his ex-wife had called that evening. She'd rattled off numbers, why her alimony was unnecessarily modest, evidently the housing staff wanted a raise and she wouldn't be able to keep on all of them unless she got more money. He'd thought about telling her to fire someone and try to do one thing for herself, but had bitten his tongue. The last thing he needed that day was an argument. He knew how it would end. She'd accuse him of being cold and unfeeling and usually he'd think she was right. Not today, he was the exact opposite today. He was full of warm feelings for Ebony Harris and he couldn't wait to see her again.

"Just send the bill to my office," he said before hanging up on her. He'd sort out her finances later...on his own without her chirping in his ear.

Chapter Three

Ebony had her briefcase on Friday. Carrying the black Kenneth Cole meant one thing: she was definitely not having a casual day. She had another meeting with the Davenports. They had decided that she would come to them this time and Ebony felt it would be in bad form to show up for a business meeting in a mansion wearing jeans. So, instead of her oversized red bag she was carrying her briefcase, like an actual adult! She should have had Jenna take a picture so she could send it to her dad. He'd never believe that she'd donned a charcoal gray Donna Karen pantsuit and actually used the gift he'd bought her when she'd successfully pulled off her first event.

She glanced at her watch and frowned. She'd have to step on it to make it up The Hill to the mansion by two. Mindy had gotten out of school early to attend this meeting; it would be in bad taste for Ebony to show up late. The forestry alongside the road was distracting. She wasn't used to so much *nature*. Her two bedroom "starter" home boasted two rose bushes and a scrawny elm in the front yard. Ebony had never even kept a houseplant alive. Anyone that brought anything with roots past her front door was sentencing it to death. The poor thing was rotated out the back door to the garbage can within a week, sometimes less.

Ebony turned right off the main road and onto the private lane that led to the Davenports' home. The thing about the houses on The Hill was that they're easy to see when looking up at them from town, but they were difficult to find. They were nestled onto the side of the mountain with walls of trees all around them. To build them a road or private driveway had to be made, and the road itself didn't impede upon the forest too much. There seemed to be just enough room for a standard-sized SUV, no more, no less. Ebony eased along the narrow road and her mouth dropped open when she reached the house. She drove around the fountain full of stone fairies pouring jugs of water in all directions and parked along the circular driveway. She pulled her briefcase out as she got out and took a minute to straighten her clothes and put on the work smile.

A haggard looking, red-headed maid answered the door. She was attempting to smile but Ebony could tell she didn't mean it. "Hello," she said with a British accent, "you must be Ms. Harris. The missus is expecting you. She's waiting in the sitting room."

"Thanks," Ebony said following the woman through the foyer, to the left and into what must have been the sitting room because Dorothy was doing just that. She was perched on a flower print overstuffed settee that looked antique. Ebony wondered how much the Antique Road Show on PBS would appraise it. A cursory glance around the room showed her that the Antique Road Show could do a whole

series from inside that room alone. Every table looked appropriately worn and there were at least a dozen vases. The two that flanked the stone fireplace were as tall as her!

Dorothy put down the cup she had been sipping from and walked toward Ebony. She had her long hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and wore a plain white t-shirt and dark jeans. Her white stilettos were half hidden in the plush white carpet. *Who wore painful heels with jeans, it completely cancels out the comfort of wearing jeans?! Besides the woman was already tall, now she was just rubbing it in!* Ebony silently hoped she hadn't tracked anything in on her shoes.

"Hello," Dorothy said with a quick limp hand shake. "Please have a seat while I get Mindy down. She's upstairs in her room."

Ebony took a seat on a safe-looking armchair and refused the drink the maid offered. The woman frowned and shrugged. "Not a drinker, eh? I'll just bring you a cuppa mineral water."

Ebony thanked her and gazed around the room once again. The walls were a deep red-wine color with cream molding and lace window treatments. She spied her sad-looking car parked on the cobblestone drive through the front window. She loved that car, it was her first, and even better, it was paid off. She didn't think the picturesque driveway did it justice or was it the other way around? Her eyes flitted around the room at the pictures embossed in gold frames. There were

numerous expensive art pieces, but no personal photos. Where were the family pictures?

“Hi there!” Mindy chirped breaking into her thoughts.

“Hi, Mindy. Wow, you look great.” Ebony stood as the girl approached her. She wore khaki capri pants and a peach colored t-shirt, yet, even with her blonde hair down, she didn’t look washed out.

“Thanks, my dad is taking me to dinner tonight. I’m thinking I want sushi, but he hates it so we have to sit at the hibachi table instead of the sushi bar. He says he has to have his food cooked. He’s like that sometimes.” Mindy shrugged one shoulder and flounced onto the settee her mother had abandoned.

Dorothy retrieved her tea and glided into the armchair facing Ebony.

“Your home is lovely,” Ebony said nodding to Dorothy.

“Thank you,” she said with a hint of a smile. “I appreciate you coming for this meeting. That school and their attendance policy.” She rolled her eyes. “They say Mindy has too many tardies for the semester.”

“I completely understand,” Ebony said fishing the Davenport file from her briefcase. “I brought the figures with me. I have estimates from my main suppliers but I can work with anyone if there’s someone you want to work with specifically.” She glanced at the spreadsheet she’d drawn up before handing a copy to Mindy who immediately passed it to her mother. “Luke Burke is the caterer;

he's very excited about the theme. His minimum fee is seven hundred and if you have over two hundred guests, he'll give you a ten percent discount. Of course, there are delivery charges and linens and it costs extra if he provides the wait staff. If we use the staff at the club, it's included in the reservation fee. Bill Mauricio is the florist and he's great. His estimate is well over three grand right now, it could go either way once we give him exact details on the centerpieces and arrangements, but I can guarantee you'll be happy..."

"He did a wonderful job with the Crane wedding," Dorothy interrupted.

"I'll be sure to tell him you said that. He'll be thrilled." Work smile. "Are there any questions you have for me about the party or the invoice?"

"The New York School of Acting?" Dorothy said raising a perfectly arched and penciled brow.

"That is for character work. If you'd like to have the White Rabbit and everyone else at the party it'll cost quite a bit, but that includes costume rental and transportation."

"Hmph," Dorothy said training her eyes on the paper. "Is this per actor?"

"Yes."

Ebony watched as Dorothy took a moment to scan the rest of the paper. "You really thought of everything didn't you?"

"Hopefully," Ebony said with a shrug.

Mindy sighed as if she was bored.

“Have you found a dress yet?” Ebony asked her.

“No,” she shrugged. “Daddy said he’d take me into the city to shop next weekend. I’m sure I’ll find something then.”

“Well, make sure you get a couple. Just in case you want to change your mind at the last minute or decide you want to do a costume-change in the middle of the party.”

Mindy seemed to like the idea of more than one dress because she grinned like the Cheshire Cat.

“Is your father going to join us for this meeting?”

“No,” Mindy said. “He won’t get off work until five. I’ll give him the estimate at dinner.”

“Make sure he’s had some sake first,” Dorothy said handing the paper back to her daughter.

The three laughed and Ebony put the file back into the briefcase. She blinked at the glass of water on the coffee table in front of her. She hadn’t even seen the maid bring it in. That woman was good!



Jenna is a perfect assistant and a great friend. Ebony had to remind herself of that

when her cell phone rang that night. It was almost eleven and she was channel surfing. Her regular boring cell phone ring wasn't what signaled the call; the ring tone was "She's Playing Hard to Get" by Hi Five. Ebony ran to her purse and dug though the mess meanwhile pre-pubescent voices blared:

She's playing hard to get

She just won't admit

That she likes me

She likes me

She's playing hard to get

She just won't admit, oo yeah

That she likes me

She likes me

She's playin' hard-

"Hello," she answered without even looking at the caller id.

"Nice ring tone," Brock said. She could just picture the shit-eating grin on his face.

"Oh, God. I didn't do it. I can't even program this damn phone. Jenna changes the ring tones on me as a joke. She knows I won't be able to change it back by myself."

Brock laughed that rumbling chuckle that made her smile through her embarrassment.

“I’ll make her change it on Monday.”

“Of course.”

“Seriously,” Ebony said curling up on her couch. “I didn’t do it.”

“Hey, I believe you. Now can we talk about something besides your musical confession?”

Ebony decided to let that jab go. “Fine, what’s up?”

“What are you wearing?”

She looked down at herself. “Pink camisole and pink terry-cloth shorts.”

“How short?”

Ebony flushed. “I don’t know...they’re too short for the Catholic school test. They don’t reach the end of my middle finger.”

Brock moaned lightly.

“Hey, did you call me to interrogate me about my wardrobe or is there another reason?”

“Oh...yeah. I was calling to ask if you’d come to my house for dinner tomorrow night.”

