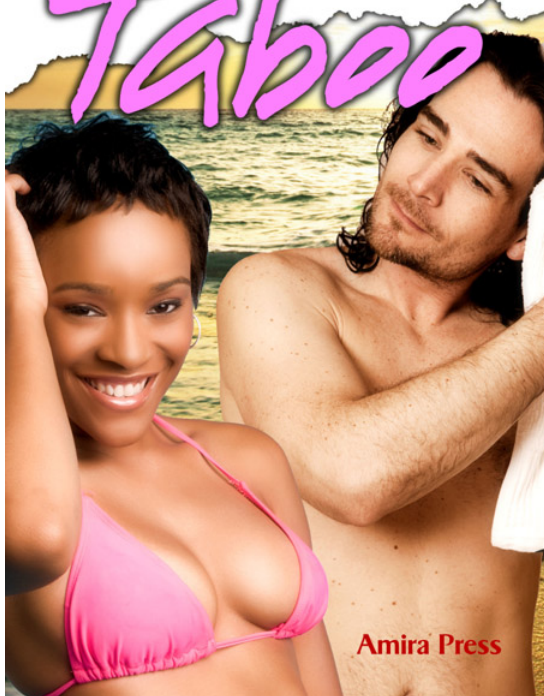


EMPRESS LABLAQUE

Taboo

*Doesn't she know...
Caucasian men are taboo?*



Amira Press

Taboo

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Chapter One

I only needed to pick up a few items, but the express lane was closed. That turned out to be a good thing. While standing in line, I had a nice picture to admire. He was probably six feet tall, and I loved his tight butt. His shoulders were strong and seemed nice to lean on. Standing behind him, I noticed that his light brown hair was long and cut into wispy layers. It was obvious his tips were moussed. Without warning, he turned around. "Would you like to go ahead of me? I only have a few items."

His voice was deep, but his timbre was light. He didn't have to ask but once. "Sure, thanks," I agreed, moving ahead of him. As I walked past, his natural scent overpowered his cologne. Together they created a lure of raw sensuality. While under his aromatic spell, I tried to glimpse the name tag that hung from his neck. Trying not to be noticeable was a chore. "I thought I'd be standing here all evening."

The store must have been having the sale of the century. There were hordes of shoppers with overstuffed baskets. At that rate, the line would have taken forever. Finally, the line started to move slowly. I was facing forward and pacing when the guy asked a question. "So, you're cooking dinner tonight?"

When I turned around, I felt my ponytail brushing across my back. He was only making small talk, so I responded courteously, "Yes, I love to cook." I gave a brittle smile, then turned back around.

The guy rocked on his heels and peered over my shoulder. Encircling me in his manly scent, he asked, "Having company?"

I was on a roll. I hadn't had a serious hit in months. When I turned to address the man, I noticed that his hazel eyes were absolutely stunning and I stammered, "Well, no. Not really."

"What a shame," he said, shaking his head. "Looks like you have far too much to eat by yourself."

Nervously, I shrugged and turned to face him again. "I'll just pack some for my lunch tomorrow."

"Oh. A smart woman." The guy smiled and placed both hands behind his back. His eyes swept over my form, stopping at the length of my short dress. "I'm a meat and potatoes man myself."

Wondering where this conversation was going, I nodded and gave a brittle smile. Was this guy being friendly or was he really coming on to me? In the past, I've been mistaken, and really gotten my feelings hurt. Although I saw his mouth moving, his body language was very subtle. It was not the

in-your-face flirting I was accustomed to. Deciding to plunge forward, I extended my hand. "My name is Nandi Boyet."

He grasped my hand tightly while admiring my large bracelet. "Nancy?" he repeated, without accuracy.

"No, it's Nan-di." To appear approachable, I softened my stare and smiled.

"Oh, Nandi. That's a striking name. Seems I've heard it before—movie perhaps? I'm Trace. Trace Wynn."

Sweeping my bangs from my eye, I asked, "Well, Trace Wynn. What are *you* cooking tonight?"

Trace reached for a can of lubricant stray positioned on the rack beside us. "I'll probably grab a burrito or something. I just came in to pick up this duct tape." He displayed the tape.

To appear interested I inquired, "Oh, is something broken? I heard duct tape was good for everything."

"Ah, yeah," he said, sarcastically. "Something is really broken. I just hope I'm not too late to fix it."

Finally, the checker made her way to me. "It's about time," I murmured, reaching inside my purse. Turning toward Trace I admitted, "They must be having a great sale. The store is really busy today; I should have come sooner."

"It is busy," he said, grinning seductively, "but I'm glad you didn't come earlier."

Immediately, I caught his clue and smiled. It would have been nice if I could have gotten to know him better. Nevertheless, I felt our conversation would end at the checkout counter. While the checker sacked up my items, I ran my debit card. Although I punched in my PIN, I was wondering if I would see Trace again. My last thoughts were '*what will be, will be.*' After reaching for my bags, I hoisted my purse upon my shoulder and turned toward Trace. "Nice meeting you."

Trace raised his brow, and nodded with a half smile. "Likewise."

Once I waved good-bye, I walked slowly out the door. Because he had only two items, I was sure he'd be along shortly. Then I could see what he was driving. Trace seemed new in town. Most people who lived here were not so friendly. I tossed my groceries into the passenger's side, then slid myself into the driver's seat. For a moment, I checked my cell. When I still didn't see Trace, I searched my CD case. After making a selection, I filed the old one away. When I looked toward the store, there was still no sign of Trace.

At that moment, he emerged and stood in the doorway. Then, I realized why he had taken so long. A beautiful blonde had trapped him in the store's entrance way. She was Barbie doll—gorgeous with cleavage from hell. Trace grinned broadly as he passed her his cell phone. She entered a number then passed the phone back to him.

What on earth made me think I had a chance with him anyway? After spending moments with the blonde, he could not possibly think I was dating material. By my standards, I was quite a catch. Cranking my car's ignition key, I then threw it into reverse. Suddenly, I heard a man yelling out from behind my car. I turned just in time to see Trace walking toward my vehicle. Was he actually coming to say good-bye? I was *not* going to assume anything. Sure enough, he pointed his remote, unlocking the red truck parked beside me. When he stood by my car, he gestured that I should roll down my window. "This must be my lucky day. I thought you were long gone."

