

*Noble Romance Publishing*

IF I WERE A  
*Lady...*



**Bryl R. Tyne**

Bryl Tyne

## Noble Romance Publishing, LLC



[www.nobleromance.com](http://www.nobleromance.com)

If I Were a Lady . . .

ISBN 978-1-60592-025-2

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

If I Were a Lady Copyright 2009 Bryl Tyne

Cover Art by Fiona Jayde

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any existing means without written permission from the publisher. Contact Noble Romance Publishing, LLC at PO Box 467423, Atlanta, GA 31146.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The characters are products of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

### **Book Blurb**

Fifth grade English teacher, Kendra Wright, doesn't believe in instant love. In fact, at twenty-nine, she's all but given up hope of ever finding love, period. That is, until she meets the new principal, Valerian Riche.

He may be stunning, gentlemanly and honorable, but falling for the man is the last thing on Kendra's agenda. But when Val makes the first move, Kendra's life as the youngest spinster to ever grace the pages of history is turned upside-down.

She's longed to be treated like the lady she knows she is, but *technically*, is not. But if the truth comes out, it will destroy her career and end the wildest romantic ride she's ever known.

Kendra must end the relationship before she's in too deep. Before the truth is revealed. But, how does a lady say no to the charm-charged wiles of a man as determined, and eager, as Val Riche? While she anticipates the horror of breaking the news, he persists on making her decision as difficult as possible. Maybe Val should've checked Kendra's package before he unchecked his heart.

## Chapter One

I swore, if they giggled one more time, I'd lose my lunch.

Yes, I'm a lady . . . but these women were making me nuts.

"Oh for God's sake, Dalia. Give it a rest, will you?" I shook my head.

Unreal. They acted like cockroaches anticipating a forgotten morsel.

"Kendra, he's in the lounge, right now!"

"Yes, I'm well aware of that, Dalia." I glanced up at Janie and Dalia from the stack of papers I'd tried, for the last fifteen minutes, to grade. Why couldn't they see I wasn't interested?

"I'm not going to miss him waiting around on you. Are you coming or not?"

"Yes, Janie. I'm coming."

So what if eye candy's finest sample paraded about the teacher's lounge in an Armani suit? I chucked the third pencil I'd snapped in half since my co-workers had invaded my classroom.

Janie started for the door with Dalia on her heels. "Come on, Kendra. Hurry up." Dalia stepped into the hall.

"Hold on!"

I never understood the rush, the excitement. No, that's not entirely true. I had believed in love, that special someone for everyone kind of love, once upon a time. But I'd long ago outgrown fairy tales.

Well, I wouldn't be finishing my work here. I sighed, crammed the remaining handful of papers into my canvas satchel, and caught up to my lust-smitten friends in the hall.

I'd missed his arrival, but from what I'd heard, our new principal was young, single, and extremely virile. *Right*. I'd worked with Dalia and Janie for over five years. To them, virile ranged from strapping young to pleasantly graying, as long as the prospect hadn't prescribed to any of the various male

enhancement formulas. Despite my protests, why had they always recruited me to test their hypotheses and provide a full report?

Years on end, my bed went unruffled, unstained by another. Bathroom stalls and taxi backseats had served a purpose, but I found confessions of love under those circumstances mere declarations of momentary satisfaction. I longed to have someone waiting for me at home, someone to whom I could confide my passions, my anger, my deepest secrets, and who would assure me throughout the night whilst holding me securely in his formidable arms. That's what I'd sought, what I'd always wanted. Love. But as with spontaneous beginnings, so were their endings. Resigning to a spinster's life at age twenty-nine, I'd given up hope of ever finding Mr. Right.

So, what qualified me for the outlandish assignment of man reading? How could I pinpoint an intention from a stride, a personality from a shift of a brow? Sure as hell had nothing to do with my Masters in education. Oh, how I longed to proclaim my credentials to the world, but I'd learned the hard way some things are better left unspoken. I hated bragging, but my assessments had never proven wrong.

I tried understanding. Still, Dalia and Janie's infatuations drove me crazy. They were illogical and served no purpose. I saw no point in sizing up a principal who arrived more than three-quarters through the school year. He was either desperate for employment or another wannabe testing the administration's waters; either way, I'd written him off my list of potentials.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agonizing over my choice in heels, I leaned on the wall by the door, waiting for the swarm to scatter. *Oh my God . . .* "Dalia . . . Dalia, honey!"

Recognizing my urgency, she hustled my way.

"What's the matter, Kendra?" She took my hand and stepped too close. Her heel came down on my numbed toes.

As fiery pain soared up my foot, I supported my weight on her shoulder. “Whatever you do, don’t look now. But, isn’t Nancy engaged to be married? What’s she trying to pull?”

Dalia spun around and gasped. “Looks to me like his dick.” Her voice carried and I cringed. She should’ve just planted a sign above me with the words, YES, I WAS TALKING ABOUT YOU!

*Thanks a lot, Dalia.*

As Nancy noticed us noticing *her*, the she-devil scurried away, allowing room for the other vixens to move in, my friends included. *Do they have no shame?* I had to admit, though, it was fun watching them fawn over this stranger.

Pocketing his hand, his gathered suit cinched a partial view. Sore feet or not, I decided I was staying for the finale, hoping for a glimpse of the front side of *Mr. Buns-of-Steel*.

He towered over the flocking teachers by at least eight inches. Looked to be around six-foot-three . . . *perfect, just like his ass*. They’d clear out soon and I’d mosey in for a closer inspection. Only because I must; my assignment demanded keen observation skills. If I stayed at this distance, my undereducated findings at tomorrow’s morning planning session might tarnish my reputation.

Step by step, I slid his way, admiring his waves of ebony, collar-length hair with no little envy. Although my strawberry blond suited me, I’d adored that raven sheen since childhood. The handful of remaining teachers dispersed. *Thank God. My tired feet were—*

My next step forward landed me flat on my rear-end. *Damned heels!* Ass on the carpet, I glanced about, relieved to find everyone gone . . . . His leather-soled shoes appeared in my downcast line of sight.

“Are you okay, Miss?”

Every pore on my skin tingled at the sound of his reverberating baritone voice. I peered upward, accepted his outstretched hand, and he whisked me to my feet.

*Don't faint. Calm down. Breathe . . . slower, stupid.* So close, too close. I inhaled the still-fresh starchy scent emanating from his shirt. "I-I'm fine. Thank you."

I shuffled my thigh-tight skirt into position above my knees. My cheeks felt warm. I knew he'd catch me staring as I studied his face, but how else could I assess him? Dark eyes, dark hair . . . quite simply, gorgeous.

"I wondered when you'd introduce yourself, Ms. Wallflower."

*Wallflower?* "Excuse me? I don't think I caught that." His wry grin fueled my determination. "I'm Kendra Wright, fifth grade English and Social Studies." Defying intimidation, I straightened my shoulders and extended my hand.

My left eye twitched as he lifted my fingers to his lips. "I'm Val. Valerian Dominick Riche, your new principal."

Self-conscious, I scoured the room for spies. *Some nerve, and in public.* I yanked my hand from his. "Principal Riche." As his hawk-like stare locked with mine, the tops of my ears burned—a sure sign the heat that'd warmed my cheeks moments earlier had invaded the rest of my face.

"Ms. Wright." He tipped his head, turned, and strolled out of the lounge.

\* \* \* \* \*

My weighted satchel felt like air on my two-mile stroll home. The distance I covered normally in half an hour, I mastered in less than twenty minutes. I kicked off my walkers as I dropped my bag just inside the door, unwound the braided string, whipped the flap open, and grabbed today's enemies with two fingers and a thumb. Regardless of style, I vowed from now on I'd stick to pumps or flats, as the two-and-a-half-inch heels hit the bottom of the plastic-lined garbage can with a thud.

*Oh yeah!* I loved the feel of sliding across the linoleum in my nylons, as I danced my way to the fridge. The solution to my grumbling stomach resided just on the other side. I yanked the freezer door open to grab a package of chicken patties, and half the freezer's contents tumbled onto the floor . . . and onto my bare feet.

"Damnit!" Over-abused toes stinging, eyes watering, I picked up the potpies and TV dinners and threw them, along with the chicken, back inside the freezer. I slammed the door. Forget it, I'd finish grading the papers, take a shower, and go to bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peeling my hose over each knee, I hummed a little tune. Principal Riche had flirted with me. I stepped behind the shower curtain, meeting warmed porcelain. As the water cascaded over my boney shoulders and along my skinny arms, doubts clouded my mind. *Val . . .* Why bother? He'd just end up like all my other prospects. The scent of lavender filled the humid confines as I scrunched my shoulder-length hair into a bubbly pile atop my head. *Maybe not*, my more romantic nature asserted itself. *What if he likes women like me?*

One eye squinting to avoid the sting of soap, I peered at my French pedicure as I worked raspberry gel along one leg then the other. Nothing was wrong with me. Why wouldn't he like a girl like me? I ran possible scenarios through my mind as I lathered my body. My fingers hesitated at my midsection, the culmination of *why not* readily apparent. I wasn't a lady.

The touch of my palm melted into fanciful feelings of Val's hands caressing my ass and ghosting up the length of my thighs. After adjusting the tap, I drifted into the dream. Hot water teased the crack of my ass. I pinched and tugged my nipples, my other hand flowing over my swollen man-clit.

I imagined Val's lips at my neck and his hands wandering my body, following the curve of my hips, my pelvis, my belly. With sturdy fingers, he

tested the depth of my navel and teased my breasts. *So close . . .* His chest of dark hair dusted my back as he stood behind me. I stroked faster and imagined him entering and filling me. Again and again, until I exhaled through a multitude of spasms, riding waves of mind-blowing pleasure. Blazes of white blinded my vision, and I was floating, falling . . . “Ow!”

Sopping hair hindering my sight, I felt for the tub’s edge, braced atop it, and shoved to my feet. My thigh burned from the fall, my ego bruised, but thank goodness I’d avoided major injury. I rinsed one last time, cut off the water, and pushed the curtain to one side. Arms numb, I struggled to wrap the towel around my chest. Tears stung the corners of my eyes as my weakened knees carried me toward the bed. He’d never like me. After all, I wasn’t a lady.

## Chapter Two

The seating arrangement sucked. We’d never be able to talk from halfway across the room. Dalia glanced at me then turned away with a scowl. Whatever crawled up her ass and died, I didn’t know. She and Janie continued to exchange whispers. *What did I do?* Ten minutes remained before I’d get a chance to feed them the details of my analysis on the way to our respective classrooms.

But as the meeting broke up, my friends seemed to forget my existence.

“Janie . . . Dalia . . . Wait up!”

Janie grabbed Dalia’s elbow and tugged her to a stop. “Oh! Hey, Kendra,” Janie said.

“If you guys are busy, we can talk later,” I said, catching up to them. Stunned as Dalia rolled her eyes, I gaped. “What?”

“Don’t try and play miss innocent with us, Kendra. We heard all about you and Principal Riche,” Janie said.

The heat rose in my cheeks and I offered a half-smile. “What?”



My thoughts converged on last night, before I realized they couldn't possibly know about my one-handed shower session. "What are you talking about?"

Dalia clamped a hand on my shoulder. She looked pissed. *Might help if I knew why . . .*

"Listen, I don't know what you've heard, but I'd appreciate you not jumping to conclusions." *No response . . .* "Come on, we've been friends for years. You know I'd tell you if anything happened." I elbowed Janie playfully.

She threw her arms around my neck and apologized.

Dalia stepped closer, but her head remained down.

"Okay. Now, mind telling me what everyone's saying?" I asked.

Skepticism flared in Dalia's eyes as she directed her gaze to me. "You know Candace?"

"The librarian," I said.

"Yeah, that's her. Well, she forgot her purse in the lounge yesterday afternoon. She, Jolene, and Debra—Jones, not Packard—went back to get it." Dalia scratched at a snag on her sweater. "They're telling everyone they saw Principal Riche kiss your hand."

*Oh boy.*

"Well?" Janie asked.

*I had no control over his actions. How could they be mad at me?* My head ached as anxiety's lasso encircled, gave a quick jerk, and applied tension. *And I just promised to tell them everything . . .* "Yes, he kissed my hand after helping me off the floor."

Both Dalia and Janie gasped.

"Listen, I twisted my ankle. He thought he was a damned knight in shining armor or something. I didn't appreciate it, and made sure he knew how uncomfortable he'd made me," I said. "It was no big deal. Really."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dalia, Janie, and I were back to being friends. During lunch, we'd commented on another bout of Nancy's unwelcome forwardness. She'd tried wedging her thunder thighs in between the gym coach and Principal Riche. *The audacity . . . .* I flipped through my planner.

When Nancy had placed her hand on the small of Principal Riche's back, I'd snapped a picture with my cell phone. I had a good mind to send it to her fiancé. *Bitch*. But as tempting as the thought might be, I'd never do it. *Spiteful* had never been my thing.

Since we'd returned from the cafeteria, the kids had been rambunctious as hell. Must've been the cupcakes. *Bran muffins, my ass*. Those things were laced with sugar.

"Yes, Bobby?"

"Ms. Wright, may I use the restroom?"

"Yes. Take the pass and don't forget to wash your hands."

I checked the clock. *Still two hours left*. The afternoon dragged on.

"Okay class, settle down." Some days the kids drove me nuts, yet others were so perfect. I wished I knew what to expect before arriving. "All right, that's enough! Karen, give John his notebook. Chandelle, quit tormenting Jacob." *What is it with ten year olds and using violence to flirt?*

"Take out your social studies books and turn to page one hundred and seventy-eight." I massaged my temples. "You have forty-five minutes to read chapter ten. Pay attention to the vocabulary terms because I'm handing out a quiz afterward."

The room fell silent as my students began to read. Ah, blessed quiet. Working with children five days a week, I'd come to value those peaceful moments scattered throughout the day. Only a few minutes had passed, but I felt much better.

"Excuse me."

*This is not happening.* I tried reassuring myself, as I recognized the voice. Calmly, I closed the novel I'd brought with me, flipping the back cover upright. *Big mistake;* the artwork there was more provocative than the front. Making eye contact, I held his attention, slid the book into my top, right drawer, and eased it shut. "Principal Riche, what a pleasant surprise."

One broad hand landed flat on my desk. His other hand descended on my chair, tilting it back until my toes were the only part of me still grounded. I let out a startled, "*Eek!*" Making an unsuccessful grab at my desk, I settled on clutching the edges of my seat. His thin, gold silk tie swung back and forth, teasing the creases of my navy skirt as he leaned over me. My attempt to ease my dry throat came out as a gulp.

"Ms. Wright."

My name flowing from his lips sent ripples of pleasure south. Wordlessly, he released my chair, pulled the drawer open, and retrieved my novel.

