



MI'CELLE
DODSON

Pretty
PACKAGES



Pretty Packages
by Mi'Chelle Dodson

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Dedication

To God from whom all blessings flow.

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Chapter One

Oooh . . . he sho' is ugly, Giada Dawson mused, misquoting a line from *The Color Purple* upon seeing her very unattractive neighbor mowing his lawn across the street on that sunny spring day.

Despite her condescending thoughts, she nodded in polite greeting to Kentucky Jones—the object of her scorn. No need to let him know how she really felt about him. As neighbors, she might need him for something one day.

Kentucky nodded politely in return, paused to wipe the sweat from his brow, and continued with his task.

Brother has a nerve to make the ugly worse by being sweaty and dirty, Giada thought, unlocking the trunk of her sky-blue BMW with the press of a button. *He's lucky I even spoke to him at all.*

She turned her head to hide her wince of distaste at the man whose face only his mother could love. Giada didn't make a habit of associating with unattractive men. Unless they had money or were willing to run errands for her, she found them a complete waste of her gorgeous time.

Kentucky didn't look like he had any money, or rather, not much, not the kind of money Giada was looking for in a man. If he did, he wouldn't be living in this lower middle-class neighborhood. This same neighborhood was one step up from the hood, three steps down from where Giada wanted to be—in the elite upper class.

The only thing he has going for him is that body. She turned to assess her neighbor's physique.

At six-four, Kentucky was solidly built with rippling muscles from head to toe. He looked like he stayed in one of Miami's many gyms. There was no fat anywhere on his large frame. Every muscle group was well defined.

If he wasn't so ugly, he might have qualified to be one of my little boy toys, Giada thought, referring to the men who she used just for sexual pleasure when she was in between relationships like she was now.

She never lied to her boy toys, and they didn't have to have much money to be with her. All they needed was a fine body, bedroom skills, and the considerable stamina needed to keep up with her overactive libido.

Though Kentucky had the body, and very likely the stamina based on how long and how hard he usually worked to make his lawn the best on the block, his face cancelled him out in Giada's book. It cancelled him way out.

He looks like he could be Arnold Schwarzenegger's uglier little brother, she thought, closing the door to her trunk now that she'd gotten all of her groceries out of the car.

Though Kentucky did look like the actor-turned-California-governor in Giada's mind, there were some key differences. First of all, he was at least thirty years younger and two inches taller than Arnold. Secondly, Kentucky's teeth had no gaps, and he had a slightly larger nose.

I bet he can smell chicken frying from a mile away with that schnauzer. Giada's own nose wrinkled with a frown.

Suddenly feeling gypped, Giada started to wonder if the Realtor had deliberately showed her the house on a day when Kentucky was at work. *I just know he's scaring all the little kids on the block.* She almost wanted to pack up her things and move at the prospect of seeing Kentucky's ugly mug every day.

But she couldn't.

Giada just bought this house and couldn't afford to move right away, especially not on the money she made from her paralegal job or from the rental income she received from leasing her deceased grandmother's old house.

Matter of fact, neither Giada's current job nor her rental income had put her in this new house. Six months' worth of dating a wealthy NBA player had given her the capital she needed to buy this house and finally move out of the hood where she'd been staying in the run-down home she inherited.

Joaquin was a newly signed player with the Orlando Majestics when Giada met him through the entertainment lawyer she worked for. It had taken half a year, but she'd charmed him out of thousands of dollars in jewelry, shopping trips, and even a new car.

When Giada caught Joaquin with another woman, she didn't freak out. Instead, she parted with him on amicable terms. Giada understood that infidelity usually walked hand in hand with that kind of career. Plus, she had bigger fish to fry if she was going to get everything on her ever-growing wish list.

After that relationship ended, Giada pawned all the jewelry Joaquin had given her. Then she used those funds to renovate her grandmother's house and also put a substantial down payment on this house. Though Joaquin wanted them to continue dating because of how well she'd taken his infidelity, Giada refused. She never shared herself or her man when in an exclusive relationship.

Never!

If the relationship was casual, that was different. But if the relationship was exclusive, then consensual sharing resulted in the loss of respect and gifts. Giada couldn't have that. Besides, as gorgeous as she was, Giada didn't feel like she had to share anyone or anything.

Standing at five-three, she had long, wavy black hair and a slender frame that was packed with curves. She didn't need a man to tell her she was beautiful and fine. Her mirror confirmed that fact every time she looked into it. Most men said she reminded them of a young Salli Richardson, just with a plumper bottom, deeper skin tone, and bigger breasts.

I paid good money for these girls, Giada thought, looking down at her perky Ds. They were a high school graduation gift from a male teacher who she'd secretly had an affair with during her twelfth-grade year.

Wonder what ever happened to him. Giada toted her groceries inside. She'd broken things off with that teacher right before going off to college. She dropped him like a hot potato, in fact. She hadn't looked back since.

"Hey, Mercedes," Giada cooed, forgetting about all men as she greeted her beloved pet Chihuahua, a pet that she named after the dream car that she had yet to cross off her wish list.

* * * *

When Giada turned her back to Kentucky, he scowled. He knew a gold digger when he saw one.

As a man with several psychology and psychiatry courses behind him, Kentucky also knew the signs of a person trying to fulfill emotional needs with material things. Giada fit the bill on both occasions.

As a professional bodyguard to the rich and famous, it was his job to keep women like Giada away from his clients. He did his best to keep them far, far away.

They will sell or rent a house to anybody in this neighborhood now. Kentucky remembered when only two-parent families resided in this community. Now they had single women on Section 8 dotting the neighborhood. Kentucky saw nothing wrong with that in and of itself. He was all for giving others a helping hand.

It was just that some of those Section 8 mothers had more kids than they could handle, which led to more unsupervised children roaming the neighborhood. Many of those women also had sleepover boyfriends who cared nothing about helping them maintain the properties they rented.

Mama really ought to let me move her out of here, Kentucky thought, ready to bring up that topic again.

But he already knew how that conversation would go. Hannah Jones would go on and on about how she treasured

the home she moved into soon after marrying his beloved father. This was the same home she continued to raise Kentucky in when his father died nearly twelve years later.

Then Hannah would talk about how most of her friends were still living in this neighborhood. She would share how she wanted to remain in her home, a home that contained precious memories in every room, for as long as she could.

After those potent reminders, Kentucky would drop the subject of moving yet again. Then he would head back to the upper east side of town where he lived now. At least he did when he wasn't traveling with one of his many clients or spending the night at his stepmother's after being fed another one of her bountiful meals. Lately he'd been spending a lot of nights at his childhood home due to a surge of break-ins in the area.

Kentucky could afford to live on the upper east side for two reasons. One, he got paid very well to guard the lives of his clients and their loved ones. Two, as the owner of an MBA in business and finance, he'd made a fortune in wise investments. In fact, Kentucky had done so well with his investments that he was now closer to making a longtime dream come to pass—the establishment of a coed boarding school for fatherless children grades seventh through twelfth.

With a little extra funding, that dream would become a reality within a year.

But no need to ever let his stepmother's new neighbor know all that. Although Kentucky couldn't help but find Giada attractive just like any other heterosexual man would, he

didn't want or need a woman going after him strictly for his money.

If only his body didn't tighten with desire every time he saw her.

* * * *

After putting up her groceries, Giada went to her living room window and looked out. She could still hear the lawn mower running from across the street.

He's not done with that yard yet? She peeked through the blinds just in time to see Kentucky turn the mower off.

"Finally!" Giada said under her breath.

Suddenly she gasped. A moan followed as Kentucky proceeded to pull off his white T-shirt and use it to wipe the sweat from his face, neck, and chest. A pool of desire gathered in Giada's nether regions and throbbed with need at all the muscles she saw on the man's tanned chest.

Kentucky truly was rippled with muscles. Every muscle group could be seen. He had an eight-pack for a stomach, and his waist came to a sensual V before exploding into powerful hips and thighs.

Giada moaned again as Kentucky ran the T-shirt over his short dark brown locks to remove some of the moisture collected there. Her fingers tingled, literally tingled, to touch him and roam over all the muscles she saw there.

Suddenly Giada snatched back from the window.

Had Kentucky turned and caught her staring at him in lust?

No, Giada caught herself. She wasn't about to stand there and keep lusting after a man she didn't want to want.

Kentucky wasn't worth the time of day to pursue in any way, shape, form, or fashion.

So why did Giada suddenly feel the need to take a cold shower?

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Chapter Two

June

Kentucky saw Giada away from her house for the first time two months later on a hot night that announced that it was indeed summertime in Florida. She was among the crowd at a popular nightclub that he still did bouncer work for on occasion.

Kentucky usually stuck to just bodyguard work. Yet, since the owner of the club had given him his first break into the world of protection services and was very instrumental in getting him high-end clients over the years, he did this favor as needed and whenever his schedule allowed.

Instead of sexy office attire or skimpy around-the-house wear, Giada was dressed in a black catsuit tonight. That racy outfit had cutouts on the sides, in the front, and in the back, which left very little to the imagination.

Kentucky felt his lower body tighten at all the skin Giada showed tonight. Fortunately, he was able to will his libido down quickly with the self-control techniques he'd practiced over the years in order to keep himself constantly composed.

With his mind clear again, Kentucky noticed what he had missed before—Giada was not alone. She was on the arm of a guy who he recognized as an up-and-coming rap artist named Smooth-Tip. The rapper's large entourage was also with them.

When Giada got close enough to recognize him, Kentucky saw surprise in her eyes. They exchanged no words, only the

usual brief nod that they often shared whenever they saw one another in passing.

Good. Kentucky didn't mix business with pleasure anyway. Plus, he really didn't want to associate pleasure with Giada at all.

Talk about danger. Kentucky felt sorry for the man she was with tonight. He almost wanted to warn the guy. But since the rapper wasn't a personal client of his, Kentucky decided to let him find out the hard way what kind of woman he had.

After losing a few thousand, he'll be wiser next time, Kentucky thought, shooting Giada a sideways glance as she sensually switched her hips through the doors of the club. *I hope she's worth parting with all that dough.* Yet he knew women like her seldom were.

* * * *

Giada was surprised to see Kentucky standing in front of the nightclub tonight. She had no idea what his profession was until now. Now she understood why his car was never parked outside the Joneses' house until very late at night. He was working.

With that mean mug and that huge body, this is the best career for him. Giada suddenly couldn't help but wonder how much professional bouncers earned. After all, the clothes Kentucky had on tonight were far from cheap.

The leather boots he wore had to be tailor-made for his large feet, and his jeans were the most expensive brand in menswear. The only inexpensive thing on Kentucky's body

was the black club logo T-shirt he wore over that large chest of his.

Whatever he makes is nothing compared to what Smooth-Tip makes in a day from record sales alone. Giada returned her attention completely back to the man she was with. This was the same man she intended to charm out of several thousand dollars before she called it quits.

If only Giada could forget how fine Kentucky looked in all black with his biceps bulging like mountain ranges.

* * * *

Things did not go as well as Giada thought they would tonight. Her date turned out to be a total dud. She wasn't too surprised.

What else could I expect from a rapper? Giada readily lumped all rappers in the same pile, even though there were probably some true gentlemen in the bunch.

Though Giada started her life as a subtle gold digger during high school in order to take care of herself and the elderly grandmother who raised her, she had deliberately stayed away from rappers, wannabe or otherwise. They reminded her too much of the thugs she'd grown up around.

Giada might not have listened to everything her grandmother tried to instill in her growing up, but she had listened to *some* things. One was to stay away from thugs and those involved with illegal activities. As a result, a grown-up Giada had only dated wealthy businessmen, professional athletes, and men with access to trust funds.

Her specialty was men with new money since they were easier prey. Men who'd been accustomed to wealth for years tended to be more suspicious, vigilant about their associates, and more discerning of gold diggers. They were also harder to get gifts from unless they were old as Methuselah and ready to give a twenty-three-year-old woman like Giada anything to make them feel young again.

Tonight Giada gained all the extra incentive she needed to never date another rapper again. First of all, most of them kept too many people around. Every time she tried to work her charm on Smooth-Tip tonight, his entourage would interrupt.

That same entourage seemed to want to start a fight in every room. It was as if they didn't know how to have peace with anybody. Or perhaps they just wanted to be seen by everybody. Giada still didn't know what their problem was.

Finally fed up with the whole scene, she asked Smooth-Tip if they could go back to his place for more privacy. Of course he agreed . . . but only if his crew could come with.

Then, when Smooth-Tip started talking about running a gang bang on her and the other ladies that his entourage had picked up in the club, Giada got up and walked out. Sadly, she was the only woman in the group who did.

"I may be a lot of things, but even I know that gangbanging is for sluts," Giada muttered angrily to herself as she stood outside the club minutes later, waiting for the first available cab. "And I'm definitely not one of those."

"What *are* you then?" someone with a deep, rural-sounding voice suddenly asked from behind her.

* * * *

After his shift ended, Kentucky went to say goodnight to Sal Delfino, the club owner. When he exited the club, he noticed Giada standing outside alone. Since she had not arrived alone, he went over to investigate.

His unexpected question to Giada was not necessarily one of inquiry since Kentucky already knew what she was. Rather it was one fit for pondering, a question to get *Giada* thinking about what she was and why.

Kentucky didn't mean to startle her with his question and sudden appearance at her side. He didn't mean for her to nearly jump out of her skin, causing the black purse in her hands to drop to the ground, fly open, and spill its contents everywhere.

Giada's cell phone went one way. The key ring holding her emergency credit card and home and car keys went another. Various tubes of makeup rolled wherever they liked. Kentucky heard her hiss out an expletive. She looked frustrated to the max now.

Guilt instantly singed his soul. "I am so sorry," Kentucky said, immediately bending to help gather her things. He became sorrier when her key ring went sliding into a sewer drain and disappeared below before his swift hands could catch it.

Giada cursed again. "You just ought to be sorry," she said, turning to glare at him. "Now how am I going to get into my house tonight? And the one emergency credit card I carry with me just went down the drain, too. It's a good thing

Mercedes is at the pet sitter's tonight. Otherwise I'd really be in a panic."

"You wouldn't happen to have left a window open, would you?" Kentucky suggested, allowing her anger to roll off his back. He was man enough to take his punishment when he was wrong.

"No. Not with all the recent break-ins in the neighborhood. And don't even *think* about breaking one of my bay windows," Giada replied adamantly, refusing to cause any damage to her precious first home. In reality this was the first home she actually bought for herself.

"We can call a locksmith." Kentucky looked down at his watch and winced. It was 3 a.m. No locksmith was going to come out this time of morning. This included the one who he knew personally.

"On second thought, maybe I can put you up at Mama's place tonight. We can call a locksmith in the morning," Kentucky continued, not about to spend one brown penny on a gold digger, although he was responsible for her current dilemma.

"A locksmith that's going to come out on a Sunday?" Giada looked doubtful. "Why can't you just put me up in a hotel instead? Oh wait, that expense is probably not in your bouncer budget," she said haughtily, snapping her purse closed now that most of her belongings had been salvaged.

"I know a guy who'll come out on Sunday as a personal favor to me," he replied, completely ignoring her dig about his part-time job.

"If you know him that well, why can't he come out tonight?" Giada asked.

"Because he has a wife that he wants to keep." Kentucky chuckled, causing his deep voice to get even deeper.

* * * *

Giada felt her nipples instantly tighten at the deep, husky baritone of Kentucky's chuckle. That had never happened before. Never!

No man had ever turned Giada on with just his laugh before. She was usually turned on by a man's physical attributes or . . . his money.

Suddenly she didn't mind spending the night at the Joneses' house. Suddenly she didn't care how much smaller it was than her place. Wherever Kentucky was, that's where she suddenly wanted to be tonight.

He's actually not that ugly when he smiles. Giada suddenly saw Kentucky in a whole new light. And she just loved how white and perfect his teeth were. Plus, his slight country accent was adorable. It was simply adorable.

Maybe Kentucky was worthy of her time after all.

Though he still wasn't boy-toy material yet, Giada could certainly use another good errand boy. The last one had turned into a stalker. She had to take out a restraining order just to get him to leave her alone.

"I'll be glad to stay at your house tonight," Giada finally said, looking up at Kentucky with a charming smile on her lips. "Now where is your car parked?" She glanced around the corner towards the parking lot area.

* * * *

Kentucky narrowed his eyes at Giada's sudden change in attitude. His guard instantly went up. It went way up.

After a quick review of his words, Kentucky wanted to kick himself. Hard. He'd just given himself away. By calling the family home his stepmother's place, that meant that he had a home of his own.

But how much had he just given away? For all Giada knew, his place could be a lowly one-bedroom apartment, especially if she thought he was just a bouncer.

Sighing with relief that he hadn't given away more personal info than that, Kentucky led Giada to the modest Jeep he liked to drive in order to hide his true wealth from women like her. He just hoped his stepmother was asleep when they got there and that Giada slept in late in order to miss Hannah on her way to church in the morning.

Hannah liked bragging on her stepson, whom she felt privileged to raise from toddlerhood, three years after his birth mother died. She would tell any- and everybody about how proud she was of him protecting so many influential people. All it would take was for her to drop a few names, and Giada would know that Kentucky had more wealth than he let on. He had much more.

* * * *

The ride to the Jones house was far from quiet. Giada kept trying to charm Kentucky with her smiles, overall personality,

and compliments about his physique. She was doing a good job of it, too.

Giada was very personable, smart, beautiful, and had an adorable sense of humor. Kentucky could see why men fell under her spell. He could see why they wanted to just spoil her in reward for being so bright, so beautiful, and so capable of making *them* feel good in her presence.

The way Giada maintained constant eye contact with a man had a way of making him feel as if he was the only person in the world who mattered to her. Each compliment she issued seemed so genuine, specially made just for him.

Giada was also the type of woman who made a man want to stay up late making love to her. Forget about going to work in the morning. She was the perfect excuse to be late for one's job. A man might even be tempted to use one of his sick days for her.

Giada's curves were full and supple. Oh yes, each and every one had that squeezable look. Her body was toned and fit. And the sensual way she walked suggested that she knew how to work her hips for maximum pleasure.

By the time they actually arrived at their destination, every muscle in Kentucky's body was tense. The one in his secret place was especially tense.

"You sure you didn't leave a window open?" Kentucky asked, having second thoughts about being under the same roof as Giada. She was testing his control to the limit as it was.

What was it about her that affected him so deeply? She wasn't the first beautiful woman who had shown interest in

him during his thirty years on the earth. Kentucky's physique attracted beautiful women all the time. With them things had remained on a physical level. Yet, with Giada, something about her tugged on his emotions.

Why?

Kentucky didn't know that yet. He planned to find out . . . very soon.

* * * *

Giada smiled at the newest question she'd been asked. She knew why Kentucky had inquired about her windows again—she'd gotten to him on the ride home. She'd tried to. Shoot, Kentucky had gotten to her just as well, and without premeditation.

After watching his large hands and those big, muscular arms of his work that steering wheel and gear shift, Giada was now ready to see how skillful he was at other things. She was now ready to boot him up to boy-toy status, despite the fact that he wasn't as cute as some of his predecessors.

"No, I never leave my windows open," Giada replied, finally answering his question.

* * * *

Keeping the disappointment at her reply off his face, Kentucky reluctantly got out of the car. Reminding himself that his stepmother was in the house did wonders to calm his raging libido. Soon he was back under control.

Kentucky and Giada entered the house very quietly so as not to disturb his sleeping parent. The front door was opened

and closed with very little sound. They didn't utter a word between them.

Unfortunately for them, Hannah still woke up anyway. Kentucky heard the telltale squeak of her boxspring. He knew that his stepmother hadn't been sleeping well lately on account of the recent crime spree in the area. He suspected that she probably had awakened at the first sound of his car pulling into the driveway.

Yet despite the recent break-ins in the neighborhood, Kentucky still couldn't get Hannah to move away. Instead she opted to believe that the crime spree would end once the summer was over. After all, like those living in the lower islands, Miamians knew how crazy the heat in these parts could make people at times.

"Kenny, is that you?" Hannah asked through her closed bedroom door.

"Yes, ma'am," Kentucky assured her, pausing by her bedroom door. "But I'm not alone. I have Giada from across the street with me. She lost her key ring at the club and needs a place to crash for the night. I'm gonna put her up in the guest room, okay?"

"Okay, son. Hey, Giada."

"Hello, Mrs. Jones," Giada replied pleasantly.

Kentucky fought not to frown at her overly friendly tone. Was Giada trying to ingratiate herself with his stepmother? What happened to barely speaking to either of them?

Yes, Giada had always talked warmly to Hannah no matter how short their conversations had been. Yes, she seemed partial to older people as a whole, which might explain why

she moved into this settled neighborhood. But tonight she had put extra sugar in her speech. Why?

"Y'all hungry? I could get up and fix something," Hannah said, forever hospitable.

"No need to get up, Mama," Kentucky answered for the both of them when he heard more movement in her bedroom. "We're fine. Just go on back to sleep." He did not want his stepmother up talking to Giada about anything.

"All right. I'll cook a big breakfast for you in the morning then," Hannah said, obviously settling back upon her bed based on the *zing* sound of her box spring.

"Thanks, Mama. Goodnight," Kentucky replied, determined to wake up extra early in order to do damage control. Once his stepmother learned what kind of woman Giada was, she would keep a lid on his information.

"Goodnight, son. Night-night, Giada," Hannah said, singing her neighbor's name at the end.

Giada chuckled. "Night-night, Mrs. Jones."

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Chapter Three

As Kentucky showed Giada around the guest room, he found himself experiencing some of the same things he had in the car. He quickly came to the most obvious conclusion—him, Giada, and small spaces didn't mix.

She seemed to be aware of that, too, because her breathing instantly became shallower. That hungry look that she'd given him in the car returned. Except this time it was even more voracious.

For the first time in his life, Kentucky was actually afraid of someone. He was afraid of a woman at that. He wasn't fearful on a physical level, rather on an emotional and financial level.

Kentucky feared falling in love with Giada, being weakened by that love, and eventually losing the fortune he'd spent years to amass due to her materialistic nature.

And yet Kentucky showed no signs of fear. He'd been trained not to during his brief stint in the military.

"If you need an extra pillow, let me know. I can bring you one from my room," Kentucky said, continuing to talk about her accommodations. If only his voice wasn't so husky at the end. If only she wasn't standing so close to him.

* * * *

Giada smiled, pleased that she was having even the slightest effect on the big giant of a man. She'd wanted to affect Kentucky, which was why she'd been following him foot

to foot around the room. She had him boxed in near the closet now.

"The only thing I need from your room is a T-shirt to sleep in and . . ." Giada paused, leaned up to steal a quick kiss from him, and added, "You."

Kentucky inhaled sharply. His eyes registered surprise, then hot desire.

Giada suppressed a squeal of delight. Did he really like her aggression? The brief smack she'd given him on the lips? She hoped so. There was plenty more where that came from.

"You and I both know I'm out of your league, so why bother?" Kentucky said, suddenly picking her up and moving her to the side as if she weighed nothing. It was more like she weighed less than nothing in his arms.

Desire surged through Giada's body at being lifted so effortlessly by him. Kentucky was strong. The man was *real* strong. The fact that he was heading for the door in an attempt to escape what was happening between them turned her on even more.

"You don't have to be out of my league tonight, Kenny," Giada purred, calling him by his nickname as she started after him.

* * * *

Kentucky stopped midstride at her use of his nickname. It sounded so erotic, so . . . right coming out of Giada's mouth.

Unaware that she'd been right behind him in his distraction, he abruptly turned around, causing her to run smack into his chest.

They both moaned with need upon impact. Yet only one of them actually did something about it.

Locking her arms about Kentucky's neck, Giada leaped upon him and locked her legs around his waist. Then, before he could utter a sound of protest, she latched onto his lips and went for broke.

Kentucky knew he should pull Giada off of him. He knew she was so wrong for him. He knew a lot of things. Yet despite what he knew, he wanted her kiss and so much more.

And so he surrendered . . . as much as he could allow himself to under his stepmother's roof.

Pulling her aggressive tongue deep into his mouth for a hard suck, Kentucky slid his large hands to Giada's bottom and squeezed. He knew it would be soft. He'd seen the way it jiggled when she walked.

"Yes, baby. Squeeze that thang," Giada muttered against his mouth.

Ready to oblige her, Kentucky first glided her hips lower. He waited until the moment her softness slid across his rigidity to give her that extra squeeze she required. They both moaned deep in their throats at that intimacy.

"Oooh . . . you're big everywhere," Giada noted breathlessly as passion's fire blazed even hotter between them. "Show me what else you got going on."

At those words, Kentucky took the role of aggressor, bombarding Giada with deep kisses that had her trembling in his arms. His kisses had her wanting, needing him, like she'd needed no other man on the face of the earth. And kissing was just *one* of his special talents.

* * * *

When Kentucky broke the kiss and carried her over to the bed, Giada fully expected him to all out ravish her now, despite how gently he'd laid her on the bed. She wanted him to ravish her. She wanted him to ravish her badly.

He did not.

Instead, Kentucky planted a tender kiss on her forehead and said, "Goodnight, Giada."

Her eyes widened. "Are you just going to leave me like this?" Giada asked breathlessly. She couldn't believe he was actually walking away from her.

From her!

No man had ever refused Giada's goodies once they were offered. *No* man.

"I don't have sex with women under Mama's roof. It's a respect thing," Kentucky said, moving towards the door. He sounded only slightly breathless.

Giada was about to suggest that they go to a hotel, when she remembered that he couldn't afford such an expense on his salary. "Can I get a rain check then?" Even as she said those words, she couldn't believe that they were actually coming out of her mouth.

What had this mammoth done to her?

"We'll see. In the meantime, I'll bring that T-shirt you asked for," Kentucky said at the door. Then, before she could tempt him even more, he left.

Giada punched the pillow in frustration when he left. Her body was on fire. And so was her temper. She couldn't

believe she'd actually humbled herself like that. She felt even worse for humbling herself for a man like that.

Get a serious grip, girl, Giada told herself, punching the pillow again.

* * * *

When Kentucky returned with the T-shirt, Giada was suddenly very cold and aloof. Interestingly enough, he wasn't too surprised by her change in behavior. He half expected it. And yet he still remained hospitable.

"Goodnight, Giada," Kentucky said after placing the T-shirt on the chair by the door.

She gave him one of her brief nods and waited until he'd closed the door behind him to move from the bed.

Out in the hallway, Kentucky sighed heavily with relief. He knew he'd just dodged a big bullet. Had this been his house or a hotel room, he would have been all up in Giada by now. He wouldn't have stopped making love to her until they'd both been thoroughly satisfied.

At the depth of passion he'd seen in Giada's eyes earlier, experienced in her kisses, complete satisfaction could have taken a very long time to reach. She seemed to have the sexual appetite of two women.

No wonder she has so many boyfriends. Kentucky recalled how many different cars he'd seen Giada exit over the short time that she'd lived in the neighborhood.

She might be able to find her Mr. Right if she stopped shopping for pretty packages, he surmised, deeming every man in Giada's social life pretty in looks and/or bank account.

Though Kentucky was up on his game in the latter, he didn't mind being deficient in the former.

When you weren't drop-dead gorgeous, it was easier to figure out who genuinely liked you. The same was true when one kept one's wealth a secret.

Giada will never know my net worth as long as I have anything to say about it, Kentucky decided, going into his room down the hall.

If she could go at him so hard thinking that he was broke and with him not being the prettiest flower in the garden, imagine what she would do if she learned he was a millionaire several times over.

* * * *

Though Hannah kept her word and cooked a bountiful breakfast, she was considerably less friendly to Giada in the morning. In fact, she barely said much of anything to her over their meal, which caused the younger woman to look puzzled by her change in attitude.

Kentucky was on the silent side as well. He'd said all that needed to be said two hours ago. Not to Giada, mind you, but to Hannah as he revealed the true nature of her neighbor. Thus, when it came time for her to go to church, she was reluctant to leave her stepson alone with Giada.

"Kenny, what time did you say your locksmith friend was coming?" Hannah asked, looking at Giada's skimpy club attire from the night before. All those revealing holes bothered her.

"Newton will be here within the hour." Kentucky rose to his feet. "You have a good day at church, Mama. I got everything

covered here," he added reassuringly, lifting her petite frame into his arms for a warm hug.

Returning to her feet seconds later, Hannah smiled proudly at her strong stepson. Trust swelled in her heart. Kentucky could handle himself in any situation. That had been proven time and time again.

"Good-bye, Giada," Hannah said politely, giving her guest a pasted-on smile in passing.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Jones," Giada replied, continuing to look puzzled.

* * * *

"Did I do something wrong?" Giada asked Kentucky once they were alone. "Your mother was kinda cold towards me this morning. She's usually much friendlier."

"Mama's change in behavior is because of me," Kentucky admitted, returning to his seat after pouring himself more orange juice. "To keep her from trying to play matchmaker between us, I told her that I was way out of your league. That there was no hope for us because you liked pretty packages."

"Pretty packages?" Giada frowned, not liking the sound of that at all.

"Yeah, men with prettier faces and fatter wallets than mine. *Much* fatter wallets," Kentucky said, clearly pulling no punches with her.

Springing to her feet, Giada slapped him hard across the face. "How dare you tell your mother I'm a gold digger!"

"That's what you are, aren't you?" Kentucky said, looking unaffected by her blow. He hadn't even spilled the orange juice in his right hand.

Giada felt her cheeks grow hot. "It's none of your business *what* I am!"

"It is when what you are tries to spill over into *my* life!" Kentucky retorted, putting down his juice.

"Why you . . ." Giada began, raising her hand to strike him again.

Kentucky caught her wrist with ease. "I let you have that first blow because I still feel guilty about making you lose your keys last night, but I'm not gonna stand for another one. So unless you want to get hit back, I suggest you sit back down and eat the rest of your breakfast while we wait for Newton to arrive."

Giada trembled at the menacing look on his face. She'd never seen him look uglier. "You would really hit a woman?"

"Keep swinging on me, and you'll find out. Now sit!" he ordered, finally releasing her wrist.

Giada plopped down in her seat. Her eyes were wide. She was scared out of her wits. She began to take deep breaths to bring her breathing back under control.

Where was the gentle giant from last night? Where was the man who had given her that tender forehead kiss?

Unable to sit still after a long, torturous minute of silence, Giada said, "On second thought, I think I'll wait for your friend on my porch." Then she got up and fled to her home.

* * * *

Kentucky chuckled when the door slammed behind her. Though he knew he would never hit a woman unless it was a matter of life or death, he didn't want Giada to know that. He wanted her scared of him. Maybe then she wouldn't try to snoop into his business and then come after him for his money, especially since that money had already been slated for worthy causes.

* * * *

"Okay, there is something seriously wrong with me," Giada muttered to herself as she sat on her front stoop. "The man practically threatened to physically abuse me, and all I can think about is how much I want to sex him up."

Maybe she was so turned on because Kentucky was the first man who had stood up to her in years.

He was certainly the first man to refuse her sexual advances.

Maybe it was also because, now that she'd had a little time to think, Giada really didn't believe that he would hit her or any other woman. After all, men who abused women didn't usually have so much respect and reverence for their mothers, especially not their stepmothers.

And Kentucky had the ultimate respect for his stepmother. Giada could still recall his "*yes, ma'ams*" and "*no, ma'ams*" now.

So why would he deliberately scare me like that? she asked herself. *Because I'm a gold digger.* Giada answered her own question with blunt truth.

Pretty Packages
by Mi'Chelle Dodson

Suddenly, for the first time in years, she actually felt ashamed of herself. Unfortunately, it was not enough to make her change her ways. Giada had too much stuff she still wanted in life, too many places she still wanted to see to let a temporary emotion like shame stand in the way.

* * * *

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Chapter Four

September

Giada didn't speak to either of the Joneses again for the rest of the summer. She was too embarrassed to say anything to Hannah. She was also still too angry with Kentucky to say anything else to him.

She finally broke her silence one starry Wednesday night. It was a night when Hannah was late getting home from Bible study and Kentucky was at work.

Giada was just getting out of the shower after a long day at work when she heard glass breaking. She sighed with relief when she realized that the sound was too far away to be one of her window panes.

But then whose windows *were* being broken?

Was it the Jones house? The sounds had resonated from that direction.

Curious, Giada tiptoed to her bedroom window. She turned off the light in the process, having learned from her years in the hood not to draw attention to herself at times like these. Slowly, she peeked through the window blinds.

Sure enough, the Jones house was being invaded. It had been invaded not by one thief, but two.

Both were men, based on their muscular builds. They moved swiftly into the house, as if it was second nature to them.

Career criminals, Giada surmised. She could spot professionals a mile away. No first-timers would know exactly

where to break a window in order to best reach the latch. No first-timers would move that fast, either. Hannah's nineteen-inch den television set was already being handed out the window from one thief to the other.

In the hood, Giada might not have called the cops. Snitching was heavily frowned upon there. It was also dangerous since the thieves just might be your next door neighbors or some relatives of theirs.

In the suburbs, one tended to look out for one's neighbors more. Some did so out of the goodness

of their hearts. Others did so because they simply didn't want their property values to go down due to rampant crime. In Giada's case it was a little of the former, most of the latter.

She retrieved her cell phone from her purse and called the police. She told them in great detail what was going on across the street. With her keen eye for fashion, she even described what the thieves had on, down to the expensive white sneakers on their feet.

Unlike the hood, the police were there within five minutes. They didn't catch the thieves in the Jones house since they'd left the scene by then, but they did catch them trying to leave the neighborhood in a car they had parked up the street. The stolen merchandise was with them.

Giada followed through with her Good Samaritan act by going down to the police station, pointing the guys out in a lineup, and giving an official statement. She was assured that her identity would be protected and so feared no retaliation from the thieves. She was also told that the owner of the house had been contacted.

Later that night, the Joneses showed up at Giada's home to thank her for her good deed. Hannah had a cake in her hand, a smile of gratitude upon her lips, and glossy eyes full of emotion. Kentucky had something else altogether in his eyes—respect.

Before tonight, his chocolate pools had held passion, lust, and an abundance of desire when he looked upon Giada. They had never held respect for her.

Giada found herself highly turned on by that new look. When that look was followed by heartfelt words of gratitude from Kentucky's own mouth, she actually felt heady. Yet it was when he stayed behind to humbly apologize for misjudging her as shallow and self-centered that Giada nearly had an orgasm right there on the spot.

Seeing Kentucky so meek made Giada feel powerful. It was the greatest aphrodisiac. Even Mercedes seemed to be mesmerized by Kentucky as she sat silently in the corner, looking up at his tall frame
in awe.

"I will gladly accept your apology, if you will finally give me that rain check," Giada said, taking full advantage of this opportunity now that Hannah had gone back across the street to oversee the work the carpenters were doing to her den windows.

Kentucky's eyes bucked.

Giada smiled. She knew she had surprised him yet again . . . and turned him on . . . immensely. Now she had to keep the flames burning hot in order to finally get what she wanted—his body.

* * * *

Kentucky's eyes instantly lowered to Giada's swaying bottom as she turned around and walked farther into the living room with the cake in her hands. That red tank dress she wore was formfitting and hugged every curve she had. No visible panty line meant that she was either wearing a thong or no panties at all.

Kentucky was on fire now.

"This ain't what you want, Giada," Kentucky replied, refusing to budge from by the front door. He had to fight this attraction, lest *it* and *she* reduce him to a nothing with nothing.

"Oh, but it is," Giada replied, licking her full lips as she looked back over her shoulder at him. Her eyes seemed to devour him. Looking away for a second, she fondly instructed Mercedes to go upstairs. The obedient dog quickly obeyed.

"I'm out of your league, remember?" Kentucky reminded her.

"Not sexually. Sexually, I think you just might be in a league of your own." Giada placed the cake on the coffee table and sat down on the brown sofa nearby. "Come have a sit down, Kenny." She patted the seat beside her. "Let me play in *your* league tonight." Again, she licked her lips and devoured him with her eyes.

Kentucky took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, feeling himself weakening already. "Giada—"

"Look, I probably put my life on the line tonight by pointing those bad guys out," Giada interrupted. "Don't I have

the right to request how I want gratitude to be shown to me for my act of bravery?"

"Can't I write you a check instead?" Kentucky offered, trying to appeal to her sense of greed even though everything in him wanted to take her up on her offer. Like Giada, he remembered their heated night vividly, too.

"You and I both know you can't afford my price on your salary."

Kentucky could have refuted that statement, but he didn't. That would surely spark her interest in him on a whole other level. He silently cursed the desire surging through his veins, the weakness he obviously had for Giada in order to even consider her request at all. Had this request been made by any other woman, he would have walked out a long time ago, despite her good deed to his family.

"What's your fascination with me, Giada?" Kentucky asked, still trying to avoid the inevitable. "I'm sure you can find plenty of men to have sex with you. Richer men. Handsomer men."

"I've had richer men and handsomer men. What I haven't had is *you*," Giada replied, giving his muscular body a slow perusal.

Kentucky felt heat everywhere her gaze fell. His body was hard beyond anything he'd ever known before. Even his baggy jeans couldn't hide his prominent arousal.

"Unless you want a quickie, I'm gonna have to come back later. I have to make sure things are in order with Mama and the house." Inside Kentucky hoped that his absence would

give Giada time to come to her senses. He needed time to come to his as well.

Giada nodded in understanding. "You can come back later. In the meantime, come get a little taste of this." She leaned forward, scooped up a thick patch of icing from the side of the cake, and held it out for him.