I lied. "I had to check my receipt. I think she made a mistake."

Ignoring my lie, Trace crouched near my window, and our eyes met. "I'm glad you're still here. Do you know where I can find a great place to buy burritos?"

After bursting into laughter, I instructed, "Sure. Go down to The Taco House. They make pretty good burritos."

Trace stood up and looked across the parking lot. He squatted beside my car once again. "Man, I hate to eat alone. I wish you knew me better. I'd love to have your company."

Narrowing my eyes I asked, "Didn't you just get the phone number of a beautiful blonde?"

Trace glanced toward the door of the store. "Oh her." He shrugged. "She works in the store—trying to get me to register for some speed boat or something."

"Oh," I grew quiet. "Tell you what, Trace. You can follow me to The Taco House. I'll probably get out and have a bite with you."

"Splendid plan." He raised his eyes and scoped out the area. "No one is going to stab me in the chest, are they?"

While sweeping my bangs out of my face, I cocked my head to one side. "What are you implying?"

"I'm just saying . . ."

"Oh!" I leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel, then I pointed to myself. "You're asking if I'm seeing someone."

"I believe that was my point, yes."

"Wow." I shook my head. "Why didn't you just ask?"

As if offended, Trace leaned backward and turned his head to one side. "I just did."

Folding my arms, I shrugged and stated coolly, "I'm sorry. I wasn't quite sure what you meant."

"Oh." He stood up, towering above my car. "You're a bright woman." When I looked upward, I saw a smile play across his ruddy lips. "Read between the lines."

With that, Trace got into his truck and waited for me to back out. The conversation felt awkward, but first impressions can be deceiving. Strange thoughts swirled in my head as I'd never dated out of my race. I hoped we wouldn't have any problems being seen together.

Even though the food was good at The Taco House, it was not what I called a nice place to visit. As I drove down the street, my gut did not rest easy. I needed an alternate plan. If the weirdoes were there, I'd convince Trace to eat someplace else. When I drove up, my suspicions were correct. The town's riffraff were hanging out in the parking lot. Dooney Boy, Kirk, and Junnie were either just getting out of prison or plotting to go in. I wanted no part of this terrible bunch. Immediately, I made a circle in the parking lot and met Trace's truck as he entered. He rolled down his window. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just thought of a better place to eat. Let's try Mama Maria's. Their food is much better."

"Sounds even better." Trace looked at the shabby building and grimaced. "No offense, but this place doesn't seem dreadfully appealing."

Trace's observations were correct. I'd eaten there many times. Funny. I had never noticed their substandard condition.

Chapter Two

Within a few minutes, we had both parked at Mama Maria's. As I closed the door to my car, excitement made my stomach quiver. How could I think of food at a time like this? Was it possible for Trace to be better-looking now than he was at the store? His chiseled features reminded me of the perfect mold for a man. The evening light revealed that his dark hazel, deep-set eyes were his greatest asset. His nose was a perfect fit for his face; his lips were plump, slightly ruddy, and sensual.

As Trace held open the door to the restaurant, confidence emanated from his being. At the sight of him, I felt my knees almost buckle and butterflies took flight in my stomach. However, a question burned in my mind: was Trace going to be my lucky catch, and, if so, could I handle such a mystifying man? Although he was restrained with his approach, it was clear we were going to hit it off just fine.

As usual, Mama Maria's had a waiting line. We decided to wait in the bar and make small talk. Naturally, when I walked in with Trace, all eyes turned. Feelings of dread wafted over me. Judging from the jealousy in their eyes, I guessed that Trace was clearly taboo. He didn't make the situation any better. Placing his arm inside mine, he walked toward the bar. After sitting on the bar stool, Trace turned toward me. "What would you like to drink?"

"I'm sorry," I bit my bottom lip, then cut my eyes nervously toward the door, "but I don't drink."

"Really." Trace nodded. "Imagine that; I don't partake either."

Laughter erupted between us. We were both trying to accommodate the other's wishes. When he finished laughing, Trace shook his head. "The irony of it all—what are the odds that you didn't drink?"

"Somehow, I was always the designated driver. That's a pretty important job. I just didn't feel the need to drink or get high. There are three good reasons for not drinking. Number one, there're no regrets in the morning. Number two, I remember *n/ho* I kissed, and number three, I didn't show my boobies to anyone. I've never regretted the choice to remain sober. So, what's your story," I said, smirking at my own humor.

Trace rolled his hazel eyes toward the ceiling and thoughtfully pursed his lips. "My dad was a drunkard, and he beat my mom." He shifted his weight on his stool. "So, I decided I wanted no part of drinking."

With a hangdog expression, I folded my arms and sighed. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Trace cast his eyes toward the floor. "I'm okay. My mom is fine now. One night, dad finally drove over a bridge, and that was that."

“Oh, wow.” I crossed my legs. “That’s terrible. Are you really okay?”

“I’ve done considerably well. I turned a negative into a positive—meaning that my dad influenced my life so much, I decided to help people with chemical addictions. I’m the new administrator at the Choices Center.”

Placing my hand on Trace’s thigh I declared, “You’re kidding. I work with unwed mothers. In a way, we’re both in the service field. Is that the only branch you work for?”

“One is quite enough,” he grimaced. “What are the odds we’d meet each other?”

“I know, right.” Placing both hands on my thighs, I asked, “You must handle some pretty rough characters, huh?”

“Sorta. They’re a rowdy bunch, but it’s nothing I can’t manage.” Trace turned his gaze toward the door. “I try to make them realize that home is where you make it. They’re trying to get a leg up, or else they wouldn’t be there.”

Affectionately, I placed my hand over Trace’s and stated my fears. “That job can be dangerous. Plus, that place is huge. How many rooms does it have?”

Trace glanced down at my hand, then he placed his other hand atop mine. “Right now, we can house about one hundred men.”

My mouth flew open. “One hundred men, addicted to alcohol or drugs—I don’t know if I’d have what it takes.”