“That sounds like fun. Who’s cooking? I’m not much into sweating over pots and pans.” Ebony could cook perfectly well, she’d taught herself as a teenager

because her father was lacking in that department.

She kept both of them fed for years and she purposely left out his staple meal: chili. She'd had it once a week followed by leftovers another day since she was five and was beyond sick of it. She still had an aversion to anything containing large amounts of beef and beans. However, she was not in the habit of disclosing her culinary prowess to guys...at least not before the fourth date.

"I'm cooking, you just have to relax and eat."

"Cool," she said flipping off the television. "I'll try not to make a pig of myself this time."

Brock laughed. "I love watching you eat and you look nothing like a pig when you do it."

Ebony smiled. "Thanks. That's the sweetest lie I've ever heard!"

They talked a while longer. He told her that he'd be spending the next two weeks in town working from his house. The summer tourists were coming into Manhattan and he hated navigating the traffic and the congested sidewalks. His trips to the city would be limited this summer. She settled into the couch and spoke in soft tones. Once again she was hesitant to talk about herself at first, but quickly eased into the give and take.



"I don't usually go past first base on the second date," Ebony gasped as

Brock licked his tongue across her collar bone and rubbed his thumb over her stiff nipple.

“Uh-huh.”

Ebony arched her back to press more of herself into his palm. “I know that’s what all we women say, but I’m serious.” Her body completely contradicted her words. Her panties were soaked. Brock’s tongue moved along the tops of her breasts, over one, dipped into the cleavage and across the other. Ebony felt like she was on fire. “It’s been a long time since I’ve...”

Brock stopped his methodical tongue bathing and pulled back. Ebony seemed to deflate into the couch. “How long?”

“Huh?” She’d heard the words but they hadn’t quite registered over the hormones rushing around in her head.

She’d *tried* to be good. She’d worn a white strapless sundress with a line of tiny red flowers embossed across the top, the hem which fell past her knees, and around the waist line. She’d picked the delicate strapless dress so she would be careful not to eat like a starving person and mess it up. A daunting dry cleaning bill was as good a reason as any to practice good etiquette. She’d shown up to Brock’s mansion looking properly demure with red ballet flats on her feet and a huge bottle of Merlot in her hand.

After a wonderful dinner of spaghetti and a few glasses of wine, she and

Brock went to the couch to “talk”. They didn’t say one damned word before they began necking like teenagers. Ebony found that she relished having his large hands on her, and liked the feel of him, every part of him. The only thing that kept her dress on was the fear he’d think she was a slut. No matter how horny she was...she wasn’t a slut.

“How long have you been celibate?” Brock asked.

Ebony flushed with embarrassment. “Why?”

“I’ll bet I’ve got you beat.” A smile played on his lips.

“You’re seriously betting on who hasn’t had sex the longest?”

Brock’s eyes danced as he nodded. “How long?”

“Two and a half years.” It sounded like forever when she said it out loud!

There was no way any man could go that long without sex.

“That’s nothing,” Brock said. “Six years.”

Ebony rolled her eyes. *That was such a lie!* “Don’t mock me!”

“I’m not. It’s really been that long.”

Ebony self-consciously adjusted her dress. “But...how?”

“I’ve been divorced for two years.”

“What about before that?”

“My ex and I slept in different bedrooms for the last four years of the marriage.”

Ebony frowned. "You could have gone outside the marriage."

Brock caught her gaze. She was struck by the intensity in his eyes. "No, I couldn't."

The brusque tone he used made Ebony scoot away from him. "So, how have you stayed sane for the past six years?"

Brock shrugged. "Lots of hours at work and I've become...uh..." he stretched the fingers on his right hand, "familiar with myself."

Ebony laughed and Brock shrugged again, not in the least embarrassed about what he'd just confessed. "It's just that...if I seem a bit over zealous, it's because I'm a sex starved fiend."

"Hmmm," Ebony mused, "Who would have thought? I never took you for a desperate man."

He laughed. "I said sex-starved...not desperate."

"Good," Ebony said toeing off her shoes. "What would it say about me if you were desperate?"

"That when you let me get past third base, your mind, among other things, will be blown."

"You're awfully cocky for someone so out of practice."

Brock gave her a dazzling smile. "I'm a business man; confidence is engrained at this point. Besides, it's like riding a bike."

“I don’t think it’s anything like riding a bike,” Ebony said wrinkling her nose.

He laughed and grabbed her waist, easily pulling her back into his embrace.



“You’re fired,” Ebony informed Jenna as she arrived at the office on Monday morning. Jenna didn’t look up from her computer screen before she fell apart in laughter. The laugh bounced off the far wall behind the love seat and filled the waiting room. “I just had to do it.”

Ebony dropped the offending phone on the desktop calendar. “Fix it.”

“Of course,” Jenna said. “How was the date?”

Ebony fiddled with the zipper on her purse. “It was good.”

“Did you spend the night or the weekend?”

“Neither! I’m not telling you anything ever again.”

“You know, you could just figure out how to work this thing.” Jenna punched the key pad.

“I barely remember to turn it on, how am I supposed to remember how to do all that crap?”

Jenna smiled and shut Ebony’s phone. “All better now.” She dangled the phone between her thumb and index finger. Ebony accepted it and continued into her office.

She had just finished her second cup of coffee when Jenna gave her the ten minute warning. Her first appointment of the day was going to be with Sarah Klein and her son, Lewis. Ebony had thought it strange that they were using her to plan his bar mitzvah, considering they lived in Hartford, Connecticut. Jenna explained that their extended family still lived in New York so the party itself would be in Manhattan.

“That still doesn’t make sense. There are planners in Hartford and in the city. Why the hell are they coming to Hillsdale to plan?”

“Maybe they liked the website. Besides, they probably know the Cranes.”

Ebony rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on Jenna, all rich people don’t know each other.”

“Well, they sure as hell don’t know me. Who are they hanging out with then?” Jenna pulled a file labeled ‘LEWIS KLEIN’ from the drawer and handed it to Ebony. “Wait!” she said when Ebony turned to walk into her office.

Ebony turned back. “Forget something?”

“Almost,” Jenna said reaching to unbutton Ebony’s fitted blue dress shirt. She’d paired it with a pair of flowing black dress pants and short black heels...going more toward Jenna’s idea of casual and away from her own.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ebony screeched. She would have swatted Jenna away, but each hand held something she didn’t want to drop; her extra large

pink coffee mug in the right and a file full of loose papers in the left.

“Just undo the top two buttons,” Jenna said stepping forward as Ebony stepped back. “Show these things off.”

Ebony calmed a bit knowing that Jenna was not taking any cues from *Jenna Jameson*. She was just trying to get her to show some skin. *Wait a minute!*

“Why should I show them off?” she snapped as Jenna turned back to her desk.

“There is a hormonal almost teenage boy coming in here. Show him a little something. He’ll appreciate it. I’m sure he’s not interested in what happens at his bar mitzvah. He just wants the money.”

“What about the meaning of the ceremony?” Ebony asked incredulously. “You know...becoming a man, honoring the faith.”

Jenna dropped into her chair and gave Ebony a patronizing smile. “It’s about the money, honey.”

Ebony sighed and once again started for her office. “Isn’t it always?”

Sarah Klein was a force to be reckoned with. Where Dorothy Davenport was lax and seemingly uninterested, Mrs. Klein was beyond invested. She showed up with her own file, full of lists. There was a list of kosher caterers, prospective bands, and a guest list that rivaled the local white pages.

Once again, Jenna had been right. Lewis ogled her cleavage openly and

merely nodded when his mother asked him if he agreed with something. He shifted continuously in his chair and couldn't make eye contact. He had dark brown hair that hung in his dark eyes as he ducked his head to try and hide the fact that he was watching her chest.

When the hour was over, Ebony felt like she needed to shower. *There's nothing like being leered at by a twelve year old to make you feel like a dirty old woman*, she thought before standing to walk Mrs. Klein and her son out of her office.

"I really appreciate you coming to me for this event, Mrs. Klein," she said pasting on that work smile. "It's such a long drive from Connecticut."

Sarah smiled. Ebony couldn't help thinking the woman held a glow. She looked like a childbearing woman, generous hips and breasts, in a long floral dress. Her dark hair was pulled up in a messy bun and her face was almost angelic in its roundness. "I wouldn't have gone with anyone else after Dorothy Davenport told me you were doing Mindy's Sweet Sixteen."

"So, you know the Davenports?" *Did Jenna ever cease being right about everything?!*

"Oh, yes. The Davenports used to own the house beside our vacation home in Cozumel." Sarah dropped her voice, "you know, before they sold it off in the divorce."

Ebony nodded but remained quiet. It wasn't in good form to gossip about one client with the other.

She let out a sigh when the Kleins finally left.

“How was the meeting?” Jenna asked retrieving the file and handing her another. This one said *‘MEU-MEU FASHIONS’*.