I leaned as far away as possible, as he hovered over me and examined my book. I prayed he'd put the damned thing back in the drawer, but watched perplexed as he ran his fingers over the half-naked man on the embossed cover. Rotating it in his hands, he smiled as he read the back blurb.

As hope fluttered to life inside my chest, I remembered we weren't alone. I scanned my students' down-turned heads, relieved they'd been too busy reading to notice. No sense exposing their moldable psyches to their teacher's discomfiture. They needed strong heroines, assertive role models. As if the profession weren't stressful enough, it was imperative I consider my students' well-being at all times.

Val thumbed through each dog-eared page. My hope sputtered and mutated into annoyance. I turned and cursed under my breath for marking the sex scenes.

"I'm here to monitor your class."

*What?* I'd had enough stress for one day and made sure my glare conveyed the message.

A smirk lifted one corner of his mouth. "I'd like to view your teaching style for the remainder of the afternoon. If that's not a problem, I'll just pull up a chair in the back of the classroom."

Speechless, I stared, shocked he hadn't seemed to mind my reading tastes. What ulterior motive prompted his visiting my class? He studied the back cover a bit longer then slipped my novel inside the drawer before walking away with a chuckle.

A smug grin spread from cheek to cheek as he wedged his body into the student-sized desk-chair. Funny as the sight was, his knees banging the bottom of the desktop, his breadth extending either side of the seat, I didn't dare laugh. With the sudden urge to pee, I darted from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

I spent ten minutes putting myself back together, took a deep breath, and reentered my classroom as if unaffected. He may've gotten the best of me, but I'd be damned if I let him know. At least he had the decency not to stare when I retook my seat and the chair's springs made an obnoxious creak. But his courtesy did nothing for the anxiety threatening to burst the buttons of my blouse. I couldn't remember my heart ever beating this erratic.

\* \* \* \* \*

After passing out the quizzes, I returned to my squeaky chair and scratched a quick note to bring spray machine oil in the morning. *Why couldn't he just fall asleep from boredom?* But no . . . he'd requested I give him a copy of the quiz and asked that I grade him, also. I checked the clock and caught him eying me with a look I could only equate with that of a child . . . one who had his face plastered against a taffy shop window. My gaze dropped to the desk.

The back of my neck permeated with sweat. I found each subsequent inhale shallower. Thank goodness the kids hadn't acted up again . . .

A tiny noise caught my attention. I scanned the room and tried to pinpoint the source. My anxious gaze fell upon Leroy's tear-stained face. I jumped up and shuffled between the desks to his side, conscious Val watched my every move. The reality of Val's presence and my skirt's length pushed to the forefront of my mind, and I stopped, mid-lean. I crouched beside Leroy instead. With my body forming a protective wall between him and Val's prying eyes, I spoke in a hushed tone.

Bad enough the child had emotional outbursts. He'd be an absolute wreck if he thought the principal had noticed. "What's the matter, Leroy?"

He looked over his shoulder at the clock then turned around and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "The time's almost up and I still have half the questions."

I pulled a tissue from my skirt pocket and handed it to him. "Is there one you don't understand? Maybe I can help." He grinned as he pointed to where he'd stalled on the test.

\* \* \* \* \*

I accepted the quiz from Leroy, scanned it quickly then smiled. Not only had he been the first one finished, he'd also missed only one question. Val clearing his throat brought me out of my contentment. I glanced up to find Leroy still at my desk.

"Well?" he asked, hope glistening in the edges of his red-rimmed eyes.

My concern flitted between Leroy and Principal Riche. Why did I feel as if I was on trial? *Forget him and his condescending looks.* What mattered were my students. If he didn't like how I handled the situation, too bad. I concentrated on Leroy. "You did excellent. An A, sweetie."

Principal Riche shifted in his seat, garnering my attention once again. In an attempt to loosen the ever-constricting material, I ran my finger around the inside of my high collar, as his goofy grin rekindled my anxiety. I hadn't felt this self-conscious since the night I'd discovered not all men of the cloth were chaste. If this kept up, I'd need to carry an emergency inhaler.

"Library time! Don't forget your things. You'll be excused from there."

How Val Riche affected me in such a short time, I struggled to comprehend. He was a man who, like all the rest, would no doubt turn me away once he knew the real me. But whichever way I spun the tale, every time our eyes met, my convictions fell on hope.

Bobby dawdled getting his backpack zipped and finally lumbered toward the exit. Today, for the first time, I blessed his lack of coordination. *Please, Bobby. Take all the time you need.* Following him toward the door, I stretched the pink neon key ring about my wrist. Firm but gentle fingers snagged my arm, stopping my escape and stealing my breath.

"Brilliant students you have, Ms. Wright."

My instincts screamed fight or flee as he spun me to face him. I opened my mouth to protest, but with one look at those perfect lips inches from mine, my voice seized.

"I'm sure they can find their way to the library without you, Ms. Mothering Hen."

Apparently, my brain malfunctioned also, because I could no longer discern if his smile leaned toward comfort or corruption. A strand of hair fell loosely about his forehead, and I thought I caught excitement dance through those black eyes as he scanned over my features from toe to head.

"Excuse me, Mr. Riche—"

"Please, Val. Please," he said.

As if a switch were triggered, my walls slammed up, disguising my feelings to the outside world. Surely, this was a setup. No one had ever come on this strong—or this fast.

“Sir,” I said with a croak, “are you attempting to cover your intentions with professional conduct, or do you find sadism humorous?”

His forehead creased, and he dropped his arm to his side. “Ms. Wright. I can assure you, it is neither.”

Could I be more confused? Knowing me, yes, but that’s not the point. He noticed my discomfort and took my hand. With one squeeze, he could easily crush my fingers, so dainty and slim were they compared to his. My breath hitched as he cupped my chin and lifted my face to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry if this seems forward . . . .” He paused with furrowed brows.

Compassion melted my defenses. I sensed sincerity in his voice and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Ms. Wright—”

“Kendra.” I told him, and wondered if I’d regret taking this chance, allowing hope to bloom after years of convincing myself *never again*.

“Yes . . . Kendra, I’d like very much if you’d accompany me to the symphony this evening.”

*No blowjob? No quickie? What in the hell was this. A date?* Maybe my encouragement was a bit much.

### Chapter Three

Nerves getting the better of me, I smoothed the black nylon blend over my waist for the third time in five minutes. Tight at my wrists, the sleeves accentuated my manicure. I preferred my necklines sit higher to obscure my somewhat masculine Adam’s apple, but the slight scoop did hide my prominent collarbones. As always, I highlighted my best feature, making sure my dress hugged my hips and rode mid-thigh. Just the other day, Dalia had told me how much she envied my legs. Compliments like that boosted my self-esteem.

Fastening the last unruly strand of upswept hair with a bobby pin, I rechecked my makeup. “What if he notices the imperfections, Kendra?” I

adjusted my hose and slid into my pumps. *Now he has me talking to myself.* My last official date ended in disaster six years ago . . . a nightmare I'd rather not have remembered. *Why'd I agree to this in the first place?*

Pacing—that's how discombobulated Val Riche had me when the doorbell chimed. My stomach lurched into the back of my throat. *Come on, Kendra. Get a grip!* But my sweaty palms found it hard to accomplish something as simple as twisting the knob.

*If I chip one of my nails . . .* The door flung open and smacked the wall, missing my nose by a hair. I whipped my hand out just in time, thankful to whatever muse bestowed the burst of luck. Val's upturned lips quickly flattened into a thin line.

My mouth hung open as speechless as usual in his presence, as my eyes drank in the dark wine of his silk suit. His matching tie with an ebony shirt as slick as his *Steven Seagal* style highlighted his strong-featured face.

"For the lady." With a slight bow, he handed me a rose.

"I wish," I said under my breath, accepted the flower, and headed for the kitchen sink. "You can come in if you want."

Turning on the tap, I smiled at Val as he stepped through the entranceway and settled on a stool beside the short bar. "Fuck!" My heartbeat droned in my ears as crimson-tainted water flowed down the drain. I clutched the counter in a desperate attempt to halt the spinning.

"What—? *Kendra?*"

Everything went black as I felt the counter leaving my grasp.

I came to, who knows how many minutes later, peering up into Val's face.

"Are you all right?"

No, I wasn't all right, and I shoved off the firm chest supporting me. I abhorred fainting in front of others, worse than I hated the sight of blood. I found no evidence of a laceration, no gaping puncture wound as I scanned one side of my finger then the other.



“Barely a scratch.” Val stepped around me, filled the glass I’d taken from the cupboard, and dropped the rose into fresh water. “The bleeding stopped right away.”

Warmth radiated from the reassuring hand he placed on my back, but nothing compared to the fire creeping into my face.

“Come here.” He pulled me against his chest. “Lots of people don’t deal well with the sight of blood.”

My exhale came out as a sarcastic snort.

“Kendra.” He tilted my face so our eyes met. “It’s not a big deal. Hell, I planned on being a doctor.” A grin slid across his lips seconds before those same lips slid across mine. His story was probably bullshit, but desire overpowered logic. I wanted this, and anything else he’d give me, right here, right now. In anticipation, I parted my lips . . . .

His kiss ended as abruptly as it had begun. He abandoned my lips and backed away.

*What? Don’t treat me like a lady. Not now!* Not when I wanted him so badly.

Val ran his palms over the sides of his head then straightened his suit. “We’d better go; we’re running late.”

My head screamed, *no*, but I resigned myself to a meek, “yes, you’re right,” retrieved my purse from my room, scanned my reflection one last time, then joined him at the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Holding my hand, he led me up a dimly lit, carpeted stairwell. One-handed, I struggled to keep my skirt’s gravity-defying material snug over my hips. Mind focused on everything except my current line of travel, I smacked into Val’s abruptly stopped form. Like ricocheting off a brick wall, my center of

gravity snapped in the opposite direction. As I flailed and cursed every four-letter word known to man, Val lost only a step before steadying me.

Wrapping an arm around my waist, he eased me up the last few steps and unlatched the balcony's barrier rope. "After you," he said.

I hesitated before going forward. "The sign says VIP seating."

"I'm aware of that." He clicked the barrier back into place.

Without offering an arm, or his hand, he walked past me. I'd disappointed him, maybe worse. I followed a few steps behind. When we reached the front row of seats, he allowed me to enter first. I realized we'd missed the warm up as I took my seat, debating which were more silent, the orchestra or this balcony.

After handing me the program, he kept his hands on his knees and his gaze glued on the pit. I pretended his avoidance didn't affect me, but the longer I stayed buried inside the pamphlet, the wearier I became. If I'd done something wrong, I should know. I decided I'd had enough of his attitude. Our shoulders bumped as I leaned into him. "I hope we're not breaking a rule or something. There's no one up here but us."

When he turned, his eyes showed uncertainty, not the anger I'd expected. "Can you not enjoy the moment without so many questions?" He tucked a wisp of hair behind my ear. "Are you concerned about being alone with me, Kendra?"

I realized Val's conduct had never crossed my mind once this evening. If I answered honestly, though, I'd incriminate myself. Lately, it was *my* conduct I worried about keeping in check. "No, not at all," I said.

His burst of confidence troubled me as he took my hand into his. "Good, because I'd like to surprise you once in a while."

I shifted in my seat and remained quiet, shocked beyond words when he informed me that tonight was his first surprise of many. He'd reserved the entire balcony for just the two of us.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s been years, Val.”

“Really?” He released my hand, placed his arm around my shoulders, and drew me closer.

*That wasn’t what . . .* “I-I mean—” His sudden kiss stole my breath and stopped my words. I played a mock battle of keeping him at bay, but he shifted in his seat and eased his arm to the small of my back. His mouth lingered, spurring apprehension. *Dark balcony, the two of us alone . . . need I be concerned?* Any misgivings disappeared as his soft lips pressed and parted mine. If not for the rail-thin armrest, I’d have melted into him.

Our tongues exchanged greetings, and I chased after his taste, needing to brand the flavor of Val Riche into my memory. For I knew whatever he felt would abruptly change when he discovered I wasn’t a lady.

Touching his face, I registered his rugged masculinity beneath my palm and longed to dissolve all ladylike qualities I possessed. Only the threat of ending up *Val-less*, along with the possibility of him recognizing my weakness, reigned in my desire to fuck convention.

His palm slid across my stomach as he released me and settled into his seat. “Let’s enjoy the show, Kendra. This opportunity may only come once.” His words broke through my lust-induced trance.

*Coming once . . .* exactly what I feared. He must’ve realized I wasn’t a lady.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry I ran out on you,” I said.

“It’s okay. I understand.” He accelerated, passing a sputtering minivan going ten miles under the speed limit.

He understood my missing a quarter of the concert, hiding out in the ladies' room, nursing mascara-streaked tears? *Right.*

"You aren't the only one who appreciates Chopin," he said.

Keeping my gaze on the passing scenery, I hoped to convey my disinterest in discussing the significance of the Opus in question. His silence stirred my curiosity though. I stole a glance, only to catch a too-knowing smile.

"Do you want to share why the piece was meaningful to you?"

*Not really.* Without a word, I resumed counting parking meters.

"Let me guess, lost love?"

I turned to glower at him, wondering if he'd left his manners in the auditorium's parking lot. He smirked and tilted his head, wickedness gleaming in those obsidian eyes. "He was a stallion between the sheets, wasn't he?"

*Jackass would be a more accurate description . . .* My skin crawled as, without permission, he exploited my memories. Regardless of his ability to read people or his uncouth propensity to brag about it, he'd no right making me feel as if I sat naked in the seat beside him. If it was a fight he wanted, a fight he'd get.

Though I trembled, my voice held firm. "As a matter of fact, he was *all that* and more." Again, I fixed my stare out the passenger side window. Only this time, a wall of tears I'd fought to restrain blurred the passing objects.

"Kendra, I'm—I was just trying to make conversation. Obviously, I failed."

"Asking what's really on your mind's a start."

He cleared his throat. "That piece, it made you remember an ex lover?"

"Is there something wrong with recalling happy moments from one's past?" I refused to comment on their brevity.

His knuckles whitened, his jaw angled a touch sharper, but only for a second. He tugged my shoulder and eased me against his side. "Perfectly understandable," he said, resting his chin on my head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Windows fogged, his car may've been idling, but I found our mouths and hands busier than they'd been all night.

Unfortunately, so was my brain.

I'd struggled to avoid thinking as he rippled the back of my dress, mapped a path lower, and cupped my ass. With certainty and strength, his kneading fingers exceeded all bliss my fantasies had imagined.