“I could say the same thing about your line of work,” he joked as he swiveled his chair. “You work with unwed mothers. That could get pretty ugly, too. You never know when they’ll go left and try to harm you.”

Beaming broadly, I admitted playfully, “I know you’re only teasing, but I did have one girl who tried to attack me. I had to twist her arm behind her back, then I knocked her smooth out!” I affirmed, “She musta lost her mind messing with this girl. I think she was on something.”

Trace’s expression became solemn. Suddenly, he burst into laughter. “Nandi Boyet, you’re a liar. You did *not* hit a pregnant woman.”

Seeing Trace finally relaxing, I entertained him with amusing banter. Nodding my head, I opened my palms. “Really. And right today, she’s like, my best friend.” I made a tight fist and shook it. “I just had to put the old girl in check.”

Trace held his stomach as he rolled in laughter. Then, leaning forward, he asked, “Did you hurt the baby?”

“No,” I teased. “He loves me, too. Sometimes, pregnant women be trippin’.”

He shook his head. “Well, you certainly know how to handle your business.”

Chapter Three

The hostess finally paged us, and we moved toward the front of the restaurant. “Mr. & Mrs. Wynn,” she called.

Trace held a finger in the air. “Here.”

I squeezed his arm and whispered, “Why didn’t you correct her?”

Trace grinned, “I’ll take her word as prophecy.”

We walked toward our table. “You’re frightening. You know that?”

When our waitress gave us our menu, simultaneously we both gave them back. Trace narrowed his eyes, “Aren’t you hungry?”

“Sure, but I know what I want.”

“And what do you want, dear lady?” He moved the salt shaker near his grasp.

Folding my arms I disclosed, “I’m having the chicken enchiladas with extra guacamole.”

“No kidding.” In surprise, Trace sat back in his seat and turned his face from mine. “I’m having the same thing.”

As if hit by a bolt of lightning, I threw my hands in the air. “This is like, so scary.”

Trace smiled a half smile. “I must agree with you. Our meeting has been quite unusual.”

“Wow. I’ll bet we have more things in common than we know. What do you like to do for fun?”

Trace tugged nervously at his earlobes. “Why don’t you go first?”

Sitting back in my seat, I confessed, “I like movies, comedies especially.”

“So do I. However, I do prefer action films. Martial arts, especially. I’m not into chick flicks.” He swayed his head from side to side. “You know, the nerdy girl turns prom queen. That sort of thing.”

“Yeah, martial art films are among my favorites. But some action films do make me a little nervous.”

“Nervous is good.” Trace folded his arms and leaned upon the table.

“What else do you like?” Because Trace was quite a turn-on, I was mentally taking notes. He was sensitive, confident, and attractive to no end. If we had enough in common, my dating woes could be over. Plus, commonality would make a lasting relationship.

Putting up three fingers Trace touched the first one. “I hike and swim. Occasionally, I enjoy deep-sea fishing.” He finished by holding up his thumb.

Because I felt a weird but wonderful connection with Trace, I proceeded to lie. “Shut up! I love hiking, too. Plus, I took swimming lessons when I was eight—swim like a fish.” *But more like a rock*, I admitted to myself.

“Oh.” Trace stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Then you’re ready to hit the beach.”

Thinking of the gritty sand in my shoes, I lied again. “Sure.” I stretched my eyes to seem sincere. “I love the beach. All that sand and sun. Makes a girl’s skin glow.” *Yeah, glow with sweat.*

Trace relaxed. “Excellent. We could hit the beach one weekend and let our hair down.”

My ’do had cost me a fortune. It had a shelf-life of three weeks. Trace was trying to erase that date. “Sure thing. I just got a new swimsuit last week.” I questioned my sanity, as lying was becoming a habit with me.

“Great!”

When our food arrived, we gazed into each other’s eyes but enjoyed every morsel. His eyes twinkled mirthfully each time I took a bite. With Trace’s company, average food became a scrumptious and sensuous tool for flirting. It was obvious he was captivated by my presence, as he hardly took his eyes off me. The rest of the evening was filled with loving glances and warm touches. Beyond a doubt, there was a strong chemistry between us. At times, our attraction was silent, then there were times when it manifested in nervous laughter. Although Trace seemed refined, he appeared lightly amused by my street sense. My wild stories of conquest brought him simple pleasure. Time flew by and before we knew it, the manager was locking the door.

Trace stretched and covered his mouth with a closed fist. “Excuse me, I must be tired, yet I’m not ready to go. I haven’t enjoyed myself this much in years. You’re quite a storyteller, Nandi.”

“Well, thank you.” I smiled broadly and nodded my head majestically. He was easy to please and seemed interested in my experiences on the street. “They’re all true.” I sighed. Suddenly, my smile faded. “Oh my God. What time is it?”

Appearing concerned, Trace looked at his watch. “It’s ten thirty.”

“You’re kidding. I think I’m on call. But my phone didn’t ring all night.” I picked up my phone and saw seven missed calls. “Umm. I’d better call in. Excuse me.”

While I called my job, Trace went to pay the bill. I discovered I wasn’t on call—I had a parenting class scheduled. Dee had taken over my class for the evening. How could I have forgotten? I needed to be back at work by seven!

Trace walked up to the table. “I hope everything is alright.” He reached out his hand and helped me from the booth.

“Well, I kinda missed my evening parenting class. Dee took over for me. It’s just not like me to be so irresponsible.”

“Maybe it was my company.” Trace placed his hand around my waist and ushered me toward the door.

“I had a lovely time. I’m sorry I missed my class, but I’m not sorry that I spent time with you.”

“Same here, Nandi.” As we approached the locked door, Trace made an observation. “We’d better hurry. The manager looks a little warm.”

I watched the manager as he waited angrily by the door. “Yes, he does.”

When we walked by, Trace apologized sincerely. “We’re quite sorry, sir. Time just slipped away.”

The man nodded, and gave a scowl. With a Spanish accent he said, “I do understand.” He unlocked the door. “If I were with a beautiful lady, time would also stand still.”

I smiled. “Oh, wow. Thank you.”