“I think it went well,” Ebony said flipping through the file. “They know the Davenports.”

“That makes sense,” Jenna said returning to her desk. “You’ve got two phone messages on Outlook and the Meu-Meu teleconference will start in twenty minutes so make those calls fast.”

Ebony smiled. The Meu-Meu affair was huge. It was the biggest job she’d had to date. Molly Finley was a tiny red-head that designed women’s clothes sold in all the big named retailers, Nordstrom’s, Macy’s, Saks, etc. She had contacted them through their website to plan the dinner party and fashion show that would show off her upcoming fall line.

Ebony had secured the Brooklyn Museum of Art before the ink had dried on her contract. It was perfect. The museum was the ideal place for a fashion show that was exclusively women’s clothes. Considering there were entire floors dedicated to exhibiting feminist art for months at a time, Ebony couldn’t imagine a better place for Molly Finley to show off her new line.

After weeks of begging and scheduling with the curators, Ebony had gotten a date in late June and after that, everything else came easily. The party was

planned and in a matter of weeks, she'd have to execute it to perfection. That day's conference was to finalize the wording on the second round of invitations that would be mailed in two weeks.

Her stomach fluttered when she saw that two of the phone messages Jenna had sent through Microsoft Outlook were from Brock. She didn't hesitate to call him first.

"Thank God, it's you," he said after two rings.

Ebony smiled. "It sounds like you're glad to hear from me."

"You have no idea," Brock said, "I thought I'd be talking business all damned day. You'd think some people had never heard of a person working from home before. If one more person calls to ask me a question that my secretary can answer I'll chop down the phone pole myself."

"So, when did you find the time to call my office and leave messages if you've been victim to so much harassment?"

"I'd be a fool not to make time to do that."

Ebony bit her bottom lip to squelch the giggle that was threatening. *Damn! That man could talk the fleas off a dog.*

"Well, I have a meeting in ten minutes so you don't have much time."

Brock groaned. "Not you too."

"Yes, me too," Ebony said with an exaggerated sigh, "I have this troublesome

need to make money so I've gotten into the habit of working...turns out I'm pretty good at it."

"Yeah, I've got that problem too. Since I only have your ear for a few minutes, let me get straight to the point. I'd like to take you to dinner tonight."

Ebony forced herself to remain seated and not jump up and down repeatedly screaming, "Yes!"

"It's Monday," she said evenly. "It's not exactly a date night."

"I am completely aware of that and beg your favor because...well... because there is no way in hell I can wait until Friday night to see you again and lunch just isn't enough after what happened Saturday night."

Ebony flushed at the urgency in his voice and the montage of images that raced through her mind. They'd kissed so hard and so long that her already full mouth had been swollen when she woke up the next morning. She'd come dangerously close to begging him to take her upstairs instead of getting in her car and driving home at one a.m. "Well, Mr. Huntington, I will grant you the favor as long as you realize that I'm not going to give it up just because you managed to make it to date number three." *She hoped.*

"I completely understand I would never assume that you're a 'third date girl,' I wouldn't insult you that way."

"I appreciate that."

“I’ll wait as long as you need me to wait,” Brock said quietly, “something tells me you’re worth it.”

Chapter Four

Brock stared at Ebony as she approached the table. He'd stood as soon as he'd caught sight of her following the maître d' but now he was standing there, gaping as she smiled shyly under his open mouth stare. He'd practically begged her to see him that night and he'd never been so glad he'd groveled.

She wore a slinky black dress with spaghetti straps and a deep v-neck that showed off her beautiful breasts. The thin material hugged her curves and caught the light. He loved the sight of so much of her brown skin. Her hair was piled on top of her head with a perfect spiral curl falling down each cheek.

"Hi," she said smiling as she slid into the chair he had pulled out for her. "I guess you're not sick of watching me eat yet."

"Never," Brock whispered close to her ear before returning to his seat.

Ebony spread her napkin across her lap and took a sip of the Pinot Grigio the waiter had just poured.

"I hope you don't mind, I ordered for us while I was waiting."

"That's fine," Ebony said fidgeting with her napkin. "What are we having?"

"Duck L'Orange, with lentil and rice stuffing, and kale greens."

"Fancy," Ebony said spreading butter on a piece of French bread.

“I just hope you like it.”

She smiled. “I’m sure I’ll love it.”

“You look so beautiful,” Brock said watching her with eagle eyes.

“Thanks,” she mumbled around the crusty bread.

They continued their conversation in hushed tones and Brock couldn’t help but laugh when her eyes went wide at the sight of the crisp duck smothered in sauce.

“Omigod,” Ebony moaned after the first bite. “This is amazing, Brock. You have great taste!”

He watched her eyes flutter shut and leaned forward. “I know.”

Ebony’s eyes popped open at his words. Her face flushed when she caught the intensity in his gaze. She noticed that he hadn’t even picked up his fork.

“Did you drive here?” Brock asked an hour later when they stood in front waiting for the valet to pull the car around.

“No,” Ebony answered. “I had to put it in the shop this afternoon. I took a taxi.”

“Will you allow me to drive you home?”

“Of course.”

Ten minutes later, Brock had parked his gray BMW in her driveway and they stood at her front door in nervous silence; and somehow he was still

ridiculously handsome even in the weak orange light coming from the anti-bug florescent bulb beside the door.

“Would you like to come in for a drink?” Ebony asked fiddling with a loose string on her purse.

Brock tucked a finger under her chin and tipped her head up so he could see her eyes and she could see his. “I don’t think I should.”

His voice was deep, but quiet.

“I don’t want to put any pressure on you,” Brock said letting his hand leave her chin and making its way down her shoulder. He caught her hand in his to place a gentle kiss on it. “I can wait.”

They said their good nights. Brock placed a chaste kiss on her lips, shoving his hands into his pockets to stop himself from pulling her against him and deepening the kiss.



Thirty minutes later, Ebony was undressed and slipping into her robe when the doorbell rang. She frowned. Who was visiting so damn late? She couldn’t withhold the gasp when she saw Brock, well his shirt, through the peephole.

“Okay,” he said as soon as she opened the door. “I know I said I would wait as long as you needed me to, but I have to tell you, I’m about to hit the wall here.”

Ebony smiled. “Why, Mr. Huntington, you sound close to desperation.”

“It’s your fault,” Brock whispered, stepping into the house and her personal space. “You’ve taken me from a sex-starved man to a desperately horny animal.”

Ebony ran her hands over his broad chest and tipped her face up to look at him. “I’m so sorry, Brock. I didn’t mean to do that.”

He groaned, grabbed her roaming hands and pulled her close. He buried his nose in her hair and inhaled. “God, Ebony.”

She slid her hands around his waist and pressed her cheek against his chest. “Will you feel better if I let you stay here tonight?”

“That depends on what happens if I stay.”

Ebony smiled. “We could get to work on ending the dry spell we’ve both been having.”

“Really?” Brock held her by the shoulders and at arm’s length. He studied her face, but her black eyes looked up at him earnestly, not even a hint of teasing.

She nodded and he let out the breath he’d evidently been holding. He pulled open the sash on her robe. The red satin sheath fell off her shoulders revealing a black lace camisole and matching boy shorts.

Brock growled deep in his throat. “This is how you answer the door?”

Ebony let the robe fall to the floor. “I can go put something else on if you’d like.”

“No, no, no! I’ll destroy every piece of clothing in this house if you try it.”

Ebony's body reacted to the threat Brock had growled through his clenched teeth. It made her throb.

She slipped her hand into his and led him through the house to her bedroom. Brock glanced around the small bedroom. Her bed was large enough, covered with green and white pillows and a white down comforter. The rest of the room contained a small dresser, covered with perfume, jewelry boxes, and lotions, a matching hope chest, and an area rug with green, beige, and pink flowers in a pattern.

Ebony turned to face him again. *Damn*, she thought as his pale blue eyes traveled over her semi-nude body. *I am a third date girl!*

"Well," Ebony whispered, "are you going to take off your clothes or just stand there and stare at me all night?"

Brock's fingers flew over the tortoise shell buttons on his shirt as Ebony worked on his belt buckle. He shrugged out of his shirt and looked down at her trembling hands. Capturing them in his own hands, he lifted them to his lips.

Ebony sighed and turned to turn down her bed. Brock made quick work of the rest of his clothing and joined her on the queen-sized sleigh bed.

Brock gathered Ebony against him and pressed a hot kiss to her neck. His tongue grazed the column of her throat and she moaned.

"You taste even better than I imagined," Brock whispered. He tugged off her

panties and tossed them onto the floor along with his clothing. “Take this off,” he muttered fingering the camisole.

Ebony pulled the slip of fabric over her head and gasped when Brock took a nipple into his mouth the moment her breasts were free. His tongue caressed and stroked it to hardness before doing the same to the other.