I wanted this, and the fierceness with which he kissed me revealed he wanted the same. Our teeth clicked and scraped as we devoured each other. I ran my fingers through his hair, seeking a hold to keep me grounded, and immersed my tongue in the depths of his taste. My mind reeled as I inhaled the heady scent of his aftershave-sweat blend. Inside the humid and cramped interior, each second I chose to stay in Val's presence, I risked falling deeper in lust.

With each caress, electricity pulsed through me. My longing to be touched intensified as he soothed patterns along my sides and across my belly, and . . . my sanity returned. My brain reengaged. I had no business playing with Val Riche's heart. I wasn't a lady.

Val nibbled my neck, unaware of my plight. But as his hand neared my breast, I wriggled out of his embrace and flung open my door.

Before I gathered my composure to stand, he'd crawled out, circled around the car, and stood, proffering a chivalrous hand. Why he exuded this amount of effort, and for me, I didn't understand.

I straightened my dress and swiped the hair from my eyes. Despite my disconcertedness, a smile returned to my face as he, in perfect gentlemanlike fashion, walked me to my front door.

## **Chapter Four**

If only I'd paid attention as I maneuvered the crowded hallway instead of worrying about my friends' possible opinions . . . I collided head-on with Val and ended up, once again, with my ass on the floor. The bite of icy terrazzo seeped through my thin cotton skirt and I shivered. Shaken, but otherwise unaffected, Val sat, my mirrored opposite, his legs intertwined with mine.

"I'm so sorry." I untangled our legs and scurried to my knees, blocking out the onlookers' *oohs* and *ahs*.

Val stood and helped me to my feet. "No harm done." He brushed the dust from his suit pants. "Pleasure bumping into you again, Ms. Wright." With a professional nod, he continued on his way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you okay?" Dalia asked. We were alone in the ladies' room, where she had dragged me after my mishap in the hall.

"Beyond becoming today's lunchroom gossip, you mean?" Dalia knew me well enough to know my latest graceless blunder was merely a symptom of a much bigger problem.

I stared at her. I would have loved to get an objective opinion, but what if Dalia couldn't be objective? What if we were too close? Arguments for and against telling her tormented me. "Dal, can we talk?"

Next to the wall-length mirror, she settled beside me on the bench. "Kendra, it's obvious he likes you. If others can't accept it, too bad." She caressed my back in a soothing circular motion that reassured me her words were genuine.

"That's not the half of it, Dal. I think he's looking for something serious."

"In two days? *How serious?*"

"How old did we estimate him? Thirty-four, thirty-five?" I waited for her confirmation. "He's forty-three! And last night he mentioned he's ready to settle down."

Dalia's eyes sparkled. She squealed and launched herself at me, her embrace forcing the air from my lungs.

"Dal . . . Dalia!"

"Sorry, I'm so excited for you. He asked you out?"

"Are you listening to me? Yeah, he invited me to the symphony. Do I look like *settling-down* material? *Puh-lease!*"

"Wow! The symphony? Hah! So, Principal Riche is *rich*?"

I flicked a piece of hair off my black skirt then checked if I'd damaged my nails in my earlier collision. She wasn't listening, and I didn't need encouragement. I wanted someone to cram logic up my ass and make me face reality. Someone who would reinforce the ever-proven fact that I hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of winning a man's heart, and especially not Valerian Riche's heart. At least then I wouldn't be disappointed when he dumped me. And he *would* dump me. They always did.

"Kendra, why can't you live for the moment? What's wrong with being happy when life hands you something incredible?"

"It's complicated, Dal. I've always longed for a life I'll probably never have. You know, like any other girl, the American dream—white-picket fence, a husband, two and a half dogs."

"That's not too lofty a goal, Kendra. Don't you think you're being a little impatient? You're still young."

"You wouldn't understand . . . . No one—"

Dalia leapt to her feet, checked under each stall then returned after locking the door. "Kendra, I'm not as oblivious as the rest. Just, so you know."

I'd never say it first, if that was why she hesitated. Having come this far, Dalia apparently planned to go the whole way. She took my hands in hers and looked me dead in the eyes. "We've known each other for over five years. I can't believe you've never confided in me."

She frowned as I placed a hand to my chest in mock surprise.

“Come on. You’re not super woman, Kendra. We’ve all forgotten to pack a spare . . . you know, tampon. Oh, but not you.”

“I-I come well prepared.” *God, was that the best I could come up with?*

Dalia’s skeptical look confirmed the lameness of my reply. I pushed back the bitter taste burning my throat, dreading what came next. My life—the one I’d spent over half a decade building, defining, living in this cozy yet modern Central Florida town—would become, as the peacefulness of this ever-expanding city, vanquished.

“Kendra! Please . . . . Is your gaff in a twist today, or what?”

*Busted!* I lunged off the bench, destination home.

“No, no, no!” Dalia grabbed me, whirled me around, and shoved me against the wall. “Don’t! Please, Kendra. I swear, I’d never hurt you.”

I stared at the floor. Dalia’s open-toed sandals were cute, I thought absently. “How long have you known?”

Beside me, she leaned against the wall. “Couple of years, I guess.”

“Hah! That obvious?”

“No, not at all. You’re perfect. So perfect, you make all of us jealous. That’s why I stopped you from leaving just now. There’s no sense panicking, creating a scene, having people start asking questions. No one knows.”

Water rushing through the pipes in the wall at our backs broke the silence.

Dalia shifted her shoulder to the cool ceramic tile and began playing with my hair. “Can I ask a question?”

*Now how the hell do I get out of this one?* I tilted my head back and fixated on the ceiling as if its gray paint held the answer. Eventually, I’d have to let someone in on my secret, trust someone enough to reveal my true self. Dalia and I were as close as sisters. *What the hell?* I gave a mental shrug. If I was considering trusting a man again, I could afford Dalia that much courtesy, also. “Go ahead. You want my life story or what?”

“You’re hair’s real, not a wig . . . a-and pretty, by the way.”



“The *question*, Dal.”

She fidgeted with her rings. “You’re makeup, it’s never caked on. How do you do that? Do you use hair remover or shave? How do you get your legs to look so . . . so sexy? And, your voice, it’s feminine too. A-Are . . . well, you’re not . . . I mean, you’re breasts look real, even though they’re kind of smallish.”

“Your one question turned into a lot of them.” I glared. “Listen, I’m a woman, Dal. I go through the grooming regimen every morning, just like you. Electrolysis took care of the little bit of body and facial hair years ago, and yes . . . the boobs are real. Not big, maybe not as round, but more than a handful’s a waste, right? Besides, push-up bras are like—the eighth wonder.”

She snickered. “You’re so natural and carefree about it. How’d you—I mean, when did you realize you were a girl?”

“Dal! I’ve always been a woman. Look at me. You said yourself no one has a clue. Hormones can’t change the shape of my face or my bone structure. They sure as hell didn’t change my voice, either. Dal, do I look like I was ever male?”

Clutching my wrist, she lifted and examined an arm then fingered my chin and tilted my face upward. I briefly wondered if she worked dog shows on the weekends. She ended her exploration by running her hands along my sides and over my hips. “Damn. You feel one-hundred-percent woman to me.”

“I told my mother when I was eleven. Then spent two years throwing out all the *boy stuff* she bought me and wearing my older sister’s clothes before she finally believed me. Shortly after that, she dumped me at an aunt’s house. My aunt told me Mom went to visit an uncle—I guess my great uncle was ex-CIA or something. She returned with a new birth certificate and social security card for me, and officially changed my name from Kenneth Ryan to Kendra Ryan just before we moved.”

“Didn’t other kids ask questions? What about gym?”

“My mother got the signature of some doctor friend. Supposedly, I had a serious heart disease. I never had to dress out for gym.”

Dalia stared, silent. Maybe she was absorbing the information, but her stare grew uncomfortable.

“Dal, why didn’t you ask about . . . you know, *the* surgery? That’s usually the first question everyone asks.”

She looked at the floor. “I already know. I-I peeked over your stall one day.”

“You spied on me using the toilet? That’s sick. Some kind of seriously twisted, weird—”

“It’s not like that!”

“Yeah? So, what’s it like then?”

One second she was screaming in my face, and in the next she had me pinned to the wall with her body and lips pressed to mine.

When I failed to respond, she backed away, stammering a stream of apologies.

“Sweetie,” I said, lifting her face. “Believe me, if I were a lesbian, I’d be so down on that—”

“*Kendra!*”

“I don’t get it, Dal. If you’re into girls, why are you always going along with Janie when she’s checking out the new guys?”

“Call it my *beard*, so to speak,” she said.

“I’d better hurry. My kids are demons if left alone first thing in the morning.” We freshened up with five minutes to go.

“I’d never hurt you, Kendra.”

I gave her a quick hug, and we walked to the door. “Hey Dal, you know, I think I’m the one who’s jealous. Are those tits for real?”

“Whatever.” She smacked my hand away from the front of her blouse. Turning the lock and cracking open the door, she peered into the hall. “I knew you liked them,” she said, stepping back to swing the door wide, “by the way you always gawk when I wear my floral chiffon top—the pink one with the V-cut.”

“Dream on, bitch.”

“Stop.” She giggled as we hustled down the hall.

“Go get him, tiger.” Once we reached my classroom, she gave me an encouraging hug then turned away.

“Oh God, Dalia.” I clutched her arm, stopping her mid-stride. “What if he wants kids?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning flew by with Val’s ravenous gaze undressing me each time we passed in the hall. The situation required honesty. Dalia had instructed me, and I’d agreed, but wasn’t sure I wanted to end the tiny thrills of happiness that soared through me every time I laid eyes on the man. A man of Mediterranean heritage, with sculpted muscles and the demeanor of a kitten, treated me like spun gold . . . And believe me, I knew what a gem he was. Men of Val’s caliber seldom hit on ladies like me. I didn’t intend to give this up, not yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

I spent half the lunch hour gathering my courage. Then I recruited Dalia to referee my class and hers, and I headed for the library.

“Mind if I join you?” Val greeted me as I strode down the deserted corridor.

Despite my heart’s sudden leap, I shrugged. Eagerness wasn’t ladylike.

He paused at a door and checked the handle before fishing a set of keys from his pocket. “I’d like to show you something, Kendra.”

As I neared the open door, he grabbed my arm and whisked me inside. A *janitor’s closet*? He shut and locked the door then slid home the deadbolt. I blinked several times as my vision adjusted to the light from the single, low-

watt bulb. Val and I stood inches apart wedged in between a cleaning cart and a tower of shelves. I looked to question, but was silenced with his mouth crashing over mine.

One strong hand at the base of my skull, the other at my waist, he pulled me flush against his body of steel. He inhaled my lips as if oxygen deprived and forced them apart in a crazed exploration that left me lightheaded.

As his tongue delved deep, last night's longing returned full force. I surrendered my breath. My will not far behind, I dug inside his jacket, tugged his shirt free of his slacks, and worked my hands up his back, mapping the plains, excited to find him as hairy as I'd envisioned.

Val's low chuckle tickled my upper lip as he pulled away a bit. He kissed a trail from my throat to my neck to my ear. "Call me crazy . . . ." His warm breath caressed my skin, eased my nervousness. "But I can't get you out of my mind, Ms. Kendra. Wright." He bunched my skirt, cupped my ass, and ground his stiff cock against my hip whilst sliding a hand up the front of my thigh. "I want you." He nibbled on my earlobe, his fingers lingering inches from my crotch.

*Oh, God!* In a heartbeat, panic cut through to the logical side of my brain, instructing me to carry his hand around to join the other.

His lust-filled gaze met mine. He raised a brow.

What was I thinking when I said, "I-I like it better in back"? I wasn't, and a millisecond later, I realized what my words implied.

"Do you, now?" He smirked before capturing my lips again. He dipped relentless fingers under my slip and crept up the back of my hose. Snapping a garter en route, he seized my bared cheeks and pulled me in closer. His rigid, fully erect cock pressed against me, trapped behind a barrier of clothing that left nothing to my imagination.

With an ache encroaching on my lower belly, I couldn't drag this on for long. I wedged my hands between our bodies, found the hem of his shirt and, once again, ran my hands inside. Coasting over his abs, I foraged through hair

as thick as fur. His torso's coarse forest rustled under my palms and through my spread fingers, heating my blood to near boiling. *Now or never, Kendra.*

Taking control, I backed him into the shelves and unbuckled his belt. Once I managed to get his pants unclasped, I eased the zipper over his erection-jutted shorts, and pushed his slacks down until they fell bunching at his ankles.

"Kendra . . . ." The raspy edge in his voice sent chills along my arms. He lowered his head and sucked on my neck, sure to mark me, as he wriggled hurried fingers beneath the strap of my tight thong.

Fumbling my grasp on the waistband, I shoved one hand inside his boxers. Again, wielding my power, I wrapped my fingers around his thick meat, and with a jerk, slowed his eager search. I fixed his drawers over his cock's head before reaching my other hand in from the bottom to rake my nails along his heavy sac. Immobilizing him further, I worked the loose skin over the hard inner core of his cock with long, steady strokes.

Every upward pull and every downward glide tortured my desire. With a gasp, I forced my eyes open, hoping to see anything but my mind's vision of his cock's exposed and shiny head playing hide-n-seek in and out of its foreskin. I groaned, as my breathing labored.

His breaths came sharper and heavier as I latched onto his throat. I reveled in the burn of his lime and spice aftershave on my tongue. Both hands busy, I palmed his balls, gently massaging, as I tightened my flowing grip on his thick shaft. I picked up speed, and moans rumbled from deep within his chest, intermingled with breathless declarations of pleasure that included my name.

With blood flow stifled to my aroused, but well-tucked, man-clit, the throbbing neared unbearable. I clenched my thighs in a futile effort to suppress the pain. Coaxing him along with sultry voice, I whispered. "Come for me, Val. Give it to me." Suddenly, his hands shifted beneath my thong. Parting my

cheeks, he traced the outer edge of my entrance, teasing my opening. “God, Val . . . .”

His thrusting hips forced his cock through my firmly wrapped fingers, then through again. Faster and faster, until he shuddered, singing my name in repeated grunts, his cock spewing, streaming thick, hot spunk inside his boxers and over my fist.

Sweat slicked his temples as he released me. “Kendra . . . .”

He sounded winded, as if he’d just run a marathon, but that was the least of my concern.

“Sorry,” I said, and wiped my hands inside his shorts as I withdrew them. Agony seizing the cleft of my thighs, I unbolted, unlocked, opened, and closed the janitor’s closet door behind me, in a rush for the nearest ladies’ room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aside from the twenty minutes I spent in the restroom washing and placing all-pertinent details in perspective, today’s lunch hour had exceeded my relaxation demands. Though dwelling on my unethical behavior had me carrying a smile into the afternoon, today’s closeted incident made me give thought to the consequences associated with sleeping with the boss. I decided keeping my reputation and career intact of far greater importance than worrying my head over Val’s rejection.