"I already know how Mama's red velvet cakes taste."

"Not on me you don't." Giada lowered the top of her tank dress and smeared the icing across her generous bosom.

Kentucky involuntarily licked his lips at the sight of her beautiful icing-covered breasts. Though he could tell that they'd been augmented, he didn't care. Most men didn't care about such things as long as they *felt* natural.

"Come taste me, Kenny," Giada prompted in a sensual purr.

Oh, the woman was ruthless in her pursuits. She should have been a lawyer because she'd definitely just won her case with this man.

Kentucky's feet seemed to move of their own accord. Soon he was kneeling beside Giada. Licking from south to north, north to east, then from east to west, the ravenous man removed every trace of icing off her globes. He got his greedy hands involved by gently squeezing and kneading her.

* * * *

Giada moaned at Kentucky's thoroughness. Amazement filled her heart as she watched him do his thing. She couldn't believe she was getting so hot so fast. She was even more

amazed about getting this excited for a Plain-Jim man like him.

Suddenly Giada let out a loud gasp as Kentucky cupped both melons together and descended upon her twin peaks. She moaned just as loudly as she watched him work that beautiful mouth of his to both of their satisfactions.

"Yes!" Giada whispered, arching her body even closer to him. Her legs seemed to have a mind of their own as they opened in invitation.

As if he was fully aware of her sensual invitation, Kentucky sent one of his hands below. She gasped again when he took a dip in her core and found her dripping with liquid passion. She was ready for him. So ready.

Kentucky moaned this time, which was music to Giada's ears. "Get that, Kenny," she urged, grinding against his hand. "Get it now, baby."

Instead of getting anything, Kentucky suddenly withdrew from her. "I'll be back later," he said, swiftly standing. He immediately headed towards the door.

Giada's eyes were wide in disbelief. "You're leaving? *Now*? Surely there's time to squeeze in a little something."

Kentucky paused and looked back, giving her a feral look that made her literally tremble with need.

"If I so much as touch you right now, Giada, you will have more than a little something *in* you, and there will be more than a little something done *to* you. Since Mama is probably wondering what's taking me so long over here as it is, I need to go before she comes back to investigate."

Disappointment settled into Giada's soul. "Are you really coming back later? If not, I'll take that quickie now." She pulled up her dress even higher and spread her legs wider in invitation.

Kentucky let out a low growl of need as his eyes zoomed into her intimate landscaping. It was beautifully maintained and trimmed to perfection.

"I gave you my word, and I always keep that," he said, dragging his eyes upward again. Turning towards the door, Kentucky paused and looked back again. "By the way, I'm disease-free. Are you?"

"Of course." Giada felt the heat of offense in her cheeks. She immediately snapped her legs closed. "I just got the results of my latest checkup on Monday. I'm definitely disease-free, and I have an IUD to prevent pregnancy."

"Good, I'll need to see those test results when I return. I have mine in my wallet if you want to do the same."

"I sure do," Giada retorted, angry because he'd led the way in common sense. She usually brought up protection issues with her sexual partners first. So why hadn't she done so with Kentucky?

Had Giada actually been about to have unprotected sex with him a few minutes ago? If so, why him? Did she trust Kentucky that much already?

Giada continued to ponder those things as the fine giant of a man took a temporary leave of her.

* * * *

Outside, Kentucky was disappointed that Giada hadn't used her offense at his health question to call the whole thing off. Well . . . most of him was disappointed. A smaller part of Kentucky wanted to see this night through to the delicious end.

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Chapter Five

Giada found Kentucky to be a man of his word. Around 2 a.m., he returned to her home just like he said he would.

Giada was ready for him. She was more than ready.

She was newly showered and wearing one of her skimpiest black teddies. The living room was romantically lit with scented candles. Soft jazz music played in the background. Her sofa bed had been pulled out and groomed with red satin sheets. Her recent test results were on the end table in the corner for his review.

As for her dog, Giada put Mercedes to bed upstairs. She pulled the door closed so that the canine wouldn't wander out at the wrong time and be a distraction to them downstairs.

Giada thought about taking Kentucky up to her bedroom. Yet, when she reminded herself that only boyfriends were allowed up there, she prepared the living room instead. Boy toys were restricted to the first floor.

In contrast, Giada noted that Kentucky had barely prepared for their night at all. Yes, he'd showered and even shaved, but the clothes he wore were so . . . unromantic. Instead of the all-black attire that he had on before and usually wore to work, he now had on a gray T-shirt, a pair of sweatpants, and black sneakers.

Most men went out of their way to dress up for Giada, but not Kentucky. He didn't even have on any socks with his sneakers. It was as if he'd gone to bed, then suddenly

remembered his word to her and threw something on right quick to come across the street.

I'm no afterthought! Giada raged inwardly, determined to put something on Kentucky tonight that would make him never forget her again.

After they shared test results and briefly discussed her birth control device, they proceeded to share a long kiss.

Giada's mind emptied as she became swept away in that fantastic kiss. She was entranced by the hardness of Kentucky's muscular frame. Was every part of this man granite?

Oooh . . . I can't wait to see him naked. Giada might have to turn every light on in the room. The candlelight they'd used to read the results may not be enough for her hungry eyes.

"You ready for me, baby?" Kentucky asked after reluctantly breaking the kiss.

"Been ready," Giada panted out, already trembling with need.

"Let's go see." Kentucky lifted her effortlessly into his strong arms and carried her over to the sofa bed.

"You're so strong," Giada noted, feeling like she was on a honeymoon or something as he carried her. "But I guess you have to be for your job, huh?" She planted kisses upon his thick neck. She ran her tongue along the path of one of the throbbing veins there.

Kentucky moaned. "Baby, I've been strong since I was thirteen. My father was a big man. It's in the genes."

"I guess you are attracted to petite black women like he was, too," she said, referring to how small his stepmother was.

Though Giada was an inch shorter than the five-foot-four woman, neither she nor Hannah were over a hundred and thirty pounds. However, Kentucky's mother was slender all over. Giada was short and curvy like the actress Salma Hayek. Her lower curves could get almost as wide as Jennifer Lopez's if she didn't watch her weight.

"Although I like women from all ethnicities like my father, I've actually taken to dating plus-sized women over the last few years," Kentucky confessed, gently laying her down on the sofa bed. "I got tired of small ladies either being too scared of me in the bedroom or else unable to handle me."

"You don't scare me." *Anymore*, Giada added to herself, remembering that kitchen incident.

Kentucky chuckled. "I guess not. If I did, you certainly wouldn't be blackmailing me to sleep with you tonight." He kicked off his shoes and removed his shirt as he spoke, revealing a tanned chest packed with muscles.

"I'm not *blackmailing* you!" Giada felt two kinds of heat envelop her. There was the fire of anger at his words. There was also the fire of desire at the sight of his muscular chest. Really, could the man be any finer?

Kentucky chuckled again, causing his face to actually look handsome in this light. "All right, so you're not blackmailing me. But you are guilting me into sleeping with you. By now you know that I don't like owing anybody anything. And we

both know that I owe you big-time for what you did for my family tonight."

Giada sat upright, no longer in the mood for sex. "As of this moment, you don't owe me anything. Consider the slate washed clean. Close the door on your way out." Then she turned her back to him, lest she be tempted to change her mind since he'd been just about to take off his sweatpants. Giada knew she couldn't have taken that sight. Seeing Kentucky so aroused through those pants had been enough temptation as it was.

Kentucky's tone grew serious. "What's the matter, Giada? You can't take a little truth?"

"Just leave, Kentucky!" she snapped, calling him by his given name now.

"I'll go, Giada, but you better make sure that's what you really want. Because once I walk out that door, you won't be able to use this little trick on me again."

Giada didn't answer him. Instead she folded her arms defiantly across her chest.

* * * *

At her defiant stance, Kentucky shrugged and bent down to retrieve his shirt. Coming over here tonight had been a bad idea anyway.

And to think, Kentucky had counted down the hours to seeing Giada again. He'd waited somewhat impatiently for his stepmother to go to sleep just so that he could sneak over to keep his word. He hadn't wanted to give Hannah, or even himself, the wrong idea about him and Giada.

Like Giada, Kentucky knew this was a onetime thing. He wasn't about to allow himself to think otherwise. Now even that was over.

As Kentucky redressed, Giada continued to silently sulk. Instead of sitting on the sofa bed, she got up and went around the room blowing out candles and turning lights on.

Kentucky smirked at her ire. It amused him. It kind of turned him on, too. Now he was starting to have second thoughts about leaving. Why did this woman affect him so deeply? Jumble him up so terribly inside?

"See you around," Kentucky said, speaking the first thing on his mind as he made his way to the door.

"Not if I see you first," Giada snapped.

Don't say anything. Just keep walking to the door, Kentucky told himself.

"Matter of fact, I wish I had never set eyes on your ugly mug," Giada continued, twisting the knife in deeper.

Kentucky had been called ugly many times over the years by many people and had grown a thick skin about his looks. But when Giada said it, it cut deep. It cut real deep.

Before he knew it, Kentucky had made a beeline for her. His strides were long and swift. He could feel the scowl lines settling into his face.

With a look of terror, Giada backed up against the wall when she saw the large man coming towards her. She looked too scared to even scream.

"I may be ugly, but I most definitely know how to make beautiful love to a woman," Kentucky said, towering above her. "In fact, if tonight had gone down, I would've had you

screaming my name so loud that the neighbors would have awakened and called the police back out here. I would've spoiled you for all those punk pretty boys you seem to like so much. After one night with me, all your body would have wanted for years is me, me, and more me."

Giada didn't look fearful now. Now she looked inundated with passion. She even moaned.

Kentucky's hard gaze grew even more intense as he watched her chest rapidly move up and down with rising desire. He knew she wanted him. He could smell her heat. His body instantly became rigid again knowing that he was the cause of such potent desire.

Needing to remind Giada of what just one kiss from him could do, Kentucky lowered his mouth to hers.

Once again, Kentucky put his all into their kiss. Unlike Giada, he wasn't trying to impress anyone with his expertise. This was simply the way he functioned in his life—all or nothing. There was no half-stepping with him.

With a greedy moan, Giada immediately welcomed his tongue into her mouth. She sucked hard. Her hungry hands flew to his chest, found their way underneath his shirt, and touched that smooth, tanned skin of his.

Kentucky moaned at her touch, broke the kiss, and lowered the straps to her teddy. He bent to taste her breasts. Moving from one taut peak to the other, he feasted. His little nibbles at the end caused her to shudder violently. When he dipped a hand into Giada's cavern, he noted that her underground river of desire had already started to flow downward.

Groaning with need at her readiness, Kentucky withdrew, and scooped her up in his arms again. In no time they were on the sofa bed. After laying her down, he took that time to kick out of his shoes and remove all of his clothes this time. Things were about to get very serious between them.

* * * *

While Kentucky undressed, Giada used that time to just look at him in full light. Her breath caught. Her body started to tremble as she gazed upon him in all of his glory.

The.

Man.

Was.

Super-fine!

A Mr. Universe if she ever saw one.

Eyes dripping with lust, body sizzling with hot desire, Giada practically ripped the teddy from her body. Who cared that it cost her two hundred dollars? She'd get another man to buy her a new one since she deemed Kentucky too poor to afford such things.

Flinging the thin material aside, Giada tugged Kentucky down to the sofa bed. He willingly went, but would not place the whole of his weight upon her no matter how much she tried to pull him closer.

"I need you closer, Kenny," Giada said in frustration, tugging to no avail yet again.

"I'm too heavy for you, baby," Kentucky told her. Then he rectified the situation by rolling sideways and pulling her on top of him.

Giada instantly lowered her lips to his. She kissed him deep. She kissed him long. She kissed him as if he was about to take a long trip and she didn't know when or if she'd ever see him again.

* * * *

Feeling more wanted than he ever had in his life, Kentucky returned each and every flicker Giada gave him. He sucked her tongue. He tasted every crevice of her sweet mouth.

Kentucky allowed his hands to roam her frame. He enjoyed the silkiness of her mocha skin and the lushness of her curves. He loved the way Giada's supple bottom fit perfectly in his large palms as he gently squeezed her lower cheeks. If only his hands were a little bigger, he'd be able to cover the whole circumference.

Finally breaking the kiss, Giada swiftly positioned herself to ride him. Kentucky could sense her eagerness. He relished it. It was a good thing she was already tropical, because he really was big all over, and thus the extra lubrication was needed to increase her comfort level.

"Be careful with that, baby," he cautioned. "I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"I can handle it." Giada looked up at him in challenge. "I can handle it all," she said, pushing downwards until they were joined to the hilt. They both moaned loudly at the intimacy that ensued.

Kentucky gave her an intense stare. He liked the way she'd fearlessly taken him on and in. He wanted to devour her now. "Come here, baby," he said, pulling her closer to him for a

ravenous kiss. Timing that moment perfectly, Kentucky thrust his tongue into her mouth and his hips upwards at the same time for optimum pleasure.

With a gasp of surprise, Giada's amber pools registered awe. They'd barely begun, and she was climaxing already. Her body trembled like a leaf.

That reaction had been Kentucky's intent. Very much aware of her status, he squeezed her lower body closer and began to thrust faster in order to make the moment even better for her.

* * * *

A sense of completeness washed over Giada as she received stroke after stroke from Kentucky. Each new stroke was more special than the last. All were rhythmic and fluent.

Who knew sex could be like this?

Giada sure didn't.

Sex?

This wasn't sex. This was making love, which was why she was about to do something that she'd never done in her life—scream.

As predicted, Giada screamed Kentucky's name loudly with her release. It would have been even louder if he hadn't swallowed most of it in his mouth.

While her body continued to tremble all over, Kentucky stilled completely. He seemed to be relishing the delicious clenching and squeezing around him.

Giada was helpless to stop her quaking core from telling him everything he needed to know about her right now—that

she was officially branded. Why else would she be reacting so strongly to his loving?

When most of the trembling had stopped, Giada broke the kiss and collapsed onto his chest. She needed time to catch her breath. She also needed to get her bearings back.

Had she bitten off more than she could chew with this giant of a man? Giada had just had the most powerful orgasm of her life, and Kentucky was still as hard as a rock . . . all over. If her ear wasn't against his rapidly pounding heart, she would have thought she hadn't affected him at all.

Determined to be the one leaving the biggest lasting impression, Giada sat upright again. She began to slowly move her hips upon Kentucky, ready to use her body any way she could to conquer him.

* * * *

Kentucky was far from being conquered. Though what Giada was doing certainly felt good, something was wrong. And suddenly he knew just what the problem was.

The rhythm. It was too casual. It was entirely too bland.

The rhythm was also too sporadic. Giada kept pausing every five seconds to flip her long hair back over her shoulders. At this rate, it would take forever for Kentucky to reach his peak.

"Hold up for a second, Giada," he said, stilling her hips with his hands as he spoke.

"Hold up? You want me to stop?"

"Yes, something is off-key here, and we need to fix it," Kentucky explained gently. "Now those tender strokes and

that constant flipping of the hair might turn those pretty boys on, but for a man like me, you got to bring it."

"Bring it?" Giada looked confused. "You want it faster?"

"No, you can keep it slow. Just make sure to work your hips steady and strong. You know, show me how bad you really want me. And forget that you even have hair. Just let it go wherever it wants. I always wondered what you looked like without every hair in place, so seeing you wild will be a big turn-on for me. With all that said, you ready to put it on me, baby?"

Giada nodded. "Yes."

"Well, let's do this then." Kentucky grinned, pleased that she had accepted his blunt, yet gently spoken rebuke so well. Then he began to lead by example, showing her exactly how he wanted this ride to go, and a few other things to help heighten the mood.

* * * *

Giada was a quick study. Combine that with her natural stamina and she had him going over the edge with a loud shout. Though Kentucky was still far from conquered, she felt a huge sense of accomplishment and power nevertheless at having brought him to his peak so intensely.

I just might keep him for my boy toy for a long time to come, Giada decided.

Yet by the time Kentucky left right before dawn, she wasn't sure if maybe *she* was the toy now. After being made love to for nearly four hours straight, with barely a break in between, Giada had never felt more pliable in her life. There

was nothing Kentucky couldn't ask of her right now. Or rather there was *almost* nothing he couldn't ask of her.

Giada would have given up anything for Kentucky, *except* for her gold-digging ways. There was still just too much stuff she wanted in life. Things she didn't think he could give her now, or ever, for that matter.

Fortunately for Giada, the only request Kentucky made of her before he left was the opportunity to see her again the next day. He actually asked to see her later that evening since it was already the next day.

With a smile, a kiss, and the beginning of an unfamiliar emotion stirring in her heart, Giada whispered, "Yes."

What she received in return was a tender smile from Kentucky, another one of his toe-curling kisses, and a gently spoken "See you later, baby."

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Chapter Six

On Thursday night, Kentucky returned to Giada's house after work. This time they made love in her bedroom. Everything was done very, very slowly. Every light was on in the room per Giada's insistence. She claimed that she simply couldn't get enough of looking at him.

Knowing that she wanted to make love to him in full light pleased Kentucky immensely. It softened his heart all the more towards her.

Kentucky found himself becoming even more attached to Giada as she touched and kissed his body from head to toe in an almost worshipful manner. For the first time in Kentucky's life, he actually felt . . . beautiful.

And so wanted.

Giada's touch was just as hungry as her kisses. And she kept asking Kentucky what else he wanted her to do to and/or with him. She was open to any fantasy he had, and he had plenty. Yet since they both had work tomorrow, they actually only got to experience a few of those fantasies.

Afterwards, they cuddled and just talked. Kentucky found himself more talkative than he'd ever been with any woman after sex.

He told Giada about his childhood. He talked about how he got the name Kentucky. About the fact that Hannah wasn't his birth mother as Giada suspected all along due to their different ethnicities.

He shared how his biological mother was actually a petite Caucasian woman named April who died soon after giving birth to him. And how Hannah was actually his former preschool teacher, who fell in love with his grieving father and eventually married him.

Kentucky also told Giada about the loss of his father due to a railroad accident. He talked about how that tragic event caused him to grow up very fast, though he was barely a teenager at the time.

"Somebody had to take care of Mama. She went into deep depression after Papa died, couldn't work, causing us to almost lose the house," Kentucky confided. "To help out more financially, I took my GED test in the tenth grade, passed it on the first try, and then went to work full-time."

"Wow. You really did have to grow up fast," Giada said. "Your mother must have eventually snapped out of her depression, because Mrs. Jones is the most positive person I know."

"I think seeing me make such a sacrifice with my education snapped Mama out of her depression. She returned to a teaching position in the local school system, enrolled me in college, although I was only sixteen at the time, and insisted that I only work part-time on the weekends so that I could enjoy what was left of my teen years." Kentucky was downright proud of his stepmother, and it showed in the reverential way he spoke of her. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for her."

Even now he was missing out on a few high-paying gigs due to his love for Hannah. Kentucky simply refused to leave

his stepmother's side for very long while the neighborhood was besieged by burglars.

Giada's eyes grew glossy at his deep love for his stepmother. "I felt the same way about my grandmother, who raised me, by the way, when both of my parents died." Then she went in depth about her own childhood.

Giada shared how the girls in the neighborhood used to be so jealous of her naturally long, thick hair. Some wanted to play in it all the time. Others tried to pull it out by prompting fights with her. One girl even tried to cut off Giada's long ponytail from the seat behind her in elementary class.

"My grandmother used to comfort me about jealous females in the most unique way," Giada continued, smiling in memory. "She used to take me to the bedroom, stand me in front of the mirror, and then make me recite, '*Jealousy will not stick to my soul*,' until it sunk in. That was Granny's way of showing me how not to let the jealousies of others torment me."

"That was unique," Kentucky acknowledged with a tender smile.

"Yes, it was. She also taught me to love myself no matter what. My mother must have missed that message because she didn't seem to love herself at all."

"How so?"

"First of all, she hooked up with a man that didn't have anything going for him but his looks. My father was one of the most handsome men in the neighborhood, but he was no good. He cheated constantly, and he was a petty thief by trade." Giada's eyes grew glossy again, even though there

was a touch of anger in her voice. "It was no surprise to any of us when he got killed trying to rob a convenience store."

"I'm sorry to hear that, baby." Kentucky gave her a squeeze of comfort.

Giada blinked her eyes clear. "Thanks, but I think I was more angry than sad about him dying. I was angry about the effect his death had on my mother. About how she literally drank herself to death three years later. That's why I don't drink alcohol today."

"Not even a wine cooler?"

"Not even a wine cooler," Giada confirmed. "That's also why I refuse to fall in love." She spoke defiantly, as if that emotion was somehow coming against her right now.

"Drinking and heartbreak took my mother away from me. Therefore, I don't want anything to do with alcohol or love," Giada concluded, blinking her eyes free of all emotion.

Kentucky frowned at those words. He felt grieved by them, yet he said nothing. Instead he allowed Giada to continue to talk. He soon discovered why she started along the gold-digging path in the first place.

"After my parents died, things were very hard for me and my grandmother. I quickly grew tired of wearing hand-me-downs, sick of eating Ramen noodles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When I turned sixteen, I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to banish poverty from my life forever. The quickest way I found to do that was through my looks," Giada said, sharing things she had never told anyone before.

Kentucky continued to be the great listener that he was. Although he clearly disapproved of what she'd chosen to do with her life, he understood her decisions a lot better now.

"Why didn't you try modeling or acting instead? Why use men to rise up from poverty?" Kentucky asked, very interested in her answer for more reasons than one.

"Like I alluded to before, I was looking for a quick fix. Modeling and acting took time. My grandmother needed her costly medicine on the regular. Food and clothing still had to be bought. The house was paid for, but the taxes were still due. Not to forget the utilities and my college tuition." Giada sighed. "I did what I had to do. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to pay for my grandmother's funeral since there was no life insurance money. I also wouldn't have been able to finish paying for my last year of college or keep the house that I now use as rental property."

"Why do you continue to date men for money now? You have a steady job at a prestigious law firm, and you have rental income. Why not take that income and build upon it? Or better yet, use that money to go to law school since you obviously have the brains and the drive for that type of career. Bottom line is, you don't have to lower yourself to the role of gold digger anymore just to raise your net worth." Unfortunately, Kentucky's tone had gotten angry, even judgmental at the end of his response.

Now the air was thick with tension in the room. And not the sexual kind, either.

* * * *

Giada sat upright with a frown, highly offended by his tone. "Haven't you been listening at all? I'm too impatient for a slow buildup. I've lived enough years in poverty. It's time for me to live the high life *now*. I plan to for the rest of my life."

Kentucky sat upright, too. "So where do *I* fit into this picture, Giada? Do you expect *me* to give you the high life? Or are you gonna look beyond me and find some other man to give you the life that you crave?"

"We can still have our special nights together, Kenny, no matter who else I date," Giada said, discreetly letting him know that nights would be all they had. She didn't openly date boy toys.

What Giada failed to tell Kentucky was that, as soon as an opportunity to be exclusive with a rich man availed itself, their nighttime trysts would have to cease altogether. She didn't let anything mess up her money supply, not even her libido.

"So you expect me to stand idly by and watch you parade around on the arms of other men, even sleep with them on occasion, if the money is right?" Kentucky got up from the bed and started to look for his clothes.

"Yes," Giada admitted, seeing no need to lie to him. Kentucky already knew what she was. Besides, she never lied to her boy toys. Lies were reserved for those she wanted to extract gifts from.

"Do I *look* like the type of brother to go for some bull . . . for something like that?" Kentucky asked, sending her a hard glance as he visibly fought for control of his temper and

tongue. "I may not be the most attractive guy in the world, but even *I* refuse to share a woman." Picking up his shirt from the floor, he slipped it over his head and down his torso.

"Don't be like that, Kenny." Giada stood up and began to follow him around the room as he looked for the rest of his things. For some reason she felt grieved by him leaving on these terms.

"No, don't *you* be like that. I'm not about to let you use me for some sex toy simply because you don't think I have the looks to be seen with you in public or enough money to satisfy your material wants and needs."

Angry herself now, Giada returned to the bed and sat down with her arms folded and her legs crossed. "It's your loss. Most men would kill to have sex with me anytime of day or night."

Kentucky's head snapped around to face her. "If they knew what I know, they wouldn't have to kill a fly to have sex with you."

Giada glared at him. "You don't know nothing about me!" she said, giving him a dismissive flip of the hand.

Challenge filled Kentucky's eyes as he closed the distance between them.

* * * *

"I know that all a man has to do to get you wet is this." With the word "this," Kentucky dropped to his knees and descended upon Giada's exposed breasts. Moving from one taut peak to the other, he sucked and then nibbled lightly at the end.

As expected, Giada shuddered violently with desire. Rivers of passion began to flow. Her legs parted automatically. It was as if Kentucky had turned a key in her lock. He had.

The girl was open. She was wide open for him to do as he pleased with her now.

Though Kentucky could have been satisfied with his current triumph in humbling Giada, he took it a step further. Easing between her legs, he joined with her again and began to make love with long, powerful strokes. He put his whole back into it.

If the relationship was going to end, Kentucky figured he might as well go out with a bang. He was going to make it a good, hard bang, too.

* * * *

As if her body had a mind of its own, Giada found her anger being rapidly replaced by desire. She moved her hips in time with Kentucky's. She locked her legs about his waist. She welcomed his fervor. She embraced his intensity. And although she was probably going to be sore for days afterwards, she couldn't help but thrust against him just as hard. That's just how greedy she was for him.

When Giada went over the edge a few minutes later, all she could say was . . .

"Kenny."

"Kenny."

"Knnnnnnnnny!"

Mercedes could be heard scratching at the closed door of her bedroom after being awakened by that unexpected

scream at the end. Giada barely heard those scratches. Her mind was too gone for anything to fully register.

* * * *

Moments later, Kentucky threw his head back and released his essence into Giada. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out in ecstasy. She would never know how much he enjoyed this last time. She definitely wouldn't know how close he came to telling her that he could give her the life she craved . . . now.

Reluctantly, Kentucky disengaged himself from Giada's body now that their final tryst was over. In silence, he gathered the rest of his clothes and prepared to exit the room and, ultimately, her life.

"All fine and well," Giada said, looking highly offended that he'd been the one to end things between them, that he wasn't even going to say good-bye first.

"I was going to dump you anyway once I found the kind of man I really want," Giada added spitefully.

Kentucky paused and looked back over his shoulder. "Happy hunting, baby." Then he turned around and proceeded down the stairs, dressing on the way. In the distance, he could hear Giada calling him almost every bad name under the sun, which was rising at this very moment.

Kentucky didn't care *what* she called him now. It was a new day. A new day meant it was time for him to start putting all of this behind him.

Starting now. Kentucky walked out into the warm morning rays, bravely closing the door to Giada's house and signifying the close of their brief relationship.

* * * *

At the sound of the closing door, Giada's rant abruptly ceased upstairs. Grief filled her heart. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She wanted to run to the nearest window, fling it open, and shout for Kentucky to return to her on his terms . . . on any terms.

But Giada refused to budge from the bed, despite her current misery. She would not lay her destiny at Kentucky's feet.

I'm meant to marry a rich man, and he's simply not that man, Giada thought, oblivious to her error in judgment.

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Chapter Seven

Four significant things happened after that incident between Kentucky and Giada. First of all, the crime spree that had been plaguing their neighborhood was over before the year ended. It seemed that the thieves who burglarized the Jones home were tied to a crime ring of crooks. Their arrest led to several others.

Soon thereafter, Giada noticed how Hannah went out of her way to befriend her. The woman even hand-delivered a plate of food to her every Sunday. This act of benevolence continued until Giada became exclusive with a new rich man and moved out of the neighborhood, which were the second and third significant things to happen after Kentucky and Giada's fallout.

Having returned to dating in full force in order to quickly push herself past the Kentucky incident, Giada finally hit the jackpot when she met Fabian Flow, the newest R & B sensation out of Florida.

Looking and sounding like an old-school singer named Jon B., Fabian's melodious hooks were coveted among many rap artists. Singers from all over wanted to do duets with him.

Giada loved the fact that Fabian was rich, handsome, and generous. There was nothing she couldn't ask for that he wouldn't give her. There was no place she couldn't ask to go that he wouldn't make happen. Fabian even moved Giada into his condo because he hated being away from her for long

stretches of time. The weekly allowance he gave her was more than she made in a month at her job.

As a result, Giada was able to quit working and move off Wilmington Street right after New Year's. However, she did not sell her house. Instead, she used it as another piece of rental property and allowed that money to draw interest in a high-interest-bearing account.

Other things Giada loved about Fabian were the fact that he didn't allow stardom to go to his head, could be faithful to one woman, and didn't travel with an entourage. The only people Fabian traveled with were his manager/assistant named Bartley and one bodyguard.

The only downsides to Giada's relationship with Fabian were his bouts of possessiveness and . . . their sex life. Though she obviously satisfied him—the man actually shed tears during their first time—Fabian wasn't able to completely satisfy her in the bedroom.

Giada might have been satisfied with Fabian's efforts if she'd never had those two nights with Kentucky. She might have been content if she'd never been exposed to how great sex really could be between a man and a woman.

That giant of a man had been right about spoiling Giada for other men. He'd been right about her body craving even more of him after they made love. There hadn't been a night since that incident that Giada hadn't craved Kentucky's body next to hers, *in* hers.

Yet to hold on to her otherwise great catch, Giada pretended to enjoy her intimate times with Fabian more than she actually did. Trying to get another boy toy was out since

she wasn't about to jeopardize the financial security she now had.

Besides, Giada seriously doubted that any man could ever top Kentucky in the bedroom area. As the first man to ever make her scream in ecstasy and secretly entertain thoughts of falling in love, the gentle giant was an extremely hard act to follow.

* * * *

The fourth significant thing that happened after Kentucky and Giada's estrangement proved to be more beneficial to Kentucky this time. In fact, this beneficial thing was actually fueled by that estrangement.

After his last night with Giada, Kentucky threw himself into his boarding school project even more. Instead of just looking at his business plan on paper, he submitted it to several banks and a few other investors. All jumped at the chance to support him in this worthwhile venture.

Encouraged by their response, Kentucky applied for all the proper accreditations and then went in search of the perfect location. He searched doggedly, putting all of his pent-up frustrations about Giada to good use.

That fervent search led to the acquisition of some prime real estate in lower Georgia in a rural town called Village Square. These days Kentucky spent every available moment overseeing the renovation of the colonial mansion, which would house the classrooms, library, dining room, and nurse's office; the building of male and female dormitories; the construction of a gym with an adjoining pool; and the building

of independent cottages for the headmistress and other on-site teachers and counselors. Kentucky's stepmother took over the task of interviewing and hiring the academic personnel.

Though the school was stretching his financial portfolio in a major way, Kentucky knew that it was for a worthy cause and so didn't mind all the expense. Plus, with the various endowments he'd gotten recently from wealthy donors and the approval of a government grant, he would be able to recoup what he had put into the project within three years.

Until then, Kentucky had to continue to live modestly, only take on the highest paid protection assignments, and save, save, save since he wasn't about to dip into the retirement funds he'd set aside for him and his stepmother.

Last, but certainly not least, Kentucky also had to stay away from gold-digging women. He especially had to stay away from Giada, no matter how much he still dreamed of her at night.

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Chapter Eight

Five months later

Set to accompany Fabian for his upcoming summer tour in the Caribbean, Giada learned he was in need of another bodyguard. The old one had opted out of his contract early in order to guard a congressman's daughter overseas.

In the world of bodyguarding, certain assignments were considered nobler than others. Guarding a politician's child over an R & B singer was one of them.

What Giada did not know was that Fabian's new bodyguard would be none other than Kentucky Jones. Up until today, she didn't even know that he performed bodyguard services.

Giada almost choked on her orange juice when Fabian revealed the name of the new bodyguard his manager hired. She started to cough again when he started listing some of the man's credentials.

Among Kentucky's clientele were several politicians and dignitaries, singers, movie producers, actors, a Texas oilman, and even a few high-profile businessmen traveling overseas.

This could mean only one thing—Kentucky was rich.

Rich!

He was probably rich when I met him, too, Giada thought.

Her suspicions were quickly confirmed when Fabian revealed how much he was going to be paying Kentucky for his services. He shared how hard it had been to even secure Kentucky's services in the first place since he was among the

top-notch in the business and could pick and choose whom he wanted to work for at will.

No wonder Mrs. Jones never wanted to talk about her son's profession, Giada recalled. Or why he suddenly had to be gone for long stretches of time.

Giada also thought about how the question of *"If Kentucky doesn't really live here with you anymore, where does he live?"* was never answered by his stepmother, and downright avoided every time.

I can't believe I could have had it all. The money, great sex, and the finest man on the planet. Grief settled into Giada's heart.

"Are you all right, baby?" Fabian asked with concern when her coughing had gone on a bit too long for comfort. "You're not asthmatic, are you?"

Giada cleared her throat once and for all, then blinked rapidly to refocus before answering him. "I'm fine, with no traces of asthma in sight. It's just that I thought I heard you mention the name of a former neighbor of mine. A neighbor who lived very modestly and whom I thought only did bouncer work at local clubs."

"Kentucky Jones was your neighbor?" Fabian asked with intrigue.

"First, are we even talking about the same Kentucky Jones here? The one I'm referring to is from Miami and looks like a young Arnold Schwarzenegger," Giada replied.

Fabian chuckled. "That's the one. Though I have yet to meet the man in person and have only seen a picture of him, is he as mean as he looks?"

Giada chuckled for a whole other reason. Only she knew that Kentucky's bark was often worse than his bite, especially when it came to his stepmother . . . and his lover. Her lower body throbbed with the memory of what it had been like to be Kentucky's lover. The man had been gentle and passionate all at the same time.

"Put it like this, Kentucky knows how to be mean to the right people," Giada replied with a knowing smile. "As for being my neighbor, I was actually neighbors with his *mother*," she went on to clarify. "Kentucky didn't live with her, but he was over there quite a lot. Either way, they were both very hospitable to me when I lived in the neighborhood. Kentucky even helped me out of a crisis once, so I know he's going to be a great bodyguard for you."

Fabian smiled. "Now I *know* Bartley made a good choice. I can't wait to meet this Kentucky dude now," he said, showing that he trusted her judgment.

Fabian had no reason *not* to trust Giada's opinion in business matters. Not only had she helped him successfully renegotiate the contracts for this tour greatly in his favor, but she'd done so even better than his manager had. That last thing gave Bartley one more reason to hate her, as if he didn't have enough reasons already.

"When will you meet Kentucky?" Giada asked casually, successfully playing down her excitement.

"Any minute now. Bartley asked him to meet us all for breakfast on the yacht."

The yacht Fabian spoke of was the rental that he would be residing in for the next month and a half of touring. The boat

was mobile and able to take him from one island location to the other. It would also keep him at a safe distance from fanatic fans, which he'd acquired over the last year of recording back-to-back hits.

Fabian and Giada had spent their first night on the yacht together last night. It had been romantic and satisfying . . . at least for one of them.

At the thought of suddenly seeing Kentucky again after all these months, Giada's body began to betray her. The tips of her bosom became rigid, her pulse quickened, heat shot through her veins, and her hand shook slightly on her glass.

No other man could do this to Giada sight unseen. She resented Kentucky for this power he seemed to have over her, for making her need a change of underwear, or rather, a change of swimsuit since that was basically all she had on right now.

Giada had barely stood up after excusing herself to their cabin when none other than Kentucky Jones stepped on board. He wore all black as usual. This time it was a black T-shirt tucked into a pair of black jeans. Black boots were upon his large feet, and he walked with that confident stride that dared anybody to cross him. Behind him was blond-haired Bartley.

Giada plopped back down in her seat just as Fabian stood up to greet their guests. She had to sit. Her legs had gone all jelly on her.

Crossing her legs, Giada attempted to squeeze out the ache that the sight of Kentucky's bulging muscles had produced within her body. The way his rippled abs strained

against the tight T-shirt he wore and the narrow V of his waist had her going through another heat wave. It had her remembering old times between them, fun times.

* * * *

Kentucky felt his lower body tighten the moment he saw Giada standing near the breakfast table. Her mocha skin looked like a scrumptious chocolate bar from being out in the sun, and the swimsuit she wore was far from modest. While she'd been standing, Kentucky saw that the mesh shorts she wore did nothing to hide the thong bottom of her bikini.

This is one time I should have researched my client further. Kentucky regretted that he hadn't dug deeper into Fabian's personal life before taking this assignment.

Although he'd been very thorough with Fabian's professional background, the price had been so right and the financial need so great that Kentucky had only performed cursory research on the man's personal affairs. Plus, he'd been told by Bartley that the singer had no current love interest in his life.

Wonder why he lied? Kentucky continued to ponder, also wondering why Giada never appeared in any photos with Fabian.

Suddenly Kentucky's ponderings stopped as he remembered what kind of woman Giada was. No doubt Bartley didn't count her as a serious love interest due to her gold-digging ways. The manager probably kept her out of all photos for the same reason.

Kentucky started to wish that Giada was a passing fancy for Fabian, too, but for very different reasons. After all, ever since their encounter, she'd been visiting his dreams on the regular. Last night was no exception.

Although Kentucky didn't allow himself to daydream about Giada during his working hours, when he was driving home or flying on a plane somewhere, his mind would wander to those incredible two nights when they made love until the sun came up. If only he hadn't signed that contract and given his word to guard Fabian for the next six weeks. If only he didn't have so many fatherless kids counting on him to provide a place of refuge for them.