“Your body is incredible,” he confessed when he’d successfully peaked both nipples and flooded her pussy.

“Thank you,” Ebony said blushing.

Brock’s fingers played along the valley between her breasts. “No, thank you.”

Ebony stared up at him and smiled. The sparkle in his light blue eyes and the way his dark hair was mussed made him look like a teenager, not a thirty-six year old man. He studied her with such concentration she began to squirm under his heated gaze.

Brock moved over her, parting her legs with his knee and Ebony finally got a good look at his dick. Her head began to swim with anticipation at the sight of his long, thick member jutting out at her.

It had been so long!

She was snapped out of her haze by the sound of tearing. She watched Brock put on the condom and smiled. *Finally!*

Brock's gaze caught hers as he leaned forward and prepared to enter her body. Ebony could hear her heart hammering in her ears. She gasped when the head of his dick pressed into her. *It's so big*, her mind screamed and she once again got the feeling she would faint. *That just won't do*, she thought, *I can't pass out at the first sign of a dick in almost three years!*

She'd just have to be a big girl and take it. She moaned as Brock pressed further inside. He looked like he was going through some things of his own. His brow was beaded with sweat and his jaw clenched tight.

Ebony wanted to ask if he was okay, but could only manage a guttural groan as he sheathed himself completely inside her body.

"You're so tight," he whispered. "It's incredible."

Ebony could only nod as her head swam and her body reacted to the sudden feeling of fullness. She didn't remember sex being so good; otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to go so long without it!

"Oh, Brock," she breathed as he began to move in and out of her wetness.

Before she knew it, Ebony was screaming to the heavens as she and Brock made love. She came once, twice, then three times, and she saw stars. Once again, she wondered how she hadn't missed that feeling in the past two and a half years.

Ebony's body yielded another orgasm, tearing a scream from her throat

and setting off his orgasm. “Ebony,” he gasped repeatedly as he filled the condom.

She was still coming down from her release when he left the bed and went into the bathroom. She gathered the covers around her and patted the bed when he returned. Brock slipped into the bed and noticed her dark eyes were almost closed.

“Goodnight,” he whispered kissing her nose.

“Night,” she muttered snuggling against his large frame.

Chapter Five

Brock tucked a strand of black hair behind Ebony's ear and smiled. She stirred, swatting at his hand in her sleep. He was in awe of her. She was steadily proving herself to be more than he could have ever hoped.

"What are you looking at?" she grumbled burying her face in the pillow.

"You," he whispered gently pulling the sheet away from her so her breasts were exposed.

"Well, don't." She clutched at the sheet but he pulled it just out of her reach. "It's too early."

Brock glanced at the window where the weak rays of sunlight were streaming through her sheer sage-colored curtains and across the bed.

"If I make you breakfast, can I look at you?"

"You make coffee and I'll put on a fucking parade."

"Naked?" Brock offered.

"If it's really good."

Twenty minutes later, Ebony made her way into the kitchen. She saw Brock sitting at her kitchen table folding up the *Wall Street Journal*. He smiled.

"Sit on my lap," Brock said so flippantly she wondered if she'd heard him

correctly.

“Excuse me?”

“I said,” he patted his thigh with a large mitt, “on my lap.”

Her body immediately went hot. “Uh...I...uh...why?”

“I just want to show you something.”

“What is it?” Ebony asked suspiciously.

Brock watched her brown thighs revealed as she crossed her arms, causing his white dress shirt to creep higher. He raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Are you scared?”

Ebony narrowed her dark eyes and frowned. “No,” she said haughtily and stalked across the kitchen. She turned to the side and sat gingerly on his leg, making sure her feet still supported her on the stone tile floor.

Brock rolled his eyes. He was not a mall Santa and she was not some petulant child. “No, no. Let me help you.” Before she could protest, Brock grabbed her waist and succeeded in planting her full on his lap, facing him, with her legs splayed on either side of his thighs. Her toes barely touched the floor.

“What are you...,” Ebony started but he silenced her with a searing kiss. His palms grazed her bare thighs now completely without coverage because the shirt had ridden so high.

“I want you,” he said when he freed her lips.

“You had me last night,” Ebony whispered, hesitant to open her eyes. Suddenly she felt like she was dreaming. Maybe she was still in bed.

“Let me finish,” Brock said holding her against him as he fiddled on the table behind her. “I want you to see how much you turn me on.”

Ebony rolled her eyes.

“Close your eyes,” he said, “and open your mouth.”

She nodded and obeyed.

The sweetness poured over her tongue first...maple syrup, followed by the warm fluffy texture of Belgian waffles.

“Mmm,” she moaned as she chewed. “Did you make this?”

“Just for you, sweetheart.”

“It’s so good!” She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

“Look what you do to me, Ebony.” Brock placed his hands on her waist and pulled her forward. She felt his hard cock pressing against her panty-covered mound.

“What’s that for,” she breathed.

“For you. Everything about you turns me on, especially the way you enjoy food.”

“I don’t enjoy food! Well...maybe I do but not in a weird way. I just like good food. Doesn’t everyone?”

“I was married to a woman that inventoried every calorie, and was always on a diet. No fat, no carbs, no sugar, no caffeine, no dairy, no-.”

“Okay! Okay!” Ebony interrupted waving her hands. “That sounds like hell!”

“It was,” Brock said with a shrug. “She was miserable and so was everyone around her, most of all, me.”

Ebony smiled. “I can’t picture you miserable.” She brushed his dark brown locks out of his eyes and kissed his forehead.”

“That’s only because you’ve made me so happy.”

She let her hand drop to his lap and his erection pulsed against her palm. “Is this what you call happy?”

Brock’s hands slipped from her waist to tug aside her panties. “That depends on what we do about it.”



“You’re late,” Jenna said when Ebony walked into the office two hours later. “The Ryder meeting is in twenty minutes and....” Jenna stopped cold when she finally looked at Ebony. “I don’t believe it!”

“What?” Ebony asked, stopping her stroll to her office.

“You got some!” Jenna launched herself out of her chair and followed her boss.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jenna rolled her eyes. “Like hell! Look at you. You’re wearing a dress!”

“So?” Ebony dropped her purse in the bottom desk drawer and fell into her chair.

“You never wear a dress. That means, this morning you weren’t getting dressed for *work*, you were getting dressed for the person watching your ass!”

Ebony stopped booting up her computer, glanced down at her vintage Diane Von Furstenberg wrap dress, and glared at Jenna. “Are you kidding me?”

Jenna crossed her slender arms and returned the glare. “You come in here doing the slut-stroll and expect me not to notice?”

“What the hell is the ‘*slut-stroll*’?”

Jenna smiled. “It’s like the walk-of-shame except you’re not wearing the outfit you had on yesterday. You could pass for normal, except for the dopey grin on your face and the ‘*I-don’t-really-have-time-to-do-my-hair-after-going-another-round-this-morning-ponytail*’. Tell me I’m lying!”

“Okay, fine!” Ebony cried. “You’re right. I did have company last night and he was still there this morning when I was getting ready for work. I’m late because he made waffles for breakfast.”

“Sure,” Jenna said rolling her eyes, “*that’s* why you’re late! I’m sure Mr. Huntington had nothing on his mind this morning but waffles.”

Ebony wanted to insist that her tardiness was strictly breakfast related, but Jenna had her dead to rights. Instead she said, “Could you bring the Ryder file to me please? That’s an anniversary party right? Did we get all the figures to finalize our estimate?”

Jenna waved away the questions and dropped into a chair. She crossed her long legs and her fuchsia Stuart Weitzman heel waggled furiously. Ebony took a moment to admire the shoes, before apprising the rest of Jenna’s outfit. The slender woman wore well-tailored cream-colored linen pants and a pale pink blouse. The only thing she had on that matched the bright pink shoes was a chunky bracelet on her right hand.

“Ebony,” Jenna finally said, “give up the details.”

“I’m not telling you any details!” she scoffed turning back to her computer monitor.

“Okay, okay. Just answer one question.”

“One question,” Ebony agreed.

“Was it worth the wait? Don’t tell me you broke three years of celibacy for...” she shrugged her shoulders, “eh.”

Ebony rolled her eyes. “Two and a half years.”

“This isn’t a Congressional hearing, woman, just answer the question!”

“It was definitely worth it, Jenna. Now bring me the Ryder file!”

Jenna gave a mock-salute, unfolded herself from the chair and practically skipped back into the reception area.



Ebony had just finished finalizing the guest list for Mindy Davenport's Sweet Sixteen party. She checked each name against the engraved blue and white invitations and put them in a manila envelope to be delivered to the Davenports. She placed the extra invitations, just in case Mindy decided she'd forgotten to invite some people, in a separate envelope and filed it in her cabinet. She liked to keep pictures and stationery of events in case they came in handy later.