The three-minute bell chimed, signaling the students pack up to go. I slid my feet from the pumps and into my walkers, then stuffed and secured my satchel. As the students filed out of the room, I hit the lights, locked the door, and followed them outside. Trying my best to circumvent further interaction with Principal Riche, I descended the pick-up ramp, and gaining speed, hit the sidewalk home with a running start.

## Chapter Five

“Meet me at the south entrance,” I whispered to Dalia as I passed her on her way into school the next morning.

I kept walking and cut across the second and third graders’ playground and rounded the corner. As I approached the side entrance, Dalia shoved open the door. “Thanks,” I said, hustling inside.

“Kendra. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just avoiding . . . uh . . . problems.” I dropped my cell phone into my satchel then did a one-foot balancing act as I kicked off the walkers and slid on my pumps.

“Don’t give me that, Kendra. You’re acting really strange. Now what’s going on?”

I sighed. If I didn’t let her in on my theory, I’d never hear the end of it. “I think Principal Riche is setting me up.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Dalia, please . . . I’m telling you, I know what I’m talking about. What time is it?” I dipped into the girls’ bathroom, Dalia on my heels.

“I think you’re paranoid,” she said, reapplying her lipstick. “It’s ‘cause I said something to you, isn’t it? I never should’ve let on I knew.” She stepped to the side, allowing me room.

“Come on, Dal . . . .” I held her concerned gaze in the mirror. After twisting the last strand of hair around my finger, I hair-sprayed the tiny ringlet into place along my cheek.

“Your hair looks very cute like that.”

My eyes rounded, and I shuddered, wishing she’d keep her thoughts to herself. I was still working on digesting her confession from yesterday. “None of it makes sense. Think about it, Dal. What if he came onto you his first day here? Second day, he invited you on a pricey date, and the third day . . . .” I

drifted off, my thoughts skipping to my *meeting* with Val in the janitor's closet yesterday.

"Kendra, what'd he do to you?" Dalia's question jarred me into the present.

I gathered my spritz, brush, and makeup, buying time to decide how much information I should reveal. "We . . . kind-of-made-out-yesterday-at-lunch." I could feel the heat of her glare as I tossed my cosmetics into my bag and snapped it closed. When I looked up, her mouth hung open.

"Where?" she asked.

"The janitor's closet next to the library." I hurried toward the door. "We're going to be late."

\* \* \* \* \*

Val must've been busy all morning. I didn't see him wander past my room one time. And so far, I hadn't spotted him in the lunchroom, either. I heaved a sigh and diddled my spoon in my applesauce, wondering what meat by-product the gray-white sauce concealed.

"What're you thinking about?" Janie asked, sliding onto the seat across from me. Dalia plopped down by my side. Maybe my lazy blink sufficed as an answer, because Janie continued without waiting for me to say a word. "You're not going to believe this, Kendra!"

My annoyed stare said *try me*.

"Principal Riche sent Nancy home. I think . . . ." Janie sliced her index finger across her throat.

I turned to find Dalia wearing a devilish grin.

"What'd she do?" Studying their gleeful faces, I wondered if I were the only one concerned.

Janie leaned across the table. "I heard she put some heavy moves on him . . . ."



“Whatever.” I attempted a return to my half-eaten lunch.

Janie fanned her hand in my face, motioning me to listen. “In his office! Can you believe that?”

I didn’t answer. Janie no doubt meant it as a rhetorical question anyway, but the reality of the situation troubled me. *Who the hell does he think he is?* After yesterday’s romp in the closet, he hardly qualified as judge.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ms. Wright.” The school secretary’s voice crackled over the intercom.

I shoved away from my desk, stood, and pressed the wall button. “Yes?”

“Please report to the office.”

*Three minutes . . .* I waited for the dismissal bell. The children gathered their things and filed out the door as I cleared my desk of all personal items, placing them in my satchel. Hesitating in the doorway, I took a long look at my classroom, flipped off the lights, and marched toward what might prove my final moments at Jasper Elementary.

I’d move on; I always had. Though I’d never had to worry if my boss would out me or not. This might be the final stop in my career. For after today’s *Nancy news*, avoiding Principal Riche had shifted to avenging a worthy cause.

Maybe as a fiancé or wife goes, Nancy was far from perfect, but she’d always been a wonderful teacher. When I finished with Val Riche, he’d have no questions about the proper way to treat a la—strike that. A *good teacher*.

\* \* \* \* \*

I entered the school’s office and dropped my bag into a seat next to the door. “You needed to see me?”

The school's secretary peered over the high oak counter as I stepped closer. Ms. Wilson or Williams? I couldn't remember. I'd only been called to the office once . . . well, twice, counting today.

"Hello, Ms. Wright." She picked up her purse and placed it on her chair. After shrugging into a bulky wool sweater, she slung the purse over her shoulder. "Principal Riche would like a word with you." She circled her desk and pressed the phone's intercom. "Principal Riche?"

"Yes, Ms. Wilkinson?"

*Wilkinson. That's it.*

"Ms. Wright is here to see you."

"Thank you, Ms. Wilkinson. Send her in, please."

"You're leaving already?" I asked, as the fiery spirit from minutes earlier fizzled to a dying ember.

"Yes, sweetie, Principal Riche gave me two hours with pay. Told me to go and enjoy myself. He's such a kind and considerate man. Wouldn't you agree?"

*Kind and considerate? Not really, no . . .* I stared until her backside cleared the doorway.

"Kendra?"

My apprehension took a back seat to my ire as the too-smooth voice called my name. Mission recalled. Embracing my anger, I twisted around and greeted Val with a look of scorn before stalking into his office.

Arms crossed over my chest, I stood as he shut and locked the door behind me.

Palms upward, he shrugged. "If you're upset about yesterday, I'm sorry. It won't happen again." He took a step toward me.

*Sorry, I won't corner and molest you again?* Jaw clamping tighter by the second, I turned away, refusing to face him. He was oblivious to my feelings. I couldn't rightly hold something against him I had enjoyed also. But this wasn't about me.

"Kendra, let me explain."

I unfolded my arms and clenched my hands into fists at my side. *Wrong answer*. Livid—no, *beyond* livid—I whirled around screaming. “Shut your damned mouth until you know why I’m angry with you!”

The louder I yelled, the faster he retreated. My fury halted only when he did. With his legs backed against the oak desk, his hands curled over its edge, him leaning as far back as possible without toppling backward, me, leaning over him, I stopped. Everything stopped—my rant, Val’s movements, my ability to breath, and time.

I fixated on his less-than-confident bottom lip, wanting nothing except another taste, his touch . . . . The whites of his eyes grew, but he didn’t blink as I kicked his feet apart, straddled a leg, and hovered inches away from him.

One finger between his collar and tie, I loosened it from his neck and edged the knot down the tie’s length. Our mutual silence balanced on matching stubbornness. I slid the tie through his stiff collar and pulled it free, catching a lightening quick streak of trepidation in those marble-black eyes. From the mist collecting above his brow, I figured he probably hoped I hadn’t noticed.

I straddled him, hovering less than an inch above his thigh. My skirt bunched higher as I closed the distance until I was sure we exchanged breath. “You want to kiss me, don’t you?” I lifted his right hand and cinched the quickly lineman-knotted tie around his wrist.

Anticipation danced in his eyes. Yet he remained as stone when I changed position with a hike of my leg. He thought his will stronger than mine. I pressed between his parted thighs and wiggled until I loomed inches from his chest. Lifting and moving his free hand to join the other, I secured his wrists behind him.

His push upright ended with me pressing my forehead in defiance at a hardened pec. I held my post and moved quickly to unfasten his belt and pants. The shifting muscles in his chest told me he worked hard to stifle a chuckle. He thought he had me, and almost did, as my inhale carried his fresh-pressed scent to delight my palette.

“Do you like it like this, Val?” I stepped back, tossed him a seductive gaze, and withdrew the belt from his pant loops.

His lapels reached higher with each breath, but I received only a twitch of his right brow in response. I kicked off my shoes, lowered myself to my knees, shoved his feet together, wound the belt twice around his ankles, and buckled it tight.

As I hesitated, my fingers dawdling on the clasp of his pants, he whispered my name. I jumped up, straddled his bound legs, and leaned in for the kill. The tips of our noses brushed. Our eyes locked in a battle stare. “Tell me you like this, tell me you want it.”

With my crotch brushing over his clothed erection, I slid my tongue across the seam of his lips, accentuating the velvety touch of my words. “Say it.”

A single bead of sweat trickled along his rough cheek. I grabbed two fistfuls of hair and pulled him closer. I licked a trail from his chin to the bridge of his nose before ghosting my painted lips over one set of lashes. “You like?” My words floated as smooth as my breath, as soft as the wisps of lashes at my lips.

I lost my grip and stumbled backward as he reared upright with a start. “For God’s sake, Kendra! Suck my goddamned dick!”

Enraged, I tore open his pants and yanked them and his boxers down over his ass to his knees. “Is that why you fired her? Because she wouldn’t suck your cock!” Before he could answer, I ripped the hanky from his suit pocket and crammed the wadded cloth so deep inside his mouth I thought his lips might split.

His pleading eyes and furrowed brows held my attention as my hand encircled the base of his jutted and twitching cock. “What? You don’t want this?” I dropped to my knees.

He shook his head yes, then no, and then exhaled loudly through his nose as he dropped his chin to his chest.

I shifted my grip, and the mission—to make him beg, give into him, and leave—wavered. As the loose skin veil fell away, I came eye to eye with his cock’s glistening head. My gaze flickered upward, finding Val wide-eyed, breathing heavy, and dripping with sweat. I licked my lips. Had to keep up the ruse; no way would I let him know how his cock turned me on, how even in my dreams, I craved to feel him inside me.

I’d failed not only myself, but also Nancy—a bitch, a slut, but a damned good teacher. Despite how I longed to mock Val, as that breath-hardened pink skin neared my lips, lust overshadowed my mission. I smoothed over his dark hair-covered thigh, and the remnants of my splintered rationale evaporated.

I tongued his cock’s bulbous head as my hand drifted past his balls and through his legs. *Yes!* Excitement raced through me when I discovered the same fur covering each cheek. My blood rushed south, and I squirmed. *Not already . . .* I had expected my mission’s purpose to squelch my desire. Obviously, my expectations had been too high. Eyeing Val, I traced the bulging purple vein running the length of his shaft, eased my grip at the base, and slid my tongue along his sac.

His chest heaved as I dampened each furry nut before twisting my head to one side to draw them, one after the other, between my lips. He smelled of herbal soap and sweat, and I relished in his unique aroma as I bathed his balls in saliva. I pulled back, seizing short strands of hair with my teeth, knowing he loved the inflicted gentle tug when, with a throaty growl, his head flew back.

I teased his ass crack with my fingers, and left a lipstick trail along his cock, kissing my way to the head. He snorted, inhaling deep as, once again, he focused on me, his eyes begging. I swirled my tongue around the edge of his cock’s head then flicked the tension-stretched slit. My efforts earned an abrupt buck of his hips, and his cock bumped against my lips, pleading with my mouth for entrance. I fisted the base to hold him at bay and continued my torture.

*Self-inflicted torture*, my gaff-hidden ache reminded me. Heat surged through me as I caressed the inside of his thigh and closed my lips around the edge of his need. Between the thicket of fur coating his body and his attentive, hazed-over stare, I became entranced. Inching his cock deeper, I sucked, teasing the rigid layout of taught skin with my tongue. His cock's head met my throat as I moved my hand to meet my lips. I swallowed once and again backed my mouth to the head.

Val's nostrils flared with the languid intensity my tongue inflicted. I tried not to grin as I used my teeth to tease the swollen ridge of his cock's head. At the same time, I glided my palm along the length of his shaft. Eyes narrowed, he leaned on his bound hands and arched his hips from the desk.

His skin's saltiness coated my tongue. I allowed him to control the pace for a moment, but after he eagerly crammed his cock twice down my throat, I pinned his ass to the desk with a stiff palm to his pelvis. I sucked down his shaft, retreated, then repeated the motion. I adjusted my angle to accommodate his size and took him deeper, fisting the portion of his length my mouth failed yet to entertain.

He cursed behind the cloth gag and strained against my braced hand. Sweat-drenched locks splayed his forehead, his temples. His once-crisp shirt clung to his torso. Despite my anger, I reveled in witnessing Val, sexed up and yearning.

The sight of his dampened, mussed hair and longing gaze heightened my arousal. Pain radiated from my pinched and swollen man-clit, up, and through my groin, and I quickened my pace. I fingered his tightened balls with each downward stroke; and with every glide upward, I led him into the depths of my throat.

With a muffled growl, he shook the wet strands of hair from his eyes. His ass tensed, and he strained forward. Pressed between desk and hand, his body quaked as his first burst of cum filled my mouth. My lips holding firm, I

swallowed, constricting my throat around his cock's head with each spasm. Drinking his sweet and salty juice, I sucked him dry.

When his head dropped to his chest in utter exhaustion, I removed my mouth. He slid down the front of his desk to collapse on the carpet like a rag doll. His flaccid cock drooped over his thigh.

Regret raged war with the agony nestled in my crotch. I needed to leave, to run, to hide, but guilt-glue held me to the spot. What had I done? Were there cameras? Paranoid, I scanned the room from my seat on the floor. What of Nancy? Did I truly care?

As my troubled gaze fixated on Val, his eyes flew open. I hadn't a clue what he felt, but I felt like the selfish piece of shit I was, and I tore the hanky from his mouth.

Taking in mouthfuls of air, he struggled to sit as I reached around him and began untying his wrists. "Kiss me," he said.

*Is he crazy? Can't he see how vile, how unladylike I am?* My vision clouded over, and I avoided his searching gaze. I fought for restraint, but the tears welled up and over and rolled down my cheeks. With a sigh, I took his beautiful face between my palms.

His hands freed, he ruffled the sides of my head. Shaking loose my tidy hairdo and carrying the length over my shoulders, he led me to his mouth. Val's conveyed desire reeled me in, introducing feelings I wasn't sure I understood. My head whirled. My heart pounded. I tore myself from his embrace, grabbed my shoes, and made for the door.

"Kendra!"

Door unlocked, hand gripping the knob, I hesitated.

"I didn't fire Nancy. She had a family emergency. I approved her personal leave."

## **Chapter Six**

No doubt in my mind, I was a fool. A fool hopelessly enamored with the most self-assured, arrogant, sadistic—thoughtful, caring, beautiful man I'd ever known. Part of me regretted what I'd done, but a slightly larger part kept retreating and replaying the scene from the day before yesterday. Twisting regret into justification, justification into want, want into need, need into . . . . What I *needed* was to haul my lazy, brooding ass out of bed.