Trace walked me to my car and opened the door. “By the way—the manager was right. You are quite a stunning lady.”

“Thank you, Trace.” I bit my lip and slid into the driver’s seat. “I had a nice time.”

Chapter Four

That night, I didn't sleep. I had a horrible case of Trace-itus. No matter how I turned in bed, I could see his ruddy lips calling to me. We just had to make a relationship. Although Trace was considered taboo, it was unmistakable there was an attraction between us. Simply put, I was hooked on his charming and confident demeanor. Mostly, I couldn't get over the fact that Trace seemed familiar. He was almost like an old high-school friend—albeit an unapproachable Adonis who would not have given me the time of day.

Aside from, hiking, swimming, and deep-sea fishing, I felt we connected exceptionally well. There was no way I wouldn't pursue him. Who knows, there was a possibility I could grow to love those things. Because my life was boring, I'd never been exposed to very much outside of the streets.

While I tried to sleep, I could imagine Trace in his cargo shorts, jacket, and hiking boots, hiking down a trail. Of course, he'd have me in tow. Then I visualized him capturing a large marlin, with me helping to pull in the line. How bad could those things be? It could be a way to broaden my horizon, and they could even be fun. Other guys took me three places—the club, the Waffle House, and to bed. Was this all I wanted out of life?

* * * *

The next morning, I was eager for work. I took special care with my makeup, groomed my fake ponytail, then put on large hoops. Today, I felt like wearing my short yellow dress and, to complete my outfit, yellow stilettos. After putting on my best smile, I floated through the door on cloud nine. Of course, Dee was waiting for me, and she was more than a little pissed. It was her night off, and yet she had covered for me. Now, she stood in my office with one hand around a coffee mug and the other hand on her large hips. "Where were *you* last night?" She stared straight into my eyes.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. I don't know what got into me. I had an unexpected date, and time just slipped away."

Dee put down her cup and got in my face. "Nandi, I worked for you last night, I hope you had a damn good time!" She then opened my candy jar and took a handful of treats. "You owe me big," she said, shaking the candy in my face.

Kissing the air around her, I humbly admitted, "You're right, sweetie; please forgive me."

Dee tore open a candy bar and took a vicious bite. "Is he cute?"

As if I was waiting for her question, I answered, “Dee, he’s fine as frog’s hair and as handsome as a Tennessee walker.”

Chewing ungracefully she asked, “Do I know him?”

I picked up the mail and started to sort it. “Doubt it.”

Dee took another bite and sat on the edge of my desk. “Girl, you’d better handle your business.”

Fretfully, I admitted, “I’m trying, Dee. I just have one problem.”

“He’s Caucasian, isn’t he?”

“Ah, yeah.” My shoulders slumped forward.

Dee tossed her candy wrapper in the trash. “I should have known. You’ve dated every guy in this town. I figured you’d cross over into taboo territory.”

Guarding my honor, I folded my arms. “What do you mean, crossed over? Girl, there is nothing out there.” I popped my lips. “Most of the guys in this town don’t work, and they’re looking for someone to take care of them. Dee, this guy is a professional. He’s got a job.”

“That’s an unfair statement, Nandi. You can find someone who’s black.”

“Girl, please! There’s a whole generation of healthy black men in jail. What else am I supposed to do? Either they’re going in jail or just getting out. Girl, I’m not going to settle for just any old thing.”

“You’re still wrong!” She took a sip of her coffee. “There are some good men out there. You’ve just gotta find ’em.”

I stood up and placed my hands on my hip. “Where, Dee? Should I start seeing other women, or should I be like you and share a man—a married man!”

“I knew you’d say something about that. There is nothing wrong with sharing,” she said quietly.

“Hello, Dee! He’s married, and you’re not the only one he’s seeing. Wake up, girl! You deserve better than that.” Walking closer to Dee, I stated my observations. “Now you have a son by this guy, and he never spends time with him. Wake up!”

Dee shrugged, “That my own personal business, Nandi.”

I walked toward the front of my desk and sat down. “So, what you gonna do? Corbin already knows his father has another family. How do you think that makes him feel?”

“Corbin will feel what I tell him to feel!” Dee snapped.

“Now, that’s unfair.” I softened my voice. “Listen Dee, I wasn’t looking across the fence when this guy fell in my lap. It just happened.”

“You know what they’re going to call you.” Dee leaned against my desk and crossed her legs.

"Honey, if I'm in bed at night, cuddled up with my man, I don't care what they call me. They're already calling me names anyway."

Picking up her mail, Dee asked, "What about Kirk? He was good to you."

I turned my back and walked away, then I faced Dee and narrowed my eyes. "Please, Dee. The man has more baby/mama drama than anyone in this city. He's got two babies in the hospital's nursery right now." Looking out the window, I explained, "Last week, two women tried to kick the baby out of each other. Each one swore that the other one wasn't carrying his child. Plus, he doesn't work, Dee. He's never had gainful employment. Women take care of him, Dee. And I'll be hanged if I'm going to work hard and make a nest for some worthless baby machine."

"You're just wrong, girl. Ain't nothing wrong with a brother."

"Dee." Exasperated, I walked back into her face. "Let's get this clear right now. I'm not saying that *all* black men are worthless. It's just that they're not *available* to me. They are *not* in this town. I'm not trekking across the country for a guy on the Internet, only to find he's got a wife and kids."

Recalling her recent dilemma, Dee admitted. "I know, I know."

"So far, this guy seems to like me. Why is that such a crime?"

Dee would not let up. "It's a race thing. What you're doing is taboo, and you know it."

"Don't go there," I warned, sticking my finger near her face. "And you know what I mean!"

Dee had started my day with a bang. I had no idea I'd walk into an argument, but I was not about to give up on Trace. Only he could make me do that. So far he was different—strong, yet sensitive. And I was going to hang onto that.

Chapter Five

As the day wore on, my body still tingled with memories from the night before. I picked up my phone to see if Trace had called, but he hadn't. By midafternoon, I started to wonder if Dee was right. Maybe I was giving up on black men too early in the game. After counting my dating choices on two fingers, I realized that the dating pool had grown smaller. The minute you met a guy, you had to accept his luggage. If he was newly divorced, he had left his wife for some other woman. Things just didn't balance out.