She scribbled a note instructing Jenna to have the courier deliver the invitations to the Davenport home first thing in the morning, stuck it on the envelope and gathered her things to leave. It was after six, Jenna had been gone for almost two hours.

She dropped the packet of invitations on Jenna's desk, locked up, and drove home.

She had just taken off her heels and tossed them in the general direction of her closet when her cell phone rang.

"Did I tell you this morning how much I wanted to take that dress right back off once you'd gotten it on?"

Ebony's heart leapt at the sound of Brock's husky voice.

“You may have mentioned it,” she said giggling.

“So, can I come over and take it off you now?”

Ebony frowned. “I thought you had to work in the city today.”

“I did. I had a meeting this morning, you and that dress made me late. I was grievously ashamed.”

“I didn’t make you late!” she objected.

Brock chuckled. “I beg to differ. However, I will say that it may not have been the dress. I could place blame on that extra forty minutes we spent in the shower. Shower or dress...either way, you’re a co-conspirator.”

“I will not stand here and let you accuse me of making you late for a meeting, especially when I had no prior knowledge of said meeting. I cannot be held accountable for your delayed arrival when I had no idea there was a table of corporate big-wigs waiting around a table for you to drive into Manhattan!”

“First of all, their wigs are nowhere as big as mine, considering I own the company. Secondly, I could argue that your wanton ways served to sway me from my intended course. I could have easily left you and driven to the city, had you not looked so damned good in my shirt, and in the shower, and in that dress! *J’accuse, mademoiselle, j’accuse!*”

Ebony laughed. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“How could you possibly?” Brock questioned.

“I’ll be wanton tonight and prudent in the morning.”

“I don’t know if I like that idea.”

“What’s the alternative when you have such a long commute?” Ebony teased as she fell onto her bed.

“Good point,” Brock sighed. “Looks like I’ll just have to stop scheduling meetings before ten a.m.”

“You are so smart!” she giggled.

“Now that we have that settled,” Brock said with an air of finality, “What are you wearing?”

Chapter Six

“Omigod, Ebony, my dad is totally going to ruin my party!” Mindy looked to be on the verge of tears, her bottom lip quivering, eyes full of tears.

“Oh no, honey,” Ebony said putting a hand on the young girl’s back. “What happened?” She had been on her way home when Mindy had called and asked her to stop by her house. She’d sounded panicked over the phone, but face-to-face; she looked about a half-a-second away from hyperventilating.

“He called the school and found out that I have a “C” average in Intro to Ethics,” Mindy sniffled, “and my dad is such a hard-ass about good grades, he’s *totally* pissed and said he wants to cancel the party!”

“Can’t your mom talk to him?”

“They don’t talk as much as argue and that won’t help my case at all.”

Ebony nodded still rubbing small circles on her back. “So...what are we going to do?”

“I was hoping you could talk to him.” Ebony began to shake her head in protest. “He doesn’t know you! You can reason with him.”

Ebony fought the urge to sigh and deny. It wasn’t her job to beg someone not to pull the plug on an event. That’s what the deposit was all about. Mindy was

looking at her when she blinked out of her thoughts. Her eyes silently pleaded with Ebony to help her.

“Okay...okay...I’ll give it a try. What’s his number?”

“I can’t give you his number. He said I’m not to hand it out to anyone. I’ll call him and have him call you. You do have your cell on you, right?”

Ebony rooted around in her bag for a minute before finding the phone.

“Great. I’ll be right back.”

Ebony sat on the same expensive-looking chair she’d sat on her first visit to the home. She played with the phone, dropping it from one hand to the other and twirling it between her fingers. It was almost ten minutes later when Mindy rushed back into the sitting room. “He’s calling right now.”

Beyonce’s “Crazy In Love” rang out through the still room. Ebony felt herself blush when she caught Mindy’s smirk.

Ebony fumbled with the phone but answered it breathlessly.

“Oh shit,” Brock said on the other end. “*You’re* the party planner?”

Ebony’s heart leapt into her throat. She should have known something was wrong when that ridiculous song had signaled the phone call. Jenna was so fired this time! She glanced at Mindy who was staring at her with her blue eyes so wide they were almost round. “Yes, I am the party planner. You must be the party pooper.” Work smile.

“I can’t believe this,” Brock muttered.

“Well, there are only two party-planners in Hillsdale. My firm has been open the longest and is more experienced with larger, more exclusive events.” *It wasn’t bragging if it was true.*

“I thought they were using a firm in the city.”

“No,” Ebony sighed. “I guess not.”

“Well,” he said softly, “You’re supposed to convince me that I should go ahead and let Mindy have her party.”

“Yes. Well, a ‘C’ isn’t really that bad,” Ebony started. “It is average.”

“Average is not acceptable.”

“Well, if she goes into a business career field, she’ll need to have questionable ethics anyway.”

Mindy smiled.

“Is that a shot at me?” Brock asked with a smile in his voice.

“Not at all...but seeing as you are such a good business man, you’ll understand that you’ve already invested in this party and the deposits are all non-refundable.”

“I could cancel the checks.”

“Yes, sir. You could do that but then it will become a legal matter. Besides, you’ll have a miserable teenager on your hands and that can’t be easy.”

“Fair enough, Ms. Harris. Please tell my daughter you’ve managed to convince me not to cancel the party. However, the average gets up to a ‘B’ in the month she has left in school or that party will be the last time she sees her friends until school starts again in September.”

“I’ll be sure to relay the message,” Ebony said feeling the tiniest thrill at the authoritative tone in his voice.



“What are we going to do?” Brock said as she walked into his house that night.

“I don’t know,” Ebony sighed. She was slow to turn around and face him, not wanting him to see how embarrassed she felt.

“I didn’t know, I mean, when Mindy gave me the number I thought it sounded familiar, but I never thought...,” his voice trailed off.

“We should stop seeing each other until the party is over,” Ebony offered, her voice as weak as her resolve. “It’s probably the best thing.”

Brock stared at her as if she’d grown a second head. “I don’t think that’s best.”

Ebony’s eyes widened with surprise. “You know what they say about mixing business with pleasure.”

Brock reached for her hand and pulled her close. His eyes studied her face

earnestly. "Pleasure is your business," he muttered cupping her face in his large hands. "Besides, I don't think I can go two weeks without you."

Ebony's heart skipped its next beat. "It's only ten days."

Brock frowned. "I'll make a deal with you."

Ebony narrowed her eyes but waited to hear the terms.

"I will not call you, visit you, text you, or e-mail you for the next ten days...as long as you spend the night with me tonight."

"All night?" Ebony teased.

"And one or two rounds in the morning," Brock said grinning.

"Okay," Ebony said lifting herself onto her toes and pulling him down to her.

"Seal the deal with a kiss."



Ebony moaned lightly at the warm feeling creeping into her. She was asleep but parts of her were slowly waking up. The warmth crept from her thighs upward.

"Hey," Brock's sleep-hoarse voice rumbled in her ear.

"Hmm," she moaned, still refusing to open her eyes.

"Let's get this day off to a good start, what do you say?"

"Whassat mean?" she muttered, knowing full well what he meant.

Brock's hand drifted over her bare belly and down. Her eyes opened when

his fingers breached the waistband of the boxer shorts she'd borrowed for sleeping.

The clock in front of her showed that it was after seven.

"No time," she attempted even as his hand covered her sex.

"Plenty of time," Brock argued. "We'll make it quick."

"I don't think you're capable of a quickie," Ebony mock-complained.

"I'll try my best not to make you late for work," he said working his mouth against her bare shoulder.

"Well...I am the boss," she said rolling over to face him. She wrapped her hand around his cock, making him grunt.

"Keep that up and it'll be quicker than a quickie!"

"An *oopsie*?" Ebony grinned. "That would be a first...something worth seeing!"

Brock grabbed her hand and stilled it. "None of that!" he growled pulling her leg over his waist. He moved over her, gripped both her wrists and pinned them to the pillow just above her head.

"Brock!" she gasped wriggling beneath him.

His grin could only be described as wicked, revealing itself slowly from one gently upturned corner to the other.

"I see I'm going to have to buy a special set of handcuffs for you!"

Ebony yelped at his statement, but before she could protest, his lips crushed against hers.

“Dad!” a voice called from downstairs. “Dad, are you up yet?”

“Oh, my God!” Ebony gasped pushing against Brock’s massive shoulders after he’d released her hands. “Mindy’s here!”

“Shit!” he snapped hurrying off the bed and rushing to the bedroom door.

“Pants!” Ebony hissed just as his hand hit the knob.

“Shit!” Brock repeated, retreating to his dresser, he yanked open a drawer.

Ebony’s eyes widened when she heard the soft knock at the door. She slid off the bed and onto the floor. She located the t-shirt Brock had taken off the night before and slipped it on over her head.

“Just a minute!” Brock called.

“Come on, dad! I’ve been calling you forever.”