Pushing all thoughts of Giada away now, Kentucky pasted a business smile on his face. Then he forced his powerful legs to move the rest of the way to actually shake the hand of his new employer.

"Nice to meet you, Kentucky," Fabian said, shaking the hand offered to him.

"Nice to meet you, too, sir," Kentucky replied, releasing the man's hand after a firm shake. "Giada."

He gave her the briefest of acknowledgements and a polite nod. He wasn't about to touch any part of her body. Not now. Not ever.

"Hello, Kentucky," Giada replied, giving him a return nod.

"Oh, so you do already know my lady. Giada told me that you did," Fabian said, making polite conversation.

"Yes, sir, we do. She used to live across the street from my mother," Kentucky replied, digesting the fact that he'd been discussed between the two lovers.

Had Giada been responsible for him getting this job? If so, why? And if Giada now knew about him being a bodyguard to the rich and famous, then she had to also know that he was not as poor as she originally thought.

No need to worry, Kentucky told himself. *The man she has now is rich and handsome. I'm just rich.* He comforted himself with that thought. It was a great day to be an average-looking guy.

"How *is* that wonderful mother of yours?" Giada asked, drawing Kentucky's attention back to her.

"Mama is fine," Kentucky replied, ignoring the heat that attacked his body as their gazes met again for a longer period of time.

"Good. Well, tell her I asked about her, okay? That I really miss her cooking," Giada said, giving him a charming smile.

"I will." Kentucky braced himself against that smile. "And how is Mercedes?" he asked, concerning her beloved pet.

"Fine. I wanted to bring her along for the tour, but Fabian didn't think she'd like the sea. So I had to leave her in a kennel since the regular sitter couldn't keep her for six whole weeks," Giada replied with touches of sadness in her eyes.

Kentucky silently noted the forlorn look in her amber pools at the fact that she'd be so far away from Mercedes for so long. He felt compelled to help her, despite his misgivings.

"If you're uncomfortable with Mercedes being in a kennel, I could ask Mama to watch her for you," Kentucky offered. "She had grown fond of the little thing when you lived across the street. I'm sure she wouldn't mind looking after her. Plus,

Mama could definitely use the company with me being gone for six whole weeks, too."

Giada's eyes lit up with excitement. "Oh, could you, Kentucky?" Her voice was just as excited.

"No problem. I'm sure Mama won't mind at all," Kentucky replied. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Fabian's frown. He quickly deduced that the man either didn't like Giada's pet or didn't like some other man making her happy. It was probably both.

Promptly returning his attention to his new employer, Kentucky said, "I was instructed to call you Fabian, sir. Am I correct on this?"

"Yes." Fabian smiled, looking satisfied that the subject had been changed. The easy rapport between Giada and Kentucky had seemed too unsettling for him. "I prefer to use first names only. And you can also drop the 'sir' part since I'm a very informal guy all around. What would you like to be called? By the way, please have a seat."

"Kentucky is fine," he said, sitting as requested.

Bartley had already sat down and was now shooting covert icy glares at Giada.

Watchful as always, Kentucky noticed those glares, too. He understood the manager's suspicions.

Giada was one of the most determined gold diggers there was. With a mind that could have made her a brilliant lawyer who earned thousands, she chose to use it to con men out of their money instead.

Just sad. Such a waste of brilliance and intelligence.

Kentucky grieved for the woman Giada could be if she wasn't so materialistic.

"Kentucky is such an odd name for a person. Were you named after the state you were born in?" Fabian asked. "Your slight rural accent suggests that you're not a native of Florida."

"Something like that." Kentucky issued one of his rare smiles.

Then he went on to share how his Kentucky-bred father was offered a great job in Florida when his birth mother was seven-and-a-half months pregnant with him. He talked about how his mother went into premature labor right at the Kentucky/Tennessee line.

"After pulling over to the side of the road, my father delivered me in the backseat of their car," Kentucky continued. "Paramedics came a little while later to drive me and my mother to the nearest hospital, which was in Tennessee. Since I was born right at the border, there was some dispute about which state to put on my birth certificate. When Papa couldn't get them to put Kentucky on it due to their rationale of using the state of the hospital I'd been examined in, he decided to name me what he did as an act of defiance." Kentucky chuckled, causing everyone else to laugh, too.

Giada laughed though she'd already heard this story before. Their eyes met and briefly held as they both remembered exactly when and where she'd heard it.

* * * *

Giada suppressed a moan as she remembered the first time she'd heard the story of Kentucky's birth. She also had to catch herself from being mesmerized by the sight of his perfect teeth and the wonderful sound of his deep chuckle. She must have been a fool to ever think he was ugly. Anyone with an uncritical eye could see that he was the other U-word—unique.

"Good thing your parents weren't born in Georgia. Imagine going through school with a name like that," Fabian said. "You'd have to fight every day."

Everybody laughed again.

Giada fell a little bit more in love with Kentucky's smile.

"Yes, Georgia would have been a hard name to live down," Kentucky replied after the laughter had died down some. "But I was so big as a child that no one dared poke fun at any name I had. By seventh grade, I was five-ten and looked like a full-grown man."

"Have you stopped growing yet?" Fabian asked with a playful smirk.

"Yes, as far as I know." Kentucky nodded. "Papa grew to be nearly seven feet tall. I'm still just six-four."

"Wow," Bartley said, taking a break from scowling at Giada to actively participate in the conversation. "I wonder how big your kids are going to be."

Kentucky shrugged. "Who knows? But I do hope my wife fares better than my birth mother did. Giving birth to a ten-pound baby took such a toll on her body that she died soon thereafter. As a result, my father refused to impregnate his

second wife, my current mother, for fear that the same thing would happen to her."

"W . . . Wife?" Giada suddenly blurted out. "You're married, Kenny?" She released his nickname by mistake as anxiety surged through her veins.

Fabian frowned at her emotional outburst.

Kentucky gave her a look of disapproval. "No, not yet. I was speaking of my *future* wife."

Giada instantly relaxed again. "Whew! I thought I had missed out on the best red velvet cake in the South. Your mother said she was going to fix a five-tier one for your wedding day since that was your favorite dessert," she said, smoothly playing down her unexpected outburst.

"Don't worry, Giada," Kentucky replied calmly. "You'll be one of the first people to get an invitation to my wedding. How could I not invite the woman that put her life on the line to help the police catch the thieves that robbed my family home?"

Fabian's brows rose. "Giada helped *you* in a crisis? I thought it was the other way around."

"Actually it was both," Giada replied, doing her best to quell any suspicions her boyfriend had about the true nature of her past relationship with Kentucky. "The Joneses put me up for a night when I lost my car and house keys. I, in turn, called the police for them when their home was being robbed while they were away."

"Yes, Giada's testimony led to the discovery of a rising crime ring in the area," Kentucky added, causing Fabian to

relax further. "My old neighborhood is now safe again because of her act of bravery."

Fabian smiled adoringly at Giada. "Beautiful, bodacious, and brave. I believe I've hit the jackpot with you, baby." He leaned over and planted a possessive kiss on her lips, clearly staking claim and sending a silent message to his new bodyguard—*Giada is mine!*

Giada felt her face grow hot even as she returned that warm smack. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the left side of Kentucky's mouth twitch. His nostrils flared wider. Yet he regained his composure so fast that Giada thought she imagined those sure signs of jealousy.

"No, Fabian, it is me that hit the jackpot with you," Giada said, tenderly stroking her lover's face just to see if she could cause Kentucky to twitch again.

Nope. Kentucky had his guard up this time. He had it up real high.

In the seat beside Giada, Bartley looked as if he wanted to throw up yesterday's breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

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Chapter Nine

I'm not gonna make it, Kentucky thought after he returned to his home later that evening. How was he going to protect Fabian from others when he wanted to kill the man himself?

He'd wanted to bash the man's head in just for even daring to kiss Giada in front of him. How was he going to survive six long weeks of them kissing and hugging and doing more than that right down the hall from him?

Was Kentucky insane? Or trying to be driven insane?

I need to terminate my contract immediately, Kentucky decided, ready to save them all a great deal of trouble.

Yet, when he thought about all those fatherless kids due to come to the Hardy Jones Academy in the fall, he knew he would go through with the Fabian assignment. Kentucky needed the money . . . for them.

With his mind firmly made up, Kentucky went upstairs to take a shower. He needed a cold shower at that. Seeing Giada again today had him all hot and bothered on multiple levels.

Just as Kentucky was toweling off, he heard the doorbell ring. After slipping on a pair of gym shorts, he rushed downstairs to answer it.

Who can this be? Kentucky thought, looking at the mahogany wood clock on the wall as he descended the stairs. It read 9 p.m.

One look through the peephole answered his question. It was Giada.

* * * *

"What do you want?" Kentucky demanded as soon as he swung the door open.

Giada gasped as the sight of his bare chest snatched her breath clean away. "I want . . . I want . . ." she began, trying to answer his question through the thick fog of desire clouding her brain.

Although sex was not her original intent when she came here, it was now. Thick lust was all over her. It oozed out of her pores, danced in her eyes as she stared ravenously at Kentucky's chest, which he deliberately folded his arms across in order to break her stare.

"I want answers," Giada finally squeezed out, dragging her gaze upwards to his scowling face.

"I want a few of those myself. Like how did you get my address? And does Fabian know you're here?"

"I got your address from your resume in Fabian's office. And no, he doesn't know I'm here. He thinks I went back to the condo to get a few last-minute things," Giada replied, looking downward again, this time at his bulging arms. They were even bigger than before. The flames of desire lapped upon her even higher. "Now are you going to let me in or what? Because I have a lot of questions for you, and it might take a while."

"I can answer any question you have right here," Kentucky said, blocking the doorway with his large frame.

Giada frowned at his deliberate movement. She'd been just about to squeeze past him and boldly enter his home

unannounced. Dang. Now she couldn't make the most of this visit by cornering him unchaperoned behind closed doors.

Double dang.

"As you can see, my front porch is very private," Kentucky continued, pointing to the tall shrubs aligning both sides and the front of that greeting space. He removed the lock from the door, stepped farther onto the porch, then closed the door behind him.

Giada narrowed her eyes at him. "Why can't I come inside, Kenny? Do you have a woman in there?" Hot jealousy made her ears tingle with warmth as she stood akimbo style.

It gave her great pleasure to see desire instantly flare in Kentucky's chocolate pools. Had her jealousy gotten to him? The sound of his nickname upon her lips?

"That's none of your business, Giada. I said I *can* answer any question you may have, not that I would," Kentucky said after quickly getting himself back under control.

Giada huffed in frustration. She'd forgotten just that fast that she couldn't wrap Kentucky around her finger like other men. She'd forgotten that his will was even stronger than his body. Why did that both thrill and irritate her?

"Why didn't you tell me that you were rich, Kenny?" Giada asked, continuing her line of questioning. "If you had, I would have dropped all my other men for you." She moved closer. "All of them." She slowly ran her hands up his large chest. "Oh, Kenny. We would have still been together now." She embraced his neck and met his gaze again. "In every way." Giada licked her lips with anticipation.

* * * *

Inhaling sharply at her unexpected touch, Kentucky realized in that moment that it wouldn't take much effort to snatch her away from Fabian. One kiss and Giada would be his again. It was in her hungry look. That look became even more ravenous because she now knew about his money.

My money! Kentucky thought, forcing himself to focus on why Giada had really sought him out tonight. She didn't really want him. She wanted his money.

Well, she's not getting either. Kentucky frowned. Then he took two steps back, causing Giada's hands to fall back to her sides.

Giada frowned at his clear rejection of her advances.

"I didn't tell you I was rich, because I needed you to choose me for me, *not* my money," Kentucky said, picking up the conversation where it left off. "And how long have you known about my wealth anyway? Did you set up this job as a way to get back into my life?"

"I found out that you were more than a bouncer just this morning after Fabian told me who his new bodyguard was going to be. I did some checking of my own afterwards and discovered all kinds of interesting things about you." Giada smiled, looking pleased that she now knew so many of his secrets.

"Interesting things like what?" Kentucky asked, not about to tell her anything she didn't already know.

"One, like the fact that your net worth is greater than most of the clients you protect, including Fabian." Giada looked especially pleased about that. "Two, that you're getting ready

to open some fancy boarding school for fatherless kids in Georgia."

"Had you taken the time to check a little deeper, you might have found out that financing that fancy boarding school has rendered me asset rich, but cash poor," Kentucky said, trying to deliberately deter her interest in him with a few true facts.

As expected, Giada frowned with disappointment. "You mean to tell me that you have *no* money?"

"I won't starve, but I certainly don't have enough for your expensive tastes," Kentucky replied, not surprised, but still disappointed that she was that same impatient gold digger as before.

"But you will again in a few years, right?" Giada asked with a hopeful look in her eyes.

Kentucky scowled, repelled by her renewed interest in him solely because he would one day be rich enough for her again. If she wanted him so badly, why hadn't she tracked him down before now?

Why hadn't she pursued him when she still thought he was among the working poor?

If she had tracked me down back then, I would have . . .

"It's always about money with you, huh?" Kentucky said, interrupting his own thought pattern. He didn't have time for what-ifs. "Bye, Giada. Go back to Fabian or some other sucker foolish enough to get mixed up with you." Turning the doorknob behind him, he went back inside.

"You arrogant—" Giada didn't get a chance to finish the rest of her sentence before he slammed the door in her face.

Kentucky peeked out a nearby window in time to see her storm back to her car. Before Giada stepped off his porch, he heard her say, "Who does he think he is slamming the door in *my* face! Now that I know he needs this job, I'm going to make the next six weeks of his life a living hell!"

That's what you think, Kentucky thought with flaring nostrils.

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Chapter Ten

Kentucky showed up for his first day of work all business. He'd been hired to protect Fabian on social outings, professional engagements, and to act as chauffeur on occasion, with Sundays off.

He was not hired to pay attention to Fabian's girlfriend. As a result, Kentucky determinedly blended into the background and turned a blind eye to Giada's attempts to make him jealous. She would never know how tormenting it was those first two weeks on the job when she dressed extra sexy and showered Fabian with too many kisses to count in front of Kentucky.

As a way to work off his frustration, Kentucky decided to amp up his exercise regiment. He wanted to be so physically tired that he went to sleep as soon as he hit the bed. That way he wouldn't lie awake wondering what Giada and Fabian were doing down the hall.

Tonight was the Friday of week three. Kentucky was in full control of his mind, body, and soul. He'd convinced himself that Giada wasn't the one for him. Every day she stayed with Fabian proved that.

It was a good thing Kentucky was so settled about the issue because Fabian decided to change things up at the last minute tonight. Instead of going straight back to the boat after the concert, the singer wanted to go to an after-party that was being held on the island of Barbados. Ticket sales

had been through the roof tonight, and Fabian was in the mood to celebrate.

Because Kentucky would appear as one of Fabian's entourage members, he dressed a bit differently than usual. Though still dressed in black, he left his black jeans and boots on the boat.

Tonight he wore a dress shirt, black trousers, and black dress shoes. All were made of the finest material. Kentucky's weapons of choice were a Taser and a small revolver since he was still on duty, no matter how casual he looked. The Taser was in his pocket, and the gun was attached to his calf by a sturdy strap. Kentucky could retrieve either within seconds if the need arose.

At the upscale nightclub, Bartley immediately took the seat right beside Fabian, leaving Giada to sit on the other side with Kentucky to her left. It was their usual seating arrangement during the rare times they went out to socialize in public.

Kentucky stilled himself against the alluring scent of Giada's perfume as he sat beside her. He tried very hard not to look at her voluptuous frame in the blue crisscross halter dress she wore with its rhinestone trimmings and bare back.

"I know you don't drink, baby, but tonight you have to make an exception," Fabian told Giada as he sat with an arm possessively behind her head. "Tonight we have a milestone to celebrate. This is my highest grossing concert yet."

"I . . ." Giada started, about to refuse the way she always did.

"I won't take no for an answer," Fabian insisted. "One glass of champagne is not going to hurt you."

Kentucky frowned, careful to keep his eyes staring towards the dance floor instead of on the couple beside him. He didn't appreciate Fabian pressuring Giada to do something she vowed never to do on account of her mother. Though she swore off love, too, alcohol would likely do way more damage to her body.

Suddenly Kentucky found a way to help her out of the sticky situation. "Fabian, they serve a great non-alcoholic champagne here that bubbles like the real thing and tastes even better. Perhaps that might be more to Giada's liking. I know that's what I'm gonna have. Especially since I'm still on duty tonight and need to keep a clear head."

"Yes, I'll have that. The fake champagne," Giada said decisively with relief in her eyes. She sent Kentucky a look of gratitude. He gave her a nod of welcome in return.

"Well, I'm still having the real thing," Fabian said stubbornly, cutting his eyes at the man who'd gotten Giada to stand her ground. That was the closest Fabian had ever gotten to making her even take a sip of alcohol. Now his nostrils flared with ire, despite the fact that he held his peace in so public a place.

Kentucky noticed how Fabian continued to brood silently even after their orders were taken and delivered. He barely wanted to sign autographs for the handful of female fans who had been allowed to venture over to their VIP table. Had it not been for Bartley nudging him, he might have turned all five women down.

"No more autographs," Fabian told a sixth woman who walked up to their table a minute later. No amount of nudging was going to work this time.

"Oh, I didn't come over here to get your autograph," the woman in all pink clarified. "I came over here to ask *him* to dance," she added, pointing and looking seductively at Kentucky.

* * * *

Giada instantly narrowed her eyes at the woman in pink. Jealousy shot through her body like it never had when women approached Fabian. She stiffened in her seat.

Though the woman before them was built like an Amazon with her height and thick curves, she was exactly the kind of woman Kentucky would date. This was the kind of woman that he didn't have to wonder if she could handle him in the bedroom.

You don't have to be big to know how to handle a big man. Giada recalled how she had handled Kentucky once upon a time.

"Actually, I'm on duty tonight . . ." Kentucky began, about to politely turn the beautiful caramel-skinned island bird down.

"Actually, he's not," Fabian interrupted, giving his bodyguard a look that broached no argument.

"Or at least not as much as he thinks. Tonight we're all mixing business with pleasure. Feel free to dance all you want, Kentucky. You can even ask your lady friend to join us if she wants to."

Giada wanted to protest so badly, but she knew she couldn't. If she did, she would give her true feelings towards Kentucky away.

"I would like that very much, *Kentucky*," the woman said, giving him a lustful smile as she repeated the name she just heard Fabian say. "By the way, my name is Pinky." She extended a manicured hand in greeting.

"Nice to meet you, Pinky." Kentucky smiled, showing off those gorgeous teeth of his as he shook her hand. "I love that outfit."

"Nice to meet you, too. And thanks," Pinky said, accepting his praise of her sexy pink minidress. She reluctantly released his hand.

"Do you want to dance now or sit and talk for a while?" Kentucky asked, moving over just in case.

"I'd like to dance first." Pinky chuckled huskily. "You can tell a lot about a man by the way he moves on the dance floor."

Kentucky chuckled, too. "That goes both ways, you know." He rose to his feet. "Page my phone if you need me for anything," he turned to tell Fabian, proving that he hadn't forgotten that he was still on semiduty.

Fabian nodded. "I will. Now go have some fun with your lady." He pulled Giada closer and added, "I know I'm going to have tons of fun with mine tonight."

Giada blushed with embarrassment. Inside she was fit to be tied.

Bartley rolled his eyes with disgust.

Kentucky simply turned around and left with the lady in pink.

"Why did you embarrass me like that, Fabian?" Giada hissed under her breath when the other couple had gone.

Fabian looked shocked. "As much kissing and hugging as we've done around Kentucky and you chose *that* statement to be embarrassed about?"

"We haven't done all that around *her*," Giada retorted, sending a suspicious look Pinky's way. "At least we *know* Kenny. We don't know this woman from Eve."

Fabian bristled at her almost reverential use of Kentucky's nickname. He suddenly looked very irritated. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous," Fabian fired back.

Giada scoffed. "Of her? Please." She waved a dismissive hand in the air. She turned back to face Fabian. "Besides, why would I be jealous of her? She's not after *my* man. My man is still right here by my side." She gave Fabian a heated look that quickly chased all of his suspicions away.

Bartley rolled his eyes again. "I think I need something stronger. Waitress?" He hailed the nearest one. "Your best vodka on the rocks, please."

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Chapter Eleven

Though Giada did her best to hide her jealousy towards Pinky, she couldn't seem to shake it. She wanted to be the one slow dancing with Kentucky. She wanted his arms around her. In short, she wanted to be his.

The more the night wore on, Giada became inundated with thoughts of Pinky returning to the boat with them. Fabian had mentioned that he was okay with Kentucky inviting his date back to the yacht for a nightcap, especially since that was the same privilege he regularly afforded Bartley.

If she comes back to that boat, I don't know what I'm going to do. Giada continued to sip her non-alcoholic drink, which was starting to taste like it could be the real thing.

I don't think I can handle Kenny sleeping with someone else right down the hall from me. Giada overlooked the fact that she'd done that very thing over the last three weeks. Like so many others before her, she couldn't handle the shoe being on the other foot.

She has to go, Giada decided selfishly, looking for the first opportunity to get rid of Pinky.

That opportunity came when Pinky excused herself to the ladies' room. Giada followed right behind her, walking a little unsteadily on her feet for some reason.

"Are you coming back to the boat with us tonight?" Giada asked Pinky as they refreshed their makeup in the large bathroom mirror.

Pinky smiled. "If Kentucky asks me to," she replied, showing how conducive she was to the idea.

"Well, if you do, I hope you're into S & M, because Kentucky likes it rough based on what the last woman told me," Giada lied. "I thought we were going to have to call the coast guard in when I heard that girl screaming at the top of her lungs that night." She shook her head with fake sadness.

"I called to check on her just yesterday, and the child still ain't right yet."

Pinky stiffened. "Kentucky's into beating and bondage?" Her eyes looked fearful.

"Yes." Giada nodded. "And so much more. I thought I would tell you so you'd know what you were in for tonight." She shrugged. "But hey, you should be all right. Your frame is much sturdier than the last girl's."

On that note, Giada left the restroom so that Pinky could have some time to mull over what she would do. She knew she'd taken a chance by lying on Kentucky like that. But it was a chance Giada was willing to take in order to . . . in order to . . . save him for herself?

Now if I can only get rid of Fabian. Or at least get away from him for a while. Giada needed some time alone to just think about what she really wanted in life. She needed to particularly think about *who* she really wanted in her love life.

* * * *

"Where's Pinky?" Kentucky asked when Giada returned to the table alone. He exited the seat so that she could return to her place beside Fabian.

"I left her in the bathroom. She should be here in a little bit," Giada replied innocently, settling into her former seat. She looked down at her glass and noticed that it was full again. "Who refilled my glass?"

"Fabian," Kentucky replied, sending her a look that reeked of caution.

Though she didn't fully understand that look, Giada knew not to touch that drink. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Fabian frown with irritation at the unusual connection she and Kentucky seemed to have with one another. It was almost as if they could read each other's minds at times.

"Thanks for the refill," Giada told Fabian, even though she failed to actually bring the drink to her lips again.

Just then, a waitress came up to their table with a note. "Which of you goes by the name Kentucky?" she asked.

"I do," Kentucky replied.

"A tall lady in pink left this for you." The waitress handed him the note and departed.

Giada held her breath as Kentucky unfolded the pink slip of paper and read the note. A frown creased his brow a few seconds later. Confusion shrouded his features.

"Is something wrong?" Bartley asked, looking over at him with glazed eyes. He'd had one drink too many tonight.

"No, Pinky just had to leave on an emergency," Kentucky replied. "Any idea what that emergency was since you were the last one to talk to her?" He looked to Giada for the answer.

"No," Giada lied, fidgeting in her seat. "But she did get a call on her cell phone right before I left the restroom, so maybe that was her emergency."

"I see." Kentucky nodded, giving her a look that said he didn't believe a word she just said. "Well, no use crying over spilled milk." He balled the note up and put it in the ashtray in the center of the table. "Especially since we leave in the morning anyway."

"Th . . . That's a great way to look at things," Bartley slurred out.

Fabian laughed at his manager's inebriated speech. "And on that note, I'd say it's time for us to be heading back to the boat." After signaling the waitress for the check, he turned to Kentucky and added, "Maybe you'll meet a special lady at our next port. I heard that there are plenty fine women in Trinidad."

Kentucky smiled. "I've been there before, so I definitely know a few."

The men laughed, as if sharing a private joke.

Giada felt her temper flare, but she swiftly quenched it and forced a smile upon her face. She thought she would make this trip tormenting for Kentucky. Somehow it was turning out to be torture for her instead.

* * * *

Pleading a headache tonight, which she really did have, Giada waited until Fabian passed out from having a few more drinks in their cabin before leaving the room. Keeping her

dress on, she donned a pair of soft slippers and quietly made her exit.

Where was Giada going?

To Kentucky's cabin.

Why?

She felt guilty for running Pinky away and wanted to apologize to him. Maybe then her headache would go away.

Kentucky wasn't in his cabin tonight. He was in the weight room right next to it. Giada could hear his loud grunts from the narrow hallway. Her core instantly began to clench with need as she recalled a few more times when he'd grunted from exertion.

Entering the weight room, Giada had to take a deep breath to calm herself as her eyes lit upon Kentucky's glistening chest. He was exercising in nothing but a pair of shorts. There weren't even any shoes or socks on his feet.

"Kenny," Giada said a bit on the breathless side. She had to take another deep breath, lest she lose all control. As for her headache, it had miraculously disappeared at the sight of him.

Kentucky paused from his repetition, put the weights down, and gave her his full attention. "What do you want now, Giada?" he said, once again asking a question he likely already knew the answer to. Surely he could see the desire all over her. The sight of her taut peaks straining against her dress had to give him some kind of clue.

I want you. Giada kept that thought to herself.

She wanted Kentucky back, all right, but only on her terms. If she was the first to give in, in any way, everything

would be on *his* terms. Giada couldn't have that. She liked being the one in control of the relationship, or at least the one with the most control.

"I wanted to come and apologize for running Pinky off tonight," Giada finally replied. "I told a lie on you in the ladies' room that scared her off. I couldn't sleep with it on my conscience."

"What was the lie?" Kentucky asked, not looking surprised at all by this news. He knew that Giada lied all the time to get what she wanted.

Giada looked down at her hands. "I told her that you were heavily into S & M. I'm sorry, Kenny."

Kentucky shook his head in disgust. "I *knew* you had done something in that bathroom. I just didn't know what." He rose from the weight bench. "Now I want to know why. Why would you sabotage my evening with Pinky, or any other woman?"

"What difference does it make? I said I was sorry, didn't I?" Giada retorted, meeting his gaze head-on.

"Yes, you did, but I don't believe you," Kentucky fired back, reaching for a nearby blue towel to wipe the sweat off his face. "I don't believe for a second that you're sorry about running Pinky off. I think, given the opportunity, you'd do it again."

Incensed by how perceptive he was of her, Giada turned to leave the room. "Think what you want to think, Kenny," she said over her shoulder.

"Oh, you don't want to know what I think," Kentucky said, throwing the towel down. "I think you didn't come in here to apologize at all. I think you came to get what you kept Pinky

from getting tonight." Talking low, he walked behind her, taunting her with the truth.

Giada stopped midstride and looked back at him. Then she snatched up the back of her dress, smacked a bare cheek, and said, "Kiss my—"

Kentucky closed the distance between them before she ever got the last word out. "I have already done that, remember?" he whispered. "Matter of fact, I have kissed nearly every square inch of your gorgeous body."

Giada shuddered with need at that potent reminder. His warm breath fanning across the top of her head made her shudder again. How was it possible to want someone this badly?

"Now if you won't be truthful with me, Giada, at least be truthful with yourself. I know I've been very honest with myself lately," Kentucky continued, "brutally honest." He let out a deep, husky chuckle.

"Be truthful about what?" Giada nearly panted out. Kentucky was closer to her than he'd been in a month. And he still hadn't touched her yet. He hadn't even touched the bare right cheek that was still exposed to him. How much willpower did this man have?

"About the way we feel towards each other. I've resigned myself to the fact that I probably will always be attracted to you." Kentucky moved back a few steps. "You can look at me now and see that. My body can't seem to help but want you."

Giada looked down and moaned at the evidence of his desire. It pleased her to know that their argument had stimulated him as much as it had her. Now all Kentucky had

to do was act on that stimulus. Just one advance towards her and Giada would gladly become his again, regardless of his finances.

"But I've also resigned myself to the fact that those two nights we had together were probably all we were meant to have. You belong to Fabian now, and I've learned to respect that over the last few weeks. And because I respect your new relationship, I'm going to do *this* for both of our sakes."

Kentucky reached over and tugged down her dress.

Giada's eyes watered. "I don't know what to say, Kenny."

"No need to say anything now, Giada. Just go back to your man." Kentucky turned away from her and readjusted his shorts. "My only advice is that, if you're gonna stay with Fabian, you really need to be more watchful. I caught him pouring *real* champagne in your glass when you were in the ladies' room. No telling how often he'd done it while I was away from the table dancing." Kentucky went over to the small fridge for a liter of bottled water.

"No wonder those last glasses of the fake champagne tasted so differently." Giada touched her head. "That's probably why I had that headache by the time we got back to the boat, too." She was mad again, at a different man and for a different reason now.

"Probably. Either way, if you two are gonna go the distance, he needs to respect your vow of sobriety. Have you told him why you don't drink? You know, the whole situation about your mother?" Kentucky opened the bottled water and took a long swig, as if he needed the cold liquid to cool his hot body down even faster.

"No. I don't really share my history with people," Giada replied, watching his Adam's apple bob up and down as he drank heartily. She found it sexy.

Surprise was on Kentucky's face as he lowered the bottle from his mouth. "I can't believe you've been living with this man all these months and he doesn't at least know *that* about your background." Giada had shared that information with him the second night they were together.

"Maybe it's time that you told Fabian what happened with your mother. I'm sure he will understand and refrain from repeating what he did tonight."

"Maybe so." Giada grew thoughtful. "Well, goodnight, Kenny."

"Goodnight, Giada." Kentucky waved good-bye as she turned to leave.

* * * *

When Giada disappeared out of Kentucky's sight, he sagged against the nearest wall. That encounter had taken more out of him than his workout routine.

There would be no soaking in the Jacuzzi for him tonight. Kentucky was going to take a super cold shower and then head straight to bed.

* * * *

The whole way back to her own cabin, Giada kept replaying some of Kentucky's words in her mind. "*Be truthful with yourself.*"

If the truth really be known, Giada wanted Kentucky now more than ever before. The way he'd stood against temptation tonight, how honest he'd been about still wanting her, and even the way he respected her relationship with another man, all made her want him back.

I'm going to get him back, too, Giada told herself, ready to dump Fabian right now. She was ready to be rid of him even more so now that he'd proven himself untrustworthy by spiking her drink.

Yet Giada wouldn't break things off with Fabian right away. No, she would bide her time on this ship a little longer just to see if she could get next to Kentucky.

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Chapter Twelve

The next morning, Giada complained of an even worse headache than the night before. Today's headache confined her to bed for most of the day, spoiled her mood for sex, and even a kiss.

Although Giada's head was actually fine, she wanted to prick Fabian's conscience for what he'd done to her. She even brought up how her alcoholic mother, who made her despise alcohol altogether, used to have headaches like these all the time just to see if Fabian would confess to spiking her drink.

When a new diamond bracelet came around 4 p.m. instead of a confession, that's when Giada knew that Fabian really was guilty. The fact that he thought a gift would somehow assuage his guilt and her pain made her heart wax even colder towards him. Now she really didn't want him anymore, no matter how generous he was.

From that day forward, Giada stopped being so affectionate with Fabian in public. She even slowed down any private affection. Instead of sexing him up four to five times a week, she barely had sex with him once this week. And even that was only a quick get-in-get-out deal.

Fabian complained about the abrupt change in their sex life, but Giada didn't care. All she cared about now was getting Kentucky back—the man she secretly lusted for, the man she secretly loved.

Yes, Giada was in love with Kentucky. She'd been in love with him for a while now. It just had taken her this long to truly realize it and admit it to herself.

* * * *

One week later, Giada realized something else—haste was now in order. She really needed to step up her pace if she was ever going to get Kentucky back. That realization stemmed from a phone call he got just that morning from a woman named Bev.

Bev was the wife of one of Kentucky's friends. She was also an unapologetic matchmaker since the call mainly centered around her wanting to know why Kentucky kept dumping her girlfriends and female associates.

Giada ascertained this information based on Kentucky's responses as he sat at the far end of the rectangular breakfast table. Her ears had never been more alert.

Fabian was at the head of the table. Giada was to his right. Bartley was on the left. The two men nearest her were talking business as usual.

Giada was glad that Fabian was preoccupied with something other than her. It gave her a chance to focus even more on Kentucky's conversation. It was a good thing his deep voice wasn't made for low whispering. Otherwise she wouldn't have heard a word he said from where she sat.

Now all Giada needed to do was keep moving her food around on her plate and take a nibble here and there in pretense of eating. No need to mess up what she had with

Fabian completely until she knew she had the man she really wanted.

* * * *

"Look, Bev. Nobody is asking you to keep trying to set me up," Kentucky said, still speaking as low as he possibly could considering the fact that Giada was only a few feet away. "In fact, I really wish you wouldn't. It's starting to make me lazy and forgetful about how great it is to go after my own woman. Matter of fact, I'm not accepting any more blind dates from you or anyone else. From now on, I find my own women. You never know, I might just find Miss Right in the bunch."

"Do you even *know* what kind of woman you want your Miss Right to be?" Bev asked.

"Hmm . . . what kind of woman *do* I want my Miss Right to be? Let me think on that for a moment, Bev," Kentucky replied. Then he took a brief moment to do just that. "My Miss Right would have to be feisty and yet know how to be submissive when she needs to be. She don't have to be the prettiest thing on the block, but she has to have a beautiful soul. She must be loyal, love kids, and adore my mother almost as much as I do." Kentucky paused, met Giada's gaze across the table, and added, "And she *cannot* be selfish."

"I notice your list didn't mention many physical characteristics. What do you want your Miss Right to *look* like? By the way, I'm taking notes of everything you say to be passed along later to any eligible bachelorettes I know," Bev said.

Kentucky chuckled at her tenacity as a matchmaker. Then he turned serious again. "I'm not too picky about a woman's physical characteristics since Mama taught me long ago how futile it was to get hooked on looks," he said, giving Giada a hard glare before shifting his gaze to the sea.

"However, my Miss Right has to at least love her body enough to take good care of it. She also has to be physically strong enough to not only handle me in the bedroom, but to also carry and bear the large babies my genes will undoubtedly produce." Kentucky chuckled. "But, hey, until I find my Miss Right, I'm going to be busy enjoying a lot of Miss Right Nows. Maybe even this weekend."

Bev laughed. "Sounds like somebody's trying to be a bad boy this weekend."

"On the contrary, I plan to be good this weekend. *Real* good," Kentucky replied, letting out a husky chuckle.

* * * *

Giada bristled at the thought of Kentucky being with another woman this weekend, or ever, for that matter. She wanted to be his Miss Right. She wanted to be his one and only. Would Giada fit any of his requirements? Surely she did in the bedroom, right?

Right then and there Giada resolved to do her best to fit every description he gave. She already fit most of them and then some. The only thing really standing in her way was that selfish trait, which meant Giada had to do some changing. She had to learn a new way to behave. But like everything else she put her mind to, she was up for the task.

* * * *

As usual, Kentucky waited until everyone had gone to bed to do his workout routine. He liked to work out alone. Plus, he didn't want to run into Giada again.

Turning her away last week had taxed Kentucky's control to the max. He didn't want to go through that again, which is why he'd been going out of his way to avoid being alone with her ever since.

After his workout, Kentucky took a brief shower and then went to the flybridge to enjoy a long soak in the Jacuzzi alone.

During those Jacuzzi times, Kentucky closed his eyes and just allowed his thoughts to go where they may. Nine times out of ten, they always wandered to those two nights he'd had with Giada. Tonight was no different.

I really need to get laid, Kentucky decided, tired of stressing over the same woman. He'd only had sex once since Giada, and it wasn't very good.

Maybe next time will be better. He reached behind him for his cell phone. It was in its waterproof case, so he had no fear of ruining it if it accidentally dropped into the Jacuzzi with him.

The woman he called answered on the second ring even though it was 2 a.m. in the morning.

"Hello, Alexandra, it's Kentucky." He smiled, pleased that his ex-flame had responded to his call so promptly at this time of the morning. That was always a good sign. "I'm back

in your neck of the woods, and I was wondering if I could come see you tomorrow on my off day."

Alexandra moaned on the phone. "I'd like that very much, big man," she said in that adorable Trinidadian accent of hers.

Kentucky chuckled. "Me too, baby. I really enjoyed our last time together. I'm hoping the next time will be just as good."

"Oh, it will be," Alexandra replied. "Maybe this time I can get you to stay around a little longer."

"You never know." Kentucky grinned. This was going better than he thought. His body was even responding to Alexandra. It felt good to be attracted to another woman again.

Finally!

Suddenly Giada emerged from the shadows. Had she been watching him in secret, and for how long?

Kentucky's body grew harder and not because of the erotic things Alexandra was saying in his ear, either. It was at the sight of Giada ascending the remaining stairs that led to the flybridge with jealousy shrouding her features.

Tonight she wore a black hooded robe and no shoes. Her hair was loose and flapping angrily upon her shoulders as she walked with a determined stride towards him.