I rolled over and spied the digital red zero flash into a one. Eleven o'clock on Saturday morning, I shoved the blanketed sheets to my knees then kicked them onto the floor. *You're crazy, Kendra. You know that, don't you?* My feet flopped over the side. I pushed myself to my elbows then finally, upright.

Why hadn't he shown up at school yesterday? Was he ashamed, embarrassed, avoiding me? *Does he know about the real me?* I climbed out of bed and stretched. Tugging my long nightshirt over my head, I traipsed across the carpet to the bathroom.

After relieving myself, I flushed the toilet and cranked on the hot water. I plugged the drain and added cold water, assuring the temperature was perfect, before crawling into the tub. *Damnit!* For another few seconds, I stared at the shower caddy on the shelf beside the toilet before hiking myself to my feet to grab the shampoo and conditioner. I slammed them onto the tub wall, returning to my warm-water cocoon.

Nothing in my life made sense anymore. I wondered if it ever had.

I straightened my legs, submerging as much of my five-foot-eleven frame as the tub allowed. *Why me?* Why, with the variety of truly feminine forms, in all their buxomly, blossoming, round-in-all-the-right-places, with their hauntingly seductive, tilted faces, longing eyes and pouting, perfectly painted lips, their fake giggles, their society-induced modesty, their natural weaknesses that were, in reality, their greatest strengths . . . with all of that out there to choose from, why *me?*

But that's just it, I thought, recalling my conversation with Dalia. I had just described myself. Minus the fake giggles and figure-enhancing bosom, of



course—I ran the washcloth over my adolescent-shaped, just-shy-of-an-A-cup breasts—but I held the same qualities as any other woman. I was a woman. *I am a woman.* As the washcloth flowed along my torso, my man-clit bobbed and swayed with the turbulence. *He'll never accept me like this.*

*I'm not going under the fucking knife.* I sank, and my hopes sank with me. Blinking to adjust to the soapy water, I stared at the blurry ceiling, wishing it would cave in and hold me under until I drowned.

“Fuck!” Choking and coughing, I bolted upright and lugged my sorry, dripping ass from the tub. Love happened only in fairytales, dreams never came true, and I seriously needed to get laid.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clothes were optional today, with the exception of my form-fitting panties. My open bathrobe hung off the side of the window seat as the sun's rays tinkled through the trees and warmed my skin with dancing shadows. I could've finished my book, if not for the kaleidoscope of bright colors that faded too soon into the violet-blues of encroaching darkness. I tossed the throw pillow to the other end of the narrow bench, stood, and made my way to the sofa.

No sooner had I plopped onto the cushions and clicked on the lamp than the doorbell chimed.

“Just a minute!” Fumbling for the straps of my robe, I padded across the room and peered through the peephole. *Val!*

“Uh . . . Who is it?”

“Please, Kendra, may I come in?”

Fingering the knob, I reached for the security brace propped in the corner, but instead, I unlocked and opened the door. *What the fuck am I doing?*

All I could reason was, I couldn't reason. With scrambled brain, I stared at him blankly. In unkempt glory, I stood, my eyes as wide open as the door

and my robe. I didn't want to think. I couldn't think—not with the hammering in my chest or the swirl of emotions threatening to topple me—as Val stepped over my threshold.

“Kendra . . . .”

My hand fell away from the knob, my backward steps in sync with his forward. Startled when he kicked the door shut behind him, I faltered another attempt to gather my robe. He loomed over me as I backed into a wall, and yet he neither leered nor laughed. Gentle but firm, his lotion-softened hands covered and aided mine in closing and tying my robe. With my nakedness secured behind a wall of terry, Val drew me into his strong embrace. “I’m sorry.”

He held me close, my arms trapped between us. With my head to his chest, he smoothed my ratted hair. His gentle swaying quieted and replaced the drumming in my mind with the wild beat of his heart. *Why was he here? Shouldn't I be the one apologizing?* Confused, but thankful for the peace, I leaned into his proffered warmth, galvanizing the moment.

“Kendra.” His arms relaxed. He lifted my chin.

I pulled away and turned my head. “Val, please don’t look at me, not like this. I don’t have my makeup on for God’s sake.”

“Then, by all means, my lady, you’re free to go and do whatever it is you do to look most stunning.” He took one liberal step backward, bowed, then started for the living room. “I’ll wait here. We’ll talk over dinner.”

Reassuring myself this dream was indeed real, I watched Val sink into the sofa before retreating to my room, mind numb and heart aflutter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheer layers of green silk swished this way and that. Adorning the matching scarf, I admired my choice of coffee brown, sequined sandals in the door mirror. I pinned my hair into a twist and fashioned the tiny strands about

my cheeks into loose ringlets, remembering Dalia's remarks on how I looked beautiful this way. Val had me feeling like a princess, and now, I resembled one.

Halfway to the living room, my uncertainty returned. Sequined clutch in hand, I leaned against the wall. *Why me?* Again, Dalia's voice rescued me from the abyss. *Be happy while life hands it to you.* I continued toward the living room, my steps now sure.

Emerging from the hall, I stopped, momentarily speechless. Immediately, my knees weakened at the sight of Val. His attention was riveted on the pages of an outdated issue of *Girl Talk* he'd obviously pulled from my shelf.

A covered *EEK* or a gasp, not sure which, carried his attention to my dismay. Silently, he closed the magazine and placed it on the coffee table.

Hand in pocket, he unfolded from the sofa and shook his leg twice. He crossed the floor, his dark gaze leering from my toes to my head. Finally, his devious look settled on my face. "That was time well spent."

His hand at the small of my back, he led me toward the door then paused. Warm breath ghosted over my neck as he whispered, heady and deep. "Tonight, I want you to feel as if you're the most beautiful woman in the world, Kendra." His lips brushed my cheek. "Because, you are."

He opened the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Haven Erastis* lived up to its reputation thus far. Fresco archways, burbling fountains, walls, nooks, and high shelves lined with ceremonial swords and an assortment of exotic, Middle Eastern artifacts. I tried not to show my astonishment, as the *maitre d'* ushered us across the polished marble to the only two open seats at any of the floor-length tables. "For the lady," he said, as he held my chair.

I noticed an elderly woman helping herself to the *sarma*. Blushing as my stomach growled, I tore my gaze from the platter upon platter of Mediterranean appetizers lining the table to find Val dishing *sarma* onto my plate. I loved stuffed grape leaves, especially soaked in tomato sauce.

He smiled and leaned into me to pass the platter. “I hope you like Greek.”

With his proximity, his wafting cologne disrupted the delicacies’ aromas—as well as my logic. Any modicum of modesty unguarded, I brought my lips near his shadowed jaw. “I like you, don’t I?”

Inwardly cursing as my mind replayed Val’s startled expression, I asked the restaurant patron on my right to pass the *hummus*.

Over the course of thirty silent minutes, we gorged ourselves with fried cheese, mini stuffed pitas, and cucumber and tomato salad. We had our choice of chicken or beef kebabs, which came with a never-ending supply of broiled vegetables, pita bread, and rice. When I thought I would burst, Val’s order of *mousakka* arrived.

He held a heaping bite to my lips. “You’ll love this eggplant casserole,” he said. With his other hand under the fork, his fingertips brushing my chin, he flashed me that familiar sadistic look. Fork enclosed between my lips, I struggled to negotiate the over-abundant mouthful as Val toyed my bottom lip with his thumb. With an eerie seriousness, he asked, “So, you *like me*, do you?”

My judgment lapse had returned to haunt me. I swallowed hard and reached for my wine, never more thankful for live music, as the band started a conversation-droning number. Val earned a new title, as he scooted closer and draped an arm over my shoulder . . . *persistent*.

His mouth a hair’s breadth from my ear, he attempted apologizing for his forwardness and lack of self-control earlier in the week. He proposed we get to know each other better . . . much better, citing his confounding attraction for me.

*He’s confused?* I shrugged off his arm and shoved my chair back from the table.

“Excuse me.” I stumbled toward a destination unknown and bumped into a busboy, who kindly abandoned the dishes broken on my account to escort me to the ladies’ room.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Are you okay, Miss?”

I cursed my emotions as the woman, who seemed to adore stuffed grape leaves as much as I did, coaxed me from my lavatory stall hideout.

After blowing my nose, I exited the stall to find her seated in the cozy waiting area. She made room on a pinstriped loveseat and motioned me to her side. She wrapped an arm around my back as I settled next to her. “You have a wonderful gentleman friend out there worried to death, dear.”

*Gentleman?* If only she knew.

“I may be overstepping my bounds, but I feel compelled to ask, what exactly is the problem? From the moment you two entered tonight, I sensed the chemistry. Like a bird takes to flight, he flows into your every move, and you encourage him. Between your pseudo-modesty and his veiled eyes, I don’t know who is better at charades.”

“Excuse me?” Tears long gone, I wriggled away from her concern and strode to the sink to reapply my makeup.

She joined me, and for a minute appeared mesmerized by my application of foundation. “Please don’t be upset with me, Miss. What I was trying to say is I’ve never seen a more complimentary couple. There’s no doubt in my mind. You two were made for each other.”

Mascara brush mid-stroke, I stopped and turned. Her face mirrored a life of regret, and I could seem my own future reflected there. Yet, despite her pain, she radiated an undying hope, one only grasped from experiencing a deep love.

“I’m scared,” I said.

She chuckled. Her overlapped belly jiggled the rolls in her dress as the rumbling grew louder. Wiping the moisture from the corners of her eyes, she shook her head. “Funny how that works,” she said, her jolliness morphing grim. “I won’t tell you I understand, even if I do. But all night, I’ve been fascinated with the interaction between you and your man, as you now know. And I can assure you, he is head-over-heels in love.”

She grabbed the back of my arm and pulled me down to her level. “I’ll let you in on a secret . . . . He holds a far greater fear of you, than you of him. That’s respect, my dear. If you let that man get away, you’ll regret it the rest of your life.”

She left as abruptly as she had entered. As the restroom door scraped shut, I pondered a reflection I no longer recognized. “What have you gotten yourself into, Kendra?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Val leapt to his feet and held my chair as I returned to our table. I retook my seat and glanced across to where the elderly lady had sat earlier. As expected, she was gone. “What time is it?” I asked.

“Almost eleven; I’m sorry if I upset you, Kendra.”

Something moved inside me as the music mellowed. I turned to him. “Dance with me.”

“I’ll warn you in advance; dancing is not my forte.” He took me in his arms and pulled me close.

One hand in his, the other on his shoulder, I donned a seductive tilt-smile combination as he led me across the floor. He, in turn, adorned a debonair smirk. Never did it fade, even as he smashed my toes under the sole of his shoe. I couldn’t help but laugh aloud, recalling the words from my ladies’ room cohort. *He holds a far greater fear of you, than you of him.* Maybe Val and I did have some things in common. Maybe he *could* want a lady like me.

After the third toe-bruise, I requested a reprieve. We settled in a pair of empty seats near the center of the hall, just as the music shifted. I'd waited all night to gauge his reaction to what I knew came next.

Dalia had talked of *Haven Erastis*' dancers quite often. I rolled my eyes as the lights dimmed. *How could I have been so clueless?* I'd assumed she'd longed to be a dancer; never once had it crossed my mind she'd wanted to fuck one.

Knees wide, Val shifted in his chair. Mere feet before us, cymbals tinkling, four *Barbara Eden* clones draped in bright pink, purple and yellow silks, invaded the floor. The music exceeded lively, and I became lost in the spectacle of the belly dancers' detached, yet flowing, abdominals, their seductive, pelvic sways, and sudden hip thrusts. They solicited donations with erotic shakes of their frill-covered breasts and abrupt quakes in their pierced, exotic jewel-adorned navels. I found myself rummaging through my purse for loose change as Val's finger-aided whistles pierced the air.

Yes, we had compatibilities. We both appreciated the female body. But Val's fidgeting began to bother me. *Is he tired? Does he want to leave?*

With high hopes, I turned to ask, only to spot the fully erected *high-top* in his lap. "You get turned on by every woman who wriggles and writhes, or do these four hold a special place in your heart?"

With an abrupt snap of his head he gave me an answering glower that sent a sense of doom racing over my skin. My chill apparent, his offense mellowed. He drew me into his arms. "Kendra, I can't help I'm a man. The female form in motion is a work of art in itself. Wouldn't you agree?"

He lifted my fallen gaze from his tented pants to his face. "Don't worry; I can assure you, they wouldn't have the first clue about fulfilling *my* needs."

*Obviously, you and your dick agree to disagree.* "If you don't mind, I'd like to go home now."

## Chapter Seven

“Oh—Oh—Oh—Fuck!” Wiping drool from my chin with my sleeve, I pushed to my knees. *Damnit.* Reaching up, I knocked out the source of the annoying blare. The alarm clock toppled and crashed to the floor. “Payback’s a bitch.”

Using the edge of the bed, I hoisted my hung-over ass to stand, only to trip over the sheets entangled at my feet. Outlook for today—don’t leave the bed.

“Stupid—Stupid—Stupid—Stupid!” Toothpaste splattered the mirror. I chucked my toothbrush at the back of the sink. *I shouldn’t have listened to her.* Head splitting, I turned to the shower. “Do yourself a favor. The next time some crazy starts up a conversation about your personal life, tell her to take a hike.” I shoved the curtain out of my way and stomped into the tub. I cranked the handles and traces of water that’d hung out in the pipes overnight cascaded onto my back with a sick vengeance. I hated my life.

*Why didn’t I just say no?* I leaned my head back to rinse the shampoo. *A theme park, of all places; what in the hell was I thinking?* Of course, I knew the answer. I ripped the shower curtain from its hooks, yanked a towel off the rack, and marched to my room.

“You know what’s going to happen?” I stuffed the tank top into my high-waisted, cotton mini skirt and wrenched the drawstrings tight. “He’s going to find out.” Hair snarling around metal bristles, my headache multiplied five-fold as I dragged the brush through my wet tresses. “You’ll be dismissed. *Ouch.* He’ll out you to the entire teaching world. *Ow.* And then what?”

*He’ll hate me.* I braided my hair to mid-shoulder, then applied mascara and lip-gloss. *I’ll just have to hate him first.* By the time I’d finished with Valerian Riche, he’d wish to God he’d never met me. I slid into my walkers, catching the quiet knock at the door.

\* \* \* \* \*



"You look cute today, Kendra."

"Whatever." Reclining my seat, I adjusted my sunglasses. I'd ducked away from his touch, ignored him, smarted off more than once, and he'd yet to get a clue.

"If you're not feeling well, we can always make it a rain check."

"Just a headache. It'll pass."

I didn't react when the car veered off the Interstate. But when we rolled to a stop and his arm brushed my knee, I did. With a start, I jerked upright, only to clutch my head. He opened the glove box and fished through the clutter until he produced a small bottle. "Here you go. I'll be right out." I squeezed my forehead tighter as his door clunked shut.