Ebony crawled into the bathroom and pulled the door shut just as Brock opened the other. She sat on the side of the tub with both hands over her mouth so she wouldn’t make a sound. She hoped her hammering heart couldn’t be heard outside the bathroom.

She strained to make out what was being said on the other side of the door but the voices were too muffled. She was too chicken to go to the door and press her ear against it to eavesdrop. She just wanted Mindy to leave so she could sneak

out.

“What are you doing?” she heard Brock boom. His voice was tight, as if he was frightened.

She closed her eyes tight and listened as Mindy’s voice became more distinctive, meaning she was getting closer to the bathroom! Ebony was just short of panic, she glanced around the room for somewhere to hide. Why didn’t Brock have a regular tub with a shower curtain like normal people? She’d appreciated the huge tub and its jets of massaging water before, but at the moment, it seemed like a useless luxury since it would provide her no cover.

“Where is she?” Mindy’s voice was just outside the door. She was teasing her father. Ebony heard Brock say something about no one being there just before she stood up. She crept across the bathroom, past the dressing area with its overstuffed black leather settee and into the walk-in closet. All it took was a quick glance to see that there was nowhere for her to hide in there either. She pulled the closet door shut with a quiet click and sunk onto the floor.

Ebony heard the bathroom door open and the conversation clear as a bell.

“She’s here somewhere,” Mindy said loudly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Brock countered. “Get out of my room and let me get dressed.”

“Whatever dad,” Mindy said. “I’m not mad or anything. I mean, it’s about

time. I don't know why you're trying to hide it."

"I don't have to hide anything from you, young lady. Now go downstairs!"

"Tell me again how it's wrong to lie," Mindy teased. Ebony could hear the two of them moving around in the bathroom, even the shower door being pulled open.

"I'm not lying," said Brock.

"Then those are your red panties on the bedroom floor?"

Ebony bit her lip. Why hadn't she thought of picking up her clothes before she ran into the bathroom?

"Oh, and I guess the beat up Audi in the drive is yours too!" Mindy giggled.

Beat up, Ebony thought. Her car was not beat up! She took very good care of it and--

Suddenly the closet door swung open and Ebony was face-to-knee with Mindy. She looked up just as the girl's blue eyes went round.

"Ebony?" she asked in a strained voice.

She wanted the plush carpet to part and swallow her whole. She'd just been caught half-dressed by one of her clients!

"I'm so sorry," Ebony started but Mindy just held up her hand and turned to her father.

"You're sleeping with my party planner?" she asked him.

“I didn’t know,” Brock said holding up his hands. “I didn’t know until yesterday.”

“I can’t believe you did this,” said Mindy pushing past him and escaping out the bathroom door.

Brock sighed and pulled Ebony to standing. “I’ll go talk to her. You stay in here and get dressed.” Ebony nodded.

Chapter Seven

“You can’t fire her!” Brock boomed. The four of them stood facing each other like the corners of a square. Their raised voices echoed against the twelve-foot ceiling in the foyer. Ebony was sure the chandelier would shatter over their heads any minute. She barely remembered getting dressed and driving over to the Davenport’s house. She just stood like a robot watching them scream at each other, because of her.

Ebony flinched but Dorothy just jutted her chin forward like a defiant toddler. “I can do whatever I want!” she hissed.

“But it’s *my* party,” Mindy moaned.

“And *my* money!” Brock added.

Dorothy ignored her daughter and glared at Brock. “I can’t believe you, Brock! You are ruining this for Mindy!”

Brock’s square jaw set. “You’re the one ruining it!”

“She’s your only daughter!” Dorothy screamed so loud, the last word echoed against the high ceiling and stone tiles in the foyer.

Brock opened his mouth, but shut it again quickly, as if biting back what he really wanted to say. “You’re the one that didn’t want more kids,” he grumbled.

“Just look at how you treat us!” Dorothy screamed. “I think I made the right decision.”

Ebony’s throat tightened. Dorothy was just saying that to hurt Brock. She and Mindy were financed with a life of luxury because of Brock. That qualified as pretty damned good treatment in her opinion.

Brock was physically restraining himself. His fists were clenched by his side and there were curious throbbing veins in his forehead and along his neck. “It shouldn’t have been just you’re decision.” His voice was strained with anger.

Dorothy rolled her eyes and swept them up and down Brock’s form. “Ugh, just look at you. Thank God, I did get that abortion, otherwise....” She caught her mistake a few seconds too late. Her whole face changed into a look of horror and her hands flew over her mouth.

Ebony couldn’t suppress a gasp. It just came out and was echoed by one from Mindy.

“Omigod,” Mindy shrieked. She swayed a second and bolted for the staircase. Ebony

watched as Brock moved to follow but was halted by Dorothy’s cold tone.

“Don’t you dare,” she practically spat, “I don’t want you anywhere near her!”

Ebony decided she’d had enough. She walked through the tense silence and followed Mindy up the winding staircase. Mindy ducked into a room to the right

and Ebony caught the door before it slammed. She walked to the king-size bed where Mindy had collapsed onto the cotton-candy pink duvet. She was face-down, unmoving except for her quivering shoulders.

Ebony sat on the bed and sighed. "Mindy?"

A high-pitched whine was the only response.

Damn it, Ebony thought, *I am so not good with kids*. She'd grown up an only child. Even back then she never could figure out the other kids. It may have had to do with the fact that her father spoke to her and treated her as if she was older. He never felt the need to dummy things down for her. As a result her level of social and emotional maturity was always well above her peers.

She put a hand gently between Mindy's shoulder blades. "Oh, honey," she cooed, "don't cry. Everything is going to be okay."

Mindy turned her wet face just slightly to look up at Ebony. "It's not going to be okay," she said flatly.

"I'll find you another planner. Your party will be just fine." She patted the girl's back gently.

"Omigod!" Mindy moaned rolling away from Ebony's hand. "I don't care about the fucking party! Did you hear what that bitch just said to him? She had an abortion!"

"I...I did hear that." Ebony folded her hands in her lap and stared at the

white carpet beneath her ballet flats.

“Shit,” Mindy said pressing her hands over her eyes. “She killed his kid. All he ever wanted was a family and she...shit...”

“Wow,” Ebony breathed.

“And he’s such a great dad,” Mindy continued seemingly forgetting that Ebony was still there. “Whenever I got sick, he would send the nanny home, take the day off work, and take care of me; all by himself...and I’m not even his biological kid.”

“Huh?” Ebony turned to look at Mindy. *I couldn’t have heard that right.*

Mindy sat up on her elbows and gazed at Ebony. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know that.”

Ebony shrugged. “I didn’t. How was I supposed to know? You said your dad was paying for the party...I just assumed.”

“You didn’t wonder why I don’t have his last name?” asked Mindy.

Ebony shrugged again. “I thought your mom’s family was big on keeping the family name or something.”

Mindy snorted. “Oh please. Papa Davenport lost all the family money with bad investments, embezzling, and tax evasion. That name isn’t worth shit anymore. If daddy hadn’t married mom when he did...”

“Melinda!” Dorothy snapped. She stood in the doorway, hands on bony hips

and a deep scowl on her face. Ebony had never seen so many lines in Dorothy Davenport's face. It was frightening to see cracks in the porcelain.

"Get the hell out of here!" Dorothy screamed, but Ebony didn't move. Instead, she watched Mindy leap off the bed and approach her mother.

"You get out! You're not firing her and you're not ruining my party on top of everything else!"

Dorothy stepped back and stared at her daughter. In that moment, Ebony could finally see the difference in the two. Dorothy's anger was ugly; it twisted her surgically altered face and made her hurt everyone around her, even her own family. Mindy's anger somehow softened her. She cried for her father and protected Ebony from her mother's venomous ranting. Ebony watched as the two blondes faced off silently.

Brock's hand seemed to appear from thin air on her arm. She hadn't seen him enter the room, but there he was holding her arm, leading her past the silent showdown. Ebony walked blindly through the house, clutching Brock's hand.

He deposited her in her car and even started the engine.

"Sweetheart," he said cutting through her hazy confusion, "I'll meet you at my place okay?"

"Oh, Brock," Ebony breathed, squeezing his hand until her fingers hurt. "I'm so sorry..."

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” He landed a kiss on her knuckles,
“Unless you’re not at my house when I get there.”



Ebony wiped the tears from her cheeks when she saw Brock approaching in her side view mirror. Damn, she felt like an idiot. She should have known better. She should have just broken it off with him as soon as she found out that he was Mindy’s father.

Don’t mix business with pleasure. She knew that! That was the first rule of business. Her relationship with Brock had put her life’s work in jeopardy. If prospective clients found out she had an affair with a client, they wouldn’t hire her. Party Girl, Inc. would be out of business, she and Jenna would be unemployed. Sure, she threatened to fire Jenna all the time, but she knew that Party Girl, Inc. wouldn’t work without Jenna. She was not only her wise-ass know-it-all assistant, she was her best friend.