By that evening as I got in my car, there was still no word from Trace. While I drove home, my car developed a mind of its own. Somehow, it took a left, right down Beltline. Gas is expensive. I wondered why I was wasting my time. Suddenly, there it was—the huge Choices building. It seemed to cover a city block. Out on the parking lot, I saw Trace's red truck.

From my car, I saw numerous men sitting on the front porch, as well as men participating in group conversations. I felt like a heel. It was obvious Trace had been busy all day. Dare I walk upon the porch and say hello to him. Although my brain said *no*, my hand opened the door. I pulled the keys from the switch, then got out of the car. When I stepped upon the porch, everyone greeted me. No one was fresh, and no one said anything out of the way. I opened the door and walked inside. There, I saw several offices, and at the end of the hallway, I saw Trace's name on the door as administrator. My heart fluttered at the sight.

An elderly woman walked toward me. "May I help you, sugar," she asked, looking into my eyes.

"I'm looking for Trace Wynn."

"Oh, Mr. Wynn is in his office. Is he expecting you?"

"No, he isn't."

"Just a moment." She walked slowly down the hall and knocked on the door. I heard Trace telling her to come inside. When she stepped inside, she closed the door. Shortly afterward, she stepped outside the door. "Please have a seat in the waiting room. He'll be right with you."

"Thank you. I walked to the waiting room and sat down. Before I could reach for a magazine, Trace walked through the door and stood quietly.

Owing to embarrassment, my lips cracked into a brittle smile and my brows knitted a frown. Trying to sound convincing, I said, "I was in the neighborhood."

"Really," he said, walking slowly toward me. When I stood up, he kissed my cheek. "Yes, I'm positive Choices was on your way home." He leaned against the door facing us and folded his arms. "Are you spying on me?"

“Well,” I stammered. “No. I just kinda, wanted to, ah.”

Catching me in a lie, Trace grinned. “You’re such a liar. Did you know I can tell when you’re lying?”

My eyes widened. “What happens; does my nose grow?” I placed my hands to my cheeks.

“No.” He raised a brow. “I’m just good at my job. You’ve never been deep-sea fishing a day in your life, have you?”

Taking a step backward I confessed, “No, but I’ve always wanted to go.”

“Wrong answer.”

Placing both hands behind my back, I asked, “So, you’re a human lie detector.”

“No. I study people.” Trace walked toward me. “Sometimes, I go along with the program, and sometimes not.”

My cheeks grew red with embarrassment. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I wanted to see how far you’d go to impress me.”

“Shut up. So, you knew all along.”

He kissed my cheek again. “Yes. And I’m pretty impressed.”

“So, that’s why you didn’t call.”

“No, Kitten. That’s *not* why I didn’t call. Roderick decided he wanted to commit suicide this morning. I’ve been at the hospital all day.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, he’ll be okay. He just wanted to go home.”

“Oh, wow.”

“That happens a lot around here. It’s kinda hard to say what my day will be like.”

“Bless your heart.” I stroked his cheek.

“Thanks, I need all the blessings I can handle. How about dinner? I’ll be getting off in approximately three minutes.”

“Three minutes, huh.” I stroked my forehead.

“Got any plans for tonight—any classes you need to teach?”

“No,” I admitted, blushing. “No classes tonight.”

“How about dinner at your place?”

“Is that fair?” I folded my arms defensively.

“Sure, you told me you loved to cook. Unless that was a lie, too.”

I exhaled, wondering if my apartment was neat enough to receive guests. “Okay. But you’ll be my assistant, right?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Trace opened the front door. “I’ll see you shortly.”

“Fine.” *What on earth was I going to cook?*

Chapter Six

Trace had a few stops to make. By the time he arrived, I was ready for him. The meal was almost prepared, and I was fresh as a daisy. When I opened the door he held a bouquet of flowers in one hand. "So, this was your delay?" I asked, reaching for the flowers.

With a sincere smile, Trace passed the flowers to me. "This was my *most* important stop."

Thinking about Dee's statement, I grinned and fussed over the gift. No one had *ever* given me flowers. A kiss on the cheek was in order. "This is so sweet. Let me get a vase. They'll be perfect on the table."

Trace stood in the doorway still holding a hand behind his back. "I've one more thing."

My eyes widened with interest. "Yes," I said, as he pulled out a bottle of nonalcoholic sparkling cider champagne. "Oh, now that is rich, and so thoughtful. What's my fee for these lovely offerings?"

As he leaned forward, his lips stretched into a crooked smile. "I could think of something."

Grimacing, I asked nervously, "What is that?"

"Come here, and I'll show you." I walked over to Trace, stepped into his embrace, and stared into his hazel eyes. "I'm curious. Do your lips taste as good as they look?"

My eyes searched his. "That's all. You want a kiss?" How could I resist his lips anyway?

After turning, I placed the champagne and flowers on the table by the door. Then I walked back into Trace's awaiting arms. He lowered his head and placed his lips on mine. Immediately, I knew we were in trouble. Trace held me tightly, his lips devouring mine. His embrace melted my lonely heart. Suddenly, I felt my temperature rising. How magnificent his lips felt.

When Trace finally let go, my head was swimming. I didn't know where my kitchen was, and I didn't ask Trace to sit down. Furthermore, I and my garlic bread had started to burn.

As promised, Trace helped prepare dinner. He moved like a professional in the kitchen. While he set the small table, I stood and watched. The swift movement of his hands absolutely blew me away. To say the least, I was stunned. "Someone taught you a lot about the kitchen, huh?"

Trace continued to hum while he worked. With lightning speed, he tossed the silver utensils into the air, flipping them with finesse, before finally placing them beside their plate. "You know, I went to The Fred Astaire Dance Academy when I was a boy. I also have ten years of tae kwon do

under my belt. Later, I earned my black belt. Needless to say, my body is very well disciplined.”

“Indeed it is. You move like a professional chef on steroids!”

He smiled, but continued his chore. “Cooking is an art. Some people feel it’s not manly to cook or dance. I do both sometimes, just to relax.”