"What do you have to say about that, Kentucky?" Alexandra asked after her highly sensual monologue had ended.

"Huh . . . what?" Kentucky couldn't focus on anything except Giada's voluptuous body as she removed the robe and stepped into the Jacuzzi with him. The skin-toned bikini she

wore was not only skimpy, but see-through. It was if she had on nothing at all.

"Weren't you listening at all, Kentucky?" Alexandra sounded irritated now.

"I'm sorry, baby. Duty calls," Kentucky quickly explained. Then, after agreeing to meet her at their usual place, he concluded the call.

"Fabian is duty. I'm pleasure," Giada clarified once she had his complete attention. Her voice was discreetly low.

"No, what you are is temptation," Kentucky replied, speaking just as low as he placed his cell phone on the ridge behind him. He would have gotten out of the Jacuzzi, but his body was still too aroused. He didn't want Giada to know how she affected him. Not tonight. It might lead to the wrong thing since his guard wasn't high enough right now.

Giada smiled with satisfaction. "The fact that you are feeling tempted at all means that you still want me. A *lot*."

"We've already discussed this before, remember? Besides, whether I still want you or not is irrelevant now. I'm never gonna allow myself to have you again. You belong to someone else now. Or have you forgotten that?" Kentucky replied, trying to will his body to calm down. It might have worked if Giada hadn't moved closer.

"I haven't forgotten anything, Kenny. I definitely haven't forgotten how good we were in bed together. *Real* good," Giada said, using a phrase he'd uttered over breakfast. "Undoubtedly better than that heifer you're going to see tomorrow," she added, taking a jab at her unknown rival.

Kentucky smirked at her jealousy. "You don't even know that 'heifer' to be making that kind of assessment about her." He hardened his gaze. "On the other hand, I've been on this boat for a whole month now, and not once have I heard you scream in ecstasy. The ship's walls are certainly thin enough, and I have definitely heard Fabian cry out, but not you. Why is that, Giada? Especially since we both know that you are a screamer." Kentucky left out the fact that every moan he'd heard coming from the cabin down the hall had cut him to the quick. No, she would never know that.

"Only *you* can make me scream, Kenny," Giada confessed, moving closer still.

Kentucky inhaled sharply, forgetting how truthful she could be at times. He was even harder now.

Not waiting for a reply, Giada made another confession. "I want to trace every muscle group on your chest with my tongue again, Kenny." She licked her lips. Her amber eyes devoured his wet, muscular torso. "Do you know that I still remember how you taste? *All* of you," Giada added, boldly reaching over to squeeze him beneath the surface of the water.

Kentucky bit his bottom lip and gripped the sides of the Jacuzzi. "Move your hands, Giada," he hissed underneath his breath. Passion surged through his body in heated waves.

Giada shuddered, not with fear, but with excitement. "And if I don't?" Her hands grew even bolder by dipping into his shorts and squeezing him again, flesh to flesh this time. "Let me have this, Kenny. Let me have *you*, baby," she whispered, slowly pulling downward until she'd kneaded his full length.

Kentucky sucked air in through his teeth, slammed his eyes closed, and slowly counted to ten.

Opening them seconds later, he quickly took command of the situation before he lost all control.

Prying Giada's hands from his body just as she started an upwards ascent, Kentucky adjusted his shorts and promptly left the Jacuzzi. He didn't even say good-bye. He didn't look back either.

Kentucky knew that if he said anything to Giada or dared to look at her again, he was going to have her. He would not have her in secret either. What would start out in secret would awaken everybody on the boat because Kentucky would surely, surely make Giada scream tonight. Loudly. He would do it just to hear that delicious sound again for himself.

* * * *

Giada smiled at Kentucky's hasty departure. She knew she'd gotten to him in a big way tonight. That had been her goal.

You can run all you want, but someday soon, I am going to have you again, Giada silently vowed, keeping that thought to herself. When she noticed that Kentucky left his cell phone in his haste, she smiled wider.

Looks like someday is coming sooner than even I thought. Giada grinned now.

* * * *

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Chapter Thirteen

Kentucky couldn't wait to see Alexandra after his run-in with Giada. He was going to rock her world. Hard.

After retrieving his cell phone from where he'd left it last night, he noticed that Alexandra had left him a text message, giving him the address of their usual place, the Hotel Blaze, in case he'd forgotten.

"Oh yeah, there's gonna be a blaze in this hotel today," Kentucky said under his breath, showing up at his destination thirty minutes early. He needed to reserve the room and then spend some time getting his mind off of you-know-who before Alexandra arrived.

At the appointed time, there was a soft knock on the door. Fresh from a shower and wearing nothing but a towel about his waist, Kentucky rushed to the door.

Realizing he was too eager, he paused and took a deep, calming breath before opening the door.

"Hello, baby . . ." Kentucky's words trailed off. His mouth remained open in shock.

It wasn't Alexandra at the door. It was Giada.

* * * *

"Hello to you, too," Giada said, breezing past Kentucky before he could recover from his shock and block her way. She'd learned that lesson from her visit to his home.

Giada knew how quick Kentucky's reflexes were. She also knew that his attraction to her slowed those reflexes down a

bit, which gave her somewhat of an advantage over him. She would have never been able to get away with that had she been a stranger or someone trying to harm a client.

Quickly recovering from his shock, Kentucky whirled around to face her. "What are you doing here, Giada? Never mind. I don't care. Just leave. I have a date coming any minute now."

"Alexandra's not coming," Giada replied, heading straight for the king-sized bed in the room.

Kentucky's eyes bucked. "She's not coming?" he roared.

"No, she's not coming. Now close the door, Kenny, unless you want to draw the wrong kind of attention our way," Giada cautioned in a nonchalant tone.

"How do you know Alexandra's not coming? What did you do, Giada?" Kentucky asked, reluctantly closing the room door in order to avoid a public scene.

"I did what I had to do in order to get what I wanted," Giada said casually, removing her light shawl.

"Which was?"

"I used your cell phone last night to text Alexandra with a request for the address of this hotel."

Giada chuckled. "She texted that info back to me within two minutes. I couldn't blame her. One night with you is worth any amount of effort . . . and money." She laid her yellow-and-blue shawl on a nearby wicker chair before sitting on the bed.

"Money? Did you pay Alexandra off?" Kentucky asked, looking amazed that Alexandra would even go for anything like that.

"No, but I did slide some money to the whole front desk staff. This way, when Alexandra came, she would be given a message stating that duty called for you once again and that you had to cancel at the last minute. That you would contact her when you could. My plan worked perfectly." She sighed in triumph, showing no signs of repentance.

Kentucky's eyes grew stormy. "Once again you are always thinking about yourself," he said, closing the distance between them. "Why can't you ever be satisfied with what you have?" He snatched her up to her feet. "You have your rich, handsome guy. Why do you have to have me, too?"

"Because I love you, that's why," Giada retorted, shocking him for real this time. "I've loved you since the first night we slept together, Kenny. I just didn't know it then. But after spending this last month spying on you in the Jacuzzi every night I could, daydreaming about you, and fantasizing about you when I'm with another man, I realized it couldn't be anything but love."

* * * *

Kentucky abruptly released her, causing Giada to drop back down to the bed. He blinked rapidly to refocus. He shook his head, as if he was trying to shake her last comments out of his brain. There was no way Kentucky could allow himself to believe that anything she'd just said was true.

But how often had Giada actually lied to him? Not much. She'd been more truthful with him than most of her other men.

"No, what you love is great sex," Kentucky said, stubbornly refusing to believe her words, even though those same words had him pulsating with desire. "For some reason you can't get that with Fabian, and so you're trying to get it from me." He flung his towel away, causing Giada to moan loudly with need at the sight of his beautiful nudity. "Well, I'm gonna give you what you want. And after I do, I don't want you to so much as look at me again. You hear me?"

Giada nodded, not uttering a word. She looked like she would agree to anything to have Kentucky inside of her again.

And soon he was . . .

All.

The.

Way.

Inside.

Kentucky didn't even bother removing a stitch of Giada's clothes. He worked around her blue sundress and her thong. He barely took the time to put on protection.

Balancing his weight on his strong arms, Kentucky drove into Giada hard and fast. Her pump had already been primed by the sight of his nude body, causing her overflow to splash against his thighs at the first deep dip. Knowing that she was so ready for him made him put even more fervor behind his power drives.

* * * *

Giada actually saw stars during those first couple of thrusts as pleasure shot through her body like a fireworks display. She immediately started clenching around Kentucky. Though

he wasn't as gentle as usual, every thrust, every stroke was perfectly aimed to bring ultimate enjoyment, not pain.

When Giada was able to focus again, she pulled her knees outward and upwards, and then looked down at their coupling. She wanted, *needed* to see the strong plunges, the reluctant withdrawals, the way every vein in Kentucky's body strained against his skin as he gave her what she'd come here for.

Giada looked up into his face and became even more overwhelmed by what she saw there—reciprocal love.

Love.

Love!

Giada's heart swelled with even more love for Kentucky now that she knew he shared the depth of her feelings. She began to climax even harder. She felt moisture gather in her eyes. Soon tears began to flow.

At the first tear, Kentucky ceased all movement. A repentant look was instantly upon his face. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to be so rough. We can stop." He moved to disengage them.

"No!" Giada nearly shouted as she gripped his bottom tightly and wrapped her legs possessively about his waist. "I'm not crying out of pain. I'm crying out of joy. Please don't stop making love to me, baby. I need you. I've needed you forever."

* * * *

Kentucky felt tears prick his eyes at Giada's heartfelt declaration, yet no tears flowed. Neither did any words. Instead his body did all the talking.

After bending to kiss away her tears, Kentucky gently removed her sundress and black slip. The thong he ripped off since he wasn't about to disengage them now to remove it the right way. They'd been apart far too long as it was.

When she was completely nude except for her high-heeled sandals, Kentucky began to give Giada what she needed and so much more. He lowered his lips upon hers for a long kiss.

That kiss continued as his hips led hers in a slow groove. Kentucky used the hand that wasn't balancing his weight to tenderly squeeze and knead her melons as it moved over her torso. Every now and then, he'd take a break from her lips to taste that delicious fruit, but would soon find his way up to her mouth again.

Kentucky's lips were on Giada's when she went over the edge with a violent shudder and a scream of ecstasy. Although his ears relished that scream, he had to swallow most of it in his mouth in order to keep from drawing undue attention to their room.

More tears descended as Giada clung to him, clenched around him, and snatched an orgasm from his loins shortly thereafter. This was the best reconciliation he'd ever had.

Rolling until she was lying on top of him, Kentucky held her close to him as she continued to cry. In between her tears, she kept proclaiming how much she loved him, kept talking about how much she wanted them to be together. She

told him that she wanted to be his Miss Right and that she was willing to give up her gold-digging ways just for him.

Cautious with his heart and very conscious of her track record, Kentucky uttered no words of love no matter what he felt. Instead he said, "Prove it."

Giada nodded in understanding. They both knew she had nobody but herself to blame for his lack of faith in her, his need for proof. Thus her answer was "I will. And when I do . . . ?" She left her question open-ended.

"When you do, I will willingly give you my heart and so much more," Kentucky replied, giving her an intense look.

To that, Giada nodded.

* * * *

After making love two more times, Kentucky advised Giada to leave the hotel and go back to the boat. She was extremely reluctant, to say the least. She even tried to start up round four after their heated shower scene.

"I want you to stay all night, too, baby," Kentucky said. "But I really don't need a scandal in my life right now. Imagine the field day the media would have if they knew Fabian's bodyguard was having an affair with his girlfriend."

"I stopped being Fabian's girlfriend the second I walked into this hotel," Giada replied, still clinging to his bare torso. He wore only a pair of black briefs now. She wore her satin slip.

Kentucky smiled down into her eyes, looking highly pleased with her words. "I tried to accept the fact that you were his, but deep down inside, I always felt that you were

still mine." His eyes and his tone grew serious. "But Fabian still considers you to be his woman, and the media will, too. And though a scandal might actually *help* his career, it could destroy both of mine. It might cast a bad light on my school, and my protective service clients may start thinking that I don't know how to respect boundaries. I can't have that kind of heat on me. Not now. There's too much at stake. Too many kids counting on me."

Hearing the conviction in his voice, Giada conceded. "I would never do anything to deliberately hurt you or those kids, baby," she said, finally releasing him. "I just don't want to go back to that boat and have to pretend to be Fabian's girlfriend for the next two weeks. And what about when he wants to sleep with me again? I don't think I could do it. I *won't* do it. Not after what just happened between us."

Kentucky pulled her to him again. "Let's get one thing straight right now. You are mine. *All* mine." He possessively squeezed her bottom as he spoke.

Giada moaned, highly turned on by the possessiveness of his voice and touch. "Yes, baby. You branded me for sure today." She would never forget how fervent he'd been with her today.

"Baby, I branded you the first time we made love. You just didn't know it back then, remember?" Kentucky chuckled.

"You're right." Giada smiled. "Now let me do a little branding of you," she added, leaning up on tiptoes to suck his neck hard, intent on leaving behind the biggest hickey she could.

* * * *

Kentucky moaned at Giada's aggression. He knew what she was trying to do at his neck, and he liked it. "Suck harder, baby."

Jumping upon his waist, Giada wrapped her legs about his torso and went for broke. By the time she'd placed two large passion marks on either side of his neck, Kentucky was breathing hard and ready to return the favor.

Lifting her upon his shoulders, he left two hickeys at both joints of her inner thighs. "You see where I left those passion marks?" Kentucky asked huskily as he lowered her legs from his neck and shoulder areas.

"Yes," Giada panted out, looking ready for round four now. But that wasn't going to happen. The fact that he placed her back on her feet again instead of carrying her over to the bed confirmed that truth.

"Those hickeys prove that I'm not sending you back to the boat to pretend to be Fabian's girlfriend for another day, much less two more weeks. They will also remind you not to undress in front of him when you go back today to pack and leave in order to avoid a scandal." Kentucky's nostrils flared at even the thought of Fabian seeing her naked body again.

"I love your brilliance and your jealousy." Giada smiled. "But I wasn't going to undress in front of him again anyway," she assured her new man. "But won't my leaving so suddenly create a scandal in and of itself? Fabian is going to want answers. Plus, he can be a very sensitive guy when he wants to be. The man has major abandonment issues stemming from being left by his mother and raised in foster homes. Me

breaking up with him might negatively affect the rest of his tour. I couldn't do that to Fabian. Not after he's been so nice to me all these months. What I did behind his back today is bad enough, despite the fact that he spiked my drink behind my back." Giada actually looked remorseful now.

Had falling in love given her a conscience? And why wasn't Kentucky, one of the most principled men on the planet, feeling just as remorseful?

Kentucky *did* feel remorseful, but only slightly. Though he liked Fabian as a person, he didn't like the way the man treated Giada. Instead of treating her like an equal, Fabian treated her like some little kid who he had to spoil, thereby catering to her materialistic side and forever stunting her growth.

Giada needed a man in her life who knew how to treat her special, but who could also challenge her to grow as a person. She needed Kentucky. Finally they both realized that now.

"I'm not happy about going behind another man's back either since I definitely wouldn't want that to happen to me," Kentucky finally replied after a bit of thought. "But what's done is done. We can't take back what we did. I wouldn't want to, not in a million years." He bent to kiss her forehead before releasing her completely. "All we can do now is damage control."

Then, as Giada put her clothes back on, Kentucky instructed her on ways that she could remove herself from the rest of the tour without upsetting Fabian too much. He also told her what his expectations were concerning the new relationship she was about to start with him.

One, Giada had to officially break up with Fabian once the tour was over. Two, she had to move out of the condo that she shared with Fabian. Three, she had to go back to work and enroll in law school.

Giada huffed in protest. "Why can't I just move in with you while I go to law school?" She turned away from the mirror where she'd been styling her hair.

"Because I need to see you standing on your own two feet for a change, not on my feet or some other man's," Kentucky replied from where he sat on the side of the bed. "Besides, it's not like you don't have a house of your own. Matter of fact, you have *two* houses to choose from."

"But if I move back into one of my houses, I'm going to be cutting myself off from steady income," Giada replied, "income that I could use to pay for law school, mind you. Especially since I have no idea what kind of money I'll be making at this unknown job you want me to get."

Like the wise man that he was, Kentucky knew when to compromise. "Okay, I understand that you have to learn to crawl before you can walk, so I'll put in a good word for you with Mama. I'm sure she'll let you stay there while you work and go to school. Mama could use the extra company, you can save money, and I'll have unlimited access to you when I'm in town."

Giada chuckled, clearly liking that compromise. "But I thought you didn't have sex under your mother's roof."

"I don't," Kentucky said, lying back on the bed with his arms propped behind his head. "I intend to sex you up at my

place as often as possible," he added huskily as his lower body stirred to life again.

Giada moaned with need at the high tent in his briefs. "Can you sex me up one more time before I go? You know, one for the road?"

Kentucky gave her a heated look. "I want to, but you've already been here five hours of unaccounted-for time as it is," he replied, looking at the clock on the nightstand now. "And with you not answering your cell phone all these hours, Fabian might send the police out looking for you. If he hasn't already."

Giada exhaled in frustration. "These are going to be the longest two weeks of my life." She turned back to the mirror.

Kentucky chuckled. "Not if you stay busy packing, job hunting, and filling out college applications it won't."

Giada laughed, too.

Together they made a very happy couple. It was unfortunate that their happiness had to come at the expense of someone else's unhappiness.

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Chapter Fourteen

"It looks like it's just going to be us guys for the rest of the tour," Bartley told Kentucky when he arrived back at the yacht late Sunday night around midnight.

"Giada's gone?" Kentucky asked, acting as if he didn't know that already. She'd called him as soon as she made it to the island airport. She called him again after she landed in Miami.

"Yes, she and Fabian had a fight," Bartley replied, looking downright gleeful. "It seems that she was missing for over five hours this afternoon. Didn't answer her cell phone or anything when he tried to reach her. When she finally returned, she told him that she'd stayed on the island for so long because she was tired of being at sea, was missing her dog, and was trying to build up the courage to tell him she wanted to go home without hurting his feelings. Since Fabian couldn't cancel the rest of his tour on a whim, he sent her home alone."

"I see," Kentucky replied, keeping his face neutral.

"Yes, Fabian put her in a cab and sent her to the airport alone since it was your day off and he didn't want to disturb you." Bartley grinned. "He knew you had an itch to scratch today," he said, referring to the brief conversation the men had had before Kentucky left this morning for the hotel. "Judging by those hickies on your neck, it looks like you scratched that itch well."

"Yeah," Kentucky replied, not liking the gleam in Bartley's eye at all. The man was a little bit *too* happy about Giada being gone. And although Kentucky was happy about the same thing, yet for different reasons, Bartley's glee irritated him for some reason.

Promptly excusing himself from Bartley's annoying presence, Kentucky made his way to his cabin. He'd barely gotten the door closed before his cell phone rang.

It was Alexandra. Though she'd been told that he would call her, desire for Kentucky had caused her to grow impatient. Now she wanted to know when or even if he'd be able to come see her before he left the island.

"No, Alexandra," Kentucky replied, determined to let her down as easily as possible with him being as honest as possible. "Actually, me and another one of my old flames decided to get back together and try to make a real go of our relationship this time."

Alexandra groaned with disappointment. "So duty really didn't call yesterday, huh?"

"Not really. I apologize for the fib. The truth of the matter is that she showed up unexpectedly yesterday, old feelings got stirred back up, and . . . well, we decided to start over fresh."

"Lucky girl. I wish you all the best, Kentucky. But if it doesn't work out, call on Alexandra. I can help you get over *any* heartbreak," she replied good-naturedly.

Kentucky smiled at the classy way Alexandra had just handled herself in the face of rejection. After telling her what

a wonderful person she was, he hung up and called Giada with the results of his conversation with his stepmother.

"Mama says she'd be happy to have you and Mercedes stay with her for as long as you need to. She's also happy to know that we finally came to our senses and got together." Kentucky chuckled, recalling the animated conversation he'd had with his stepmother on the ride back to the marina.

Giada gasped in surprise at his last statement. "How did she know we even liked each other?"

"Mama claims she knew you were special to me the first night you stayed over. How any other woman I would have just taken to my place or put up in a hotel that night. The fact that I brought you to our family home, where we could be properly chaperoned, meant that I felt something deeper for you."

"So I take it she approves? Even though you told her I was a gold digger?"

"An ex—gold digger. And yes, Mama approves. After you looked out for our family home, she quickly overlooked every fault you had. Didn't all those free meals tell you anything?"

"I thought she was the type of person to feed anybody."

Kentucky chuckled. "No, you got it wrong, baby. Mama will *bake* for anybody, but she only cooks full meals for those she has a special fondness for."

"That's good to know. I'm going to make sure I give her two kisses when I see her again. One for keeping Mercedes. The other for looking past my faults." Giada smiled.

"Speaking of kisses, I miss you already," she added, changing the subject.

"I miss you, too, baby." Kentucky groaned with need into the phone. "By the way, I think you were right. These *are* going to be the longest two weeks of both of our lives."

* * * *

In order to keep from missing Giada too much, Kentucky took on extra tasks about the yacht. He helped the day crew, who came to clean the boat, fix meals, and transport them from one place to the other, with their duties. He even took on more chauffeuring assignments.

Kentucky regretted that last thing the most because it put him around Fabian even more. It had been a tormenting two weeks to hear the man call Giada in his presence, complain about how much he missed her, and talk about how he planned to take their relationship to the next level when he returned stateside.

Meanwhile, Giada had moved most of her stuff into storage a week ago, was staying with Kentucky's stepmother now, and was only accepting Fabian's calls in order to help him stay focused on his tour. And even then, she only spoke to him for a short time.

When Fabian wanted to know why she suddenly didn't have as much time for him, Giada cited her hectic new schedule at the law firm she'd recently been hired by. This same law firm practically hired her on the spot, by the way, right after conducting the briefest of interviews.

Giada also told Fabian that she was spending a lot of time in the library in preparation for law school in the fall. She did not tell him that she stopped studying at 9 p.m. sharp every

night so that she could spend the next three hours talking to his bodyguard.

Kentucky felt kind of guilty going behind Fabian's back like this. He was normally such a straight shooter, dealing with problems head-on.

But what about the kids?

Kentucky just couldn't risk messing things up for all the kids who were counting on him. He also couldn't risk losing Giada again. He loved her. And she obviously loved him, too. Why else would she be going to such lengths just for him?

Him!

Though any mirror could point out who was the more attractive man, Giada's preference for Kentucky made him feel like the most gorgeous man on the face of the earth. The things she whispered in his ear at night before they went to sleep made him feel loved and so very, very wanted. The way she sighed with contentment when he whispered endearments back to her confirmed those feelings.

Finally the two weeks were up. It was time to go home. In fact, the three men were on the private jet Bartley rented to take them back stateside right now.

Fabian and his blond manager sat side by side on the plane. Kentucky sat across from them working on the personal laptop computer Bartley lent him to check on a few stocks and company profiles he had his eye on.

Once again, Fabian started talking about Giada. He talked about how he couldn't wait to go home to her, about how he planned to surprise her with a marriage proposal as soon as he saw her face-to-face.

"M-Marriage?" Bartley choked out. "This is my first time ever hearing you speak of Giada in more serious terms."

"Yes," Fabian replied. "I'm in love with Giada. I realized it after missing her so much these last two weeks."

Kentucky lifted his gaze from the laptop. He fought hard not to frown. *He* hadn't intended on proposing to Giada for at least another three months, giving her more time to prove herself and also him time to save for the perfect engagement ring and honeymoon trip. Fabian was talking about proposing today!

"Do you think she's gonna accept?" Kentucky asked, keeping his face neutral.

"Of course she's going to accept," Bartley blurted out. "Gold diggers always accept marriage proposals from rich guys!"

Kentucky and Fabian frowned.

"Watch your mouth about my lady, or you're going to find yourself with one less client," Fabian warned with flashing eyes.

Less a few teeth is more like it, Kentucky added silently, unaware that his fingers had balled into a fist on the keyboard.

Though Bartley did not know that Kentucky and Giada were secret lovers, had he forgotten that they were supposed to be old friends? But then again, Kentucky had kept so much distance from her during this assignment that Bartley might have thought he didn't really like her, either. He might have thought that he only tolerated her for his stepmother and client's sake.

"I'm sorry, Fabian," Bartley quickly apologized. "It's just that you fall in love so easily. How do you know she won't be like the last one? Remember how much Charlotte took you for?"

The woman he referred to was another gold digger who tried to trap Fabian with a baby. That baby turned out to be some other man's, despite the fact that Fabian paid for nine months of medical care, living expenses, and shopping sprees for mother and child.

The other two women Fabian had been obsessed with had had to take restraining orders out on him for stalking. They'd had to pay dearly to make those cases go quietly into the night. Bartley even had to promise the judge to keep a closer eye on his client to make sure Fabian didn't get obsessive again.

"Giada may have started out like Charlotte, but over the last two weeks, she has shown me that she is very different. Not only has she found a job at a prestigious law firm, but she has impressed all the right people there to the point that they are willing to pull a bunch of strings to help fast track her right into law school. All she has to do now is pass all of her exams and complete the necessary admissions procedures for the school of her choice. Again, we're talking all of this in just two weeks' time. I call her my little go-getter now." Fabian chuckled alone. No one else found anything funny.

"Did you say she's going to *law* school?" Bartley genuinely looked surprised.

"Yes, law school. I always knew that my lady was one smart cookie." Fabian grinned, looking very proud of "his" woman.

"If you knew this about Giada, why didn't you insist that she put her intelligence to good use before now?" Kentucky found himself asking.

Fabian gave him an arrogant look. "Because having a woman with a career didn't suit me before now. A man like me needs a woman that can be available to him 24/7. Yet, after remembering how Giada helped me with some contract issues recently, I figured it wouldn't be too bad to have a lawyer in the family after all."

The kids. The kids, Kentucky rehearsed, forcing himself to calm down before he wrung Fabian's skinny neck on this plane.

There was no trace of guilt now. Kentucky could feel no remorse for a man who would deliberately stifle a woman's personal and professional growth for his own selfish benefit.

"Anyway, Giada texted me just today to tell me that she has found another place to live because she wants to start standing on her own two feet again," Fabian continued, unaware of how close he'd just been to danger. "I'm hoping I can get home in time to persuade her to change her mind about that last thing. There's no need for her to leave now that I'm going to make her my wife."

Kentucky looked down at the computer again. Inwardly he realized that Fabian was going to be a little bit harder to get rid of than originally thought. As his eyes zoomed in to the

computer screen, he also realized why Bartley hated Giada so much, why he wanted her gone.

The man was gay!

In his distraction, Kentucky had accidentally clicked on the Favorites icon. Now he saw a string of adult Web sites that Bartley had saved from the Internet, all referring to man-on-man action. There was even one that counseled gay men with secret crushes on their male bosses.

On second thought, maybe he's bisexual. Kentucky recalled how Bartley would often pursue ladies of the night in every port they docked at. *Either way, he is definitely in love with his boss.* Even now he noticed how impassioned Bartley looked at Fabian whenever the singer wasn't watching.

Filing this new information away, Kentucky quickly clicked off the Internet altogether and closed the laptop. He needed to focus on Fabian's conversation right now. He needed to know what else his competition had planned for Giada.

Whatever those plans were, Kentucky could only hope that she loved him enough to reject them and the man behind them.

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Chapter Fifteen

Kentucky went straight home after he left the airport. Giada was supposed to meet him there. His stepmother had dropped her off after work and given her an extra key to the place. This way, Giada could cook Kentucky that special welcome-home meal she promised. Hannah had supplied the dessert.

On the ride home, Kentucky called to find out if Giada had done that other special thing she promised—officially break up with Fabian.

"I just got off the phone with him, baby," Giada replied after his inquiry. "It didn't go too well at first. Before I could get past hello, the man was telling me that he loved me."

"I know. He confessed it on the plane. I would have given you the heads-up, but somebody was always around."

"I wish you had, because I was in total shock when I heard that. Even so, I told Fabian that I wasn't in love with him, that, in fact, I was still in love with an old flame. And that I realized I wouldn't be any good to a new man until I tried to make things work with my old man first. I also told him that I had already moved out of the condo and wouldn't be coming back."

"What did he say to that?"

"After a long moment of silence, Fabian said he understood. Then he extended the same invitation to me that Alexandra did to you, except with a little twist. Fabian said that if things didn't work out with my old flame, I could look

him up again. He also told me that if I ever needed any help with school expenses or was running low on money, that I could call him up for that, too."

"In other words, he's trying to get you to follow his wallet instead of your heart," Kentucky said, clenching the steering wheel tightly. It was a good thing he was already on his street now, because he was fast becoming too angry to drive.

"Fabian could offer me the moon, Kenny, and I still wouldn't go back to him. I want you, baby.

Only you. I love you, Kenny," Giada said fervently.

Kentucky relaxed his hold on the steering wheel. "I love you, too, baby," he whispered into the phone.

Giada inhaled sharply and then moaned. "Do you know how long I've waited to hear you say that to me?"

"About as long as I've been waiting to tell you. I've been in love with you since our first time, too. Now seemed like the perfect time to let you know that."

"I wish you were here now. I would rip your clothes off and ride you until the sun came up again," Giada said.

"I am here." Kentucky blew the car horn as he pulled into the driveway. "So put dinner on hold and get ready to ride 'em, cowgirl." He smiled when he heard her squeal with delight.

When Kentucky entered the kitchen a few short minutes later, Giada was putting the salad she prepared into the fridge. The moment she saw him, she ran and jumped upon him. As she locked her arms and legs about his neck and waist, he received a kiss that oozed with love and instantly ignited passion . . . so much passion.

Kitchen.

Bedroom.

Shower.

They all saw a bit of action today. Talk about a welcome home!

* * * *

After Fabian hung up the phone with Giada, he brooded for a long while. Though he put on a brave front that he was willing to let her go so easily, he was not. Absolutely not! In fact, Fabian was going to do everything in his power to woo Giada back to him.

After pulling his cell phone from his belt clip, Fabian used it to dial Bartley's number. He needed him to do a special favor for him.

"Giada broke up with me," Fabian blurted out anxiously as soon as his manager came on the line.

"She did?" Bartley asked, sounding surprised and a little bit too happy about that.

"Yes, she did." Fabian frowned, wondering if Bartley was the best man for this special job after all.

Yet when he thought about how much dirt his manager already knew about him and hadn't leaked to the press, he reconsidered. Plus, as a loner by nature, there weren't many people Fabian could trust outside of Bartley.

"Why did Giada break up with you?" Bartley asked, wanting to know all the juicy details.

"She said something about going back to an old flame," Fabian replied through a tight mouth. His fair cheeks were aflame with jealous ire.

"Which would explain why she was so distracted at times on the boat," Bartley said, revealing just how much attention he'd paid to Giada.

"Right. Now what I need you to do is hire someone to find out who this old flame is, what his weaknesses are, and if he has any real intentions of making this thing with Giada work," Fabian concluded. "Can you handle that for me? There's a nice bonus in it for you."

"I can handle it," Bartley replied more than a bit reluctantly.

* * * *

When the lovers finally emerged from upstairs and had eaten the meal Giada had cooked, they went outside on the patio. They were in no mood to swim since they were fresh from a shower, but they did want to be outside among nature.

Sharing a large cushioned lounge chair, Kentucky and Giada peacefully watched the stars together.

They didn't say much. They only uttered a few words every now and then. Mostly they just enjoyed the serenity of being in each other's presence again. Frequent sighs of contentment resonated from the both of them.

"I don't think I've ever been this happy in my life," Giada said after sighing contentedly yet again.

"Me, either." Kentucky kissed the top of her damp head. Her hair was still wet from their shower and drying naturally on that warm July night.

"If I had known things were going to be this good between us, I would have gone after you the moment I met you," Giada said, recalling the day the Joneses came over to introduce themselves to her and welcome her into the neighborhood. Hannah had come bearing another cake that day.

Kentucky had seemed reluctant to be there and had been noticeably quiet.

"I would have rejected you." He chuckled. "You had gold digger written all over you back then."

Giada half turned her head to look up into his face. "You wouldn't have rejected me for long. I would have seduced you into my bed."

"Like you eventually did anyway?" Kentucky said, referring to their first night together.

Giada chuckled. "Hey, when it's something I want, I go after it with everything I got." She returned to her previous snuggling position, except she put one leg across his waist area this time. She instantly realized that something was different about him.

Kentucky's shorts were now prominently tented and begging for attention. "I like your aggression," he said a bit on the husky side. Their brief trip down memory lane had stirred his libido to life again.

Kentucky looked ready for more loving . . . now!

"I can see that." Giada reached down and squeezed him through his cargo shorts.

Kentucky moaned. "I like that, too, baby."

"Let's go inside, and I'll show you how aggressive I can really be."

"Show me right here."

"Right here?" Giada looked around the large manicured backyard, trying to determine if his wooden fence was high enough for privacy's sake. It was, but barely. Unless one of his neighbors was looking through a telescope from an attic, they should have more than enough privacy.

"Yes, right here. Right now." Kentucky unfastened his shorts. "If we're gonna be together, there's one thing you need to know about me. I will have sex *anywhere*."

"Anywhere except your mother's house."

Kentucky chuckled. "You got me on that one. I also won't have sex on church property, but other than those two places, every place else is up for grabs."

Giada squealed with excitement. "Now that I know all that, I think I'm going to have to start wearing more skirts and dresses around you." She rose slightly to readjust her sundress and her position on the sturdy wood-framed chair.

"That would be a wise choice," Kentucky replied.

For convenience's sake, neither of them had bothered with underwear after their shower. Since Giada had gotten a fresh checkup in his absence, there was also no further need for added protection. Things were about to get very steamy outside.

* * * *

Kentucky led the way in moaning with pleasure as Giada slid down the granite length of him. Then, with her sundress hiding their actual intimacy from public view in case someone did decide to be a Peeping Tom, he captured her lips in a kiss and began to lead her on a slow climb towards ecstasy.

Kentucky felt that telltale clenching. He swallowed Giada's initial scream in his mouth. Breaking the kiss soon thereafter, he lifted his head and just watched her finish going over the edge.

Giada was at her most beautiful at times like these. Kentucky loved seeing her mocha cheeks flushed with the rosy heat of passion, her eyes closed in ecstasy, and her hair tousled from his probing fingers. It made him quickly go over the edge, too.

And suddenly Giada's eyes were no longer closed. Suddenly they were wide open and staring at him with potent love shimmering in them. "Oh, Kenny, I love you," she whispered as he squeezed her closer and poured his hot soup into her bowl.

"I love you, too, baby," Kentucky whispered, committing this moment to memory. It was not one that he ever wanted to forget.

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Chapter Sixteen

The rest of that weekend was even more glorious for Kentucky and Giada. They made love every chance they got, learning even more things about each other's bodies. They also took the time to learn more about each other *outside* the bedroom.

Kentucky learned that Giada actually loved kids. It pleased him that she planned on having a large family someday since that was what he wanted also. Though he had no idea until this weekend that she even wanted children, he wasn't really surprised about her maternal instincts. All one had to do was look at how she treated Mercedes to tell that.

Giada also revealed what her old bra size used to be before the implants. That conversation came up while they were on their way to his stepmother's house for Sunday dinner.

"C-cups are nothing to sneeze at, Giada," Kentucky said, briefly taking his eyes off the road to glance at her bosom. "The fact that you were already that big in high school meant that you probably would have advanced to a D-cup naturally had you waited a few years."

Giada nodded. "I know that *now*," she said, squeezing her large bosom. "And I vaguely remember the doctor trying to tell me that before the surgery, but I was too impatient. I wanted a certain look right then. I also wanted all the perks that came along with having large breasts."

"Perks such as getting the attention of more rich men?" Kentucky said, forcing his eyes back on the road.

"That and getting certain jobs, too. In fact, I think these girls helped me land my latest job." She squeezed her bosom again.

"Keep doing that and I'm gonna have to pull over," Kentucky warned, having seen her movement out of the corner of his eyes. Though he was a bottom and leg man, he liked a nice pair of breasts, too. And Giada had a very nice pair.

Giada laughed and dropped her hands to her sides. "Yet for all the perks of having large breasts, there are some drawbacks, too. One of which is the fact that men tend to equate big boobs with no brains."

"I've been guilty of doing that from time to time myself," Kentucky admitted. "But after that first conversation we had in this very same car, I quickly realized that you were more than you appeared to be on the outside. *Much* more."

Giada smiled at him. "You got that right." She stretched in her seat. When she arched her back, she winced in pain.

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

"Nothing other than the second downside to having big boobs." She arched her back and winced again. "Since I was only eighteen when I had my surgery and thus still filling out, my breasts have gotten fuller each year. Now on occasion my back hurts something fierce. That's the main reason I like to have weekly massages."

"I'll be glad to save you some money by taking over that duty," Kentucky offered, giving her a heated look.

Giada moaned and squirmed in her seat. "When? Tonight?" she asked with hopeful eyes.

Kentucky smiled at her eagerness to sleep over at his place again. "Tomorrow," he replied as he returned his eyes to the road. "I have a lot of work to catch up on with the school. I'm probably gonna be up all night trying to meet a few deadlines I have by noon Monday. Plus, I know you're missing Mercedes terribly by now."

Giada pouted in disappointment, acting even younger than her now twenty-four years since her last birthday at the beginning of the year.