Brock’s sharp knock on the window made her jump. She powered down the glass and tried to smile.

“Hi,” he practically whispered, “I should have a key made for you so you don’t have to cry out here in the driveway.”

Ebony shrugged and dropped her gaze to her lap. “I don’t need a key.”

“I’m so sorry,” Brock said. “Dorothy is just upset right now. She’s big on

overreacting..."

"She's right," Ebony sighed. Her shoulders slumped forward.

"What?" Brock couldn't hide his surprise.

"I deserve to be fired," Ebony said tearfully. "I knew who you were and I was completely unprofessional."

"No you were not," Brock said shaking his head. "We were involved before this party thing started."

Ebony rolled her eyes. "We should have had restraint. As soon as we figured everything out, we should have been strictly professional."

"You think we should have gone back to Ms. Harris and Mr. Huntington after we'd slept together?"

"Yes!" Ebony snapped.

Brock blinked at her hasty answer. "You could have done that?"

Ebony bit her bottom lip hard. She couldn't answer that, instead she started her car. She finally looked at Brock and let her tears flow again. "I've got to go," she said coldly.

Brock's eyes narrowed and his jaw set. "Fine." He stood and backed away from her car. He watched as her tail lights disappeared down the long drive and went into the house. His curses echoed in the empty foyer.

Chapter Eight

“What the hell are you eating?” Jenna snapped when Ebony got into the office on Monday.

“It’s a bear claw,” Ebony answered, but her mouth was full so it sounded more like, “Is-a-bur-caw”.

“What happened?” Jenna said with a sigh.

“Nuffin’.”

Jenna launched out of her chair to follow Ebony into her office. “Don’t lie, Ebony. You suck at it. You only eat breakfast at Taste-E Bakery when you’re upset.”

Ebony dropped her purse onto her desk and swallowed her mouthful. “I just wanted a damn donut, Jenna!”

“I’m going to forgive you that outburst because you’re carbo-loading and all hopped up on sugar!” Jenna snapped. “Now are you going to tell me what happened or just sit there lashing out with glaze around your mouth?”

Ebony sighed and fell into her chair. “I need coffee.”

“I’ll be right back with your cup.”

Jenna watched in shock as Ebony relayed the previous day’s events between

gulps of coffee and bites of bear claw.

“You just drove away?” Jenna practically shrieked.

Ebony nodded.

“Did you at least call him?”

Ebony shook her head.

Jenna sighed. “No wonder you’re stuffing your face.” Ebony popped the last bite of donut in her mouth and slumped in her chair. “You may have fucked up the only relationship you’ve had in years.”

“Did you miss the part where I got fired? That’s the big thing here! I lost the job!”

“That’s not the big thing!” Jenna said loudly. “We got a huge payday from the Crane-Preston wedding and two more parties on the books.”

“But...”

“No, Ebony...but nothing! You need to call Brock and apologize.”

“Apologize for what?”

“You need to apologize for telling him that your relationship is less important than his daughter’s birthday party!”

“I didn’t say that!”

“Yes, you did.”

“Oh, shit, I did.” Ebony slumped further in her office chair. “My business is

going down the toilet and I'm sending my relationship down with it."

Jenna threw up her hands dramatically. "That's what I'm saying!"

"I've got to call Brock!" Ebony grabbed her desk phone from its cradle.

Jenna nodded and crossed her legs demurely. Ebony put the phone back in the cradle and glared at her. "You're excused, Jenna."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "You're going to tell me anyway!"

"Fine," Ebony sighed, "but you better not say a word!"

Jenna motioned locking her lips and tossing the key.

Ebony retrieved the phone and dialed Brock's cell phone. The call went straight to voicemail. "Uh...hi, Brock. I was just calling to apologize for yesterday. I'm so sorry. Call me. This is Ebony, by the way."

Jenna shook her head when Ebony replaced the phone. "You're an idiot."

"You're fired," Ebony snapped sticking out her tongue.

"Meu-Meu teleconference in a half hour," Jenna answered as she got up to go back to her desk.

"I'm going to need more coffee," Ebony mumbled.



Brock frowned at his cell phone on his desk. It beeped plaintively, signaling a waiting message. He'd seen who it was that had called on the caller id and he didn't want to hear Ebony's message. He'd lose his resolve when he heard her

voice.

He dialed his daughter's cell phone number.

"Hi, daddy."

Brock frowned at the sad tone in Mindy's voice. "What'd your mom say?"

Since the blow up, Brock and Dorothy hadn't spoken. He hated using Mindy as a conduit, but at this point it seemed necessary.

"She said we're going to pay off Ebony and she'll execute the party plans herself."

"Damn it," Brock grumbled. Dorothy couldn't organize a damned thing. That was part of the reason he was paying for her life coach. No doubt, his ex-wife kept seeing that life coach just to have one more thing for Brock to fund, knowing he despised the fact that she paid other people to run her life.

"I'll fix it." He swiveled around in his black leather chair and gazed out the plate glass window at the building tops around him. Usually the bird's eye view of the city gave him a sense of calm, but not today.

"Thanks, Daddy. I'm sorry I overreacted. This is all my fault."

Brock sighed. "It's not your fault. I should have...when I found out..."

"You deserve to have someone special in your life," Mindy said over his fumbled explanation. "I want you to be happy."

"I want the same for you. I'll start looking for another planner."

“Are you coming home this weekend?”

Brock could hear the strain in his daughter’s voice. He couldn’t stand her thinking he was upset with her and staying in the city for spite. “I’ll drive up on Friday.”

“Okay, bye daddy.” Before he could respond, the line went dead. No doubt she had rushed off to tell her friends that her dad was donning his red cape to swoop in and save her Sweet Sixteen. He just had to figure out how exactly he was going to get a planner to execute a previously planned party on incredibly short notice.

After five rejections, Brock slammed down his office phone in anger. He put his elbows on his desk and rubbed his temples. The party was in a week and everyone he spoke with informed him that they were busy, booked, or not interested.

“I have to tell you Mr. Huntington, you’ll be hard pressed to find anyone that will simply step-in and substitute at this point. I have my own florists, caterer, and venues that I partner with. For me to drop them and plug myself into someone else’s event would not make very good business sense,” one woman had told him before hanging up in his ear.

Brock picked up the phone and dialed Dorothy’s cell phone, hoping she would answer even though she was furious with him.

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to call me!” Dorothy said in lieu of a polite hello.

Brock immediately regretted calling her cell. He should have called the house phone and left a message. In Dorothy’s mind anyone worth talking to called her directly. The house phone was for call-screening purposes only. “I just talked to Mindy.”

“So what? Are you rubbing it in because she’ll hardly say two words to me?”

“No, Dorothy! I’m calling to tell you that Ebony will finish out her contract and execute Mindy’s party.”

“The hell you say!”

Brock’s jaw clenched and his temples throbbed at her indignant tone.

“No, it’ll be exactly as I say. I haven’t invested in this party for you to ruin it!”

Dorothy snorted. “You think I give a shit about your investment, Brock? You can invest in whatever whore you want, but this one won’t be anywhere near my daughter’s birthday party!”

“Don’t you ever call her a whore,” Brock said through clenched teeth.

“Considering the condition you were in when we got married, that’s not a word you of all people should toss around.”

“Are you calling *me* a whore?” Dorothy shrieked.

“I’m not saying you’re a whore for being pregnant out of wedlock, Dee...but when you have no idea which of the many European men you slept with throughout the summer is the father...”

“Don’t you dare speak to me that way and stop calling me Dee, you know I hate it!” Dorothy growled.

Brock turned to gaze out his office window again, this time the feeling of calm did come with the view. “You’re the one who brought the term *whore* into the conversation. Where are you right now, Dee? Are you playing Bridge with your friends; maybe out to tea with your mother? Why don’t you put me on speaker so we can discuss who is the whore between you and Ebony in greater detail?”

Dorothy made a noise somewhere between a choke and a gasp. “How dare you!”

“I’ll have Mindy call and rehire her party planner. I’m sure I’ll see you at the party.”

Chapter Nine

Ebony dropped the spoon into the empty Haagen-Dazs container and sighed. It had only taken an hour to polish it off. She'd come home from work that Friday determined not to wallow in the misery that had consumed her the entire week. That lasted until she got into her pajamas and onto the couch. She knew she should have gone out to dinner or shopping. That would have made her feel better but she turned to sugar and cream instead.

The ringing of the doorbell startled her. It was probably Jenna coming over to try to cheer her up. Over the past week Jenna had been so nice and considerate. She hadn't changed her ring tone once.

"Daddy?" Ebony asked when she pulled open the door.