*Idiot!*

A few minutes later, he crawled inside and handed me a slot-lidded Styrofoam cup.

"Kendra. No."

I hesitated, the cup at my bottom lip. *Who's in control here?* I tilted the cup to take a drink. Val grabbed it from my hand and slammed it into a cup holder. Hot cappuccino splashed from the opened lid, and he shook the boiling moisture from his hand. "It's too hot to use for washing down medicine. Here."

He handed me a bottle of orange juice, and a bottle of Diet Coke, which I barely managed to drop into my lap as he handed me a tall can of some kind of energy drink.

"I wasn't sure what you needed, but I figured with the variety, I should have you covered. You'll feel better soon."

Contemplating him from behind my shades, I popped the tab on the energy drink and swallowed the four painkillers. *This is not going to be easy.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Val was right. No waiting in long lines, hardly any crowd at all if you arrived just as they opened the gates. My headache had disappeared an hour ago. I wasn't surprised he'd been right about that, too. As we staggered off each ride and exited each attraction, Val chiseled and shaved at my heart of stone until he had transformed it to mush.

"Kendra."

*I can't do it.* Despite his insurmountable cocky grins, I smiled. Every faked fright for my benefit brought bubbling laughter to my lips. With each trinket, meaningless toy, cheap bead of jewelry, and touch—especially his touch—I realized . . . *I'm in love. Oh God, what am I going to—*

"Kendra!"

"Huh?"

"Are you all right?" He thumbed the tears from my cheeks.

"Yeah . . . ." I managed without losing it, hoping he'd drop the line of questioning.

He entwined his fingers with mine and started dragging me along the walkway. "Come on! There's no one on the sky ride. We can get a whole car to ourselves." My gaze transfixed on his tight-jean clad ass as he broke into a jog. Willingly, I followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Val's hand stopped the attendant from closing the door. "Excuse me sir, can you tell me how long this ride lasts?"

*What's he planning now?* I watched through the glass as the young man leaned closer to Val.

With a quick look at the path over his shoulder, the man returned to Val with a smirk. "Well, seeing how we're not busy, I can set it on its slowest speed. I think that's thirty-thirty-five minutes one-way, instead of twenty."

"Do it," Val said. He slipped the attendant a fifty then slid the door shut.

“So, have you ever ridden one of these things?” His ass squeaked across the vinyl, stopping only as his hip crashed into mine, and he chuckled.

Though I liked this more adventurous Val, I couldn’t read him out of character. “I-I was on a ski-lift once.” *Something’s up.*

“Entirely different, my dear. You’ll see.”

*Dear?*

My head snapped back then forward as the cable lurched the car into motion. We’d no sooner left the loading platform than he sprung into action. His arm about my shoulders, he leaned in and captured my lips. The force of his kiss parted my lips, and his tongue swept my mouth. I pulled back and opened my eyes to find us forehead to forehead, his gaze locked on mine. He traced the neckline of my tank top with a finger. “I’ve wanted to get you alone all morning.”

Flexing his arm, he crushed me against him, stealing my breath. When we parted, he was flushed and panting. He continued exploring my neckline. “Kendra, you know I like you.”

His hand covered one of my breasts, but instead of shying away, I fisted his hair and attacked his lips with a need I’d kept in check too long. As he tugged at my top, I pulled it free from my skirt. His palm slid along the bare skin of my stomach, and I moaned. I clutched his arm through my shirt and dragged it higher, wiggling free of my bra as he fumbled with, and finally conquered, the front clasp.

My mind soared as he thumbed then gently twisted an aroused nipple. Gasping, I broke the kiss. “Jesus—Val.”

Twisting, he hauled me onto his lap. We faced each other. With my knees on the bench, I straddled him. Without a word, he scrunched my top over my breasts and latched onto a nipple before I could protest. My crotch sizzled. *Had I ever felt this hot?* I arched into his hungry mouth. “Your teeth . . . Use your teeth.”

The sharp sting at my breast rivaled the pain I felt pooling below. He bucked his hips, seeking a higher-order of contact. I dropped one toe in a desperate search for stability. Secure footing located, I hurried to stand, the commotion swaying the cable-suspended car. I tried to gain control of both my breathing and my balance, and stumbled into the seat at the opposite end, pulling my shirt to my waist.

“Wow.” I felt Val next to me as I gawked at the menagerie fifty-feet below us. “They’re everywhere.”

“You’re funny,” he said, pecking me on the cheek. “You’ve never seen animals before, either?”

“Oh, please.” I flashed him a sideways snarl. “Yes, in zoos. Not like out in the wild or something . . . Look!” I poked the glass. He bumped my shoulder out of his way to see the pair of giraffes. Fighting or flirting, I wasn’t sure. When he started laughing, I shoved him toward the other end of the car. “What’s so funny, jackass?”

On the car’s floor, he lay where he landed, laughing with gusto and clutching his stomach.

“Whatever.” I returned to animal-watching. He’d lost his damned mind. Less than a minute later, Val had me pinned to the back of the seat by my shoulders. No laugh, not even a smirk, the second time I’d witnessed such seriousness in his eyes.

Prying my legs apart, he lowered himself to his knees between them. “Kendra.” I averted my gaze and looked out the window. He brought my attention back to him with a soft touch to my face, but I lowered my head just as quickly. “Please look at me.”

*Those tears aren’t real.* I tried convincing myself, shutting my eyes, only to open them wide as his lips flitted over mine. “Kendra.”

“What? And why are we whispering?”

Silence. So silent, I swore I could hear the bead of sweat I watched descend the inside bridge of his nose. His tongue glided over his top lip then his bottom. *Why am I shaking?*

I wasn't shaking. "Val? What's wrong?" I brushed a droplet from his cheek.

"Kendra, I . . . I-think-I-love-you."

Why had I been so worried about this moment? All the anxiety and the fear were for nothing. I answered him with ease. "You can't, Val." With the same sense of calm, I replied to his questioning eyes. "We've been around each other less than a week. You can't love me. You don't know me. Not at all."

"Don't tell me I don't know what I want, Kendra." He leaned forward and kissed me.

Inhibitions forgotten with the intensity of his touch, I forged ahead. My tongue met his and I lured him inside. *He wants me.* I sucked on his bottom lip. He sucked on mine. *God, I want him to suck—*

"I want to make love to you," he said.

Okay, inhibitions *almost* forgotten . . . . Fear seized my gut, doubt taunted me, but I forced them away. I couldn't remember ever wanting anyone as badly as I wanted Val Riche. I wanted him inside me, deep inside, fulfilling my desires, filling me.

If he gave me a minute, I'd figure out how to make it happen, too. I led his hands under my tank and seized his mouth and his tongue with mine.

He pulled back, tugging the shirt, along with my bra, over my head and off my arms. As the air rushed over my breasts, my nipples ached with an inability to harden further. His hands at my back, he pulled me off the bench and to my knees before him. He nipped at my throat and suckled the hollow between my collarbones. "Please. I want to make you scream," he said, before clamping a nipple between his teeth.

"Yes . . . ."

"Quit stalling then."

He licked a path to my breast as his hurried fingers kneaded the other. "What do you want?" His voice desperate, he gripped my ass and drew me against his denim-covered erection.

"I-It's too bright in here."

His warm breath soothed over my shoulder. "I'll close my eyes."

*He'll close his . . . ?* "Do it!"

He clenched his eyes tight, and I got to my feet. The pressure between my legs almost dropped me to my knees. He flinched as I grunted and stepped around him. "Don't you dare open them!"

I reclined on the bench behind him and relieved the pain. My semi erect man-clit bobbing in the air, I positioned my thong to cover myself the best I could. My panties rubbed over the tip of my man-clit as it jutted outward, and heat pulsed through my veins. "Fuck." It'd always been more sensitive in this position.

"Something wrong?"

*I need it. Hard. I need it. Fast. I need fucked. Now!* "You have a condom?"

He dipped inside his pocket. After retrieving his wallet, he held it behind him. I snatched the wallet from his hand, unfolded it, and pulled out the gold foil package. "Here." He shoved his wallet back into his pocket as I circled to kneel before him.

I checked his face as I unfastened his pants. He'd kept his end of the bargain so far. I grabbed the waistband of his boxers, carried the material down over that beautiful, un-cut cock, and tucked the elastic under his balls. "Whatever you do—"

"I won't open my eyes."

I caught the corner of the wrapper between my teeth and tore it open. He looked pathetic kneeling there, obeying orders. I rolled the latex over the head of his cock, then pulled him into another kiss. He took over and rolled the condom snug to the base.

"You're beautiful, Kendra."

I shuffled on my knees to face the bench, reached behind me, grabbed his right hand, and brought it up under the back of my skirt. Over my shoulder, I watched him maneuver his other hand to join the first. Squeezing both cheeks, he groaned and scooted closer, tracing along the sides of my thong, the curve of my ass.

“That’s far enough. Just do it.”

He stretched my thong to the side, pressed his cock between my spread cheeks, and rode the crack of my ass. I couldn’t bear to watch. “For God’s sake, Val, take me.”

Before I’d completed a full breath, the head of his cock set at my glory hole. One hand spread across the base of my spine, he fed my ass his cock with the other. I pressed into his push, feeling him enter.

He dug his fingers into the flesh of my hips and grunted, easing his way, inch by glorious inch, inside. “You’re so fucking tight.”

Tears ran down my face, as with one shove, my ass engulfed his cock. Buried inside me, he pressed to one side then the other, each movement accompanied by him drawing out just a bit farther.

I’d longed for this moment so badly, and despite the pain I was ready to explode. So close, I didn’t dare touch myself.

I pulled off until I could feel his cock’s head just inside my entrance then drove onto him with force. He groaned, but apparently understood what I needed. He rocked his hips fast and short, faster and longer, and then out to the tip. He plowed deep, his pelvis ramming into my ass cheeks.

His hands wandered as he perfected a rhythm. He caressed my hips, ran his palms up along my sides, then hunched over my back. Pinching my nipples, he fucked me faster. He kissed my shoulders and licked my back, never slowing the pace of that wonderful meaty cock gliding in and out of my tight hole.

I reared upright, bracing myself on the bench. “Val!” Leaning into him, I twisted my neck to see his face. Eyes still closed, he smiled as his fingers teased my nipples. “I’m . . . Val, I can’t last.”

His mouth found mine. He gripped my shoulder with one hand, placed his other hand on my stomach, and held me against his hard body. As he released his hips into a frenzy of thrusts, I touched and stroked my swollen man-clit. Val’s tongue entwined with mine, and he pounded his cock deeper and deeper. The sound of skin slapping skin filled the tiny car as our bodies met. I ceased thinking. I tensed.

“Kendra.” Val hovered at my lips, his breathing erratic. “Come for me, baby. Let yourself go.” His tongue dipped between my lips, teased mine, then retreated into his mouth. He dug his fingers into my flesh and pounded harder. “Scream for me!”

He bit into my shoulder, as a shudder raced through his body and then through mine. My ass clenched tighter. My hand stilled. “Oh—God—Val!”

His head flew back as his body jerked. “Ken-dra!”

My orgasm pulsed through me. My body moving in time with his, I came, splaying the front of the bench as over and over, he crammed his cock deep inside my ass, filling the condom with stream after stream of hot cum.

“Jesus . . . Val.” I fell onto my hands, supporting his weight as he followed me onto the cum-splattered bench. “You still have your eyes closed?”

“Yeah,” he said, winded, sliding from the tightness of my ass and toppling onto his own upon the car’s floor. “Just let me know when I can open them.” He collapsed onto his side.

Elbows perched on the bench, I leaned a minute longer to catch my breath. “You’d either make somebody a good sled-dog or one hell of an excellent wife.”

“Only for you, Kendra.”

## **Chapter Eight**



Exhausted, his eyes still closed, Val snored softly. I wiped the mess from the bench then shucked the spent condom and stuffed it, along with the nasty tissues, inside my purse. After reassuring I'd tucked myself away neatly, I glanced out the window and gasped. "Val, get up! The platform is just a few yards away!"

Stumbling and incoherent, he shoved to stand and adjusted his cock inside his boxers. Shirt tucked, he fastened his jeans and smoothed his hands over his hair as the sky car slowed then lurched to a stop.

The door opened, and I cringed from the obvious difference in the fresh air as opposed to the lingering aroma of fresh sex. Exiting the ride, he grabbed my hand and we took off down the ramp before the attendant had a chance to question.

Just outside the park, he picked me up and swung me around then kissed me as he eased me to the ground. "We have another stop today, but first, we'll get you cleaned up a bit."

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

\* \* \* \* \*

He chose to wait in the car while I showered and changed. I didn't make him wait long. Since he'd worn jeans, I decided on a cute denim mini and soft pink polo. Twenty minutes later, we hit the road.

"Just tell me, please?"

"Nope. Lie back and relax. It'll take a while to get there."

I was surprised I'd slept for two hours when Val nudged me awake. "Where are we?" Sitting up, rubbing my eyes, I squinted into the afternoon sun. We'd driven south; I could tell from the abundance of palms and the ninety-

eight degrees displayed on his *Jaguar's* console. We veered onto the exit ramp. "Cape Coral?"

"Be patient," he said.

Ten minutes later, we came to a stop in front of a wrought iron security gate. "May I help you?"

"Tell them Valerian has a guest."

"Val?" Excitement carried on the deep voice coming through the boxed speaker. I heard a loud buzzing noise, and the gates creaked open.

In a trance, I took in beds of exotic, tropical flowers. Banana and citrus trees dotted the yard. I marveled at the marble sculptures and granite statues that marked the various themed settings as we followed what seemed to be a never-ending drive.

"Oh my God . . . ." I popped my door as soon as Val stopped the car halfway up a circular drive. In the middle of the front lawn, a copper fountain, nearly twenty feet tall, sported molded dolphins and seabirds. Val's arms encircled my waist from behind.

"It's magnificent. Who do you know here?"

He chuckled, hugging me tightly. "Everything you see will be mine some day."

With a start, I pushed out of his embrace. "Y-You brought me to your parents' home? Are you crazy?"

"Kendra." He grasped my hand. "Don't, please. They'll love you; trust me."

Surprised—*more like trapped*—I let him lead me where he may.

We approached the front entry—twin oak doors with frosted, etched glass nestled between light apricot stucco. I stood awed as one half of the wooden barrier inched open.

"Val. What a surprise." Sandy blond-white tips on cropped hair, deep blue eyes, late thirties, donned in full tux, the man stepped over the threshold to embrace Val in a bear-like hug.

“Stephan.”