Kentucky chuckled at her childish behavior. "Cheer up, baby. It's not like I'm gonna leave right after dinner. Matter of fact, I probably won't leave your side until at least 11 o'clock," he said, bringing an instant smile to her face.

With that cleared up, Kentucky proceeded to tell her a few little-known things about himself. Some of those things she hadn't picked up from hanging around his stepmother or from outright observing him. One of those things was the fact that he actually did a bit of exotic dancing in college.

"What!" Giada's eyes were huge. Her bottom lip hung low, nearly to her chin.

"You heard right," Kentucky replied, trying to help her process her shock.

"Although a lot of things are starting to make sense right now, particularly the fact that you can move your body in the bedroom better than any man I've ever known, I still can't believe you were actually a stripper." She turned around in

the passenger seat to face him . . . or rather stare at him from head to toe.

"I prefer the term exotic dancer." Kentucky chuckled. "But yeah, I was a stripper for a short while."

"Why?"

"During my junior year of college, things got pretty rough again for Mama and me. I had declared a double major and so my educational expenses were higher due to all the extra textbooks I needed, the family car suddenly went out, and one of Florida's infamous hurricanes tore the roof off the house. There just wasn't enough money with her job and my part-time job to address everything, so I started dancing at bachelorette and sorority parties."

"Stripping just popped into your mind as a viable option just like that?" Giada snapped her fingers, still not quite over her shock yet.

Kentucky laughed harder. "Actually, no. That idea was courtesy of my Latina girlfriend at the time, who was a stripper by night herself. She knew of my financial woes and suggested that I put my other assets to work in order to get the money I needed. The fact that I work-studied as a lifeguard for the campus pool and had competed locally in various weightlifting contests made it easy for me to get up before women and show off my body. I did need a bit of coaching for the dancing part, though."

"I assume Miss Thing helped you get your groove on," Giada said, folding her arms across her chest as jealousy shrouded her features. "Much like Pinky did when you danced with her."

"Correct." Kentucky smiled at her jealousy. Now at a red light, he leaned over and licked the outer perimeter of her left earlobe. "Stop being jealous, baby. You're my Miss Thing now," he teased.

Giada grinned. "I better be your *only* Miss Thing." She unfolded her arms and relaxed again.

"Most definitely." Kentucky chuckled and returned his attention to the road now that the light was green again. "Anyway, Mama put an end to all that when she got suspicious of my sudden surge in income and decided to investigate. Though she was relieved that I wasn't slinging drugs like my cousin Millsap or pimping women like my uncle Ulysses, she expressed her extreme disappointment about me using my body in that way. Even preached to me about how a good name was better than great riches. How it was okay to have money just as long as I kept my integrity, too."

"Wow. Now that is deep," Giada said, looking as if she was really taking those words to heart. "No one ever said anything like that to me before. Not my mother, not even my grandmother. As long as I helped with the bills, they didn't care where I got the money from."

"That's sad." Kentucky frowned. Sympathy for her filled his heart.

"Yes, it is, but don't let that stop you from continuing with your story," Giada prompted, giving him a courageous smile, despite her glossy eyes.

Kentucky smiled, pleased to find her so brave. "Well, since I absolutely hate disappointing Mama, I retired from stripping, joined the reserves, and made use of the G.I. Bill

for my educational expenses. I also took on work as a bouncer at a few clubs around town. By the time I completed my MBA, people were requesting me for personal bodyguard services, too. I stuck with it because it was exciting, allowed me to meet important people, travel all over the world, and it paid better than the finance jobs I'd been offered," he said, deliberately leaving out another perk of his job—access to beautiful women. There was no need to bring that up.

"Which meant you could realize your dream of opening a boarding school a lot faster," Giada said.

"Exactly." Kentucky smiled over at her. "By the way, I plan on taking you to see the school next weekend if you're free."

Giada's eyes twinkled with adoration. "I'm always free for you, baby."

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Chapter Seventeen

After eating a hearty dinner, Kentucky and Giada adjourned to the family den to watch a bit of television. His stepmother was in the kitchen preparing to-go plates for them and a few extra plates for select neighbors who were experiencing illness at this time.

Kentucky sat in the oversized black recliner that had belonged to his father. Giada scooped Mercedes up from the floor and proceeded over to the black-and-blue sofa to brush and pat her pet.

"Come sit with me, baby," Kentucky said, patting his thighs.

Giada looked nervously at the doorway that led to the kitchen. "I thought we couldn't be affectionate in your mother's house," she whispered as she turned to face him again.

Kentucky chuckled. "I said I don't have sex under Mama's roof. I didn't say I wasn't affectionate."

He patted his thighs again. "Now come here, woman. I'm lonely for you."

Giada bent to put Mercedes back on the floor before going over to him.

"Uh-uh. Bring Mercedes, too," Kentucky added.

Giada's eyes widened and glistened with emotion. "You mean, I can bring her *with* me?"

"Sure. There's enough room in this chair for all of us." Noticing her glossy eyes, Kentucky asked with concern, "Why do you suddenly look like you're about to cry?"

"Because every other man I've had didn't want anything to do with my dog." Giada scooped Mercedes up again. "Fabian didn't even like for her to be in the same room with us," she continued, walking the short distance to the recliner.

"Why? Because Chihuahuas are territorial to their owners, even to the point of jealousy?" Kentucky spread his large legs wider, giving her adequate space to sit in his lap.

"Truthfully, I think it was the other way around in Fabian's case. I think he was more jealous of Mercedes than she was of him. He would scold her for following me foot to foot and hated whenever she showed me any affection." Giada sat down in Kentucky's lap and then settled Mercedes upon hers.

Kentucky nodded in understanding. "The way I see it, just like there's enough room in this chair for all of us, there's enough room in my heart for you and Mercedes. Besides, she has never given me any problems."

Giada turned and smiled at Kentucky. "That's because she probably fell in love with you like her mother did." She leaned over and gave him a kiss of gratitude. "That's for being so understanding."

Kentucky grinned. "Mercedes, what do you think Daddy will get for doing a thousand push-ups a day? Especially since Mommy is in the mood to give out rewards for things he's gonna do anyway," he said, tenderly stroking the white patch of hair at the top of the dog's head.

Giada chuckled. "Tell Daddy I'll show him tomorrow," she replied, playing along with the fun Mommy/Daddy/Baby game.

Kentucky's loins stirred. "You might have to show Daddy tonight," he whispered in her right ear before licking her earlobe and grinding his hips briefly beneath her.

* * * *

Giada gasped as desire surged through her body from Kentucky's heated words and actions. Was he serious about them making love tonight? Had he suddenly changed his mind about her sleeping over? Or was he going to break his own rule and make love to her under his stepmother's roof?

Giada couldn't wait to find out.

As if she'd been conjured up, Hannah walked into the den a few minutes later. She was carrying two bags of food containers, one in each hand. "Oh, that's so sweet," she cooed, smiling with approval at the couple and pet in the chair.

Giada and Kentucky turned to smile at her in return. The sleepy canine in Giada's lap just lifted her head and stretched lazily before settling again.

"Do you need any help with those, Mama?" Kentucky asked, noting the bags of containers in her hands.

"No, I'm fine. Just stay where you are. I know you only have a few more hours together before you have to leave." Hannah looked at the oval-shaped wooden clock on the den wall. "I should be back within the hour." She chuckled and

added, "That's if Mrs. Connors doesn't have another long story she just *has* to tell me."

Giada and Kentucky laughed and waved good-bye to Hannah on her way out. When the front door closed a few seconds later, Kentucky said, "Go lay Mercedes down in her bed and then meet me at the back shed."

A question was in Giada's heart, but she didn't voice it. She trusted Kentucky completely and so found it easy to be pliant to his will. Plus, with the impassioned look in his eyes, she knew that whatever awaited her in the back shed was going to be pleasurable for them both.

* * * *

When Giada arrived at the shed, she saw the door open, the overhead light on, and Kentucky moving a few things around inside. From left to right, she noticed how neat everything was.

Garden tools hung on the west wall from smallest to largest. Two lawn mowers rested beneath them with a red gas can beside them. Handheld power tools were on a long worktable on the east wall of the shed. A wheelbarrow filled with bags of potting soil, fertilizer, and lime sat in a corner.

On the center wall of the shed was a long, sturdy bench. That's where Kentucky was. He was moving the various flowerpots from the bench and aligning them on the floor up against the wall.

"Need I ask what that bench is going to be used for?" Giada said, entering the large shed more fully. A huge grin was upon her face.

Kentucky turned to smile at her. "Well, since I don't have sex under Mama's roof, I found a place that I *could* have sex—the shed I built with my own two hands."

"Ahh, the infamous loophole." Giada chuckled. "I found plenty of them for the old law firm I worked for. Found a few for the new firm I'm working for now in the short time I've been there."

"And they think they just hired another pretty face. Woman, you are brilliant and deserve to go all the way to the top," Kentucky said, smiling at her with pride.

Knowing that he was proud of her made Giada feel warm and tingly all over. It also inflamed her in a very sensual way. "I want you, Kenny," she practically moaned out.

* * * *

At Giada's moan, Kentucky suddenly grew very serious as the flames of her passion leaped upon him. "Close the door behind you and come get me, baby." While she complied with his request, he opened the fixed high-level side windows for ventilation purposes. Then he washed his hands in the sink and dried them with paper towels.

"Take your shirt off, Kenny. You know how much I like to touch your chest while we make love," Giada said, lingering near the door to remove her lacy underwear. Neither of them could get completely nude in case his stepmother returned earlier and came looking for them.

Kentucky nodded, showing his willingness to comply with her wishes as well. Soon he was shirtless and on the bench with his pants open and pushed partly down his hips.

Giada promptly straddled him, pushing her skirt up in the process. They were going to have to make every second count while his stepmother was away.

Kentucky promptly slid his tongue between Giada's lips at the same time she started sliding down the length of him. They both moaned with pleasure.

When they were joined to the hilt, they began a slow climb to ecstasy. They kissed long and deep.

Their hips moved in perfect unison. Their hands roamed each other's bodies, lingering at their favorite points of interest. Giada couldn't stop touching his chest. Kentucky couldn't stop squeezing her bottom. He needed her as close as possible.

As the heat rose in the room on that humid night, the heat between the lovers did, too. The air filtering into the shed from the open windows wasn't enough to cool their bodies, and so sweat poured from their pores.

They didn't care how hot it got in there. Or about the fact that they had to take longer breaks in between kisses in order to conserve oxygen. All they cared about was their driving need to give and receive the ultimate pleasure from each other's bodies.

At this point their slick bodies were rhythmically slamming into each other. Giada had already climaxed twice, and was about to go over the edge a third time, when Kentucky whispered in her ear that he was about to blow, too.

"Let's go together this time, baby," Giada urged, thrusting her hips even more forcefully against him.

Kentucky growled and squeezed her closer. Yet before he would release his essence into her, he captured her lips to muffle the loud scream that he knew would accompany this powerful moment. Giada clenched too tightly around him this time not to scream in pleasure.

When that scream finally came, Kentucky promptly swallowed it in his mouth. Giada, in turn, swallowed his loud groan. When their hips finally stopped moving, the kiss finally ended. Even so, the lovers continued to cling to each other.

For a woman who liked to have every hair in place and her clothes immaculate, Giada didn't seem to care a thing about her appearance now. Kentucky liked that she hadn't smoothed her damp hair into place yet, but rather let it remain frizzed from the humidity and her intimate exertion. He liked that she didn't care that her shirt was damp and clinging to her bosom, that her skirt was wrinkled and rumpled to the point where it would literally scare an iron right now.

My woman is changing, Kentucky thought as hope for a bright future with her mounted in his heart.

"I love you so much," Giada said once her breathing had regulated again.

"I love you, too," Kentucky replied, withdrawing slightly to look into her eyes. "I want you to be my wife."

"When?" Giada asked with eager eyes.

"A year from now," Kentucky replied, pleased that she looked ready to jump over the broom right now. "I want to make sure the school is up and running good before I take on a wife and the added expenses that come along with having a

wife." He chuckled. "Especially the kind of wife I intend to have."

Giada smiled and nodded in understanding. "So our long engagement officially begins now?"

"Yes, but I thought you might want to wait until I put a ring on your finger to make it really official," Kentucky replied, hiding the trace of disappointment he felt when she didn't protest the delay even though he was the one that suggested it. He'd wanted her to say, *"Let's just get married now."* The fact that she didn't revealed how materialistic she still was.

No doubt she wants me to be wealthy enough to support her and her expensive tastes before we get married, Kentucky thought, recalling Giada's dream wedding from her wish list.

"Even so, we don't have to wait another night to tell Mama. This is the kind of news she's gonna want to know right away. She's gonna be thrilled to know that she's about to have a daughter-in-law soon," Kentucky continued, pushing past his disappointment.

"I feel like I'm a part of the family already," Giada said, snuggling against his chest again.

"As you should, because you definitely are," Kentucky whispered, planting a kiss on her glistening forehead as his thoughts grew somber.

* * * *

Hannah wasn't surprised to hear the news of their engagement. But she was surprised to see Giada looking so

unkempt in her wrinkled skirt and frizzy hair. The dampness of Kentucky's brown locks confirmed that this engagement had come about as a result of a heavy make-out session or a culmination of the real deal.

Probably both. Hannah walked her stepson out to his car while Giada went to shower and change for bed.

"Son, maybe you should marry Giada sooner than expected," Hannah suggested.

"Why do you say that, Mama?"

"For one thing, she's the first woman you ever dared to have sex with under my roof. I'm still feeling a little hot under the collar about that." She frowned with disapproval.

"We didn't have sex under your roof, Mama. We had sex in my shed out back," Kentucky replied, being as honest as he usually was with his stepmother.

Hannah shook her head. "Okay, that was really *too* much information."

Kentucky chuckled. "Maybe so, but it was necessary to let you know that I didn't disrespect your home."

Hannah smiled, despite herself. She never could stay angry with her stepson for very long. He looked too much like his wonderful father to ever let ire linger in her heart.

"Either way, that's just another sign that you need to marry that girl sooner rather than later. Especially since y'all can't seem to keep your hands off each other. Plus, I really think Giada loves you enough to marry you without all the disposal income."

"Giada might love me enough to marry me right now, but I need this next year of waiting to confirm that she will *stay* by

my side for the long haul. I figure if she can hang in there with me when all I can offer her is my love, dinner at home, a simple movie, and the occasional trip out of town, then she deserves to stay by my side when I can offer her dinners at fancy restaurants, tickets to movie premieres, and trips around the world."

Hannah nodded in understanding. "I think Giada is really going to pass this test."

"I hope so." Kentucky sighed, looking back at the house. "Our future together depends on it."

* * * *

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Chapter Eighteen

Kentucky got down on one knee and officially proposed to Giada on Wednesday evening. He had a ring and everything. He'd dipped into his retirement fund to buy that ring because he wanted Giada to have something they both could be proud to show off.

Kentucky's stepmother was there as he slipped the large ring on Giada's trembling finger. Mercedes was also. Hannah smiled with approval as the couple sealed that moment with a kiss. The small dog leaped upon Giada's lap and tried to get in on that smooch by licking the sides of their faces.

"Mercedes, no!" Giada said, abruptly breaking the kiss to address her pup.

Kentucky chuckled. "It's all right, Giada. The baby just wants in on the love." He patted Mercedes on the head. "Is that better, baby? Do you feel loved now, Mercedes?"

In answer, Mercedes licked his face again. The humans laughed.

Giada laughed and cried. She was so happy about being engaged to Kentucky. She was elated that he seemed to love her dog just as much as she did. Giada floated on a cloud for the rest of the night.

* * * *

The next evening, Kentucky took Giada to meet a couple of his friends. They were Sal and Beverlyn Delfino, owners of the club that gave Kentucky his first job as a bouncer.

Giada had been instructed to bring along a swimsuit since they were going to enjoy the Delfinos' company, pool, and a little barbecue. The first thing she noticed about the Delfinos was how rich they were. Their house was a mansion, crystal chandeliers hung from the ceilings of every room, and they had a fleet of expensive cars in their multi-car garage.

The second thing Giada noticed was how happy they were. The Delfinos still seemed to be in love with each other after over twenty years of marriage. Yet it was the third thing that Giada noticed that made the greatest lasting impression upon her—Beverlyn's protective nature when it came to Kentucky.

Beverlyn was like the big sister he never had, though much, much shorter at only five-six. As the big-sister type, she wasted no time cornering Giada in the guest bedroom that she used to change into her swimwear.

About what?

Kentucky, of course.

"Do you love him?" Beverlyn boldly asked after closing the door behind herself.

"Yes, I do. Very much so," Giada replied, not even blinking an eye. Fortunately, she was already in her swimwear and thus didn't have to deal with trying to change in front of her bold hostess.

"I hope so, because Kenny definitely seems to love you. Not only does that big rock on your hand say a lot, but the fact that you're even at my house speaks volumes." Beverlyn came forward and sat down on the edge of the exquisite gold-trimmed sleigh bed.

"Kenny hasn't brought women here before?"

"No. He never needed to. As a seasoned matchmaker, I usually have women waiting here to meet him. So imagine my shock when he up and called us with the news that he had not only fallen in love with someone, but was also poised to marry this mystery woman," Beverlyn replied. "My question now is, how did you do it? How did *you* hook Kenny when none of my friends or associates could? Mind you, they were all just as beautiful as you. Some even more so, in my opinion."

Giada shrugged. "I really don't know. Though I was physically attracted to Kenny from the start, I didn't pursue him since I was heavily into pretty boys with fat wallets at the time. In short, I was a superficial gold digger and proud of it," she said, being extremely honest as usual with people who she wanted to see the real Giada.

Beverlyn's brows rose. "So you changed your mind about the pretty and decided to settle for the fat wallet instead?"

"Actually, I didn't know Kenny had any money when I met him. I thought he was just a struggling bouncer who lived with his mother since he was always over there. By the time I found out he was rich, we had already slept together, and I was already in love." Giada moved to put her regular clothes in the tote bag she'd brought along.

Beverlyn looked doubtful. "How do I know that you're not going to dump Kenny when a pretty boy with a fatter wallet comes along?"

"First of all, I *dumped* a pretty boy with a fat wallet to get back with Kenny. Secondly, I'm willing to prove that I'm in

this for the long haul to him and everyone else with reasonable doubts about me."

Giada paused from her task and looked Beverlyn straight in the eye. "Thirdly, I love Kenny with all my heart. I love how he loves me, despite my past."

"So he *does* know about you being a gold digger?"

"Yes. He seemed to pick that up right away. He was the first man that ever made me want to abandon that lifestyle. That made me want something deeper with a man." Giada smiled. "Kenny was also the first man to ever make me scream in ecstasy. I don't know about you, but a woman just don't let go of a man like that all willy-nilly. And if she foolishly does, she better wise up like I did and do whatever it takes to get her man back."

Beverlyn burst out laughing, instantly causing the tension in the room to flee. "I can see one reason Kenny loves you. Your honesty is adorable. It makes you even more beautiful." She stood up and hugged Giada. "I wish the two of you all the best."

"Thanks, Beverlyn," Giada said, feeling as if she'd found a big sister of her own.

"Call me Bev. All my other *friends* do."

That comment produced another warm hug, one initiated by Giada this time.

* * * *

When Giada made it out to the lighted pool, Kentucky was already making laps across it. Sal was at the grill playing chef. Classical music streamed from invisible speakers.

Kentucky stopped swimming midlap when he saw a laughing Giada and Beverlyn emerge from the house together. Their laughter didn't give him room for pause. Giada's swimsuit did that all on its own.

Though the swimsuit was a one-piece, there were so many openings that it looked like a bikini. That suit had a halter top, a deep plunge that reached all the way to Giada's belly button, and large slits on the sides.

Kentucky heaved a sigh of relief that the swimsuit didn't have a thong back and did cover most of Giada's bottom. Yet the parts that did hang out were highly accented by her sensual walk in those stiletto sandals.

Kentucky's body instantly hardened, despite the cold water he was in. Oh, how he needed his woman. He needed her *right* now.

"Giada!" Kentucky yelled, instantly drawing more than just her attention his way.

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

"That swimsuit," Kentucky said in a lower tone, conscious of all eyes on him now. He swam to the edge of the pool.

"You don't like it?" Giada looked down at herself. "Do I need to change into something else? I brought a bikini with me, too."

Kentucky shook his head. "No, don't change a thing, baby." He grinned. "As for that suit, I think I like it a bit too much. But I may need to see it up close to make sure, though."

Everyone laughed. Sal turned back to his task. Beverlyn went over to join him.

Giada walked over to Kentucky. "Is this close enough?"

"Nope. *This* is." Kentucky grabbed her legs and snatched her into the pool.

With her shoes flying off her feet, a shrieking Giada went tumbling headfirst towards the water. Yet instead of hitting the water, she landed safely in Kentucky's arms.

"I'm going to get you for that," she threatened, trying to get her bearings back with deep breaths.

"Get me now," Kentucky replied, giving her a heated look as he released his hold and allowed her to slide down his aroused body.

"I . . ." Giada paused to moan as special parts of her body came in contact with special parts of his.

"People are around, Kenny," she whispered, wrapping her arms and legs about his neck and waist.

"They won't be for long," Kentucky whispered back. "In a few minutes, Sal is gonna close the top of the grill, close the vents halfway, and then let the steaks cook slowly. Then he's gonna find some reason to talk to his wife alone in the house."

"How do you know all this?" Giada said, still talking discreetly.

"Ever since we got here, Sal's been talking my ear off about how he just got back today from a two-week trip to Atlanta for that new club they're opening. About how he hasn't had a chance to recoup the time he lost with his wife. About how he hopes he won't seem like a bad host if they sneak away for a quickie."

Giada grinned. "They're still at it like that after twenty years?"

"Yes, which is why they probably lasted so long."

"I want us to be like that, Kenny."

"At the rate we're going, we probably will." Kentucky squeezed her bottom. "I can't seem to get enough of you."

Giada moaned. "I feel the same way, baby."

Suddenly they heard Sal say, "Kenny and Giada, Bev and I will be right back. We need to take care of something in the house. No need to worry about the steaks. I have them slow cooking."

"No problem. We'll be fine out here by ourselves," Kentucky said, giving Giada a knowing smile.

When the Delfinos were gone, Giada said, "I *definitely* want us to be just like them twenty years from now."

"Let's start now," Kentucky said, lowering his lips to hers for a kiss.

Their make-out session might have started in the pool, but it ended up in the Delfinos' Jacuzzi.

Maneuvering around their swimwear, Kentucky smoothly joined them to the hilt. They both moaned from the pleasure.

"I wanted to take you like this that night in the boat's Jacuzzi," Kentucky said, bending forward to whisper in Giada's ear as he began to slowly stroke her to ecstasy. His hands were around her torso, teasing her taut peaks through the deep frontal plunge in her swimsuit.

"I wanted you to take me," Giada replied, grinding against his every thrust. For leverage, she held on to the side of the Jacuzzi.

"I couldn't, baby. If I had, I would've never been able to let you to go back to his cabin," Kentucky said, referring to someone whose name he hated to even speak these days, especially at times like these. "You would have been in my cabin from that night forward, which would have caused all kinds of problems on the high seas."

"I wanted to be in your cabin from day one. Even when I was with him, I always fantasized about making love to you instead," Giada said, not speaking Fabian's name either. She paused to moan as Kentucky became more forceful with his thrusts. "Even still, it wasn't the same. There's nobody like you, Kenny. Nobody."

"You got that right. You also got the real thing now, baby." Kentucky thrust against her hard again, causing her to moan louder. "What are you gonna do about it?"

Giada looked back over her shoulder at that challenge. "Oh, it's like that, huh?"

"It's *just* like that," Kentucky replied, thrusting again.

* * * *

Accepting his challenge, Giada turned back around and gripped the edge of the Jacuzzi tighter. Then she began to work her hips in a circular rhythm that snatched a loud growl from Kentucky's lips within seconds.

"Oh, so you trying to tame a man, huh?" he said, closing the small space between them. "I got something for that."

"Bring it," Giada challenged, meeting his hot gaze head-on as she grinded against him again.

What did she ever say that for?

Kentucky brought it all. Holding her close, he began to bombard her body with moves she didn't even know he knew. Where did he get them from? Had they come out of some locked vault? If so, where was this vault? And what was the access code to get inside?

Giada relented first. She simply couldn't control the clenching in her core. Nor could she control the tingles of pleasure ricocheting through her body.

As if he knew she was about to go over the edge, Kentucky immediately captured Giada's lips in a deep kiss in order to muffle her inevitable scream. She released it thirty seconds later like clockwork.

After swallowing her scream in his mouth, Kentucky went over the edge himself soon thereafter.

"You win," Giada panted out as she collapsed against him a few seconds later.

"We *both* win," Kentucky replied still holding her close to him as their breathing patterns regulated.

"Kenny?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Where are the Delfinos? Seems like they should have been back by now."

Suddenly they heard a loud scream of ecstasy coming from an open window of an upstairs bedroom.

"I think that answers your question," Kentucky said as they both turned towards the sound with a grin.

Looks like I'm not the only screamer in the bunch, Giada noted silently, liking Beverlyn even more now that they had that particular trait in common.

Pretty Packages
by Mi'Chelle Dodson

* * * *

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Chapter Nineteen

Kentucky discovered a few new things about Giada on their trip to Village Square, Georgia. First of all, she had the innate ability to assimilate into any environment. Giada seemed just as comfortable among the teachers who had arrived over that weekend as she did among the lawyers and celebrities she usually associated with.

Secondly, Giada had a real eye for detail. During her tour of the school, she noticed that the nurse's office didn't have what she called "rites of passage" packets for newly menstruating girls. This packet would include all the items they would need for this step into womanhood, including a pocket calendar to keep up with their monthly cycles.

Kentucky took that to heart and asked Giada if she would like to help bring that vision to pass. That request had been like telling Road Runner to run. Giada did what came naturally to her—shopped.

Hitting all the local superstores, she gathered all the necessary items and the decorative boxes they would go in. Soon there were Debutante Boxes stacked high in the storage room of the nurse's office. All had been personally assembled by Giada. The most surprising thing of all was the fact that she stayed within budget, revealing that she could exercise restraint concerning money when she had to.

"Can you spend the night at my house?" Kentucky asked on the way from the airport now that they were back in Miami. He wasn't ready for her to leave his side just yet.

"Sure." Giada looked just as excited as she'd been the day he gave her that large engagement ring. "But I need to stop by your mother's first to get a change of clothes."

"Actually, you don't." Kentucky grinned slyly. "I anticipated you saying yes, so I called Mama before we left and asked her to drop off a change of clothes for you. I told her to bring over that rust-colored pantsuit I like to see you in and the matching stilettos."

Giada laughed. "I don't know why you just won't let me move in with you. It would be easier since I'm always at your house anyway."

Kentucky gave her a look that said, *You know why.*

Giada's laughter instantly quelled in her throat at that look. "All right, Kenny." She turned to face forward in her disappointment. She folded her arms across her chest, revealing her rising anger.

Kentucky remained silent, giving her time to deal with her disappointment. She would never know how much he wanted to not only move her in right now, but also marry her. But they had to wait for all that.

In the meantime, I'm gonna see what I can do to make the wait pleasurable for the both of us. Kentucky decided to start the festivities tonight.

* * * *

Giada remained in a sullen mood all during dinner and even after she prepared for bed. Though she only wore a chemise, it might as well been a suit of armor. The stiff way she lounged in bed, blankly watching the TV with her arms

and legs crossed, sent a definite message—nothing sensual was happening tonight.

"It's not gonna work, Giada," Kentucky said, coming into the room after finishing his solitary shower. He had on a long, thick bathrobe.

"What's not going to work?" She frowned over at him.

Kentucky chuckled. "That sulking and pouting is not gonna get you anywhere with me."

"I'm starting to think nothing will. You're the most stubborn man I ever met," Giada replied, incensed by his cavalier attitude.

"You got the man part right, baby. And as a man, I'm not gonna indulge in childish behavior."

"Oh, so I'm a child now, huh?" Giada sat upright. "I wasn't a child this morning when you were screwing my brains out in that Georgia hotel room."

Kentucky's nostrils flared with ire. "First of all, I didn't hear you complaining in that hotel room. As I recall, you were begging me for more."

Giada's cheeks grew hot, but she remained silent at that blunt truth. She had enjoyed that tryst just as much as he had.

"Secondly, I didn't say you were a child, Giada, even though you are definitely acting like one now," Kentucky continued. "Matter of fact, sometimes our seven-year age difference is very obvious. This is one of those times."

"Well, let me take my childish behind home then." Giada sprang from the bed and headed towards the closet for her clothes.

* * * *

Kentucky took a deep breath and exhaled as his angry woman made her way across the room. This was not the way he planned for this night to go at all. He had to get control of himself. Then he had to take control of this situation before it got too far out of hand.

"Fine, Giada, go home. I'll even let you take the Jeep to drive yourself since I'm in for the night. But if you do leave, you are gonna miss out on the greatest show of your life." He casually walked over to the stereo system, not appearing angry at all now.

Giada paused and snapped her head around. "What show?"

Kentucky smiled, pleased that her curiosity was thoroughly piqued. "*This* show," he replied, snatching his robe open to reveal a red loincloth that only a male stripper would wear. His body was oiled to perfection and glistening all over.

Giada gasped even as her eyes widened. "I . . ." She couldn't seem to get two words out. The only thing she could do was moan and shudder with need.

"After the way you helped the school this weekend, I wanted to reward you in a special way. Since we're on a budget and since I can't afford to buy you another big-ticket item right now, I thought you might enjoy having something priceless."

"Price . . . less?"

"Yeah, something that no other woman has had since college." Kentucky ran his hands down the front of his shiny

body. "A private show from your very own exotic dancer," he added, gyrating his hips in a sensual come-hither move.

Giada moaned louder. She didn't look ready to go anywhere now.

Kentucky's smile widened as he noted the desire and the decision in her eyes. He was pleased to find her so conducive to staying after all. He wanted her to stay for her private show. "Go sit on the side of the bed and wait for me," he instructed.

Giada quickly obeyed him in silence.

Seeing Giada so compliant to him, Kentucky determined within himself to give her the best show ever. He just hoped he remembered everything. It had been nearly ten years since he did anything like this.

"Turn the TV off for me, baby," Kentucky directed gently as he turned to make sure the right CD was in the stereo. It was time for his show to begin.

* * * *

Giada fumbled with the television remote, but she finally got her designated task done. Her hands might not have been so shaky had she not just gotten a glimpse of the back of Kentucky's loincloth when he turned towards the stereo. Now she trembled all over with need. In short, there was no back to the loincloth. There was only a string around Kentucky's waist holding the thing up and on.

Fine.

Fine.

And yet more fine was her man.

After pressing play on the stereo, Kentucky clapped his hands together to brighten the lights in the room. Soon a slow tune by Marques Houston filled the air.

Giada inhaled sharply at being able to see his shiny body in more detail. She crossed her legs to squeeze out some of the ache. Yet she couldn't squeeze hard enough to stop the ache Kentucky caused by dancing over to her in the most sensual of ways.

"I never danced to fast music because I deemed that more for the feminine guys," he said, moving slow and erotic. "I never did any rump-shaking for the same reason. The only bouncing I did was this," Kentucky added, causing his chest muscles to bounce one at a time as he flexed them.

Giada licked her lips. She was ready to attack him on the spot.

"Not yet, baby. Let me give you this treat," Kentucky said, as if he could read her mind. "Just keep talking to me. It'll help keep your temperature down until it's the right time."

Giada nodded and forced herself to stay in her place. When he finally stood directly in front of her, she asked, "Can I touch you? I heard somewhere that strippers had a policy of no touching."

"You can touch me all you want, baby. Not only because I'm *your* man, but also because I am a man, period. That no-touching policy is usually just for female dancers due to the risk of physical abuse or violence by their patrons. The same risks don't really exist for male dancers. Plus, the touching seems to help them get bigger tips." Kentucky grinned. "I know it did for me."

Giada felt her nostrils flare with ire. "I'm glad you gave that life up. If not, I would probably have a police record a mile long fighting those heifers off you."

Kentucky chuckled. "Calm down, firecat." He gyrated closer to her. "Besides, I thought you wanted to touch me."

Giada felt heat gather in her cheeks. In her ire, she forgot all about her desire. Now it was back in full force. "Like this, baby?" she asked, reaching up to touch his chest.

"Yes." Kentucky moaned, still moving in time to the music. "Now go lower, baby. *Much* lower."

Giada gave him a mischievous smile. Then she moved her hands lower . . . and around, cupping his bottom instead of where he really wanted to be touched.

All words were abandoned for the moment as Kentucky nodded and prepared to respond to that unspoken challenge. He moved closer, placing her in direct eye view of his precious jewel.

Giada pretended she didn't see it as she concentrated on kneading his strong gluteal muscles. Her hands moved in perfect timing to his hips.

Kentucky simply grinned and began to demonstrate his control over muscles few men could master. His hips continued to move sensually the whole time.

"Wh . . . ?" Giada blinked to make sure she'd seen what she thought she just saw. When his wand waved in a circular motion in front of her face again, she blinked once more in amazement.

Did this man have her under some kind of spell?

"How did you . . . ? Wow! Do that again!" Giada said when it happened for the third time.

Kentucky chuckled in triumph. "I will, but only if you touch me first. And you know exactly where, too."

Giada finally did as he requested. She soon found her hand being moved in that same circular motion as Kentucky honored her request as well.

Aching for real now, Giada moaned loudly.

Kentucky moaned, too, as she squeezed him from base to tip. "Okay, one more trick and then I *have* to have you," he said huskily.

"Yes, baby." Giada nodded eagerly. She was ready to be had.

* * * *

"Lay on the floor on your back," Kentucky said, aching now himself. He'd been able to maintain his calm until she squeezed him in her own special way. He sighed in relief when she released him to comply with his latest request.

Standing above Giada a few seconds later with his legs on both sides of her body and his back to her, Kentucky lifted her legs and slowly pulled them both over her head. He took backwards steps as he did. Moaning at the revealing view of her garden that action produced, he relished the sight of her hidden river already threatening to overflow its banks. He couldn't wait to take a dip in it.

"You all right down there?" Kentucky asked, settling his thighs lightly upon the backs of her ankles. He balanced the majority of his weight upon his legs.

"Yes," Giada replied in a tone that told him that she trusted him completely even though she had no idea what he was about to do. "I'm just so grateful for all those yoga exercises I do on a regular basis."

"Me, too," Kentucky replied and then proceeded to show her exactly what he had in mind.

Still in the same position, he reached over to caress the backs of Giada's smooth thighs. His gently kneading and squeezing hands continued to move towards her garden. Sending one hand farther up to her bottom, he allowed the other hand to linger in her trimmed meadow.

Giada purred as he began to erotically stroke her in two places with those large hands of his. When he bent to taste her in that position, her body shuddered. She began to tremble with release.

Realizing how close she was to climaxing, Kentucky rose to a semi-standing position and then did the most amazing thing. He grabbed her bottom firmly with both hands, used it for leverage and flipped her over until she was on her hands and knees with him right behind her.

* * * *

Giada lost all her bearings after being flipped.

Kentucky didn't give her a chance to get them back as he quickly joined her to the hilt and began to stroke her in a different way now, with something other than his hands. Each stroke was rhythmic, steady, and with the right amount of force behind it.

"Oh, Kenny," Giada said as heat radiated from the top of her head down to the soles of her feet. When she went over the edge a few seconds later, she finally understood what it meant to make mad, passionate love, emphasis on the mad part.

Either Giada had lost her mind or she was having an out-of-body experience because her eyes had ceased to see the eggshell-colored wall in front of her. No, they seemed to be looking into the future, far into the future.

Giada saw her and Kentucky gray-haired and sitting next to each other at a long table. Around them in the other chairs were their four adult children and their spouses. The two male children were tall, fair, and muscular like their father, but with most of Giada's facial features and thick, wavy hair. The two female children were short like Giada, but their hair was brown like their father's. They also had her facial features.

There were at least ten grandchildren. The youngest sat in a high chair next to a wrinkle-faced woman who couldn't have been anyone but Kentucky's stepmother based on the lively twinkle in her eyes. They were all laughing and smiling, obviously very happy.

Suddenly Giada was back in the present. Kentucky was still stroking her, her body was still trembling with release, and she was still in awe of his ability to love her clear into the future.

Humbled by this whole experience, joyful tears began to roll down Giada's cheeks. She began to repeatedly mutter how much she loved him. Her walls clenched and pulled his

seed from his loins, even though that day of fruition wouldn't be for several years to come.

"I love you, too," Kentucky said, shifting their bodies on the floor until she was in his lap. He held her close to him as she sobbed with happiness.

Giada relished his tenderness. When she was calmer, they disengaged and went into the bathroom for round two. The music was long forgotten as the lovers continued to seal the bond between them tighter than ever.

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Chapter Twenty

Giada could barely concentrate at work the next day. She kept thinking about Kentucky's private show, about all the tricks he'd done, and about that open-eye vision she'd had of their future.

Giada also thought about the business idea Kentucky talked about later in bed last night. How she should open up a specialty gift business that supplied Debutante Boxes to public and private schools. He even volunteered to help her write a business plan.

I'll think I'll call my company Pretty Packages. Giada recalled Kentucky using that phrase once upon a time. He'd used it to refer to men with pretty faces and fat wallets. She thought the phrase was more appropriate to serve as a reminder of what *not* to look for when it came to people, but only when it came to shopping.