"Hey, hey, baby girl!" Gregory Harris said jovially. He grinned and opened his arms for her to step into. Ebony quickly got over her shock and launched herself into his arms. She buried her face in his broad chest and inhaled his scent. He smelled so familiar, like home.

She suddenly had a flash of her father holding her when she was six. She'd asked why her mom was gone, why was she the one girl in her class whose mother wasn't around for the Mother's Day Tea in the cafeteria. She'd wanted details but

knowing that she was too young for those details, Gregory had comforted her instead.

Gregory's large hand rested on his daughter's head when she didn't let go right away. "What's wrong, baby girl?"

Ebony wanted to say that everything was fine, but Jenna was right. She was a terrible liar.

"I just broke up with this guy," she muttered stepping back and allowing him entrance into the house.

Gregory frowned. He studied Ebony's face and noted the tears in her eyes and her deep bedraggled expression. "You're probably too good for him anyway."

Ebony tried to smile but instead she hiccupped and her tears flowed freely.

"You want to tell me what happened?" Gregory said fishing his handkerchief from his suit pocket and giving it to her.

"Yeah, okay," Ebony said between sobs.



Brock pulled into his drive behind a brand new black Saab 9-7X SUV. He frowned and wondered exactly how much the new car was costing him. Dorothy changed vehicles the way he changed the filter in the Brita pitcher. When Brock got out and shut the door of his Lexus, he realized that it wasn't his ex-wife getting out of the Saab; his first clue being the shiny black alligator loafer that

extended from the leg of a well-pressed pant-leg when the door swung open.

Brock stared as a slender, but well-built African-American man exited the vehicle completely and proceeded toward him. The man was at least ten years older than him, and a foot shorter, but walked in strong, determined strides. His complexion was the same color as a paper bag, his eyes hazel, and a touch of gray at his temples.

“Are you Brock Huntington?” the man asked when they were within two feet of each other.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m Gregory Harris,” he said extending his hand.

“Harris?” Brock repeated.

“Yes, I believe you and my daughter Ebony are seeing each other.”

“Well,” Brock sighed. “We were. She ended our relationship.”

Gregory frowned, studied Brock and shook his head. “Could we step inside and talk?”

“Of course.” Brock led his guest into the foyer and was headed into the den when Gregory stopped short.

“I won’t take up much of your time, Mr. Huntington. Ebony is not the kind of girl that jumps in and out of relationships. She is very upset that you refuse to return her calls. I don’t like to see my daughter cry. I’m sure you understand that,

as a father yourself.”

Brock nodded. “I do understand, but after this argument...”

“From what I’ve heard that was hardly an argument.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Harris, I was married for a long time, and divorced for not-long-enough. I know what an argument is.”

Gregory rolled his eyes. “I was married too. That’s why I know that if you really love someone, a disagreement or misunderstanding is not worth throwing away something that means so much to both of you.”

Brock’s shoulders slumped. “You’re absolutely right.”

Gregory nodded and turned to leave. He stopped once he’d pulled open the front door and turned back to Brock. “I’d also suggest you invest in a lock for your bedroom door, son. That’s just good parenting.”

Brock didn’t know whether to laugh or be embarrassed. By the time he recovered, Ebony’s father was pulling out of his driveway.



The next day, Ebony stood from her desk and gasped.

Brock took her in. She wore black and white pin-striped low-waisted slacks and a black t-shirt with a large blue-green circle in the middle. Under the circle was printed in white letters: *My Mood Ring Says You’re Pissin’ Me Off!* The t-shirt ended well before the waistband of her pants, showing an excess of her smooth

brown stomach.

“What are you doing here?” Ebony asked sinking back into her seat.

“I’ve come to apologize.” Brock folded himself into one of the chairs in front of her desk. “I’ve been an idiot.”

Ebony tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “Did my dad talk to you?”

“How’d you know?”

“That sounds like something he would say.” Ebony sighed. “Look, I didn’t mean to sic my big, bad, daddy on you. He came to see me and I was upset. I thought I would just unload on him and feel better. I didn’t mean for him to track you down like a dog.”

“That’s just what I felt like too, a dog.”

Ebony ran a hand through her hair nervously. “I’m sorry I dropped you like that. The whole situation was just so intense. I should have thought before I said those things. I was just so upset about losing the job...but you’re more important than any party. I didn’t realize until it was too late!”

Brock nodded. “I shouldn’t have been such a stubborn ass and returned at least one of your phone calls.”

“True,” Ebony said leaning back in her chair. “Mindy called me and said that you want me to finish out the contract and throw her party.”

Brock nodded. “You’re the only party girl for me. Will you give me another

chance?”

“Of course, I will, Mr. Huntington.” Ebony leaned forward on her hands and grinned.

Brock put a hand over his heart. “I thought we were going to end without me being able to tell you how much I love you.”

Ebony’s eyes shone with tears. “I love you too, Brock.”

“Good thing,” he mused leaning forward and grabbing her small hand in his. “I thought I was going to have to go another six years without sex!”

Ebony looked at her watch. “You’ll be lucky to go another six hours!”

Brock felt himself harden. “Seriously?”

“No doubt,” Ebony said with a coy smile. “These past two weeks were harder to get through than the two years before!”

Epilogue

Ebony stood on her toes and waved wildly over the heads of those around her. Mindy, adrift in a sea of caps and gowns, smiled and waved back.

Beside Ebony, Dorothy rolled her eyes and Brock smiled.

“Sorry,” Mindy said quickly. “Everyone wants to take pictures!” She pulled off her graduation cap and ran her fingers through her hair.

“It’s okay,” Ebony said quickly.

“That ceremony was forever,” Dorothy sighed.

“I know,” Brock said nodding. “I didn’t think Lisa would make it through without crying.” He gave his thirteen-month-old daughter a bounce in his arms and she giggled.

“She’s a good baby,” Mindy said handing her hat and diploma to Dorothy. “Do you want your sister to hold you?” she asked holding out her hands.

Lisa stretched her arms out to her sister and laughed when Mindy swooped her into a rough kiss.

“She *is* cute,” Dorothy said brushing her fingers against Lisa’s ebony curls. The baby studied her with round, dark blue eyes, and a pursed pout on her pink lips. She decided to ignore Dorothy and turned back to her beloved sister. Mindy

wiped her pale pink lipstick off the baby's pale, cherubic cheek.

"It's just so hard to lose weight after you've had a baby, isn't it?" Dorothy said turning to face Ebony. "You never get back to where you were before."

Brock frowned and was about to speak when Ebony put a hand on his arm. "I know what you mean, Dee."

Dorothy frowned.

"I'm only four months along with this baby and I feel like a cow."

Dorothy's face went slack as her mouth dropped open in shock. She was the only one who didn't know Brock and Ebony were expecting their second child. They'd been married a year and a half. Ebony was four months along but her figure didn't give even a hint of her being in her second trimester.

"It's probably a good thing you stopped at one pregnancy," Ebony continued. "I don't know how you'd handle all that weight. It's not like you can lose it by chasing them around, instead of having a nanny do it."

Mindy snorted out an unladylike guffaw which made Lisa laugh too. Dorothy's cheeks flushed. "Well...I..."

"Why don't we have a celebratory dinner?" Brock suggested, saving his ex-wife any further attempt at finding a snappy come-back. "It'll be just for the family since you're throwing that graduation party tomorrow night." He slipped an arm around Mindy's shoulder and kissed her forehead.

“Okay, daddy. I was wondering with the new baby and everything, will I still be able to intern next summer?”

“Of course,” Brock said beaming down at her.

“I was talking to Ebony,” Mindy said shaking her head.

“We’ll need you even more,” Ebony assured her. “Jenna and I are so busy, it’s unreal. I’m glad you’re helping out this year too.”

“I had to,” Mindy said with a sigh. “Dad wouldn’t let me go to Europe with my friends, what else was I supposed to do all summer?”

“Your dad and I agreed that you don’t need to travel out of the country on your own while you’re so young,” Dorothy said quickly.

“How about we take a family vacation to Paris next month?” Ebony suggested.

“I guess that’s okay,” Mindy said bouncing Lisa on her lap. “Do you want to go to Paris, Lisa?”

Brock, Ebony, and Dorothy stood watching the two girls walk toward the parking lot. Mindy dressed in her flowing blue graduation gown with gold Honor Cords and, Lisa looking up at her with a face full of innocence and love.

Brock was the first to speak. “I can’t believe I’m willingly doing another eighteen years of this.”

“Make that twenty,” Ebony said patting her still-flat stomach.

“Oh, you love it,” Dorothy said starting for the parking lot herself.

“I do love it,” Brock said pulling Ebony into his arms, “and I love you, Mrs. Huntington.”

She smiled up at him. “I love you too, Mr. Huntington. Now hand over the keys. You know I love driving the Bentley.”

The End

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Red Rose™ Publishing

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Party Girl, Inc.