Val pried free the hold, took my hand, and led me closer. “Kendra, this is Stephan, our family’s butler. He’s been with us for years. Stephan, I should like to introduce Ms. Kendra Wright.”

Brow quirked, Stephan offered a coy nod. “Yes, Val. Your parents are anxious to see you in the dining hall. Go ahead. I’ll make sure Ms. Kendra finds her way.”

“Thank you, Stephan.” Val dropped my hand, stepped past Stephan, and disappeared into the massive expanse of darkness inside the mansion.

Eyes like a weasel, Stephan stayed me with a knowing stance. For a second, I thought I recognized him. He offered his gloved hand. I accepted.

The air left my lungs as he jerked me against his body, jarring my memory. He held me to him, crushing my fingers, and seething as he spoke lowly at my neck. “There’s only one reason Valerian would show up here with the likes of a slut like you. If you don’t break this off, I’ll expose this charade, and he’ll lose everything. You’re a smart girl. You always were. I know you’ll make the right choice.”

I ran my tongue under his earlobe. “Fuck you, you closeted drama queen. I don’t make Val’s decisions, and I’ve no idea why I’m here. On the other hand, is he aware which city’s streets you frequent on Friday nights? Or have you progressed to call girl? I’m sure his parents would love to meet *Star*.”

He released me with a growl. “Don’t push me, bitch. You’ll live to regret it.”

I stomped past him, praying I wouldn’t get lost in that monstrosity of a home.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, there you are. Where’s Stephan?” Val asked, as I pushed through a tall door into the dining hall.

I smoothed over my clothes, fluffed my hair and smiled. “Something came up. I told him I’d find my way. I’m fine.” I winced when Val squeezed my abused hand.

“Don’t be hogging her all to yourself, Vali. Have you forgotten your manners? Introduce us, boy!”

I couldn’t put a face with the crotchety voice until we stepped past the low-hanging chandelier. At the far end of the fifteen-foot table sat an elderly gentleman with even gray hair, sporting Val’s eyes, only paler and with deeper crows’ feet.

“Kendra, this is Giovanni Riche, my father.” He placed my hand atop his father’s on the table.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Riche.”

“Don’t you listen to a word he says, Ms. Kendra, is it?” Mr. Riche hooked a cane on the table’s edge then grabbed my wrist and yanked me onto his lap. “You call me Geo; you got that?” His hand shot to my breast and he gave it a rough pinch. I leapt from his lap, only to be accosted when he clamped a more-than-healthy grip on my ass.

“Dad!” Val wrapped me in a protective hold.

“Spirited one you got there, Vali. Good breeding stock. Excellent choice, son. Excellent choice. Don’t you worry about those titties, Ms. Kendra. As soon as you pop out a kid or two, they’ll ripen up nice and plump.”

“What’s the commotion—oh, hello. I’m Sophia Riche, Val’s mother.” Coal black hair, hazel eyes, and a weighty top, she greeted me eye-to-eye.

“Mom, this is, Kendra Wright.”

I accepted her hand as Val released me. She pulled me into her arms. Crying, she kissed my cheek. “Take care of my son,” she said. Keeping an arm at my back, she turned to Val. “I wish you would’ve informed me you were coming, and with company, Vali. I would’ve prepared a nicer meal.”

“It’s fine, mom. Whatever you’re having will be fine.”

“Yes. Don’t go out of your way for me, Mrs. Riche.”

“Oh nonsense!” She patted my ass then turned to exit through a smaller door opposite the one I’d entered. “Pull up a chair. Dinner’s in five minutes . . . and for heaven’s sake, call me Sophie!”

Interesting, to say the least. I’d discovered where Val got his looks, his height, and his sexual ardor in a matter of ten minutes. Yet, I worried. What had Star meant when he’d said Val would bring me here for only one reason. Why’d his mother tell me to take care of him? We hadn’t known each other a week. My stomach twisted in knots as we settled around the table. *This can’t be happening.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophie was an excellent cook. Although she fed us a simple mutton stew with pita bread, it was delicious. If I hadn’t felt sick, I might’ve eaten more. Val’s family seemed so jolly. Everyone wore a continual smile. I imagined what it might be like having a family like this then realized I’d wished for the very thing that fueled my anxiety.

Plates of *baklava* were passed around as Sophie poured coffee for everyone. “I haven’t had *baklava* since my mother . . .” I tried to smile, but the memory was bittersweet.

Val handed me his napkin. Drying my eyes, I turned to thank him, but found his expected smile a lecherous grin. His eyes streaked with mischief.

“What?”

His arm on my shoulders, he leaned in and whispered. “I love you, Kendra.” Pushing his chair from the table, he stood. My dinner bowed gracefully as the turmoil in my stomach requested the next dance. Sweat dotted my forehead.

Val called for his parents’ attention.

“I never thought I would be saying this.” He smiled at me with his eyes, and my dinner gurgled up my esophagus. “I have finally met the woman of my

dreams. Though we've known each other for just a short time, I believe I'm in love. Kendra . . . ."

I fought to keep my stomach's contents at bay as he pulled me to my feet.

No matter what I'd tried to make myself believe, this *was* happening. I had fancied the thought, but I was a realist. I knew what would happen when he discovered I wasn't a lady. Yet, I'd let it go on, and after the day we'd spent together, I'd let myself believe a relationship with Val might work.

What had I done? I didn't want to embarrass him. Not in front of his family, but I couldn't . . . .

". . . just engaged right now, but I hope one day, you will agree to marry me, Kendra."

World spinning, hand clamped over my mouth, I toppled my chair and staggered from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside the dining room, I encountered three doors, each locked, and a darkened hallway that most likely led to the kitchen. I tripped twice ascending the grand staircase before reaching the landing. I tried the first room then the second. *Damnit, where's the bathroom?* I grabbed the third knob and gave it a sharp twist . . . . *Yes!*

"Well, what do we have here?" Stephan halted his exit, along with my entrance.

*No!*

He pinned my arms to my side and held me fast. I kicked like crazy, but with his strength and his anger, he managed to drag me inside the room. "Why don't you scream for help, girly?"

I couldn't very easily tell him I would throw up the second I opened my mouth. As life worked its irony, I didn't have to say a word. In a fit of rage, he tightened his hold, forcing the air from my lungs. "Don't St—!"

My words drowned in a sea of vomit. Stephan threw me to the floor. "You sick, fucking, freaky cunt!" With a handful of hair, he tore me from the ground, holding me upright as he screamed. "Look what you've done! You're paying big time, now."

My dinner covered him from shoulder to toe. He shoved me to the carpet, adding a kick to my ribs. "I have connections, slut. So, you teach school now, is it? Oh yeah, I got all the information I need, Ms. fifth-grade-teacher."

I stilled, terrified he'd kick me again if I moved. My hair covered my face, but I could make out his movements.

"The superintendent in your district frowns heavily on interoffice relationships, for one." He shed his soiled jacket, pants, and shoes. "Now, imagine when a little birdie informs them that Val's woman is so—much—more? Would you like that to happen, Kendra?" He hoisted me onto my knees by my shoulders. "Would you?" he asked with a sneer, as he pushed the hair from my face.

"You don't have to do anything rash. We're over, Val and I. I'm breaking it off. I'm pretty sure I've made clear how I feel." As I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, his sudden calmness taxed my nerves more than his anger had.

He began making soothing noises and comforting me. When I couldn't bear another of his patronizing coos, I attempted to stand, only to have him backhand me to the floor, pull me up by my hair, and ram a stiff cock in my face. I tried turning away, but the fist he held inches from my left temple had me rethinking. Maybe if I went along with this, the entire, disgusting episode would end sooner.

I clenched my eyes shut and tried not to gag. “Oh, come on. You know you like cock. You want my hard cock.” One yank on my hair reminded me to keep my teeth out of his way.

I had never hated myself more, hated my cowardice, hated myself for running away. I prayed Val would somehow miraculously save me right now—even if it meant facing my worst nightmare. The truth.

I had placed my hands on Stephan’s thighs to help keep him out of the back of my throat when the door thrust open and banged into the wall.

*Thank you, God. I’ll tell him the truth, I swear. No more games.*

“Kendra?”

With Stephan’s violent shove, I sprawled across the carpeted floor.

“I said no, you sick fucking bitch!” Righting his filthy nakedness, Stephan turned to Val. “I’m sorry for what this looks like, Val. She came barreling in here, saying she just couldn’t give up sucking cock for a serious relationship. I pled for her to stop, but she was relentless with her pursuit.”

I sat, speechless. My eyes, wet and burning, pleaded with Val’s shattered demeanor.

“You could’ve just told me what was on your mind, *Kendra*.”

## **Chapter Nine**

As the car jerked to a stop outside my building, I’d already given up trying to explain. For over three hours, he hadn’t looked my way. Maybe if I refused to open my door, he’d have to talk to me. His door slammed, setting off alarms in two of the neighboring cars. My door opened, he grabbed hold of my arm, and ripped me from his car and onto my feet. Though his anger terrified me, I wanted to beg him to listen. It wasn’t my fault. As I started to speak, his



tightening grip warned me not to utter a word. With eyes as cold as winter, he looked through me and said, "I wish I had never met you."

He released me with a frustrated snap of his wrist and I stumbled. He marched around the car, crammed himself behind the wheel, and careened out of my sight and out of my life.

It felt surreal, staring at the hands clutching my purse, passing it back and forth, as if a hot potato. I felt as if I were watching someone stricken with out-of-control shaking, but that couldn't be me. My hands had never shaken. No way could those hands I contemplated belong to me.

Fifteen minutes later, reality sank in. Those hands were indeed mine.

I crawled up the three flights to my apartment. Once inside the door, I let everything clatter to the floor. I trudged past the kitchen and across the living room to the bay window. With the blinds high, I kneeled on the window seat, one hand and my face pressed to the cool glass. Life would be much simpler now.

"This is what you wanted. Remember?" *Then why am I staring into the darkness, hoping he'll return?*

A simple life, I reasoned, meant me accepting life as a spinster. I climbed down from the window seat and headed for my room. I showered and brushed my teeth, though as I hit the bed, I stopped to recall if I'd done either. When I pulled the blanket around me, the shaking restarted, extending from my hands to envelope my entire body. I assured myself everything would be all right.

Besides, love happened only in fairy tales and dreams never came true . . . .

*"Shut up! Liar."*

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days in sackcloth and ashes was one day too long for me. By Wednesday afternoon, I convinced myself my kids needed their teacher. "Yes, Ms. Wilkinson, is it too late to let the substitute know I'll be in tomorrow? Well,

all right . . . Friday then. I will be there. Yes, I'm fine. Thank you for asking. Good bye."

No problem, I could do this. I was more than ready. Yes, seeing him might hurt, seeing him with another might nearly kill me, but I'd survived life this far.

In reality, I'd done better than survive. Once I'd set a goal, I had never quit. I put myself through college and grad school. Many of my decisions, and the way I'd attained some of my goals, were considered unsavory by many a person, but I'd never intentionally hurt anyone. I had achieved and maintained my independence, and though I may never have children, I had, with each new school year, at the very least twenty new kids to nurture. Many of whom vowed never to forget their fifth grade teacher.

Sleeping with the boss never worked out anyway.

I laughed, draping my clothes for the dry cleaner over the barstool so I wouldn't forget them in the morning. One more day . . . I needed to get out, occupy my mind. *Better than worrying about being outed at work . . .* My gaze fell on the glass next to the sink. The rose had wilted, and half its petals lay brittle and broken on the counter. *I'm okay . . . No, I'm not.* Again, my tears gained momentum, no matter how I tried to stop them. Moping inside this too-quiet apartment wasn't helping me one damned bit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello?"

Cell to my ear, I shrugged at the clerk, asking for the total.

"Yes. I'm fine, Dal. Much better than yesterday—*Thank you*—No, sorry. Picking up my dry cleaning. Uh hmm. Where?" I draped the bags over the new outfits I'd picked up earlier at the mall. "Of course I'd like to. Seven? I may be a little late. Okay. Janie too? Yes like old times, Dal. You too. Bye."

As I turned over the engine, the clock read five-thirty. An hour and a half to get home, shower, primp, and meet Dalia and Janie at the boardwalk. I glanced at the pile of clothes. "I don't have a clue what I'm going to wear!" I pulled onto the road and hit the gas.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Too formal, doesn't go with the pigtails, and all that sand . . .* I let the slacks drop at my feet, picked them up, folded them, and threw them on top the mounting pile slung across the computer chair. Again, I stepped into the mirror's view. "Oh, hell no!" Short shorts and the boardwalk at night reminded me too much of my earn-my-way-through-college days. I glanced at the alarm clock on my nightstand . . . *Six-fifty-five!*

Faded blue jeans buttoned, I threw the yellow t-shirt over my head, shoved my arms in place, grabbed my wallet off the dresser, my baseball cap off the closet door handle, and headed back to the kitchen. *Too late to walk . . .* I snatched my car keys off the counter and hustled out the door.

At four minutes after seven I found a parking space. I flipped down the lighted mirror. "Damnit, I know I had a spare in here somewhere . . ." I snatched the mascara from the glove box and whisked it over my lashes, swiped my lips with gloss, and adjusted my cap so the bill hung to one side. Just like old times . . . Kendra, the tomboy. I scrambled from the car and headed for the fun.

God, I felt giddy tonight. I hadn't played video games in years, and couldn't remember the last time we'd eaten pizza together. Dalia knew how to cheer me up; she always had. As I pushed the grill's glass door open, bells jingled, blending into outdated jukebox music, billiards cracking, and a whirlwind of voices. I stepped inside . . .

"Kendra! Back here!" Dalia waved her hand over top the crowd and I maneuvered my way through wall-to-wall people to reach the far corner.

I slid across the bench. “Hey Dal, how’d you snag the round booth with this many people here? Where’s Jan—?”

“What?” Dalia pulled me closer. “Talk louder. I can’t hear with this racket.”

“I said, where’s Janie?”

“What time is it?” She dug a cell phone from her purse.

“I think about seven-fifteen.” I stopped a waitperson and screamed for him to bring a large cheese pizza and a pitcher of iced tea as Dalia called to see how soon Janie would meet us.

“Well?”

“She has to baby sit. Her nephew broke his arm.”

“Is he okay?”

Dalia wrapped her arms around my shoulders and squeezed, knocking my cap off into the herd of shuffling bodies. “He’s fine, don’t worry. Let’s have fun tonight.”

When she didn’t relinquish her hold, I pulled back to see her face and caught a strange glint. “Dal? What’s—”

“Excuse me. This cap doesn’t happen to belong to one of you beautiful ladies, does it?”

From behind me, the voice boomed over all others. I pinned Dalia to the seat with an icy glare and mouthed the words *you are so dead*. Warm weight settled at my back. *Move*, I mouthed further.