I can't wait to call Kenny and let him know my decision. So deep in her thoughts, Giada barely noticed the lawyer standing in front of her desk addressing her at that very moment.

"I'm sorry, sir. What was it you wanted again?" Giada asked, blinking to refocus.

The look in the gray-haired man's eyes said, *"I want you,"* but with sexual harassment suits abounding in the land, Mr. Kerrigan said the second thing he wanted instead. "Have you finished conducting that research on the Nash case?"

"No, sir, I haven't. But if you give me a little bit more time, I should have it done before the end of the day," Giada replied, giving him a charming smile.

Mr. Kerrigan blushed. "Take your time, Giada." He smiled before hurrying away to regain his composure.

Giada's less attractive coworker, Velocity, scowled at her in protest of the clear favoritism that she'd just been shown. Someone else would have gotten reprimanded for being lax in his or her work.

Jealous heifer! Giada seethed, using that as additional confirmation to explain why she didn't have or want any female friends her own age. They were too competitive, too prone to jealousy.

To show Velocity that she was more than just a pretty face, Giada reluctantly pushed all thoughts of Kentucky to the side. Then she put her focus solely upon her work and was able to get everything done before the end of the day.

It gave her great satisfaction to see Velocity's look of shock when Mr. Kerrigan praised her diligent efforts and rewarded her with two tickets to the opera. That satisfaction was even better than the day she walked into the office wearing her engagement ring.

Giada couldn't wait to share today's good news with Kentucky. She also couldn't wait to tell him that she wanted to marry him now, not later. She wanted to tell him that she didn't care how much money he had. That all she wanted was to lie in his arms every night and know that only she had title deed to do so.

I'm going over there right now, Giada thought, headed to Kentucky's home instead of the house on Wilmington Street after work. Fortunately, she didn't have to study tonight and could sleep over if he wanted her to.

When Giada arrived at Kentucky's home, she saw a familiar car parked outside. "No, that can't be . . . Bartley's car?" she muttered to herself as she rapidly got out of her vehicle.

When Giada opened the door to Kentucky's home, she realized that that was indeed Bartley's car outside. His sour-looking presence on the sofa confirmed that.

"What is *he* doing here?" Giada asked Kentucky, deliberately ignoring Bartley. She saw no need to play nice now. She wasn't with Fabian anymore. She no longer had to hold her tongue, lest she lose access to certain gifts.

"I'm here to save you and your boyfriend a world of trouble," Bartley replied, also showing his open contempt for Giada.

"My fiance," Giada replied, holding up her left hand to show off her impressive engagement ring. As she talked, she walked over to the leather recliner where Kentucky sat.

"You must have more money than I thought if *she's* willing to marry you," Bartley said, looking at the scowling man in the recliner.

"It's none of your business *what* I have," Kentucky snapped as he gently lowered Giada down upon his lap.

"I know what you won't have, your school and your bodyguard service, if it becomes public knowledge that you stole a woman from a client," Bartley retorted.

"Watch your mouth in my house and towards my woman!" Kentucky warned, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. "If I wasn't so concerned for those kids at my school, I would have wrung your puny little neck at that first disrespectful comment. Either way, don't push your luck."

The smug look on Bartley's face instantly flew away and was replaced by fear. Kentucky looked as if he meant every word he just said.

"And for the record, Kenny didn't steal me from anybody. We were together long before I ever met Fabian," Giada added, trying to set the record straight on exactly *when* her and Kentucky's relationship started.

"So you really did go back to an old flame, huh?" Bartley said, looking amazed that she hadn't lied to Fabian.

"Yes." Giada smiled tenderly at Kentucky. When he planted a tender kiss on her forehead, she snuggled even closer to him. The depth of their love was obvious.

"Too bad people aren't gonna believe we have history together since we never openly dated before," Kentucky noted in frustration. "And if Fabian wants you back as bad as Bartley says he does, he's gonna use the media to try to ruin my reputation as a bodyguard and to bring bad publicity down on the school during its pivotal first year. I can't afford for either of those things to happen right now."

"So what do you suggest we do? Stop seeing each other? That would break my heart, Kenny. And I'm not going back to Fabian under any circumstances," Giada replied, frowning at even the thought of doing either.

"None of us want you back with Fabian under any circumstances," Bartley said, "which is why I came to Kentucky to offer him, or shall I now say, the two of you, a proposition."

"Which is what?" Giada's frown deepened.

In reply, Bartley began to explain what he'd been in the midst of explaining right before she arrived. How he could distract Fabian with a lucrative around-the-world tour and also various collaborations that would keep him busy for the next nine months. How, in that amount of time, his client's interest for Giada would surely wane since it had only taken Fabian four months to get over his last serious relationship.

"Yet me keeping Fabian away for any length of time won't do a lick of good if he finds out the two of you are not only dating openly now, but also engaged to be married," Bartley concluded.

"Which means he wants us to keep our relationship a secret," Kentucky said, cutting to the chase.

"At least until Fabian has moved on emotionally," Bartley added. "Can you do that?" He looked from Kentucky to Giada.

"We can, but whether we actually *will* is up for discussion," Giada said, defiantly crossing her arms in front of her.

"There's really nothing to discuss, baby," Kentucky countered. "If we don't keep our relationship a secret for the next nine months to a year, I stand to lose everything I've built up over the years, which will, in turn, affect what I'm trying to build with you for the future. Now had this been the school's *second* year of operation, it wouldn't have mattered. Or at least not as much since we would already know whether

the school was able to stand on its own without constant financial assistance from me."

Giada glared at Kentucky, then Bartley, and then back at Kentucky again. "Fine!" she conceded reluctantly, snatching her engagement ring off her left hand and placing it on her right. "Happy now?" Giada raged before springing to her feet and stomping out of the room.

* * * *

"You got your hands full with that one," Bartley said when he and Kentucky were alone again.

"I can handle her," Kentucky replied confidently, rising to his feet to show his guest out. He had an angry woman to go soothe.

Bartley stood also. "I believe you can. Had that been Fabian, she would have pouted or cajoled him with sex until she got what she wanted."

Kentucky frowned. "As you can see, I'm *not* Fabian and don't ever want to be." He led the way to the front door. "Now what are you gonna tell him about Giada now that it is clear she has decided to stay with me?"

"I plan on telling him that Giada's old flame is actually not a man at all, but instead a woman. This way his pride will get all involved and he will leave the matter alone." Bartley smirked. "After all, no heterosexual man wants the world to know that his woman dropped him for another woman. For a man in Fabian's high-profile position, especially with all the love songs he's written this year, that kind of news could cost him big-time in sales."

Kentucky's frown deepened. "Though I don't appreciate you painting Giada as a lesbian, I do understand why it's necessary," he said as they paused at the front door. He gave Bartley a hard look and added, "I also don't appreciate you taking so much pleasure from it. Especially since you like playing on the same team from time to time yourself. Matter of fact, I bet you wouldn't mind playing on *Fabian's* team every now and again."

Bartley dropped his smirk like a bad habit. "How did you . . . ?"

"It doesn't matter how I found out. You just need to know that Giada and I aren't the only ones with something at stake here." Kentucky opened the door. "Call me if anything changes."

"I will," Bartley replied nervously.

* * * *

As Bartley exited Kentucky's house, his anxiety increased. He thought he'd come to make the man indebted to him for saving his school and bodyguard career. Now he found himself in Kentucky's debt.

Fabian was as homophobic as they came. Once he found out his manager was bisexual, Bartley would be demoted to just manager instead of manager/assistant. If Fabian ever found out Bartley was secretly in love with him, he would fire him completely.

I'll make sure Fabian gets over Giada if it's the last thing I do, Bartley promised himself now that his own livelihood was at stake.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Nine months later

After that encounter with Bartley, Giada found the same pattern repeating itself in her life—her continually giving up something for Kentucky.

It was now April, and she was tired of the constant sacrifice.

Giada couldn't wear her engagement ring on the correct hand because it might harm Kentucky's school and career. She couldn't be seen in public with him for the same reason.

On the day of the school's official dedication, Giada even had to sit in the back of the auditorium instead of in a place of honor on the front row with Kentucky's stepmother. And no photos could be taken of them standing anywhere near each other due to all the PR at the event.

To make matters worse, Kentucky had taken on several bodyguard assignments back-to-back over the last four months, which meant they hadn't even been in the same room with each other recently.

They definitely hadn't been in the same bed.

Giada couldn't even go shopping to ease her mind, at least not to her favorite stores. Kentucky insisted that Giada create a monthly and annual budget and stick to it, the same as he'd done for his finances. This meant no more thousand-dollar suits and no more five-hundred-dollar shoes. She couldn't even afford a good pair of eighty-dollar stockings.

Thankfully, Giada had an additional source of revenue coming in from her small specialty gift business. She also received an unexpected scholarship two months ago, and so her first year of law school was now paid in full. Otherwise, she wouldn't have had the funds to get her car fixed after unexpected repairs arose *and* pay her tuition.

On top of that, just this week, Giada saw two old flames while driving back from lunch—her high school teacher and the guy who'd stalked her for a while. Both men had been driving Mercedes—Giada's dream car. They'd both spotted her in traffic, honked to get her attention, and then smirked before driving away.

Fed up with having to constantly deny herself without being rewarded for her sacrifices, Giada decided to take herself out to dinner at her favorite restaurant. Who cared how expensive The Raven was?

Kentucky was somewhere in France guarding an ambassador's adult son, no doubt eating like a king in all sorts of fancy places. Why shouldn't Giada treat herself to a meal fit for a queen?

After ordering the most expensive thing on the menu, Giada sipped on a glass of grape juice and enjoyed the exotic appetizers that had been placed before her. For the moment, life was good again.

Suddenly she heard a male voice ask, "Are you dining alone?"

Giada's hand snapped to the left and upwards. "F . . . Fabian? What are you doing here?" The last she'd heard, he was on tour. Had it ended early?

Fabian smiled. "Trying to get something to eat, just like you. Are you eating alone tonight or waiting on your girlfriend?"

Giada looked at him in puzzlement. Fabian knew she didn't have many female friends. He knew she usually went out with a man or by herself.

"I'm eating alone tonight," Giada replied, still wondering what he meant by "girlfriend."

Fabian smiled wider. "Perhaps I can join you then?" His eyes looked hopeful.

Giada shook her head. "I don't think my boyfriend would like that very much."

Fabian's eyes bucked. "Did you just say *boyfriend*?"

"Yes." Now Giada looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"But I thought . . ." Fabian paused, sat down without permission, and then tried to regroup his thoughts. "Who did you leave me for, Giada?"

Giada frowned. "Why?" she asked cautiously. "What does it matter anyway?"

"Did you leave me for a *man* or a *woman*?" Fabian persisted, looking as if he was desperate for that answer.

"A *woman*!" Giada's voice rose before she self-consciously lowered it again. "I left you for a man, of course. I'm not a lesbian by any means. You of all people should know that."

Fabian's face reddened with ire. "It appears I've been misinformed about a few things. Now I want to know why." He pulled out his cell phone, pressed the number three, and waited for Bartley to answer.

Giada sat on pins and needles as the inevitable occurred. Bartley squealed like the pig that he was. To his credit, he did not disclose the proposition he'd made with Kentucky and Giada or anything about Kentucky's school.

Instead Bartley shouldered all the blame. The reason he gave for withholding the truth was the fact that he thought Fabian's career would be severely damaged if women knew that an unattractive man like Kentucky could take a woman from him. They both knew that sex appeal was a major driving force of Fabian's career and couldn't be trifled with.

Though seemingly satisfied with what he'd heard, Fabian hung up the phone a few minutes later with a frown upon his face. He looked over at Giada in silence for the longest time. Finally he asked, "Were you and Kentucky lovers before, during, or after that Caribbean tour?"

"Before," Giada replied. She didn't have the heart to tell him about her and Kentucky in that hotel room. "And, of course, after."

"Did you ever sleep with him on the boat?"

Giada shook her head. "No, Fabian," she said, keeping her answers short and sweet. She tried hard to concentrate on the meal she'd been served while Fabian was on the phone, but her appetite was all but ruined now.

"Why didn't you tell me about your history with this man before I hired him?"

"I didn't know you had hired Kenny until the day you were due to meet him yourself, remember?"

Plus, what he and I had was over as far as I was concerned."

"Obviously not. You're back with him now," Fabian quipped.

Giada felt her cheeks get hot. "I didn't know old feelings were going to stir back up during the tour. When I realized they had, I left and went home so there wouldn't be any conflict."

"And you're sure you two didn't have sex on the boat? There were a lot of late nights that I woke up and you were gone from the bed, Giada."

"I said no. What do you take me for, some kind of slut?" Giada hissed with her patience wearing thin. "I never slept with Kenny on that boat or any other boat. Now if you're done giving me the third degree, please excuse yourself so I can eat my dinner in peace."

* * * *

Fabian didn't move an inch. He was too mesmerized by the fire in Giada's tone to budge. It reminded him of how fiery she could be in the bedroom. He missed that, wanted it back.

"I want you back, Giada," Fabian said, telling her what was on his mind. "I never stopped loving you."

Giada took a deep breath and exhaled. "I love Kenny, Fabian. He's the man I want. Isn't that obvious by now?"

"But is Kentucky the man that can give you any material thing your heart desires? And you know I know how many material things *your* heart desires," Fabian replied, reminding her of countless conversations they'd had about her ever-growing wish list.

"Kenny means more to me than any of those things," Giada advocated fervently.

"But for how long?" Fabian asked, unconvinced by her statements. "Look, my last tour was very lucrative, Giada. So lucrative that I can now afford to buy a small island if I wanted to." He leaned in closer to her and added, "But I'd rather spend that money on you, Giada. Is there anywhere you want to go? Anything you want to own? Just name it, baby, and it's yours."

* * * *

Giada inhaled sharply at Fabian's words. If only they were coming from Kentucky's mouth. But they weren't. They were coming from another man's. And thus Giada had to make yet another sacrifice for Kentucky.

"No, thank you, Fabian, but it was nice of you to offer," she said, feeling grieved in the pit of her stomach. Giada absolutely had no appetite now, which made her mad as fire. There was nothing worse than having to pay over a hundred and twenty-five dollars for a meal she didn't even eat.

"Well, at least let me pay for your dinner," Fabian insisted.

"All right," Giada conceded, pushing that expense upon a man who was willing and more than able to carry it. She even allowed Fabian to stay and watch her pick at her food, while he heartily consumed a meal of his own.

* * * *

While Giada and Fabian were having dinner together, Kentucky was on the phone with Bartley receiving updates.

Though it was 2 a.m. in France, this was news that he needed to be awakened for.

Kentucky took the first part of the conversation in stride. Although Bartley claimed he didn't mention anything about the school, there was no real worry even if he had.

As of the last quarterly report, the school was already starting to stand on its own due to the recent increase in endowments and donations. This meant that Kentucky didn't have to back it financially anymore. Soon the school would have enough leeway in its budget to make the first repayment to its founder.

Once Kentucky got that money, he planned to add it to the scholarship fund he created for Giada's education two months ago. The money he'd made from his last job had been used to create that anonymous fund.

To keep Giada from knowing that it was him funding her education, Kentucky arranged for her law school to offer it to her without detailing who the benefactor was. It had worked like a charm.

When Giada shared the good news of her scholarship with him, they'd made love for hours in celebration. Kentucky almost thought she figured out the source of that scholarship based on how fervently she went at him that night.

Thinking about that night now, Kentucky grew angry instead of turned on. His ire increased after Bartley revealed the second part of his conversation with Fabian—the part about why Fabian had suddenly decided to question Bartley about Giada's old flame after all this time.

"She's still with him at the restaurant now?" Kentucky asked.

"As far as I know, yes," Bartley replied. "I thought you said you could handle her." His tone became mocking at the end.

"It's easy to be brave over the phone, huh, Bart?" Kentucky said in a menacing tone.

"I really don't mean no harm, but I'm just wondering how long you're going to hide your head in the sand about Giada. Don't you know that, no matter how much she tries to change, she's always going to be a gold digger at heart? Which means she's always going to gravitate towards the man holding the heavier wallet."

Kentucky squeezed the phone so hard that he broke it, instantly disconnecting his call with Bartley.

He cursed under his breath, having realized that all of his preprogrammed numbers were in that phone. Since Kentucky didn't know Giada's cell phone number by heart, he had to now wait until she got back to his stepmother's house to call her.

That's if she even spends the night at Mama's house. Kentucky was very aware of that possibility now that Fabian was back in the picture.

The added frustration was the fact that he couldn't hop on a plane and fly home tonight. His current assignment didn't end for another week, which meant Fabian had seven whole days to woo his woman away from him.

Kentucky cursed again as he lay in bed, watching the clock tick. If only he'd taken the time to memorize Giada's cell phone number. He definitely would after this.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Giada was barely in bed when Kentucky called the house phone. She quickly answered on the first ring so as not to wake Hannah, who was already sleeping down the hall.

Kentucky let out a sigh of relief when he heard her voice. "Thank God, you're home."

"Where else would I be?" Giada asked. "And why aren't you asleep? It has to be around 5 a.m. over there."

"Honestly, I've been up since two worrying about you."

"Why? I'm fine."

"But are we still fine?" Kentucky asked. "After speaking with Bartley earlier, I wasn't so sure."

Giada frowned in distaste. "Don't even mention *his name* to me. Did you know that that snake told Fabian that I was a lesbian?"

"Yes, I did," Kentucky admitted.

"You did!" Giada sat upright in bed, livid with him. "And you *let* him?"

"It was the only way to get Fabian off our backs at the time, although I'm starting to think otherwise now. Plus, I didn't think you'd get this upset about it. Especially since you've been called worse than that over the years due to your old lifestyle."

"Maybe I have been called worse, but I still don't appreciate my sexuality being attacked like that. Just like lesbians take pride in their preference for women, I take pride in my preference for men. I love being straight."

"Speaking of your preference for men, how did you manage to be dining at one of Miami's most expensive restaurants with Fabian anyway?"

"I was feeling lonely without you, frustrated with my finances, and so decided to treat myself to a nice meal."

"You could have gotten a nice meal at Mama's house," Kentucky countered. "And if you were feeling so lonely, why didn't you ask Mama to accompany you? Why did you have to look Fabian up?"

"Obviously Bartley didn't tell you *everything*," Giada retorted. "Otherwise you would have known that I didn't look Fabian up at all. He saw me at the restaurant, came over to my table to say hello, and started asking me all kinds of questions about some girlfriend I was supposed to have. That's when the whole lesbian thing came out. Soon he was on the phone with Bartley. As for inviting your mother along tonight, she only likes home-cooked meals and soul food buffets, remember? The Raven doesn't have anything close to soul food on the menu."

"Oh." Kentucky grew quiet now. His anger couldn't help but abate in the face of such truth.

"Yes, oh," Giada snapped, livid with him for several other reasons now. "Now I understand why you were so relieved when I answered the phone. You thought I might have gone home with Fabian tonight, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

Giada sucked her teeth in irritation. "I guess I see how much you trust me. After all this time, do you actually think I would cheat on you, Kenny?"

"I . . . I wasn't sure. The whole gold-digging thing is still an issue for me sometimes. And knowing Fabian, he probably offered you the moon to come back to him. I can't compete with him on that level. Not now. Maybe never, depending on his longevity in the music industry and me continuing to make wise investments."

"For your information, Fabian *did* offer me the moon tonight. All I would let him pay for was dinner," Giada replied, being as honest as always with her man.

Kentucky inhaled sharply. "I don't want you even letting him do *that* for you," he said through clenched teeth.

"Well, if *you* took me out every once in a while, I might not have to have other men buy me dinner!"

* * * *

Kentucky winced at Giada's stinging reply. It had sliced him deep. So deep.

"I couldn't take you out before due to restricted finances and the fact that we couldn't date openly," he reminded her through a tight mouth.

"Well, that's no longer the case after tonight," Giada replied. "Fabian knows about us, and though he's not cool with it, he is not on some revenge tip. After Bartley spit some nonsense about how letting the world know he lost a woman to you would hurt his sex appeal and thus record sales, Fabian wasn't about to draw media attention to the situation. As for finances, I know you can squeeze in a fancy dinner every now and then. Even poor people get to eat out at the

buffet from time to time if they save up for it. I know, because my grandmother and I did it all the time."

"In that case, make a reservation at that same restaurant for the night I return. We're gonna eat in style and then afterwards . . ." Kentucky deliberately left his last sentence open-ended.

"Afterwards what, baby?" Giada purred, seemingly forgetting all about her anger, too.

"Afterwards, I'm gonna feast on you," Kentucky whispered as his own body stirred mightily with desire.

Giada moaned. "Hurry home, baby."

"I will. And, Giada?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Put your engagement ring on the correct hand."

Giada smiled. "I'm doing it now," she said, quickly switching the ring to her left hand.

* * * *

Fabian began to pursue Giada with fervor after that night at the restaurant. He sent flowers to her job and expensive gifts to her home. He even gave her an open round-trip ticket to anywhere she wanted to go in the world.

Fabian spared no expense. He was determined to win Giada back. Nothing and nobody would stop him. That engagement ring on her hand wouldn't stop him. Not even Kentucky.

Although Fabian knew he could never stand up against the man physically, the new bodyguard he hired looked like he could. Champ was just as big as Kentucky, but not as tall.

Fabian made sure he never left home without Champ, especially now that he was going after another man's woman.

Though Giada promptly returned all the gifts, refusing to even sign for most of them, she did not return the ticket or the flowers. Keeping the flowers was self-explanatory since they would have wilted in the return transport and it would have been a waste of money to do so. But her keeping that ticket gave Fabian all kinds of hope, too much hope, the kind of hope that would make a man do foolish things.

* * * *

Giada was beyond excited to be openly dating Kentucky tonight. It showed. She hadn't stopped smiling since he picked her up.

They almost didn't make it to the restaurant in time for their reservation because Giada kept trying to initiate sex in the car. She couldn't seem to help herself.

For one thing, she was glad that Kentucky was back in town. For another, the way he looked tonight was a big turn-on for her. Huge.

For their first official night out as a couple, Kentucky wore one of his expensive suits. His hair had been freshly trimmed. He'd splashed on his favorite cologne. Actually he'd put on Giada's favorite cologne for him. She'd gotten it for his last birthday because of how manly it smelled. Every whiff she took of it tonight made her want to make love to Kentucky right there on the spot.

As if he knew what was on her mind, Kentucky took the role of passion watchdog. Though he kissed Giada soundly in

the car, he didn't take her as she wanted him to. When she protested, he claimed that he wanted them to slow-walk into intimacy tonight.

Accepting that, Giada made herself stay as calm as possible. That proved harder to do than expected. Especially with Kentucky going out of his way to entice her tonight at the corner table they shared.

From his place beside her, Kentucky fed Giada another bit of food from his plate. He'd been doing that off and on all night. Like before, he licked his lips when her mouth closed around his fork.

"You really have beautiful lips, you know that?" Kentucky said, heaping yet another compliment upon her. He'd been doing a lot of that tonight, as well.

Giada smiled up into his eyes.

Kentucky put the fork down and traced her lips as she chewed. "Yes, full and luscious, just the way I like 'em." He leaned over and planted a brief kiss on her lips.

Giada wished she didn't have food in her mouth because she would have definitely deepened that kiss. She started to chew faster in hopes that he'd return to her lips again soon.

"And your skin. It's so soft." Kentucky traced a slow invisible line from her temple, past her high cheekbone, and back down to her bottom lip. "So soft. I could touch you forever."

Giada closed her eyes at his touch. Swallowing the food in her mouth, she parted her lips and let out a sigh of contentment. There was so much love in Kentucky's touch. There was so much love in his very presence.

Feeling his hand gently sweep her hair back over one shoulder, Giada knew what was coming next. She was ready, too. As soon as Kentucky leaned in to lick her lips, Giada pulled his tongue into her mouth.

They both moaned. The kiss instantly deepened.

One of Kentucky's hands disappeared under the table, under her skirt, and between her legs.

Cupping her triangle, he gently squeezed before stroking her through her thong.

Giada moaned again. Her legs automatically parted as if Kentucky had said, *"Open sesame,"* in his touch.

"Sir, madam, would you like dessert now?" their waiter asked after clearing his throat didn't break them apart.

Reluctantly withdrawing from each other, Giada and Kentucky promptly placed their orders.

Kentucky's only special request was that their desserts be served after they had a chance to partake of the restaurant's dance floor.

"You know, this will be my first time dancing in here," Giada said as Kentucky escorted her closer to where the live band was. "I've only come here to eat before, and none of my other dates ever wanted to dance."

"Tonight is going to be a night of many firsts," Kentucky replied with a secret smile.

Giada didn't know what that smile was about, but she just knew she was going to love whatever he had planned for her. She always did before.

On the dance floor, Kentucky drew Giada into his arms and began to rhythmically move against her.

"Just follow my hips, baby," he instructed since this was their first time slow dancing together. "The same way you do in the bedroom."

Giada had no trouble following those instructions. "Like this, baby?" she asked, mimicking his double-pelvic-thrust-per-side rotation.

"Yes, exactly like that," Kentucky whispered huskily as he pulled her closer.

"I think I like doubling up the steps like this," Giada said, noting the differences in the way he slow danced versus all the other men she'd danced with in her life. "It helps you really feel each other, if you know what I mean." She chuckled.

"Those six-inch heels you have on do, too," Kentucky replied, referring to her stilettos. "They place you nearly pelvis to pelvis with me. I like that."

Giada chuckled again. "I know. That's why I bought them."

"Do they hurt your feet?"

"Not yet. But if they start to, I'll let you know."

"Do that. I'll be glad to rub your feet and anything else aching on that sexy body of yours," Kentucky whispered in her ear.

Giada moaned and inched closer. She was careful to keep her hips in perfect unison with his as they grew silent and just enjoyed the music and the proximity of each other's body.

* * * *

Unknown to either of them, Fabian was in the restaurant. He'd been paying a private investigator to spy on Giada ever

since the night they dined together. That's how he knew she'd be at this restaurant tonight.

Fabian was on the top level of the restaurant, which was why he hadn't been noticed by Giada or Kentucky all evening. He could have been on the bottom level, and they still wouldn't have noticed him. The couple had been too into each other to notice anyone else.

And I bet he was doing something to her under that table. Fabian recalled how Giada's face flushed when Kentucky's left hand went missing from the table.

What kind of hold does he have on her? Fabian wondered. *What is so special about him that would make her give up a guy like me?*

* * * *

As if he knew he was being meditated upon so heavily, Kentucky's gaze rose to the second level of the restaurant. He frowned and his body stiffened when he saw Fabian peering at them over one of the tall banisters.

How long has he been here? Kentucky wondered, giving Fabian a hard glare.

"What's wrong, baby?" Giada asked. She was so in tune to his body by now that she could detect the slightest change in it.

"Nothing." Kentucky forced his body to relax again. "Nothing at all," he reiterated, determined to give Fabian a show he'd never forget.

Crisscrossing his hands behind Giada's back, Kentucky slowly lowered them to her bottom and gave her a subtle

squeeze. As expected, she moaned from the intimacy. As expected, Fabian looked away, red-faced with ire.

I guess you know how I felt now. Kentucky recalled too many times he'd watched Fabian get frisky with Giada on that boat.

"Ready for dessert?" Kentucky asked, abandoning any further acts of revenge. Tonight wasn't about Fabian. Tonight was about Kentucky and Giada.

"I'm ready for whatever," Giada replied, withdrawing to smile up into his eyes.

Kentucky returned that smile, forgetting all about Fabian for sure now. They walked back to their table in a moving spoon formation with Giada directly in front of him and Kentucky's arms about her waist.

During dessert, the same scenario as dinner was repeated. This time Giada fed him from both their plates. Kentucky's hands remained free to roam her body at will. And roam he did.

By the time the check arrived, Giada was panting with need. Her thong was nearly drenched with passion's dew. She was so ready for him. In fact, she looked like she was going to attack him.

Realizing the urgency of her need, Kentucky quickly paid the check and left a big tip for the waiter. "Let's go upstairs to the room I reserved for us," he said, rising to his feet.

"You reserved a room for us at *this* hotel, baby? What about your budget?" Giada practically leaped to her feet as he courteously pulled her chair from the table.

"Like you said before, sometimes you have to splurge a little. Especially on things that are important to you."

Kentucky gave her a heated look that was sure to create a barrage of tingles in her body.

Giada swallowed hard and moaned beneath that hot gaze.

* * * *

Giada couldn't have been happier when Kentucky removed her skirt and underwear before the door to their room was barely closed. She loved the fact that his eagerness to make love was just as great as hers.

Giada greedily took Kentucky on full throttle as he lifted her upon his waist and buried himself as deep as he could get in her. She had no patience left. All that foreplay in the restaurant had her desperate to feel him inside of her.

Holding her up in his strong arms, Kentucky made love to Giada standing up, right there in the middle of the floor. He was not fast and hurried like a man lacking stamina and great physical strength. No, Kentucky made love to Giada very, very slowly. And his arms weren't even shaking.

Nor were his legs showing any signs of fatigue.

Giada felt so safe in Kentucky's arms. She had no fear of being dropped. She had no fear of anything when he held her. Only when he left her side for extended periods of time did her doubts return.

Doubts like: Could she really be a lawyer? Were all of her gold-digging days truly behind her? After all, she still hadn't returned Fabian's ticket yet. And why hadn't she returned that ticket yet?

With no thought of those things now, Giada maintained eye contact with Kentucky as he continued to stroke her slowly. Every so often they would share a lingering kiss that further emptied her mind of troubling thoughts.

"I love you," Giada whispered, leaning in to kiss his lips again.

"I love you, too," Kentucky replied right before she invaded his mouth in the most sensual of ways.

When their tongues entwined this time, things got decidedly hotter between them. The pace quickened as Giada held on to his strong neck and rode him with forceful up and down strokes.

Kentucky moaned deep in his throat. His hands squeezed her bottom tighter. His hips thrust upwards harder. They moved faster.

It.

Felt.

So.

Good.

Too good.

Within seconds they were both going over the edge.

"Oh, Kenny. I can't wait to have your babies!" Giada shouted in ecstasy.

* * * *

People walking along the hallway just outside Kentucky and Giada's room must have heard her husky declaration. Unfortunately, Fabian heard it, too. But not out in the

hallway. No, he heard it from the hotel room next door to Giada and Kentucky on the left.

Now Fabian wished he'd never followed them out of the restaurant. Now he wished he'd saved his money instead of paying off a few people to find out which room Giada was in and a little extra to get a suite right next to it. Now he wished he'd just gone home.

I have to find some way to get rid of that giant. And I need to do it quick, too, before she has a farmload of ugly babies by him, Fabian thought, bristling with anger as he snatched away from the wall.

As he exited that lonely hotel room, he knew that an equally lonely condo was waiting for him. That place hadn't felt like home since Giada left. Now Fabian wanted to get her back even more.

* * * *

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Chapter Twenty-Three

"Were you serious about having my babies?" Kentucky asked much later on the ride back to his house. Giada was spending the night again.

"Serious as a heart attack," she replied from the passenger seat.

"But what about school? Your career?" A worried look crossed Kentucky's features before he added, "What about the possibility of having a hard delivery?"

"I can have babies *and* a career in law." Giada turned to smile reassuringly at him. "As for the delivery of those babies, I'm a lot stronger than I look. I don't have these childbearing hips for nothing. And haven't you noticed how much junk I have in my trunk for my size?" she added, referring to her wide hips and thighs and her ample bottom.

Kentucky smiled at her answer. "You *are* sturdily built. How soon do you want to start?"

"As soon as we get married. One trip to my ob-gyn is all it'll take for me to be ready to conceive," Giada replied, referring to the effective birth control device still implanted in her body.

"Let me make some adjustments in my schedule, move a few funds around for that big wedding I know you want, and then we'll get married and go on a great honeymoon somewhere exotic. How does July sound?"

Giada smiled. "July sounds great. I'll be on school break and eligible for a vacation at my job."

"So it's settled then. We get married in July and use our honeymoon to start our family. By the way, how many kids do you want?"

"Four," Giada said, remembering her vision. "Definitely four."

* * * *

At work the next day, Giada found a bouquet of flowers and a gift certificate to her favorite boutique waiting for her when she came from lunch. She didn't need to read the card to know that Fabian had sent them. Kentucky wasn't flashy with his gift-giving. He preferred to give her things without all the fanfare.

Calling the number on the card, Giada promptly informed Fabian that he was not to send her any more gifts and that she would be returning the things he sent today, including the airline ticket she still had from another gift-giving day.

"I'll stop sending you gifts under one condition," Fabian said, fishing for a compromise.

"What condition?"

"That you keep the stuff I sent you today *and* the airline ticket."

Giada was about to say that Kentucky wouldn't like that when she saw the paralegal across from her choke on a sob, slam her phone down, and run towards the ladies' room in tears. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong to make cool, calm, and collected Velocity act like that.

"Fine, whatever, Fabian. I need to go now. Bye," Giada said, leaving Fabian hanging midsentence when she hung up.

After rushing off the phone, Giada went to see about Velocity. She left the other paralegal and two legal secretaries to handle the phones alone.

Giada found Velocity in the bathroom sobbing hysterically in front of the mirror. Though the two women normally only tolerated each other, seeing the other woman in obvious pain made it impossible for Giada to remain emotionally detached. She'd never been that hard-hearted towards other women, despite how they'd treated her.

"What's wrong?" Giada asked, going up to her weeping coworker.

"What does it matter to you?" Velocity snapped, looking distrustful of this unexpected offer of compassion.

"It doesn't. I just thought I could help ease your pain or something." Giada shrugged. "But if you can handle it on your own, I'll just go back to my desk." She turned to walk away.

"My grandmother just died," Velocity said, looking desperate for comfort from whomever was offering it.

Giada's eyes instantly welled up with tears. It was like she was back at the moment of losing her own grandmother. "I'm so sorry, Velocity." Before she knew it, she'd placed her arm around the grief-stricken woman in comfort.

That hug and a half hour of crying and talking together caused Giada to do something completely unexpected, something she never thought she'd do for another woman in her life. Giada gave Velocity the airline ticket *and* the gift certificate. This way her new friend could fly back to her hometown in first class and looking first-rate.

Though Giada's act of kindness wouldn't bring either of their grandmothers back, it did make them both feel better inside. They felt a lot better.

Unfortunately, Giada couldn't share her kind deed with anyone she loved. Kentucky and Hannah would probably both scold her for taking those gifts from Fabian in the first place, despite the fact that she used those gifts for good.

I guess it's going to have to be enough that I know about my good deed. Giada deemed that the best thing for everyone. *At least I can tell them that I finally found a female friend in my own age group.*

* * * *

After Giada abruptly ended their call, a frustrated Fabian decided to put a plan in motion that would not only take Kentucky out of the picture temporarily, but possibly for good.

One way or the other, Giada is going to be my wife, not yours, country bumpkin. Fabian dialed the number of an ambitious photographer he had met during his recent tour.

* * * *

Since Velicity was still on extended bereavement leave, Giada didn't get to formally introduce her to Kentucky at the firm's annual spring fundraising masquerade. However, she was able to introduce him to everyone else.

The men at the firm were initially wary of Kentucky. They were intimidated by his size. The black-and-white pirate's costume he wore only magnified his bulk. Plus, many of them

were jealous that he'd gotten the hottest female employee at the firm. That tight lady pirate's costume Giada wore made the men even more jealous of Kentucky since it showed off her assets in the most scrumptious of ways.

Surprisingly the men weren't wary for long. Kentucky was quickly able to melt their resolve with his intellect, tales of past adventures he'd had with the rich and famous—though he made sure not to call any names—and the motivational goals he had concerning the foster kids in his school. Two hours into the evening and he had accumulated no less than ten potential donors for his school.

The women at the firm had a different reaction to Kentucky altogether. From the beginning, they welcomed him into their midst. He had not only removed their biggest competitor from the pool of eligible bachelorettes in the firm, but his body reeked of sex appeal.

The long V-neck opening in the shirt of Kentucky's costume showed off that extraordinary chest of his, causing many women to see why Giada was able to look past his ordinary face. Some of those women had subtly flirted with him right in front of her. Some had gone beyond that as the alcohol consumption increased and people became more uninhibited.

"Okay, you can put your claws back in and relax now," Kentucky whispered in Giada's ear as they slow danced. She was as stiff as a board in his arms.

"I'll relax when we leave," Giada replied stubbornly. "Until then, I'm keeping my guard up in case one of these heifers tries to take my man again."

Kentucky chuckled. "As I recall, the last one didn't want to take me from you. She just wanted to *share* me with you for the night," he said, referring to the whispered offer from one of the senior partner's wives.

It seemed that this particular wife was one half of a swinging couple. She and her husband, otherwise known as Mr. Kerrigan, had been lusting after Kentucky and Giada all night from afar. When Giada briefly left Kentucky's side for a trip to the ladies' room, Mrs. Kerrigan propositioned him since it was legally and physically safer for her to do so than her husband.

Though Kentucky politely turned down that unexpected offer, the persistent woman lingered until Giada returned. Then Mrs. Kerrigan propositioned the both of them. She even went so far as to accidentally call Kentucky "Terminator" during their conversation.

Although Kentucky found the whole thing funny and downright flattering, it rubbed Giada the wrong way. As a result, he had to take her to the dance floor in order to avoid an unpleasant confrontation between the two women that might affect Giada's job come Monday morning.

"I don't care *what* she wanted. I'm *never* sharing you with another woman," Giada said as they continued to slowly sway together.