Wiping my hand on a dish cloth, I acknowledged his statements sarcastically. “Well-disciplined body. Toned muscles—martial arts—now how could I have possibly missed that one?”

Trace placed the stemware on the table. “People have no idea that martial arts and dancing are cousins.”

I placed a bowl of salad on the table. “Really? Have you beaten anyone up lately?”

Standing quietly for a moment, Trace then shook his head. “My God, Nandi. No, I rarely use it.”

At that point, I was wondering what else I didn’t know about Trace. He was mysterious, with a serene calmness about him. His behavior was contagious, and I found myself hanging on his every word. After passing him the bowls of clam chowder, he delivered them to the table without breaking his rhythm. Periodically, Trace caught me staring. It was very obvious, and I cringed with embarrassment.

Once again the meal was fantastic. The shrimp was the best ever, the salad was divine. While Trace poured more champagne in my glass, I could swear I felt tipsy. My judgment was horribly impaired, and I giggled like a teenager. Everything Trace did was unbearably romantic. Because I was not accustomed to his thoughtful nature, I found myself blushing or laughing uncontrollably.

When dinner was over, we gravitated toward the sofa. After lighting a few fragrant candles, I turned off the lights. Now, it was time for soft music and naughty conversation. While basking in the sweet-smelling glow, we sat quietly. Trace crossed his legs and gazed into my eyes. “I’m looking forward to many meals with you.”

Gawking at him with disbelief, I said, “Oh, wow. You’re kidding.”

Trace searched my eyes and toyed with my hair. “Aren’t you having a good time?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think you really wanted to start a relationship with me. You hardly know me.”

Trace leaned closer and swept my long bangs from my eye. “Nandi, I know all I need to know about you. You’re a fantastic woman. You’re funny as hell, and you’re smart. What’s not to love?”

I pursed my lips under his observation. "Well, you do have a point. I am a fantastic woman."

"Right." Trace removed my drink and took my hand. "Now, let's really get to know each other."

I widened my eyes with confusion, hoping I understood him correctly. "Excuse me?"

"I've got a question for you." He shrugged. "Tell me what you're looking for in this man."

Shaking my head, I repeated his words without success. "What am I looking for in a man?" I elevated both brows.

Trace raised a finger and spoke slowly. "No, I said in *this* man."

He had put me on the spot, and I sat stunned. "I'm sorry, Trace. No one has asked me that question before. I don't quite know what to say."

Chuckling loudly, Trace stroked my thigh. "You're weird, but it's the best kinda weird I know."

"Okay," I said, appearing miffed. "I guess that's good."

"Now, I've kept my word." He placed his arm around my shoulder. "I set the table, and I helped you wash the dishes." He nuzzled my neck. "So, now, reward me with a kiss?"

I softened my stare. "Of course, Trace." I placed my hand on his cheek and turned his face toward mine. His eyes seemed smoky with desire as our lips met.

Once again our passions turned mischievous. As if he had no control, Trace stroked his strong hands across my round breast. The sensation of his touch stirred deep inside me. "I don't mean to seem forward," he whispered through his passionate kiss, "but your breasts are gorgeous. I'm sure they raise awareness upon sight."

"Excuse you." I backed away from Trace and frowned.

Trace scooted to the edge of the sofa. "I'm just saying—I find you very intriguing. My thoughts keep drifting back to our first conversation."

I shook my head in denial and took a sip out of my drink. "You can't mean what you're saying, Trace."

"Why not?" He stared into the darkness of the room. "The moment I saw you, I was knocked off my feet."

"What?"

"Really. Nothing else around me mattered. Why do you think I let you in front of me? You have a beautiful smile—lovely hair, gorgeous skin, long legs, and a *nice*, bitable ass."

I inhaled. "You saw all of that at the checkout counter?"

Trace took a swallow from his drink and leaned back on the sofa. He paused, stroked his chin, then proceeded to explain. "Nandi. Actually, I saw you before the checkout counter. Right then, I knew I wanted to see you again. My concern was, if you dated guys like me. I had my fingers crossed, hoping you did."

Withdrawing from Trace, I flinched uncomfortably. "Oh, wow."

"See," he shook his finger. "I love that about you. When you're stunned, you always say the same thing. I love learning about you. All the little stories you tell are fascinating."

Leaning toward Trace, I made my confession. "I must be truthful. I've never made love to anyone outside my race."

"Oh," he receded. "That could be a good thing," he whispered, placing a kiss upon my forehead.

"You're awful," I said, turning my face from his.

Trace turned my face back toward his. "If you won't get angry, I'll tell you a little secret." He searched my eyes for reliance, and I nodded. "The moment we met, something stirred inside me. Since I moved here, I've met a lot of attractive women." He paused, and I nodded again. "They came on to me like gangbusters. But, somehow, when I'm with you, everything is right with the world."

Trace removed his hand but stroked my shoulder with meaningful glides. "Nandi, I meditate several times a day, so I'm keenly aware of my body. You walked into my life and totally upset the chemistry in this man's body. There is something strange about you, and I must know what that is." He stroked his forehead, then cast his eyes toward the floor. "Stop me if I'm sounding ridiculous."

Trace held his body close to mine. Because I felt grateful for his acknowledgment, I placed my head against his chest. While I stroked his muscular build, I could feel his heart beating. "No," I moistened my lips, "you don't sound ridiculous."

"Nandi," Trace said, speaking softly. "I want you just the way you are." He stroked my cheek, and I nuzzled my face against his hand. "I can't help if I feel this strong attraction for you."

At that point, I think there was music playing, but I wasn't sure. Trace removed me from his chest and stood up. He lifted me from the sofa, took my hands, then placed them around his neck. Simultaneously, he pulled me into his arms, pressing his toned body against mine. Immediately, my presence evoked a change in his physical condition. His breathing grew rapid as he grasped my waist and held me tighter. Placing both hands on my rear,

he gave a gentle squeeze. Periodically he rotated his hips, grinding his member suggestively against me.