She let me go only to brace one arm on the bench, the other on the table. “No.”

“Dalia, I’m warning you.”

“Kendra, knock it off.” Val spoke to me as if he were my father.

*Who in the hell does he think he is?* I spun around to face the jackass.

“Excuse me? Do I know you? What are you doing at *our* table?”

“Lower your voice, Kendra.”

“As if anyone’s going to hear us in this place—Dalia, let me out of here, now.”

“Damnit Val, tell her,” Dalia said.

I went from glaring at Dalia to glaring at Val. When neither acknowledged, I laid into Dalia. “Somebody better tell me what’s going on.”

“I didn’t realize Stephan threatened you. Dalia told me.”

“You what?” I glowered at her, my friend—soon to be my ex-friend at this rate.

“You don’t have to worry about Stephan. He can’t touch my job or yours. My connections are higher.”

Nice to know, and I did deserve as much, but neither Val’s awareness nor his apology solved the real dilemma.

“I’m sorry I overreacted,” Val said.

I pleaded with Dalia to let me out of the booth. When she refused this time, I started shoving her across the bench.

“Kendra, stop! He’s not finished . . . Are you, Val?” I followed her directed attention, finding Val, elbows on the table, chin against his fists.

He peered over tight knuckles. “Kendra.” He reached over and placed a hand on top of mine. “I don’t want to hurt you. I won’t hurt you, ever. I promise.”

I looked at Dalia over my shoulder. “What’s he trying to say?” I turned to him as she threw another dirty look his way.

Misty eyes met mine. “I’ve known the whole time . . . about you.”

I thought I felt Dalia’s hand on my back, but as rage filled me, my senses dulled. Val’s lips moved, voiceless. The once bustling atmosphere, silenced. Shock encompassed me. Waves emanated from my body, outward from our table in an odd alluring dance of peace, their promise of safety enticing me to follow as they tumbled and rolled into the distance. “Why didn’t you . . . ?”

“Kendra—”

I threw his hand back to him. “You could’ve told me!”

Beneath the table, I kicked him in the shin. Hard. When he moved his leg, I lifted mine above the seat, and with my feet, gave a hearty shove. He flew from the booth and onto the floor. “Why didn’t you?”

He made a grab for my ankle as I cleared his body in a single bound. “You keep running . . . .”

I plowed through the crowd and out the door. Through the lot full of cars, I passed, crossed a busy street, and *kept running*. I followed the sidewalk for two miles, hooked a left, pounded through another parking lot, and barreled up the steps to my apartment.

“You son of a bitch!” I slammed the door and sank to the floor, my head in my hands. “I loved you.”

## Chapter Ten

“How many times do I have to say it? Just go away!”

“Last chance, Kendra. If a neighbor reports the disturbance and the law is called on your boss—”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Thank you.”

Of course, he wouldn’t have, but his threat had me opening my door. He handed me my cap as he marched past, tossed his jacket on the back of my sofa, stopped, and turned to face me. Without hesitation, he pried off each shoe and loosened his tie. He unbuckled his belt, popped the clasp of his pants, and slid the zipper. Then tilting his head to the side, he unfastened the button on his shirt. “Mind closing the door?”

*He’s nuts!* “W-What are you doing?” Three shirt buttons to go, his open pants trapped at his hips, he moved one knee forward adding a jiggle from his ass. When he followed the same action with his other leg, his pants pooled at his feet. He stood in his open shirt, boxers, and socks.

I shut and locked the door.

If he thought for one second I'd give into his wishes, he had another thing coming. If sex were all I wanted, I'd gladly drive the ten miles to the truck stop off EXIT 22. "Put your clothes back on. Now!"

"Why? Isn't this—" He gestured to his groin. "All you want from me?"

"What? How could you say that?"

He shrugged out of his shirt, lifted up a foot, and slipped his thumb under the sock at his calf. His other sock followed. "Well, you don't want to talk, I'm only to assume." He hooked his thumbs in his boxer's waistband.

"Keep your shorts on." I threw my cap over the bar. Where it landed, I didn't care. "We'll talk."

He parked his ass on the back of my sofa, arms crossed over his fur-bearing, naked chest. *Jesus . . .* I leaned on the wall opposite him, mirroring his stance. "So, talk."

"I want you."

Exasperated, I threw my hands in the air and began pacing. "That's it?" If he thought that'd solve the problems between us, he was sadly mistaken. Hell, I wanted things too, like—a dog. Didn't mean a damned thing, now. Did it? "Well?"

"What are you afraid of, Kendra?"

"*Me?*" I stopped in front of his smug ass. There he was, leaning on *my* sofa, thinking he was funny for taunting *me*, in *my* place. "I'm not scared of anyone or anything. You're the one who's scared. Of *me*." Like a baseball player, I grabbed the crotch of my jeans and shook it at him. "Of this!"

Damn him. I was back against the wall, only this time, not on my own volition. Val had my arms pinned at my sides and one leg between mine. "Keep talking," he said.

Easy for him to say. My heart slammed against my chest. Ebony eyes and wetted lips inches above me, defined shoulders stressed from holding me, coarse, black hair covering his forearms and chest, flowing toward the center like tributaries into a great river, he held me in thrall.

My eyes trailed that mighty river to his waistband. I forced myself to look at his face. "Why? I want to know why? Are you fucking queer? You want to experiment with a tranny? Is that it? Are you curious? Why? Why me, Val? 'Cause it sure in hell can't be because you're in love."

"I've never believed in love at first sight, no. But . . . I really do think I love you, Kendra." His grip lessened.

My face in one hand, his thumb caressing my cheek, he unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans. "I've always liked women like this—like you." He wriggled his fingers inside. "I've no idea if that means I'm queer, gay, or full of shit." His hand slid around to give my ass a firm squeeze. "Personally, I don't care." When he finished feeling up my ass, he ran his hands as low down my hips then, without breaking eye-contact, as low along the back of my thighs as possible.

With my jeans bunched at my knees, I smoothed over his shoulders as he stood. Across his pecs and down his sides, my fingers followed the path to that broad, dark river that flowed and dipped out of sight beneath his boxers. My gaze set on my painted nails racing through that black forest. I glanced, back and forth, between my continually descending touch and his encroaching lips. "How many T-girls have you been with?"

"Enough to know . . . ." With breath heavy and warm, he took my mouth as he thumbed the top of my thong and worked it over my ass then my hips. My breaths sharp, I had to choose between his lips or fainting. My hands moved from his torso to cover my crotch as I turned my head and he kissed the corner of my mouth. He continued along the bottom of my cheek and hesitated just under my left ear.

"Please. It's okay, Kendra. I won't hurt you." He tugged at the sides, first one, then the other, inching the tight underwear over my thighs. I gasped as he eased my man-clit free of its bind. Then groaned as the conditioned air teased the shriveled skin and my still-tucked-away stuff began to ache. His hand slid between my thighs. Gently, he loosened my discomfort with his thumb.



“Let it out, relax.”

I exhaled, unaware I’d been holding my breath. He touched my man-clit, running his fingers over then under the soft skin. “God . . . Val.” His eyes hadn’t left mine for a second. Tears of shame or guilt or joy I’d never experienced streamed down my cheeks. “I tried to tell you I wasn’t a lady.”

Fire radiated from his kiss as his mouth made love to mine. He knew exactly where and how to touch me. His gentle grip encircled my man-clit and my heart raced. He shoved my t-shirt and bra above my breasts then rolled one nipple between his thumb and forefinger, alternating breasts until my nipples ached.

“Val . . . Val . . . .”

He left my lips and met my gaze.

“You really love me?”

He gave a gentle squeeze to both my man-clit and a breast, eliciting a growled, *Oh my God*, from someplace deep inside me, someplace I didn’t know existed.

“Kendra.” His lips brushed mine. “My strong, intelligent, beautiful, stubborn woman . . . .” He kissed me again, and pleasure rippled from under his touch. Parting, his face serious yet soft, he smiled. “You are the lady I’ve searched for all my life.” His warmth left my breast as he took my hand and placed it on his chest above his heart. “Can you feel what you do to me?”

His heart pounded. Through the waterworks, I managed to speak. “How do you know it’s love?”

“Oh, Kendra,” he said, with a chuckle, “if I could feel like this every day for the rest of my life, I would die a happy man.”

If he’d rehearsed all the right lines, or had memorized the perfect words, or even if he meant everything he so liberally offered, I didn’t care anymore. He liked women like me. He wanted a woman like me. He wanted, liked, and . . . he said, *he loved me*. I kissed him.

He cupped my ass and ground his covered erection against me. I ran my hands down the sides of his head, over his chest, under his arms, and along his torso, pausing at his waistband.

Wide-eyed, he stopped. Disengaging our bodies with a gentle buck, I hooked my thumbs inside and shoved his boxers to his knees.

“*God damnit.*” He groaned as his cock bounced free.

“Lose the shorts.”

Before I had slid out of my shoes, he was naked and on his knees helping me out of my pants. “Oh God.” I covered myself as he dragged my jeans and thong over one ankle.

“Move your hands, Kendra.”

“No.”

He didn’t argue, but continued to remove my clothing. With his lips on the inside of my knee, he licked a wet trail up the inside of my thigh as he pulled the works over my foot. His tongue glided along soft skin. Before I knew what to expect, I held two handfuls of his hair. “Val!”

Licking and sucking then using his teeth, he worked my man-clit until it stiffened in his mouth. As my body begged for orgasm, I arched against his lips, drawing him to me, forcing him to please me.

His hands at my ass held me steady as he took all of me in his mouth. “Oh God.” I screamed as his tongue swirled over, along, under. Holding him tighter to me, I pulled his hair as he sucked loud and hard, and my body started shaking. Pulsating. Rocking. “Jesus.” Ecstasy roared through me. “Yes! God . . . Val!” I came hard and long, and kept coming the louder he slurped, the stronger he sucked. He held me until I wilted to the floor.

Sweat stung my eyes as I worked to steady my breathing. Val grabbed my discarded t-shirt and helped me dry my face. *He’s beautiful . . .* “Kiss me,” I said, winded, but happy. Truly happy.

I fisted his cock as his lips touched mine.

He backed out of my reach. “Kendra, you don’t have to—I owe you . . . more than one.”

“Who says it’s for you? I want you inside me.”

He made it to his pants and back before I’d dropped my smile and finished getting on my hands and knees. His arms around my middle, he hoisted me to my feet and into the wall. I heard the condom wrapper tear and latex unroll. He nudged my feet apart, grabbed my hips, and lined up the head of his cock. Without a word, he entered me, swift and dry, and didn’t stop until his cock was encased to its hilt inside my ass.

“Are you okay?” he asked, gasping for air.

*Oh yeah . . .* I loved rough sex and gave him a quick nod.

He withdrew his cock slowly and drove in fast, backing out a little farther with each glide.

“You’re fucking sexy as hell,” he said, flattening me against the wall. His fingers dug into my pelvis as he plunged deep and hard, again and again. Gaining speed, he plowed inside me. The hair of his torso covered my back, sweeping over me like a soft, warm carpet. Everything Val surrounded and filled me.

He kissed my shoulder, the back of my neck, my other shoulder, as he pounded my insides with that meaty cock. He stiff-armed the wall and I grabbed the back of his head and twisted to kiss him. With one arm tight under my ribs, he paused. His cock buried inside me, he whispered. “Play with yourself.”

I stroked my man-clit as he continued to drive. So sexy, so hard, so hot . . . . “Fuck me. *Harder.*” Breaking the kiss, I braced the wall and stroked with fervor as my body screamed its readiness to orgasm again. “*Val?*”

“Do it. Come for me, Kendra. Scream my name!”

Hips bucking, harder and harder, he slammed against me, his balls slapping my ass, again and again.

“Oh God, Val . . . . Fill me up!”

With a grunt, he hesitated, and then, with long, deep thrusts, he cried my name as he spewed his hot load behind the wall of latex deep inside me. Two thrusts into his orgasm, I came again, cum dribbling over my fisted knuckles.

Knees weak, ass sore, I struggled to rouse Val to support his own weight.

"Yeah." He lifted his head from my shoulder to nuzzle the side of my neck. "Damn, that was great."

I winced under the pressure of his draped body. "Do you mind, Val? Don't tell me this is going to be a habit."

"What, babe?"

"You—too wiped out to move every time we finish."

Lazily, he suckled the back of my neck. "I want to marry you, Kendra."

Giving him room, I arched forward. His cock slid from my ass. I spun around, placing my back to the wall. A shit-eating grin plastered his face as he loomed over me. "Marry me, Kendra?" He kissed my nose, my upper lip, my chin.

"Val, you have a temper."

His kisses continued. "I do, but you're more than capable of curbing me."

"You get jealous too easily."

He slid a hand to the small of my back and pulled me flush as he kissed along my throat. "I'm very possessive of what is mine."

"Why don't we wait and see? I mean, we've only known each other for a week and a half."

He kissed me hard and deep, before parting. His gaze met mine. "So, it's official then. We're engaged to be married *some day*."

"Damn, you're persistent."

"I am." He directed that serious look of his straight into the depths of my soul. "I'm not letting you get away."

With one shove, I ducked underneath his arm and started throwing on my clothes.

“Where’re you going?”

“I have to work in the morning. I’m not leaving my car at the boardwalk until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Just call in sick. We can spend the day together—in bed.” With a wink, he waddled into the kitchen, discarded the condom, and washed his hands.

I slid into my shoes. “No, my kids need me.”

“What’s one more day?”

“Val. I’m worried about Leroy.”

He filled and downed a glass of water then left his dirtied cup on *my* counter. “I love you, Kendra,” he said, leaning over the bar into the entryway, sporting a goofy grin. “Where can I crash?”

“Anywhere you want, once my car’s home safe.”

“Huh?”

“Get dressed; you’re driving.”

~The End~

### About the Author

Bryl R. Tyne is a wrangler by nature and a fiction writer by choice. After spending her youth trapped at the feet of a brutal, self-absorbed master, Bryl broke free to discover life. Currently, she resides in South Carolina with a loving Sugar Daddy who’s smitten with the malcontent wanderer, and Bryl’s much tamer. Though she’s spent time traversing a diversity of paths, encountering a wild assortment of lovers, and forever cherishing the shared passions along the way, Bryl has determined one aspect of life that’s proved unchanging—*Love holds no boundaries*.

To learn more about Bryl, visit her Web site at:

[www.bryltyne.com](http://www.bryltyne.com)

\* \* \* \* \*

If you liked *If I Were a Lady*, you might also enjoy the following books from Noble Romance Publishing:

Bryl Tyne

Valentine's Vindication, by Keta Diablo

Beautiful C\*cksucker, by Barbara Sheridan

Dark Whispers, by Barbara Sheridan and Anne Cain