Kentucky noticed how much tighter she hugged his neck as she said that. "What about Mama? Our female offspring? *They* can't get any of my time?" he teased, deliberately misinterpreting her words.

Giada laughed, despite her bad mood. "You know what I meant, Kenny. I'm not sharing you *sexually* with another woman."

"And you never will," Kentucky assured her, bending to plant a tender kiss on her forehead. He didn't have to bend very far tonight due to the six-inch boots she wore.

"Now that's what I like to hear." Giada snuggled against him even more.

Kentucky smiled, pleased that she'd forgotten all about the Kerrigans and her anger just that quick. A comfortable silence blanketed them as they continued to sway to the Latin beat from the live band.

A few short minutes later, Kentucky heard Giada moan deep within her throat. He felt her grind against him soon thereafter as things started to heat up rapidly between them. The contagious sensuality of the music and the prolonged proximity of their bodies had him hot and bothered, too.

At Giada's second grind, Kentucky moaned this time. He lowered his right hand to the tight black bell-bottoms of her costume and squeezed her generous rump. He sent his lips on a mission to capture hers as another moan bubbled up from her throat.

As soon as their lips touched, Kentucky and Giada completely forgot where they were. It didn't really matter, though. Around them were other serious couples kissing on the dance floor, at tables, and up against the walls. As wanton as the ball attendees were behaving now, one would never believe that they were some of Miami's most prestigious legal minds.

But they were. Fortunately, the law firm had a Vegas-like motto for all of their office parties and social events, "What happens here, stays here," which meant they could get as frisky as they wanted without fear of judgment or exposure. No camera phones or other recordable electronic devices were allowed at their parties for that very same reason.

Kentucky and Giada continued to kiss and grind against one another on the dance floor. It wasn't until the Kerrigans bumped up against them by "accident" that they were reminded of the need for privacy.

"Come on, baby, let's go find a private spot," Kentucky said upon breaking the kiss. "I may like making love in all kinds of places, but I don't like having an audience when I do. Plus, I don't want anybody getting any ideas about joining us." He nodded towards the Kerrigans when he said that last part.

Giada looked where he indicated and frowned. "I see your point."

Saying their good-byes to those they encountered on the way to the exit, Kentucky and Giada went in search of their private spot.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Kentucky and Giada's private spot turned out to be his house. It didn't require any extra expense, and it was far away from any swingers like the Kerrigans. Not only that, but it gave Kentucky a chance to see all the new tricks Giada had been practicing during her lonely hours.

"I see you've been busy while I was away," he said, sitting in a chair in his candlelit bedroom, watching his woman do a striptease routine a few feet away.

"Yes, I had to fill my lonely hours with something constructive," Giada said, removing the last piece of her costume to the sensual beat coming from the stereo.

Kentucky moaned with passion at the vision before him. Giada had on nothing but two red pasties, a black-and-red thong, and black garters. When she turned around, smiled seductively back at him, and then slapped one cheek heartily before jiggling them both with a strong bounce, he reached for her. It was time to feast upon this hot tamale.

"Uh-uh," Giada said, quickly moving out of Kentucky's reach. "The female dancers don't get touched, remember?"

"Right." Kentucky groaned in frustration, dropping his hands back down to his sides. "Unless she gives the man explicit permission to do so," he added, referring to one exception to that rule. "What about it, baby? Can I *please* touch you?" His voice was the deepest and huskiest it had ever been.

"Not yet, Kenny," Giada replied, though her eyes said yes. "I'll give you permission a little later. I really want to try my hand at this lap dancing thing first. I won't be able to pull it off if you touch me right now."

"Fine, but at least let me get out of this costume," Kentucky replied, still dressed in full pirate's gear. The only thing he didn't have on was his hat. "I want to be ready when you finally give me that green light to touch you . . . and do so much more." He licked his lips with anticipation.

"Okay, but leave your briefs on. If you get completely nude, I might attack *you*."

Kentucky chuckled and stood up to quickly disrobe. When he was done, he returned to his seat. *Let the rest of the show commence!*

* * * *

Giada's lap dance began in earnest. With her arms about Kentucky's strong neck and her legs on either side of his thighs, she grinded in an erotic circle a few feet above him. Her back remained arched and her thrusts remained strong as she inched closer and closer to his hardened desire. Each movement was in perfect timing to the slow music playing in the background.

The whole time Giada watched Kentucky's face. She got to see his eyes blaze with desire as they followed the rotation of her hips. She got to witness the way he kept licking his lips when gazing at her breasts. She got to hear his breath hitch when he thought surely *this* time she'd touch down upon him.

Finally Giada did touch down. She moaned louder than Kentucky *and* the music as her valley skimmed suggestively over his mountain range, allowing them to feel each other in the most intimate of ways.

"I need to touch you now," Kentucky said, not even waiting for permission as he grabbed her bottom with both hands and squeezed her closer. His hips thrust upwards in invitation.

"Yes, baby," Giada agreed, issuing that permission anyway before negotiating a compromise. "But let me drive, okay?"

"Okay. This is your show tonight," Kentucky said, stilling his hips. After giving her bottom one more firm squeeze, he released it and then moved his hands upwards to her breasts.

Moving all necessary items of clothing out the way, Giada joined them with deft fingers. She didn't even have to look down to do it either, having memorized the planes of his body by now.

Then, returning her arms to Kentucky's neck, she used that hold as leverage to ride him very, very slowly.

Down.

Down.

Down Giada went, causing sweat to break out on Kentucky's forehead. His mouth gaped open, but no words came out.

Up.

Up.

Up Giada rose, moving just as slowly, drawing out every second of their coupling. There was something special about tonight. There was something that demanded this unhurried

pace so that every movement, every nuance could be thoroughly committed to memory.

Groaning loudly, Kentucky seemed to feel the difference in tonight, as well. Thankfully he didn't dare rush the moment by prompting a slamfest. Instead he allowed Giada to maintain the pace she'd set while his mouth feasted upon her neck and plump melons.

Kentucky's hands got in on the action by roaming up and down Giada's back, giving her any extra support she needed. Every now and then those hands would dip lower to squeeze her bottom. She liked that he never forgot to do that.

With their simultaneous moans penetrating the air around them, Giada picked up the pace. She also increased the force behind her thrusts. The rotation of her thrusts changed as well as she began to ride him hard.

Circular.

Back and forth.

Rocking chair.

Bucking bull.

Oh, yes, Giada rode Kentucky well. She rode him so well that the man actually began to . . .

Cry?

Kentucky didn't actually burst out into tears, but two stubborn drops did escape his glossy eyes and slide down his cheeks.

Suddenly their gazes met and held. Their hips stilled as the moment became even more special.

Giada had never felt more powerful than at this very moment. Yet all she wanted to do was lie at Kentucky's feet.

She was humbled by his potent reaction to her lovemaking. She was proud of the way he didn't look away in shame at his tears.

Leaning close to his face, Giada proceeded to lick those tears away in a slow upwards track. By the time she made it up to his right eyelid, Kentucky was breathing hard and sweating profusely as he fought for control of himself.

Leaning back a little, Giada gasped at the feral look in his eyes. Her heart hammered in her chest because she knew, she just knew she was going to get it now . . .

In a good way.

In the best way.

* * * *

Overwhelmed by his deep passion and even deeper love for her, Kentucky snatched Giada to him again. Capturing her lips and her hips, he went for broke.

Kentucky was in control now . . . and yet not in control at all as he went wild within her, stroking more fervently than he ever had before. It was a good thing the chair was built sturdily. Otherwise all that rocking would have surely weakened its legs and sent them sailing to the floor.

Giada tightened her hold about Kentucky's neck as he proceeded to teach her what the word union really meant. With each stroke it became abundantly clear that they were no longer two people in this pivotal moment. They were one.

One!

Kentucky and Giada surrendered to ecstasy as one, too. Even their voices rose in unison, drowning out the music still

playing in the background. No doubt neighbors thought wolves were in the area howling at the moon.

When it was over, Giada collapsed against Kentucky's sweat-drenched body and burst into tears. "I love you so much, Kenny," she said, clinging to him. "I'm so glad I met you. I don't know what I'd do without you, baby," she sobbed, still looking in awe of what just happened between them. Fear registered in her eyes about what they stood to lose if they were to ever break up.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby," Kentucky replied, his voice thick with emotion as he ran his soothing hands up and down her back. She was literally trembling as she cried against him. "I belong to you. You belong to me. Nothing is gonna change that," Kentucky continued, still using his hands and his voice to soothe her. "Remember we still have those four kids to raise together?"

"I remember," Giada said, growing increasingly calmer by the second at that reminder of her vision. Her eyes quickly dried.

"All that's left for us to do now is make it official." Kentucky chuckled and added, "I don't know about you, but I think we've already had our honeymoon. Tonight was unbelievable."

Giada chuckled, too. "I think you're right. Tonight was unbelievable." She withdrew to look him in the face. "As for making it official, I can hardly wait to be your wife. By the way, did I ever tell you that I want white doves released at my wedding?"

"Yep. *Many* times," Kentucky said teasingly, very familiar with Giada's wish list like all the other men before him. "I even know what kind of wedding dress you want handmade for that special day."

Giada poked him playfully in the side. "Stop teasing me!"

"Ouch!" Kentucky faked an injury. "Now what I don't know is what kind of lingerie you intend on wearing underneath that lace-trimmed dress."

"That's because I intend on wearing nothing underneath it." Giada smiled slyly and added, "Well, nothing except for an edible thong."

Inhaling sharply, Kentucky's body instantly stirred to life again. "Let's lie down and talk about this edible thong a little bit more," he said, moving to carry her over to the bed for round two.

Giada giggled all the way to the bed. The giggling abruptly stopped when the moaning began. Oh no, nothing was funny now.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

On Monday night, Kentucky called Giada to tell her about a new assignment he'd just been offered. This assignment entailed him protecting a renowned celebrity photographer named Jamie Benedict who was giving up chasing the rich and famous around for a more meaningful mission.

Jamie was going to various war-torn regions in Africa to document the effects that recent civil wars had had on the land and its people. This assignment also required Kentucky to leave within the week and be gone for a month.

"That sounds too dangerous, baby. I don't know if you should take this assignment," Giada said once she'd heard all the details. "Plus, you just got back home from a two-month job. I'm not ready for you to be gone for another month."

"I know, and I don't want to leave so soon either, baby, but the pay is too tempting to pass up. With this client offering to pay me triple my regular fee, plus extra for the risk factors, I could afford to give you the wedding you want and take the whole summer off if I wanted to."

Kentucky left out the fact that he could also afford to compete with Fabian financially after this job. Especially after receiving another piece of news today from the school's administrator, who told him that the first repayment check was in the mail.

"Wow. That much, huh?" Giada said, sounding very impressed by his earning potential before the deeper emotion of fear stepped back in. "Even still, I'm not comfortable with

you putting your life at risk like this. Not for a wedding. Not for anything."

Kentucky chuckled. "Baby, I put my life at risk all the time for my clients. That's what bodyguards do."

"That might be right, but I don't think you've ever put your life this much at risk before. Or have you?"

"This will be my riskiest assignment to date, but I can handle it, baby," Kentucky said self-confidently. "I'm gonna handle it . . . for us. For our future." And just that quick, he'd made his decision.

"Kenny—"

"I've made my decision, Giada," Kentucky interrupted. "I'm going to Africa. Now what I need for you to do is pack up three days' worth of clothes and come over here so we can spend the next few days and nights together."

"And what if I refuse to come?" Giada countered, revealing a bit of temper in her words.

"That's your prerogative, baby, but a month is a long time to be without good loving. You might want something to tide you over until I return. I know I could use something to tide me over," he replied, trying to appeal to her logic, sense of reasoning, and outright sexuality.

"I'll be there in an hour," Giada replied, conceding once again to his will.

* * * *

As Giada traveled to Kentucky's house that night, she couldn't help but wonder if there would ever come a time in their relationship when she finally got *her* way. She had also

decided to enlist his stepmother's help with changing his mind about the upcoming trip. Something about it just hadn't sat right with her.

Unfortunately for Giada, Hannah couldn't change Kentucky's mind no more than she could. He was a man who was used to following his own mind, the same way his father had been. Giada just hoped that Kentucky's strong will didn't lead to his destruction like it had his father.

Hardy Jones died trying to prove that he could still perform the duty of a wiper with speed and precision, even though he had been promoted to yardmaster years ago. The day Hardy accidentally slipped, fell, and hit his head while packing the internal moving parts of a train's engine with grease was the day Hannah thought she would die. She honestly hadn't wanted to live when her husband died.

Giada remembered Hannah's account of that incident well. That account included the fact that Hardy had been her life, her everything, and how no human love had been greater. That was the main reason Hannah remained a widow to this day, refusing to remarry or even date anyone.

Despite Giada's best efforts, that same pattern started to manifest in her life during Kentucky's absence. Though she still got dressed and went to work and school, something about her just wasn't alive anymore. She only felt alive when the phone rang, often beating Hannah to it in hopes that it was Kentucky calling to check in.

Kentucky called to check in every day during that first week away. The second week only three calls were received. The third week, they only heard from him once. Even then,

Hannah only got to speak to him because Giada had class that night and wasn't home at the time. Attempts to reach his cell phone in those deep regions of Africa were unsuccessful.

Yet it was the fourth week that really put Giada on edge. Even Hannah became worried. That was the week they didn't receive any calls from Kentucky at all. Calls to his cell phone were just as fruitless as before.

When Kentucky did not return on the fifth week as planned, they knew something was wrong.

That's when they received . . . the letter.

That same fateful letter almost sent both women over the edge of insanity.

Sadly, that letter was not from Kentucky, but rather about him. It was from Jamie Benedict, stating that Kentucky had been killed trying to protect him during an uprising. Jamie offered his condolences and told the grieving women that he would see about getting Kentucky's ashes transferred immediately.

"Ashes?" Giada exclaimed after reading the letter aloud.

Hannah had been too emotional to finish it past the word "died."

"They didn't wait to contact us first before cremating his body?"

"Us?" Hannah shrieked with wild eyes of pain. "Don't you mean contact *me*? I'm his next of kin, not you. He never married you, remember? Matter of fact, it's because of *you* that he took that job in the first place. You and your materialism. My son would be home and alive today had he

not been trying to give you some fancy life that you don't even deserve! You're the reason my Kenny is dead!"

Giada gasped in shock. No words fell from her lips in response as Hannah hurried from the room in tears. What could she say?

Giada *was* the reason Kentucky had taken this assignment. Her and her need for things, the high life, everything that no longer mattered now that Kentucky was dead.

Dead.

Giada still couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that her beloved Kentucky was gone. Had his giant body really been reduced to mere ashes? Was he never to be held again? Never to be kissed again? Was he truly gone?

Doing the only thing she could think of at the moment, Giada went to the bedroom she occupied, packed up a few things, got Mercedes, and left. She thought about going to a hotel, but since she didn't want to be alone right now, she called Velicity and asked if she could crash at her place for the night.

Tomorrow . . . well, Giada would deal with that when it came.

* * * *

Kentucky's funeral was held a week later. It was a simple funeral, held at the small church Hannah was a member of. Yet for all of its simplicity, the funeral was attended by important people not just in Miami, but from all over the world. Some of those people Kentucky had protected over the years. His Georgia and Kentucky relatives were there as well.

Even though Hannah had apologized for her emotional outburst the other day, Giada did not sit by her on the front row of the church. She sat all the way in the back where Velocity was.

In Giada's mind, she didn't deserve any position of prestige. She barely deserved to attend the funeral of so wonderful a man. She definitely didn't deserve the large engagement ring on her finger, which is why Giada sold it and gave the money to Kentucky's school in his memory.

Giada also sold her house on Wilmington Street for two times what it was worth. She would have liked to have sold it to the nice family who had been renting it for the last year, but they were not prepared to buy yet.

However, Giada did make provisions for her former renters by including a clause in her contract insisting that the new owner honor the current lease agreement she had with the Devines. This gave the tenants at least another year to rent at the current rate.

With that money, Giada was able to move out of Velocity's place. That was where she'd been staying after moving the rest of her things from the Joneses' house.

Instead of buying another house, Giada leased a modest apartment and put the rest of her funds in a high-interest-bearing account. She'd learned a hard lesson about the dangers of materialism. Being materialistic had cost her too much. It had cost her everything.

Thankfully, Giada's specialty business was growing, and her educational expenses were paid for from now until she obtained her law degree. It seemed that the anonymous

benefactor of her scholarship was so pleased with her 4.0 grade point average that he/she decided to offer support for her remaining matriculation in law school.

As for her relationship with Hannah, though Giada called to check on Kentucky's stepmother at least twice a week, she had yet to see her again. She couldn't. Guilt and shame prevented her from going anywhere near the Jones house ever again.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Three months later

"Giada, are you going to finally put that man out of his misery and go out with him?" Velocity asked over lunch that breezy September day.

Giada shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just not feeling Fabian that way anymore. I'm really not feeling any man. Not since . . ." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes watered.

"Kentucky," Velocity finished for her.

Giada nodded and blinked away her tears.

"But wouldn't Kentucky want you to be happy? From what I can see, Fabian is willing to make you more than happy. He's sent you flowers every day since . . . since it all happened." There was no need for Velocity to mention what "it" was. That would only cause Giada to start crying again. She'd cried enough over the last three months.

"Kenny would love for me to be happy," Giada replied. "But not with Fabian. He despised the man and his effect on me. He particularly hated how Fabian catered to my selfish side."

"Has Fabian been catering to your selfish side lately? From what you've told me, he's been a great comfort to you over the last few months. How he calls just to check on you and how he's always willing to listen to you, even if it's about Kentucky."

Giada nodded. Velocity had a point there. Fabian had been very understanding about her grieving process. He'd even

bought her a special journal so that she could process her feelings about her loss on paper when the need arose.

"Maybe Fabian has turned over a new leaf, too. You certainly have." Velocity chuckled. "The old Giada and I would have *never* been friends. Now look at us, going to lunch together and everything. We even stayed together for a little while."

Giada laughed, too. "What are you, on Fabian's payroll or something? You sure are trying to sell him pretty hard to me."

"I *wish* I was on his payroll." Velocity smiled. "I'm just trying to get you out of this funk you've been in for the last three months. Cutting yourself off from men altogether may have worked for Mrs. Jones, but I don't think that it's the best thing for you. You're supposed to be somebody's wife, somebody's mother, Giada. I'm reminded of that every time I see you with Mercedes."

Giada's eyes welled up again as she was suddenly reminded of that open-eye vision. She had been somebody's wife in that vision—Kentucky's. She had been somebody's mother—the mother of Kentucky's offspring.

What happened to that vision?

It perished with Kentucky.

"Will you at least think about it, Giada?" Velocity said, dragging her friend from her deep thoughts.

"Yes," Giada replied, blinking her eyes free again. "I'll think about moving on with my life." *Even though I definitely don't want to*, she added to herself.

* * * *

Giada's first official date with Fabian was far from private. Everywhere they went there were cameras. This was so different from how it had been when they dated the first time. Back then Bartley used to make sure Fabian entered every event alone with Giada showing up later and using side entrances. Now she walked the red carpet alongside Fabian.

Speaking of Bartley, he had been demoted to just manager. After withholding that information about Kentucky and Giada all those months ago, Fabian hired someone else to be his assistant. That new assistant was a gray-haired woman he'd gotten from an agency. Mrs. Williams knew how to do her job well. Most importantly, she knew how to stay out of Fabian's personal affairs.

Giada actually had fun on her date with Fabian, or as much fun as she could have considering her lingering grief. At the end of the date, she agreed to go out with Fabian again. It was kind of hard to refuse after he presented her with the deed to her old house.

It turned out that Fabian had been behind the sale of Giada's house on Wilmington Street. He had a real estate agent outbid all other offers on the house to make sure he personally got it.

"Why did you want my house so badly?" Giada asked as they sat in the black limo outside of her apartment that night.

"I bought it out of concern for your financial welfare," Fabian replied. "I knew you didn't have any close family. I didn't want you to suffer any hardship while you were still in school."

Giada nodded, though she didn't fully believe that his intentions were that pure. If they were, why hadn't he presented her with the deed before now? Why wait and use it as a bargaining tool to get another date?

"So I'll see you next Friday at seven?" Fabian asked, leaning towards her for a goodnight kiss.

"Y . . . Yes." Giada cleared her throat and then braced herself for a kiss that she absolutely didn't want. But then again, how could she refuse? The man had just given her the deed to her Wilmington Street house.

Allowing Fabian's kiss, Giada determined how far it would go by pursing her lips tightly together. There would be no French kissing of any kind tonight. It was still too soon for her.

As Giada quickly said goodnight to Fabian and prepared to exit the limo, she realized that it would take some more time before she was ready to start fully kissing another man. Kentucky's brand was still too heavy upon her lips, upon her whole body.

Sometimes in the stillness of the night, Giada could vividly recall how it felt to kiss her deceased fiance, how it felt to make love to him. Tonight was one of those nights.

Giada thought about making love to Kentucky all through tonight's shower and even as she prepared for bed. The tips of her bosom became taut at the memory of Kentucky's lips. She recalled the unique way he had of tasting them, making her hotter than hot and wetter than wet every time.

Giada's inner muscles clenched with need at the memory of what it felt like to slide down Kentucky's length. The man

had been big everywhere, and she'd loved every tanned inch of his beautiful body. It hadn't mattered where they made love, in a shed, in a friend's Jacuzzi, or on a lounge chair on his patio, it had been great every time.

"I miss you so much, Kenny," Giada whispered into the quiet room.

Hearing her master's voice, Mercedes lifted her head from her doggy pillow in inquiry.

"Go back to sleep. I'm still not talking to you, young lady," Giada scolded. Her passion waned as she was reminded of the cell phone Mercedes destroyed tonight.

Thoroughly rebuked, the dog whimpered and put her head back down on her pillow. Fortunately, everything would be right as rain between them again by the morning.

With her mind now free from all erotic thoughts, Giada focused on business matters instead. Tomorrow she would get the house on Wilmington Street officially and legally turned back over to her. From experience she knew that Fabian always acted in Fabian's best interest, even in his gift-giving. Giada wasn't about to give him legal room to take the house back just in case she decided to cancel her second date with him.

Sighing wearily at even the thought of going out with Fabian again, Giada's mind returned to Kentucky. *I really miss you, baby*, she mused, speaking that lament in her heart.

* * * *

Thousands of miles away and across a wide ocean, someone was missing Giada. That someone was Kentucky.

That's right, Kentucky Jones was *not* dead. In fact, he was in the jungles of Africa, tying down the legs of a wild boar right now.

Three months ago, Kentucky was almost as dead as the wild animal he'd just killed. Yet he miraculously survived that hard blow to the head and a near-fatal bullet to the chest. Kentucky also survived the raging fever that accompanied those injuries and the months of amnesia when he didn't even know who he was, much less who anyone else was.

Now that Kentucky's mind was clear again and his strength well enough to travel, he was making arrangements to go home. He was going home to his stepmother . . . home to Giada.

Yet before Kentucky could get to either of them, he had to say a proper good-bye to the old medicine man who had taken care of him these last three months. This was the same man who discovered Kentucky's body still breathing among a pile of corpses prepared to be burned, took him home, and nursed him back to health.

Despite their different ethnicities, Malik treated Kentucky like a son during the months of his memory loss, renamed him Kosey, aka Lion, and instructed him in the ways of their village and herbal medicine. Kentucky could never repay Malik for what he'd done. Yet he certainly would try as soon as he got back to civilization.

If only that track back to civilization didn't require a long ride to the nearest city on the back of a donkey. After that, another hundred fifty miles to the nearest U.S. embassy.

I don't care how long it takes. I'm getting back to the women I love, Kentucky decided as he turned and made his way back to Malik's hut.

The large boar he carried on his back would feed many families tonight. This included the family of the arrogant young protege who had recently replaced Malik as head medicine man, although he couldn't speak fluent English like his predecessor nor did he have the same level of experience.

Before Kentucky arrived, Malik had to fend for himself in the war-ravished village of refugees. Having lost his wife to disease a year after he lost his son, Malik soon found himself losing the faith of the people in his healing abilities. The chief even demoted him to the task of herb collector.

When Malik proved that he could bring someone as big and as gravely ill as Kentucky back from the brink of death, people started to have faith in him again. As a result, instead of leaving the village in shame when Kentucky eventually sent for him in America, Malik would now be able to leave with honor.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The first person Hannah thought of when she received that fateful call from Kentucky was Giada. But with all the recent publicity surrounding Fabian and Giada's romance in the press, Hannah didn't dare get in contact with her. She didn't want to disturb the young woman's newfound happiness. Plus, with Giada only maintaining contact twice a month instead of twice a week like before, Hannah truly believed that there was little room in Giada's life for any of the Joneses these days.

Hannah also didn't dare tell Kentucky that Giada was no longer waiting for him. She didn't want to devastate her stepson over the phone. She didn't want to devastate him at all after all he'd been through in Africa, but some things were inevitable.

Thus Hannah would wait until Kentucky got back to the States to tell him the sad news. She would break it to him as easily as possible, then stand by his side and do whatever she could to help him recover from that hard emotional blow.

* * * *

Kentucky came home three days later. He smiled as soon as he saw his stepmother at the airport. Lifting Hannah's petite frame into his arms, he gave her a big bear hug and whispered how much he loved her.

As soon as Kentucky put his stepmother down, he asked, "Where's Giada?" He turned hopeful eyes to the crowd of people around them, scanning for any signs of his fiancée.

Hannah took a deep breath, blew it out, and said, "She's not coming, son."

Kentucky frowned. "Not coming?" he roared. "What do you mean she's not coming?" he continued in a lowered tone after drawing unnecessary attention their way. "Didn't she *want* to come?"

Hannah took another deep breath. "I didn't tell her you were alive, Kenny."

Kentucky pulled his stepmother off to the side for more privacy. "Why, Mama? Why didn't you tell Giada about me?"

"She went back to him, son," Hannah said, deliberately not referring to Fabian by name.

"Him as in Fabian Flow?" Kentucky asked, needing to be sure.

"Yes. Their relationship is all over the newspapers, on magazine covers, and on TV. Truthfully, I thought telling Giada about you would only cause problems and more pain for you. After all you've been through in your life, I wanted to spare you as much new pain as possible." Hannah took another deep breath and exhaled. "I'm so sorry, son."

Kentucky felt tears prick his eyes. His mouth went into a straight line. He looked away, took several deep breaths, and blinked his eyes clear.

When Kentucky had regained his composure, he squared his shoulders and turned back to his stepmother. "No wonder

she was never at the house when I called," he said, stubbornly setting his jaw.

"I hated lying to you, son. I just couldn't tell you all this over the phone."

"I guess he got her another cell phone number, too, because I never could reach her that way, either. I never had Giada's work number," Kentucky said matter-of-factly. Though his initial response was an emotional one, he now acted as if he didn't care that the love of his life had moved on without him.

Why should he care? A part of him had expected this kind of thing from Giada.

"Kenny, are you gonna be okay?" Hannah asked with concern in her eyes. She touched his left arm to get his attention.

Kentucky gave her a tender smile. "I'm fine, Mama." He put his arm about her shoulders. "I've survived so much over the last three months. I'm confident I'll survive a broken heart, too."

A glossy-eyed Hannah nodded and snuggled against him as they walked towards the nearest exit.

There was no luggage to get. The tote bag on Kentucky's shoulder was all he'd brought back from Africa. All of his other belongings had been sent to Hannah months ago.

On their way to the house on Wilmington Street, since Kentucky's home had been sold last month, they talked about his African experience. They talked a lot about Malik and about the promise Kentucky made to bring him to America. It was Hannah who brought up the issue of finances.

"Kenny, you do know that, even after sending the life insurance money back, you are now richer than you ever were before," Hannah said. "Your 'death' brought in donations from all over the world, and the school was able to repay every dime you spent on establishing it. The sale of your house generated triple what you paid for it. I have it all just waiting for you in a high-interest account, minus what I took out to pay for the remainder of Giada's education. I hope you don't mind about that last thing."

Kentucky's jaw tightened for a brief moment before it relaxed again. "That's fine. It was what I would have done for her anyway. But tell me this. Did you increase her scholarship fund before or *after* she started dating him?"

"Before. I wouldn't have given her a brown cent if she was with another man at the time," she added in a fiery tone.

Kentucky chuckled. "Atta girl," he said, so glad that he'd kept his stepmother as his beneficiary.

Knowing that Giada wasn't somewhere wasting his hard-earned money with another man was comforting to him somehow. "By the way, what did you do with that wedding ring I entrusted you with before my trip to Africa?"

"I still have it. I didn't think it was appropriate to give it to Giada considering everything. And I didn't want to get rid of it because of how much thought you put into having it made."

"It's yours now, Mama." Kentucky frowned at the memory of exactly how much thought he'd put into that ring. "And, Mama, let's make this the last day we discuss Giada ever again, okay?"

Hannah frowned. "Okay, son," she replied solemnly.

Pretty Packages
by Mi'Chelle Dodson

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Decembe

Giada returned home alone after eating a late lunch with Fabian. They'd been dating for three months now, and she still couldn't seem to give him anything beyond a kiss.

Giada knew Fabian was getting impatient, but she really didn't care. She'd have sex when she was good and ready. When Fabian asked when would that be, she told him that she didn't know.

Giada then went on to suggest that he start seeing someone else who was ready for that type of relationship with him. Fabian quickly backed off the whole subject of sex and insisted that he could wait after all. That Giada was worth waiting for. Then he asked her to go away with him for the Christmas weekend two weeks from now.

I should have told him no. Giada went over to her fridge for a container of bottled water for Mercedes, who was still sleeping in her pink-and-white princess bed in the corner.

I need to just stop kidding myself, Giada thought. *Kentucky was my one great love. I'm never going to get another one like that. And if by some miracle I do, I'm pretty sure Fabian ain't it.*

Thinking of Kentucky caused Giada to also think of Hannah Jones. Guilt pricked her heart at the fact that she hadn't called to check on Kentucky's stepmother in a long while. Nearly two months to be exact.

Deciding to do so now, Giada picked up her house phone and dialed. She never used her cell phone in the apartment anymore. She stopped keeping it in open sight after Mercedes dumped the old one in the toilet on a particularly mischievous night three months ago.

"She should be home from church and cooking dinner by now." Giada estimated aloud, still going by Hannah's old Sunday schedule.

Someone picked up on the second ring. It was a man. It was a very familiar-sounding man.

Giada pulled the phone back from her right ear, looked at it in shock, and then slowly put it back to her ear again. Surely that wasn't Kentucky's voice she just heard. He was supposed to be dead, right?

"H-Hello? May I speak to Mrs. Jones please?" Giada said haltingly.

"She's not here right now, Giada. I'll tell her you called," Kentucky replied, addressing her by name.

Giada swallowed hard. "Kenny, is that you, baby?" she squeezed out in a whisper. Surely she was losing her mind.

"Yep," Kentucky replied, confirming that it was indeed him.

Not saying another word, Giada slammed the phone down. Then she grabbed her purse, scooped up her dog, and headed over to Wilmington Street.

* * * *

As Kentucky hung up the phone, he had the sneaking suspicion that Giada was on her way over to his stepmother's

house. Considering her impatient and impulsive nature, he expected her to rush right over after that shocking phone call.

In a way, Kentucky wanted to see Giada again. He wanted to see if she was still just as beautiful as he remembered. Plus, after months of refusing interviews and staying close to his stepmother's house while continuing to rebuild his physical strength, he was starting to go a little stir-crazy hiding out from the world, particularly from her.

Giada was bound to find out Kentucky was alive sometime. She most certainly would find out when he went on a promotional tour after the book he'd been working on about his experiences in Africa was published. Why not just reveal his survival to her today and get it over with? What harm could it do at this stage in the game?

Hopefully not much harm, Kentucky thought, recalling how he felt a few minutes ago when Giada issued that unexpected endearment. He'd had to brace himself against it. That fact that it had sounded so genuine had heat sweeping over his body even now.

No woman had ever affected Kentucky as much as Giada. He seriously doubted another woman could at this point.

* * * *

Giada got to the Jones residence within ten minutes. She took back roads and sped all the way there.

Ringling Hannah's doorbell three times in a row, Giada waited impatiently on the front porch for someone to answer. Mercedes, who'd been let out of her arms by now, scratched at the door of the familiar house.

Soon Kentucky's large frame filled the doorway.

Giada inhaled sharply at the sight of him. "So you *are* alive! You're alive."

Tears of joy swam in her eyes as she took in the sight of Kentucky in that white T-shirt, gray sweatpants, and white socks. Had she come thirty minutes earlier, she might have seen him in the black designer suit he'd worn to church today.

Giada didn't care what Kentucky had on. He would have looked good in anything right now, standing there as fine as ever and alive.

Alive!

"Yes, I am very much alive," Kentucky replied evenly.

"How? Why didn't your mother tell me?" Pain saturated Giada's eyes to discover that she'd been cut off from news this important.

"Mama didn't think you knowing I was alive would matter much, considering the fact that you've moved on with your life and all," Kentucky said with a neutral face and voice.

Giada's cheeks felt hot with shame that she hadn't followed her gut and just waited a while longer before dating anyone. "It would have mattered, Kenny. A lot," she finally replied, feeling moisture well up in her eyes.

"As for how I survived, it was nothing short of a miracle," Kentucky replied, seeming to deliberately ignore her last statement, her teary pools, and Mercedes's scratching at the bottom of the door.

What was wrong with the man? Didn't he feel anything for them at all anymore?

"After getting amnesia from a hard blow to the head, a serious wound and infection from a shot to the chest, I'm fortunate to not only be alive, but to also be in my right mind. Had it not been for God's mercy and a medicine man named Malik, I would not have survived," Kentucky continued.

Tears rolled down Giada's cheeks now. "Oh, Kenny. I had no idea you'd gone through so much."

"No one did," he said curtly. "Now if that's all . . ."
Kentucky moved back as if he was about to close the door.

"All?" Giada exclaimed, leaning closer to the locked screen door. "How can that be all, Kenny? I haven't seen you in months. Can I come inside and talk a little bit more with you? At least get a hug or something?"

"No," Kentucky quickly replied.

"N-No?" Giada's lips trembled out that word as her eyes widened with shock.

* * * *

Slamming his eyes shut, Kentucky took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The sight of Giada's shapely body in that royal blue pantsuit was just too tempting for him. His hands twitched to touch her.

"No has to be my answer, Giada," Kentucky said, opening his eyes a few seconds later to reveal the torment therein. There would be no more hiding his feelings. There were simply too many of them bombarding him at once.

"Why, Kenny?" Giada whispered in an anguished tone.

"If I let you in, if I so much as *touch* you, I'm gonna forget that you didn't wait for me," Kentucky replied. "I'm gonna

forget that you went back to a man that I despise. I'm gonna forget a lot of things that I need to remember in order to keep my sanity, to keep moving on with my own life."

"I'm sorry I didn't wait longer for you, Kenny." Giada pressed up against the screen door in desperation. Who cared that it was broad daylight and that anyone walking past could see her humbled to the core?

"I will always regret listening to the advice of others by stepping back into the dating pool too soon after your supposed death," Giada continued. "But that's all I've done is step back in. I haven't swum in that pool at all. The only thing I've done is go out with Fabian, exchange a few kisses here and there, but nothing else. I haven't even allowed the man to get in a quick feel, and I definitely don't love him. I love you, Kenny. You!" She banged on the screen door with high emotion at the end.

"Giada, please—" Kentucky began. His felt his own eyes fill with moisture now as unbridled love filled his heart.

"No, let me finish," Giada interrupted in a lower tone this time. "I know it doesn't seem like I waited on you, but I actually did. My heart and my body have been temporarily on hold until the man that owns them both came to reclaim them. You're that man, Kenny. I have never stopped loving you. I have never stopped wanting you inside of me." Giada licked her lips and whispered, "I want you inside of me so bad right now that it hurts, baby. It hurts."

Kentucky moaned with need. His body was stiff and on fire with desire. He ran a hand from his forehead to his chin,

trying to regain some composure. "I can't share you, Giada. I never could."

His voice was a deep, husky whisper. "Besides, the world thinks you're his. *He* thinks you're his."

"I could care less what the world thinks," Giada snapped, wiping her face free of tears. "As for Fabian . . ." She took a step back from the screen, snatched open her purse, and pulled out her new cell phone. Within seconds she had dialed Fabian's number and pressed the speaker so that Kentucky could hear the conversation, too.

"Hey, baby," Fabian said, obviously recognizing her number on his caller ID.

"Listen, Fabian, I just called to say I'm not going to be going out with you anymore, so please don't send me any gifts, cards, or anything else to try to change my mind. It's over between us, for good this time," Giada said, speaking into the phone, but looking right at Kentucky.

"Can you at least tell me why? What did I do wrong?" Fabian asked, sounding very upset.

"Kenny's back, and if he'll have me, I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him," Giada concluded before hanging up the call. "Does that prove where my heart is? Where I want my body to be?" she asked Kentucky.

Before he could get a word out, her cell phone rang. It was Fabian calling back.

"Move out the way, Mercedes," Giada told her dog, who'd long since settled upon the porch to watch the humans interact.

When the obedient pup moved to the left, Kentucky watched as Giada threw the cell phone down on the porch and began to stomp on it with all of her might. Every stomp healed another section of his broken heart. The stomping didn't end until the phone made no sound at all. Even the lighted panel was destroyed.

"Well, are you going to answer my questions or not?" a breathless Giada asked, looking at Kentucky again as her large bosom moved up and down from her emotional and physical exertion.