With my face against his chest, Trace placed his chin against my hair. Together, we waltzed slowly toward the bedroom. Once inside, Trace pushed my decorative pillows aside and placed me tenderly upon the bed. I helped him remove my dress as I also wanted him so badly.

His narrowed eyes seemed hungry as he stroked the length of my long legs. "Keep the shoes," he crooned. "All I want is panties, bra, and stilettos."

Because each man has his special turn-on, I obeyed his wishes. Once I lay before him, he disrobed with a leisurely sensual dance. His movements were erotic, and very enticing. When I finally witnessed his package, my core thickened with anticipation. I exhaled slowly, while grabbing the base of my breasts, then stroking them from base to tip. I arched my back, imagining how wonderful he would feel inside.

Finally, Trace climbed into bed. He parted my legs, then pulled my panties aside. After parting my folds, he lapped the silken cream from my pearl. Shudders of delight divided my lips as soft whimpers fought to escape. Immediately, I realized he was a master. Within seconds, Trace had my thighs trembling with every touch. My rear was flexed, as he skillfully taught the naughty pearl a good lesson. I dared not close my lips, as panting cries escaped to freedom.

Suddenly, Trace reached for protection. I watched as he rolled the rubber over his elongated shaft. Then, looking into my eyes, he sat up on his knees. Unexpectedly, he pulled my moist hips toward his waiting mast. Using his fingers, he once again pulled my panties aside. I closed my eyes when I felt him enter my cavern. With my buns clutched in his hands, he pulled my hips closer, encouraging his swollen mast into my moist canal. Trace was filling my body with a painfully slow stride. When I thought he had filled me completely, there was still more. Finally, he positioned himself, then rhythmically he slammed his body against mine.

He closed his eyes when he touched bottom. Drawing his shoulders tightly, he moaned, tossed his head, then shook his hair wildly. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear my love was his ultimate experience. Together, we rode a river of well-placed friction. My core tightened around him, urging him to spill his seed. Trace's body had discipline, but somehow my juices made him lose control. While he enjoyed my body, I relished his. He was striking my sweet spot, and I couldn't take much more. My demise was near, and I could no longer ignore my body's demands. Surprisingly, Trace stop moving. "Come on, Kitten," he instructed. "I can't stay—I can't stay," he groaned. "Come with me."

I didn't need his encouragement. This kitten was already purring and releasing the juices of her well-loved body. Feeling my strong contractions, Trace cursed, then he let go with shudders of ecstasy. There was no problem with our lovemaking. It was an excellent ride. Trace kissed what was left of me, then crashed into a smoldering heap.

* * * *

After an hour of pillow talk, Trace elevated himself upon his elbows. "I have a wonderful idea. How does the beach sound this weekend?"

Thinking of my expensive ponytail, I answered slowly. "That sounds wonderful. Will I need to pack a lunch?"

"Great idea," he kidded, stroking my bare shoulders.

Finally, I relaxed. "How about a couple of subs and some drinks? Some chips would be nice." I pulled the sheets around my breast.

Trace brightened. "Excellent. Let's go early and stay late."

Teasing, I added, "Why not stay the night?"

Upon hearing my words, his eyes glistened. "That's a novel idea. I love to *rough it*—become one with the elements. You're a woman after my own heart."

"Oh, wow." *What on earth had I done?*

"I've got an old canopy we could use. It has a few holes, but other than that, it's in great shape."

Swallowing hard, I uttered, "Fffantastic, Trace."

He reached for his slacks then kissed my lips. "I'll pick you up at six."

Chapter Seven

At six o'clock Saturday morning, Trace was at my door. He was dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt. On the other hand, I had on a new bathing suit, new shorts, and a stylish tee. A large-brimmed straw hat completed my outfit. A gleam danced in his eyes. He kissed my unprepared cheek. "Thanks for last night, Kitten. It was stupendous." Trace looked around the living room. "Are you ready to go?" He saw several bundles stuffed to the gills. Pointing toward the pile, he asked, "What's all this?"

Pulling the drawstring on a beach bag, I answered nonchalantly, "Just a few items to make us comfortable."

"O—okay," He walked over, knelt down, and searched the items. "Let's see, sunscreen, bug spray, insect repellent, citronella candles—is this a quilt, an umbrella, and a table?"

"Sure, I bought them after you left last night."

"Kitten," he shook his head. "I don't think we'll need them. I have the canopy. When you zip on the netting, it doubles as a tent."

"Well, we're driving the truck. If we need this stuff, we'll have it. Oh, by the way, I bought some of those cute little camping dishes, too."

"That's okay. Mine are kinda rusted out."

We loaded our supplies into the back of the truck, and off we went. While riding, my mind raced back to our night of passion. I was amazed that Trace knew how to bring pleasure by pushing all the right buttons. There was nothing selfish about his lovemaking. As I pondered our night together, I felt my core thicken with anticipation. Round two would have to come soon. Without delay, I got control of my passionate thoughts. It would probably be late evening before we would make love again.

After a few hours, we arrived at the beach area. Although I thought we were early, people were already fishing, picnicking, and swimming. Motor boats roared across the lake, making foamy waves as they tunneled through the water. The water had to be 32 degrees below zero, and there was still dew on the ground. I couldn't understand why these people were not in bed. After all, it *was* Saturday. "Why are people swimming so early?" I asked. "They should wait until the water gets warmer."

As he looked over the spacious campground, Trace schooled me about camping. "Actually, it's quite enjoyable. They probably spent the night."

Appearing worried, I asked, "You aren't going to throw me into the deep part, are you? If so, that would kinda piss me off."

Trace turned onto the beach area. "You said you could swim."

"Yeah, but."

Trace threw up his hand. "I promise I won't throw you in the water." Reaching up to grasp my real ponytail, Trace asked, "If your hair gets wet, are you going to curse, scream, and run all the way home?"

"No, Trace." I looked out the window. With a deaden tone I added, "Don't be so evil."

Trace turned my face toward his. "Kitten, I have a question."

I didn't answer, but I gave him my undivided attention.

"What's with black women, hair, and water, anyway?" He shrugged.