In response, Kentucky unlocked the screen door and snatched Giada into his arms. "I love you so much," he whispered, lifting her upon his waist.

"I love you, too," Giada whispered back and then literally attacked his lips right there on the front porch.

As Kentucky melted into that scorching kiss, Mercedes darted inside the house through the open door and began to leap happily upon the familiar furniture she encountered.

Meanwhile, the kissing couple started to grind against each other with ferocious need. With two large handfuls of Giada's plump bottom, Kentucky squeezed and pressed her closer still. He wanted, needed her as close as possible.

They were abruptly reminded of where they were when Mrs. Connors blew her car horn in passing.

"Let's go to my room, baby," a breathless Kentucky suggested after reluctantly breaking the kiss.

"Under the circumstances, I think we might have to break Mama's rule today."

Giada shook her head. "No, let's go get married first. If I've learned nothing else all these months, it's that life is too short to waste one minute of it with the wrong person and on the pursuit of material things. I want to be your wife the next time we make love. I don't care if we have to fly all the way to Vegas to do it. My treat."

Kentucky smiled at her answer. "We won't have to travel any farther than Judge Beasley's house," he replied, calling the name of a former client of his whose life he'd protected once during a high-profile drug lord case.

Giada grinned. "It pays to have friends in high places, huh?"

"Definitely." Kentucky chuckled, feeling like a new man already.

Then, after retrieving Mercedes and locking the house up, they went to Judge Beasley's home and got married right there in the man's living room. All waiting periods and fees were waived in light of what Kentucky had done for the judge and considering what he'd been through recently. It didn't even matter that today was Sunday. Nor did it matter that there was no exchange of rings. Only uniting in love and by law mattered today.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Upon tying the knot of matrimony, Kentucky brought Giada back to his stepmother's house. It was closer, stood no chance of Fabian dropping over, and was more private than a hotel, where someone would recognize Giada from her appearances with Fabian.

After making sure Mercedes had a nice bowl of water and her favorite play toy from Giada's purse, the newlyweds disappeared into Kentucky's bedroom. The guest room was where Malik resided ever since he was brought over from Africa two months ago. He and Hannah hit it off from the start and were actually out on a date right now.

The door had barely closed behind them and the light had barely been turned on before Kentucky commenced to removing Giada's clothes with hasty fingers. She gasped as her shirt was suddenly yanked apart, causing buttons to fly everywhere. Instead of being angry about the ruining of her expensive garment, she smiled at his aggression.

"Do you know that it was your name on my lips that signaled to Malik that I was alive among that pile of corpses?" Kentucky shared as his hands continued to disrobe her.

"Was it?"

"Yes." Kentucky bent to lick her taut peaks through her black, lacy bra, causing her to moan.

"Malik thought I was saying Da-Da over and over again. He saw it as a sign from God that he'd been given another

son to replace the one that had died in a past war." As he spoke, he unhooked her bra and flung it away.

Giada's moans increased in volume when he began to cater to her breasts just the way she liked. Oh, the man was so talented with his mouth, with his everything.

"It wasn't until months later that Malik overheard me talking in my sleep," Kentucky continued, moving his hands down to unfasten her pants. "It was then that he heard your name pronounced the right way. When he told me about it the next day, my memory instantly started to return. Within a week, I had it all back."

"Amazing!" Giada panted out as he reached inside her pants and stroked her through her thong.

"Yes, it was. I can't tell you how often I thought about *this* since I got my memory back." His probing fingers dipped inside at the word "this."

Giada moaned and spread her legs wide to give him more access. "So my name helped you get rescued *and* to get your memory back?" She was literally trembling with need now.

"Yes," Kentucky whispered huskily as he strummed her guitar. As if on cue, her hips immediately began to move to the rhythm he started. "I should have known then that I was meant to have a future with you," he continued. "My faith in us wavered when I returned to find you back with *him*."

"Now *that's* something I wish you could forget," Giada replied. To help him along, she pushed her pants downward and stepped out of them. She'd long since stepped out of her shoes.

Kentucky chuckled. "I will once I'm inside of you again. But first I need to do a few things that I've been dreaming about for months."

"What's th—" Giada started before her words were overshadowed by a loud rip.

Kentucky had torn her thong off. Completely off!

Giada's body was on fire for sure now. Leaping upon him, she wrapped her arms and legs possessively around his neck and waist. She attacked his mouth with her lips. It was time to get down to the business at hand.

* * * *

Kentucky welcomed Giada's probing tongue into his mouth. He lowered his hands to possessively squeeze her bottom. He allowed a few fingers to return to her playground and frolic, doing everything they could to make her head spin with desire like a merry-go-round.

That kiss lingered for the longest time as their tongues entwined. "I love you's" were sprinkled intermittently.

"Mmm . . . you smell just like I remembered," Kentucky said, inhaling deeply of her scent as they paused the kiss to catch their breaths. "You feel the same too." He squeezed her bottom again and then her breasts. "I wonder if you still taste the same."

"You've already tasted me," Giada said as he lifted her higher. "But I don't mind if you get another taste," she added, looking down expectedly at her bosom.

Kentucky gave her a heated look. "I haven't tasted you nearly enough," he replied and then descended upon her breasts again.

The ravenous man didn't stop there, though. He lifted Giada higher until her legs were about his neck and her head nearly touching the ceiling. Then he proceeded to sample every fruit in her garden.

Giada's eyes rolled in the back of her head at his delightful deeds. That was Kentucky's intent. He wanted his squeezing, kneading, and feasting to drive her wild. He wanted to make her shudder with release within a few short minutes.

With her body still trembling with liberation, Kentucky lowered Giada upon his waist again, pushed his sweatpants and briefs down, and joined her to the hilt. They both cried out in bliss.

He began a myriad of thrusts.

Slow.

Long.

Hard.

Fast.

All were meant to inflame both bodies. They did . . . immensely.

"Yes, Kenny! Love me, baby. Love me, baby," Giada urged as she received everything he had to offer her.

Kentucky was insatiable. Even after he went over the edge, he kept going, pausing only briefly to carry her to the bed. Not even breaking the connection, he laid her down and

picked back up where he left off. Using the bed as leverage, Kentucky handled his business in a major way.

"Kennnnny!" Giada said, going over the edge the second time with a loud scream.

Kentucky didn't muffle that one. He wanted to hear her scream his name in ecstasy. He dreamed of her doing so for months now. "Yes, baby, let the whole world know who you belong to," he said, plowing into her even more fervently.

Giada wasted no time doing just that as another scream of ecstasy burst from her throat.

* * * *

"What was *that*?" Malik asked Hannah as they entered the house at the exact moment of Giada's second scream.

"Based on the extra car parked in the driveway and that puppy running up and down the hallway like he has lost his mind, I'd say my son finally got his woman back," Hannah replied, unable to suppress her smile of approval. "They just better be ready to get married first thing in the morning for violating one of my main house rules." She led the way into the den and turned the TV up real loud to drown out the noise coming from Kentucky's bedroom.

"House rules? What are those?" Malik asked, looking very interested in these Western ways and particularly in this beautiful Western woman.

"Things that one is allowed or not allowed to do in my home," Hannah explained, sitting down on the sofa. By now she was used to the inquisitive man's constant questions as

he strove to learn the American language better and American customs as a whole.

"Which rule is Kenny violating tonight?" Malik sat down beside her.

"No unmarried sex under my roof."

"Oh, I see." Malik grew thoughtful. "So that means I would have to marry you to have sex with you here, is that right?"

Hannah's eyes widened in shock. "You want to have sex with me?"

"Very much so. From the moment I laid eyes on you. You are a very beautiful woman. I would have paid many goats for you."

Hannah smiled at his blunt honesty. "Let's stick to courting for a little bit longer, shall we? And for the record, you would have to marry me to have sex with me *anywhere* since I don't practice sex outside of marriage at all. Got that?"

"Got what?" Malik looked confused.

Hannah chuckled. "Did you get the meaning of the words I just said?"

Malik smiled wide. "Yes, yes, I did. We court for a while longer. Then I marry you, and we have lots of sex."

Hannah roared with laughter that time. "Follow me in the kitchen. I think you need some ice cream or something to cool your hormones down," she said, rising to her feet.

A few minutes later, Hannah gasped in shock and then clapped her hands excitedly with joy. She'd seen the note Kentucky attached to the refrigerator announcing his nuptials. "They got married, Malik. Married!"

Malik smiled. "This is good."

Yes, it was all good.

* * * *

Back in the bedroom, the lovers still hadn't taken a break yet. Now it was Giada's turn to live out a few fantasies. The first thing she did was straddle Kentucky and ride him until her body exploded with passion's release again. Lying upon him while she caught her breath, she kissed every inch of his bare chest. His shirt had been long since removed in the heat of passion.

Giada lingered the most at that scar on Kentucky's chest where the bullet went in before exiting his body through his back. No vital organs were damaged, but being wounded in an area of the world that had no modern medicines had caused complications on its own.

"I am so grateful for this man called Malik," Giada said, kissing that spot again.

"Don't forget about God," Kentucky added. "It was *He* that led Malik to me in the first place. It was also He that allowed me to find my way back home to my loved ones."

"Well, He's definitely made a believer out of me." Giada lifted her head to look up into his eyes. "I think I'm going to start attending church with your mother after this."

"Good, because I've been going ever since I returned. Haven't missed a Sunday yet." Kentucky chuckled. "I have a lot to be thankful for."

"We both do." Giada laid her head upon his beating heart and sighed in contentment.

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Chapter Thirty

Private investigator Lloyd Graham had gotten a last night call from his most annoying client ever—Fabian Flow. It seemed Fabian couldn't locate his ladylove again, which was the original reason Lloyd had been hired in the first place. It didn't take the skilled private investigator long to discover that Giada was at the home of Kentucky's stepmother.

"Her car was a dead giveaway," Lloyd said, relaying that information to his client as he drove past the Jones house at 10 a.m. Monday morning. He still had all the addresses of Giada's associates on file and so had driven past each location after being told that she wasn't at work today. "It looks like she might have spent the night at the Jones property."

"She mentioned something about going back to her old flame, but Kentucky Jones is supposed to be dead. Find out if that has suddenly changed since I have heard nothing to the contrary in the news," Fabian instructed. "As usual, I'm willing to pay any price for your services."

"Sir, if you don't mind me asking, why would a man like you even *want* a woman that keeps going back to another guy?"

"Because I love her," Fabian said quietly. "And because nobody takes what's mine!" he added in a harder tone.

"Maybe it's not love at all. Matter of fact, it actually sounds more like obsession to me. In which case it's probably better for you to move on anyway," Lloyd advised. He was trying to get his client to abandon this search since it was probably

going to be a waste of his time and Fabian's money to continue along this path. Giada was obviously with the man she wanted to be with.

"Just do your job!" Fabian snapped before abruptly concluding the call.

Lloyd frowned. If there was anything he hated more than a stupid client, it was a rude client. Fabian had just proven that he was both.

You'll get your latest information. After this, I'm closing your case forever, Lloyd decided with finality.

* * * *

Inside the Jones house, Giada sat at the dining room table with her new family, enjoying her day off.

The word "family" included Malik, too, since Kentucky had all but adopted him and based on the amorous way Malik kept looking at Hannah. Mercedes was outside in the fenced backyard enjoying the warm December day.

Although they had finished eating breakfast a while ago, the foursome stayed at the table and conversed. No subject was off-limits.

"Giada, I just want it to be known how sorry I am about not telling you about Kenny still being alive," Hannah said. "As a mother, I was trying to protect my son from more hurt. Had I known that you still felt so strongly about Kenny, I would have told you the first night I heard the good news."

Giada reached across the table and held her mother-in-law's soft hand. "All is forgiven, Mama Jones," she replied, making use of the new nickname she'd given Kentucky's

stepmother. "I probably would have done the same thing if I saw my son's ex-fiancee all over the media with another man." Giada squeezed Hannah's hand fondly before releasing it. "To be honest, even though I know Fabian was doing that as a way to officially stake his claim on me, I didn't bother to stop him because it served an important purpose for me, too."

"It helped you get more recognition at your job?" Kentucky asked from beside her. Like Giada, he knew how important social status was at the firm she worked for. He knew how the partners protected their status in society almost as much as they protected their freaky private lives.

Giada turned to him and smiled. "No, baby. My work ethic and a few other things"—she paused to glance briefly at her chest—"get me all the recognition I need on the job."

"I bet." Kentucky chuckled huskily, staring hungrily at her bosom in the long black T-shirt he'd lent her after her morning shower.

Giada felt a rush of heat envelop her at his sizzling perusal, at the way he kept licking his lips. "What was I saying again?" she asked, turning to Hannah again. Giada had lost all train of thought just that quick.

Hannah and Malik laughed.

"You were saying that all that publicity served an important purpose for you," Hannah prompted.

"Yes," Giada replied, now firmly back on track. "All that publicity kept other men from trying to pursue me since I was already supposed to be 'spoken for.'"

Kentucky pulled her into his lap. "Well, you are definitely spoken for now."

"Yes, I am. Our marriage license proves that fact forever." Giada smiled, loving the warmth of his strong body, the feel of him twitching with need beneath her bottom.

"Our marriage license is not the only proof of our union." Kentucky pulled a black ring box out of his left robe pocket and opened it in front of her. "This should prove a few things, too."

Giada gasped at all the sparkling gems. There was a circle of small diamonds surrounding a very large emerald. "It's beautiful, Kenny," she said as he slipped it on the fourth finger of her left hand.

"Just like you," Kentucky replied, giving her a look that shimmered with love and so much passion.

"Oh, Kenny," Giada said with thick emotion in her voice and then offered her lips to him. That loving kiss soon turned into a prelude to foreplay and total oblivion to the fact that they were not alone.

* * * *

After a full minute had passed, Hannah cleared her throat. Loudly.

It did no good. Kentucky and Giada still continued to kiss.

Malik grinned, clearly enjoying the passionate interaction between the newlyweds. He looked pleased to see Kentucky so unbelievably happy right now.

Hannah cleared her throat again. She did so even louder this time.

Giada and Kentucky finally and reluctantly broke apart. They laughed at how quickly they'd succumbed to passion, how quickly they'd forgotten their surroundings. This was a clear indication that they needed to return to the bedroom soon.

"When did you get this ring?" Giada asked Kentucky, getting back to the previous subject after taking a deep breath to compose herself again. "To my knowledge, you haven't been out of the house since we came back last night."

"I got that ring before I left for Africa. I gave it to Mama for safekeeping," Kentucky explained.

"She watched over it all this time. Even after I tried to give it to her in my anger towards you, Mama still deemed it your ring and never wore it. She gave it back this morning while you were showering."

Giada's eyes watered. "Thanks for keeping it for me, Mama Jones."

"You're welcome." Hannah smiled, getting up to finally clear the table. Those dirty dishes had been tolerated long enough. A silent Malik moved to help her.

"Had this ring been presented to me before now, I might have sold it and given the money to the school like I did with the funds from my engagement ring," Giada said, letting them in on a little secret as she moved to help clear the dishes.

"I was wondering where you got so much money to make that sizable donation," Kentucky said, pulling her back into his lap. His stepmother had already insisted upon spoiling them

over the next few days. Thus there was no need for Giada to move an inch to do anything but kiss and make love to him.

"You know about my donation to the school?" Giada asked with wide eyes. "But how? I sent that money in a cashier's check. Used a PO box for the return address."

Kentucky grinned. "As the new CFO of the Hardy Jones Academy, it's my job to know where *all* money comes from and goes to at the school. Following the money is also how I found out that my cousin Millsap has been sending funds to the school through his legitimate businesses," he replied, inadvertently sharing a secret of his own in that response.

That secret? Kentucky was giving up the bodyguard business for good and taking on a regular nine-to-five job.

"As your new husband, it's also my job to find out how you feel about living in Village Square, Georgia full-time. I can commute to work if you're not ready to leave Florida yet on account of work and school."

"You're leaving it up to *me* to decide where we live?" Giada couldn't believe he wasn't taking charge like before.

"Yes. I had a long time to think about what might have gone wrong in our relationship. I realized that I was too domineering at times," Kentucky shared. "I think it was because I didn't want you leading me around by the nose like you'd done all your other men. Plus, I thought about how, if I had listened to you about that African assignment, I could have saved all of us a whole lot of heartache and pain."

"But then you never would have met Malik," Hannah said, returning to the table for more dishware. "Which means *I*

never would have met Malik." She turned to smile at the African man coming from the kitchen.

"She's got a point there, baby," Giada said, noting how amorously the older couple stared at each other.

"So I guess everything worked out in the end, huh?" Kentucky said, kissing the side of his wife's neck.

"Guess so." Giada moaned.

"Let's go back to bed, baby," Kentucky suggested.

"Please do," Hannah inserted, "before y'all start rubbing off on *other* people." She nodded in Malik's direction.

Giada chuckled at the ardent look on Malik's face. The man looked like he wanted to kiss Hannah at that very second.

"Malik, you might want to go watch TV while Mama cleans the kitchen *alone*," Kentucky said with special emphasis.

"Yes, television sounds very good right now, Kosey," Malik said with a sheepish look before quickly making his way to the den.

"Stop scaring the poor man," Giada said, poking him in the side before rising to her feet.

"Scare Malik? Please." Kentucky chuckled, standing to his feet as well. "*His* nickname should be Kosey, because he has the heart of a lion way more than me. It was Malik that taught me how to hunt all kinds of wild animals. Plus, I saw him personally spear a lion to death when it tried to get at one of the village goats," Kentucky continued as he and his wife exited the room.

* * * *

Behind them, Hannah's mouth dropped open in shock. She had no idea Malik was so courageous since Kentucky had neglected to share certain African experiences with her. He hadn't wanted to alarm her about the other dangers he encountered in the motherland.

"I think somebody deserves a kiss anyway." Hannah headed for the den. How could she not kiss the man who not only took care of her stepson when he was injured, but also taught Kentucky how to survive in the African wild?

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Chapter Thirty-One

Much later, Giada spooned on the large bed against Kentucky's sweat-drenched chest. They'd just made enough love for five newlywed couples and a few celebrating their anniversaries. And even though they were resting now, they were still connected in the most intimate of ways.

"I'm going to make a doctor's appointment this week so we can start on our family," Giada said after their breathing patterns had regulated again.

"Great. No need to waste all this good seed." Kentucky chuckled behind her.

"I know, that's right." Giada laughed, too, squeezing her thighs together and using her inner walls to clench him.

Kentucky moaned at her actions.

Giada moaned right after him when she felt his lower body stir with excitement, causing him to pulse inside of her.

"By the way, where are we gonna raise these kids? You never did give me an answer about whether you wanted to live in Florida or Georgia," Kentucky said, continuing their conversation in a huskier tone.

"I think it would be cheaper to live in Georgia considering the cost of commuting. I don't think I would have much trouble finding a job there. Only thing is, I don't know if my scholarship is transferable."

"It is." Kentucky bent to kiss her neck.

Giada looked over her shoulder. "How do you know that?"

"Because I'm the benefactor behind that scholarship. I have been from the beginning," he confessed as he began to move within her wet depths again.

Giada's eyes widened. "Now I feel bad for getting mad at you for making me stick to a budget and get a job, for thinking *I* was the one constantly giving up things for the relationship. You've been making sacrifices all along for me. The biggest one is when you went to Africa just to afford some big wedding that I don't even want anymore."

Kentucky suddenly stopped moving. "You sure you don't want a big formal wedding? Not even just a little bit?"

Giada chuckled. "Okay, maybe just a little bit, but I definitely want you more. Now that I finally have you, I don't need all the frills. As you recall, I married you in somebody's living room with no wedding dress, no tuxedo, and no ring."

"Can I give you that dream wedding anyway?" He started to stroke inside of her again.

"Only if you let me pay for half of it. Plus, I need to tweak it a bit since I no longer want the same level of extravagance." Giada faced forward again, closed her eyes, and moaned at the wonders of Kentucky's lovemaking. The man was lethal with his hips.

Suddenly he stopped.

* * * *

"Are you sitting on money somewhere, Giada?" Kentucky asked upon pausing their lovemaking. This was the first time she ever offered to go half on anything. Now that he thought

more about it, she'd also offered to pay for an elopement trip to Vegas.

Was Giada sitting on a stack of money? If so, how?

"I got a small nest egg from the sale of my house across the street. It's actually a big nest egg considering the fact that I sold it for way more than it was worth." Giada grinded against him.

"Baby, please go back to what you're doing. It felt so good."

Kentucky moaned this time and started moving again. "We'll see what you can do to get your house back. No use both of us losing our houses." The house he'd owned had been razed to the ground soon after being sold. He still didn't know why the new owner had done that. The house had been in mint condition, livable for many years to come.

"I already have my house back." When Giada told him how she got it back, Kentucky stopped moving again and actually disengaged them.

"What's the name of the Realtor Fabian used to buy your house?" he said, sitting upright in bed.

When she told him, Kentucky sprang to his feet and started pacing the floor, oblivious to his nakedness. "He used the same Realtor to buy my house above and beyond the asking price, too. No wonder he had it torn down right after buying it. And a review of the school's books revealed that this same Realtor made an offer on the school's land."

"What!" Giada sat upright now.

"Which means Fabian has been working behind the scenes for a while now, trying to take nearly everything we owned so

that he could use it against us one way or the other. And I have no proof, but I'm starting to think he had something to do with me getting that African assignment with Jamie. Jamie said that I came highly recommended by a friend of his, but he never would tell me who that friend was." As Kentucky paced the floor, his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"I guess the joke's on Fabian, because we still ended up with each other and with most of our original possessions. We also now have fatter bank accounts because of him," Giada noted, trying to calm Kentucky down by appealing to his common sense.

Kentucky abruptly stopped pacing and looked at her. "You're right. The joke is on him," he said as a slow smile spread across his face. "Now where were we?" he asked, giving her a heated look as his anger was swallowed up in rising desire.

"I believe you were right *here*," Giada said, directing his attention to her hot core as she spread her legs in invitation.

Kentucky licked his lips as he approached the bed again. Within seconds, he was back where he belonged, joined to the hilt, as one with his beloved wife.

* * * *

It took three days for Lloyd to learn the story of Kentucky's miraculous survival in Africa. It had taken every connection he had to get even the basic details about the man's sudden reappearance since this was a story that Kentucky intended to keep to himself until he finished writing the book about his

experience. One hundred percent of the proceeds of this book would be donated to help the foster kids at his boarding school.

Lloyd couldn't help but admire Kentucky's courage and dedication to educating society's forgotten youth. He couldn't help but despise Fabian for some of the things he learned about him in a subsequent search he performed.

As a result, Lloyd decided to drop Fabian's case altogether. There was no way he was going to help someone hurt a man who deserved all the happiness he could get. Kentucky deserved the ultimate happiness after all he'd been through.

* * * *

Fabian was incensed to learn that his case had been dropped. He was even more incensed to learn that Kentucky was alive and well, which was the only information Lloyd would give him.

"Oh, yeah, and don't bother trying to go to another PI. I've spread the word around, and none of them will have anything to do with someone that tried to send a man to his death," Lloyd asserted.

Fabian frowned. "I never tried to send anyone to their death."

Lloyd scoffed in disbelief. "Didn't you when you recommended Kentucky to your alcoholic photographer friend Jamie Benedict? The same friend that you gave money to so that he'd be able to offer the bodyguard triple his usual fee, plus extras? The same friend that Kentucky risked his life repeatedly for during that trip because the man took too

many stupid risks to get his photos, putting them both in constant danger? Need I mention the fact that this same photographer friend has become an all-out drunk since that incident and was more than willing to relieve his guilty conscience when I questioned him about your connection to him?"

"Nobody's going to believe the word of a drunk over mine. Furthermore, I don't need your help anymore anyway. I can get Giada back on my own," Fabian retorted, suddenly having one whopper of an idea as he rudely slammed the phone down.

* * * *

Giada got to enjoy all the preparations for her modified dream wedding, which would be held on Christmas Eve at the Delfinos' house since it was bigger than Hannah's church. Hannah, Bev, and Velocity, who were Giada's two matrons of honor and bridesmaid respectively, helped out a great deal.

Velocity finally got to see Giada and Kentucky together at the informal dinner the Delfinos hosted for the newlyweds. She didn't stay in the loving couple's presence for too long before she ran out of the room in tears.

Giada and Kentucky followed the crying woman into the next room. As soon as Velocity saw them, she started to apologize for her tears and for everything else in between. Most of her apologies were directed at Kentucky.

"Velocity, I'm not mad at you," Kentucky reassured her. "I really couldn't be mad at Giada," he continued, pulling his wife in his arms. "She thought I was dead. It had been three

months. Your advice was sound in terms of her moving on with her life. I just didn't like who she moved on with."

Velocity started to cry again. "I'm the one that told her to date Fabian."

"I don't blame you for that either." Kentucky smiled in forgiveness. "A lot of women would have gotten caught up with Fabian's good looks, his fame, and his money. I'm hoping now you'll see that you have to look deeper than that to find real love."

Velocity nodded, sniffing back her tears. "I see why Giada loves you. You're a wonderful man."

"Yes, he is," Giada said, speaking up after watching Kentucky console her friend with all the right words. "Now go wash your face, fix your makeup, and meet us back at the table."

Smiling now, Velocity nodded and headed for the nearest bathroom.

"Do you think we have time for a quickie?" Giada asked when Velocity was out of sight.

Kentucky squeezed her bottom. "There's always time for that." Then he led her to the small room that the Delfinos used as a parlor and took her right up against the wall.

When they returned to the dinner fifteen minutes later, everyone burst out laughing at their wrinkled clothes and tousled hair. It was clear what they had been up to while they were missing in action.

Kentucky and Giada looked at each other and laughed, too. That night was the first night they decided to stay at her apartment until their Georgia move.

* * * *

After that incident at the Delfinos, Kentucky and Giada enjoyed their newfound privacy to the max. His only reservation was the fact that Malik and his stepmother were now completely alone at the family home. But after his African friend requested Hannah's hand in marriage and she accepted, there was little Kentucky could say. After all, they were grown.

Yet for the four days that it took for them to get all the paperwork processed on account of Malik's citizenship issues, Kentucky did not sleep well at all, or much at all, considering the fact that Giada couldn't seem to get enough of his body during that same timeframe. At the end of those four days, he finally got some rest. By then, he and his frisky wife were both exhausted from nonstop passionate loving.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

I wish Kenny were here. Giada thought, looking out the apartment window on that sunny Saturday morning.

Kentucky had gone to give Malik another lesson on how to cut his stepmother's lawn. The older man still didn't have the hang of all those American tools yet.

He said he'll be back by noon, Giada reminded herself as she stepped away from the window and returned to packing up the apartment. There were still loads of clothes she needed to pack from her bedroom closet.

Around midday, Giada went to the window and looked out again. She was disappointed to find Kentucky's vehicle still missing from the parking lot.

Suddenly, she gasped as she caught sight of Fabian pulling up in front of her apartment complex with not one, but *three* Mercedes Benzes trailing his limo. They were all in different colors—white, black, and red. Not one was in the color she really wanted.

Just act like you're not home. Giada quickly stepped away from the window.

That would have been easy to do if Mercedes, the dog, hadn't started barking the way she normally did whenever she smelled Fabian's scent.

"I know you're in there, Giada," Fabian said through the door. "I see your car in the parking lot, and I hear Mercedes barking. Why don't you open up the door and pick out a real Mercedes?"

"Go away, Fabian. I don't want anything else from you," Giada replied, opening her mouth, but determined to keep her door shut as she descended the short staircase. At the bottom, she picked Mercedes up from near the door and held her soothingly to quiet her down.

"I know about Kentucky being alive, Giada," Fabian went on to say. "I know you were probably tempted to go back to him. I'll even forgive you if you slipped back for a brief reconciliation. Just open the door, baby, and we can work all this out."

Giada saw red at the nerve of Fabian to think that she would actually leave Kentucky for a new car. Hadn't the man learned anything yet? How many times did she have to dump him for Kentucky before he got the message?

"There's nothing to work out," Giada said, snatching the door open in her anger. As soon as she did, her eyes were bombarded by flashing lights.

Fabian had brought along a photographer and a bodyguard in the limo with him. The bodyguard had moved to the side of the door to let the photographer get the perfect shot. It was a good thing Giada was always immaculately dressed, even in the jeans, sweater, and boots she wore now.

"Giada, I love you, baby," Fabian said, going down on one knee in front of her. "Regardless of what has happened in the past, I still want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

Giada blinked to refocus. "I can't marry you, Fabian. I'm already married." She held up her left hand, still holding Mercedes with her right.

"Married!" Fabian roared as another round of flashes captured his shocked face.

"To whom?" the photographer asked eagerly, sensing a juicy story at this unexpected turn of events.

"To me!" Kentucky replied from behind them.

* * * *

At the sound of Kentucky's voice, Giada's eyes seemed to instantly focus. There was her wonderful man, wide-legged and tall, with his hands folded across his large chest. Though Kentucky's face looked menacingly to his foes, she'd never see him look so beautiful. Well . . . at least not in public.

Kentucky always looked beautiful to Giada in private, especially when they made love.

"Get 'em, Champ!" Fabian ordered his bodyguard as he moved out of the way.

At that command, Giada noticed two important things. One, how fast the people driving the three Mercedes started up their cars and headed back to the dealership in order to avoid being witnesses to anything. Two, how forcefully Champ swung on her man.

Thankfully, Kentucky blocked that blow and administered one of his own. The sound of his fist connecting with the man's jaw was loud. It even sounded painful. Blood spilled from the man's mouth.

When Champ opened his mouth to curse, a few molars fell to the ground. Now he looked really mad. He charged Kentucky.

"Go in the house, Giada. I don't want you to see this," Kentucky said, swiftly moving out of his opponent's way, which only served to make Champ angrier.

"The whole world is going to see this by tonight with him snapping all these pictures," Giada said, referring to the photographer who couldn't seem to snap his photos fast enough. Even some of her neighbors were coming outside. "Besides, I'm not leaving you out here alone," she added. "They might try to double-team you or something."

"I seriously doubt that. Both of them ain't nothing but punks," Kentucky replied, not taking his eyes off either opponent—the one preparing to charge him again and the one who kept barking orders.

"Show him who's the real punk, Champ," Fabian instructed, prompting his bodyguard to charge again.

"All he needs is a two-piece special and a biscuit," Kentucky replied, moving swiftly out of the way again. But this time, he flung Champ up against the exterior of the apartment building, where Fabian was.

Then as the camera continued to flash, Kentucky administered that fast-food meal he spoke of with two blows to Champ's head and a knockout uppercut to his chin.

* * * *

Seeing his bodyguard on the ground unconscious, Fabian began to tremble with fear. He knew he was next. "Stop snapping those pictures!" he yelled to the photographer, who was capturing every fearful shake on film.

"I stopped being on your payroll the second you told your bodyguard to assault an innocent man," the photographer said, still snapping away. "I'm probably going to get no less than four figures for each picture."

At those words, Fabian took off at a run towards the limo, leaving his bodyguard behind.

"Boo!" Kentucky roared as the cowardly man fled past him.

Terrified that something else was going to come behind that "Boo," Fabian stopped looking where he was going, stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk, and fell face-first on the pavement.

Giada winced as Fabian's nose and two front teeth made contact with the concrete. His nose instantly began to swell, and one of those teeth actually broke in half diagonally.

Kentucky burst out laughing. Mercedes leaped out of Giada's arms and went to bite the man about his ankles while the photographer caught it all on film.

By this time, the police had been called by a neighbor. Ambulances came, too.

The statements everyone made all agreed except for two. Fabian claimed to have been attacked.

Champ was still talking gibberish as he slowly regained consciousness in the ambulance. The photographer's roll of film would confirm who really attacked whom that day.

* * * *

While Kentucky was still speaking to the police officer who took their statements, he paused in the conversation to instruct Giada to go inside and pack an overnight bag for the

two of them. "The media is gonna have a field day with this story. I don't want either of us to have to deal with people calling the house and ringing the doorbell all evening." His intent was to take her to the Delfinos' since his stepmother's house would probably be the most likely place reporters would go next.

"I think that's a good idea, Mrs. Jones," the police officer agreed. "That photographer fellow has barely taken a break from his cell phone since we got here."

Giada smiled at that reference to her married name. "Two overnight bags coming up." Then she gave Kentucky a succulent kiss and a heated look of promise before going to do as he asked.

"Call Mama, and tell her and Malik to get packed, too. I'm keeping us all out of the spotlight tonight," Kentucky said to her departing frame.

"Whatever you say, baby." Giada smiled back over one shoulder before turning to sway away.

"Sir, I hope I'm not stepping too far out of line here, but I would really love to know how an everyday-looking guy like yourself took a woman from a rich pretty boy like Fabian," the cinnamon-skinned officer asked, being an everyday-looking man himself.

Kentucky chuckled. "Let's just say that I learned early on to give a woman all of what she needs and some of what she wants."

"What do women need?"

"Love, respect, security." Kentucky lowered his voice. "And a man that can make her scream with pleasure in the bedroom."

The police officer grinned. "You think that's how Jermaine Dupri snagged Janet Jackson?"

Kentucky grinned back. "Maybe. I wouldn't be surprised."

"Thanks for all the advice, man." The officer's voice lowered. "And between me and you, I don't think Pretty Boy over there is going to be able to pin much of anything on you. Whenever you have this many witnesses all saying the same thing, plus supporting film, it's usually a pretty open-and-shut case."

"I know, which is why I made sure *not* to lay a hand on him." Kentucky winked, showing that he also had enough brains to make his everyday package that much more extraordinary. "By the way, Officer, would you like to come to our formal wedding on Christmas Eve?"

"Will there be any single females there?" the officer asked.

"Lots of them," Kentucky replied, reminded of his wife's long guest list. "Probably even some looking for their own everyday-looking guy."

"I'm there." The officer grinned eagerly. "By the way, you can call me Sean."

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Epilogue

Kentucky and Giada's wedding went off without a hitch. His wedding present to her was a silver Mercedes Benz, which was the exact color she wanted. Her wedding present to him was the keys to the yacht she'd rented for their honeymoon cruise and a letter from her doctor stating that she was clear to start on their family.

Matchmaking Hannah paired Velocity and Sean together at the wedding. They got married within the year. As of this date, their marriage is still going strong, and so is Hannah and Malik's, who is now a full U.S. citizen.

Kentucky's boarding school is still up and running well. So is Giada's specialty gift business, which she went into full-time in lieu of working in another law firm upon their relocation to Georgia.

Being able to stay off her feet and work at her own pace was extremely necessary during Giada's first pregnancy, which produced an eleven-pound baby boy they affectionately named Kenny Hardy Jones. The other three children were smaller in size, but none under eight pounds. None of the deliveries were overly taxing to Giada's body, which was a great relief to everyone.

Giada did eventually finish law school. Yet instead of operating a full-time legal practice, she became a consultant for law firms and clients that needed someone with a critical eye for contractual loopholes.

No assault charges were ever filed against Kentucky, just as Sean predicted. Champ the bodyguard didn't file any. Nor did Fabian.

Speaking of Fabian, he semiretired from the music business in shame. His record sales plunged when pictures of the incident at Giada's apartment hit every media outlet, including the Internet.

The cell phone taping of the incident by a neighbor was most damaging of all since it allowed viewers to see *and* hear Fabian's cowardice. As a result, the singer could barely find work performing jingles for radio ads.

Bartley found new clients to represent. Now he specializes in gay and lesbian celebrities.

Lloyd the PI came forward and gave Kentucky information about Fabian's connection to Jamie. That data was never used, but filed away in case it ever had to be used.

Finally, *The Love of Kentucky* went on to become one of the nation's bestsellers. It provided even more financial stability for the boarding school, which is continuing to flourish.

In that book, Kentucky shared the true story about how he made it out of the war-torn zones of Africa and back to the woman he loved. By now everyone knew that Kentucky's love was none other than Giada, whom he is still having his happily-ever-after with to this day.

* * * *

The End

Pretty Packages
by Mi'Chelle Dodson

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Letter to Readers

I wrote *Pretty Packages* during a highly emotional two-week period in my life. It was the Christmas season, and I was upset with a close relative about something, which I truly can't remember exactly what it was now, and just needed a release. I needed a positive outlet to just pour out all the emotions I was feeling at the time. Thus all the highly emotional scenes in *Pretty Packages*. Thus all the heated arguments . . . and heated other stuff.

chuckle

Although the story line evolved on its own, with very little plotting on my end, a clear message emerged therein. That message: Find out what's *really* important in life.

In Giada's case, she had to learn that looks and material things weren't all they were cracked up to be in the grand scheme of things. That the love of a good man was more important. That giving was more important than receiving.

Did you see those messages? I hope so.

In conclusion, I pray that the single ladies who read *Pretty Packages* start looking at the ordinary men around them in a different light after this story. That they don't pass up or pass by their Kentuckys like Giada almost did.

Be blessed forever.

Suprina Frazier/Mi'Chelle Dodson

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About the Author

A firm believer in happy-ever-afters, Mi'Chelle Dodson takes great pleasure in creating such happy endings via the enthralling and unforgettable stories she writes. Since all of her books are threaded throughout with golden nuggets of wisdom, readers are often able to take those nuggets and apply them to their real lives. That equals a win/win situation for everyone!

In Mi'Chelle's real life, she is known as Suprina Frazier, friend to many and mother of two. Always thrilled to hear from readers, she can be contacted at:
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