Pursing my lips, I thought for a second. "Well, I can only tell you about me. If I spend six hours at the beauty shop and pay two hundred seventy dollars, I don't want my hair ruined by some jokester splashing water in my face."

Trace nodded. "So, that's it. Braids and other styles cost a lot, right?"

"Pretty much. But I'm ready for you. I'm wearing my own hair. You're going to see the real deal today. I need to know if you'll run away when my hair dries out."

Trace scowled and gritted his teeth. "Dries out. That sounds scary."

"No, Trace. It just gets dry. Mine stands up when it dries out. I brought some hair products to keep it under control."

Keeping his eye on the small road, Trace stated his opinion. "Sounds like your hair takes on a life of its own."

I narrowed my eyes and yelled playfully, "I'm warning you, Trace Wynn. If you laugh at me, it's going to be on."

Trace pretended to flinch under my words. "I'm scared to death. Please be gentle with me."

"You wouldn't want me laughing at you, if the sun burned the tip of your nose, would you?"

"Heavens no," he chuckled. "That would be painful."

"Then don't laugh at me." While we were discussing our differences, I took a healthy jab at Trace. "And while we're on the subject, I also turn brown in the sun. My skin will tan. Is that clear?"

"So," taking his fingers he stroked my arm. "You're saying you're going to get darker."

"Yes." Smirking, I stared upside his head. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, but I do have a question. If you turn darker, will your personality change?"

"What kind of question is that, Trace?"

"I'm just saying, if you turn darker, will you become a different person? Maybe we should keep you inside until it gets dark," he chuckled.

“You know better than that—you’re being ridiculous.”

“Just kidding.” Trace reached over to turn down the air. “I wouldn’t hurt you for anything, Kitten. Just asking thought-provoking questions.”

For a moment, I thought I saw another side of Trace. I had raised my defenses against him, although it was not necessary.

Chapter Eight

When we agreed upon the perfect spot, Trace parked and unloaded the truck. I searched for the ladies room and, luckily, there was one nearby. When I stepped behind the partition, I found it riddled with spiders, mosquitoes, and beetles who had met their demise. While relieving myself, I was frightened by a large squirrel that scurried up the wall. Once it reached the top, it sat quietly on the window above the stall. Fear caused me to leap from my seated position, therefore urine streamed down my leg. As I dashed out of the stall, my flip flops lost their grip on the wet floor, then I slid into the metal sink. My side hit the nasty sink, causing me to wince in pain.

There was no way I was going to let Trace get the best of me. I grabbed some brown paper towels, and some chemical soap, then I cleaned myself up. This was going to be a long day. By the time I returned, Trace was setting up the canopy. "I need your help," he called, struggling with the long rods.

Finally, everything was finished. Our spot seemed cozy, and now we needed a break. Even though Trace had removed his shirt, he was still sweating miserably. "Would you fetch me a cold drink, Kitten?" He fanned himself with his hand. "This heat is killing me."

"Sure," I said, selecting a Coke from the cooler. I delivered it as a servant girl. "Your royal highness, here is your drink."

A broad grin stretched across his face as he reached for the bottle. When he opened it, he declared, "You're an excellent servant, my dear." He winked and took a swallow.

The rest of the day was pure enjoyment. We applied sunscreen and set out for fun. Trace found a turtle and chased me until I couldn't breathe. Then I chased him with a large stick. Yes, I meant to beat him good. Afterward, I found an old plastic milk carton. It was perfect for collecting shells. Trace took his knife and cut off the top. Inside the carton, I placed exquisite shells. I had no idea the shells were inhabited by hermit crabs. When I made that disgusting discovery, my screams echoed across the water.

Trace ran to my rescue only to find live crabs crawling about. "Nandi." Panting loudly, he ran his fingers through his hair. "They're only hermit crabs, Kitten. They aren't going to hurt you."

"I don't care," I yelled, hiding behind him. "Get rid of them!"

With hesitation, Trace picked up the carton, examined the shells, then tossed them toward the beach's edge. "This could be your supper," he admitted, playfully.

Propping my hands on my hips, I declared, "I'd rather eat roots and grass."

When things grew quiet, the sunshine, the willowy grasses, and the sandy beach made our kisses more romantic. The entire venture was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Because I had the common sense to pull my hair into a ponytail, water play was not such a mess. Later on that day, my tan had set in and my hair was a dried-out mess. When I went to the restroom again, I lowered the neckline of my T-shirt and raised the strap on my bathing suit. It revealed a dark, rich tan, and I grinned. It had been the type of day I'd never witnessed before. There was no drama, only utter satisfaction laced with moments of pleasure.

Trace had built a fire in the metal grill stationed on the sandy beach. We roasted wieners and cooked a few burgers. The aroma of charred meat wafted heavenward. Although the buns were not warm, the food was astounding. Trace sat at the picnic table making the perfect hamburger. When I walked past, he held his burger up to my lips. "Bite," he said, while chewing. "It's really good."

Preparing to spread mustard on my hotdog, I admonished, "If I bite your burger, you've got to bite my dog."

"That's a deal," he muffled, making delicious noises.

Trace held his burger up to my mouth. I bit deeply into his sandwich. When I pulled away, I took most of his lettuce and tomatoes. As I chewed, the taste of freshly grilled burgers on an open pit excited my taste buds. While I was chewing his burger, I held my hotdog near Trace's lips. When he opened his mouth, I shoved my dog down his throat, causing him to gag. Being brutal, I made a complete mess around his lips.

In response to my antics, Trace jumped up, tightly clutching his burger. The bread crumbled beneath his strength. The look on his face was one of utter surprise. Out of the blue, he spit out my mess and burst into laughter.

I placed my hands over my mouth and gasped. Then snickering loudly, I backed up while grinning, knowing I was in trouble. Quickly, I turned, then took off running with jackrabbit speed. Immediately, Trace gave chase. "Come here, you!" he yelled, mischievously.

Running like a wild woman, I almost destroyed the camp area. After chasing me around the picnic area, Trace finally caught me. He shoved his burger to my lips. "Bite!" he yelled, puckishly. "Bite it!" I turned my face from his burger, then knocked it to the ground. "Now, you're really in trouble, young lady!"

With dirty feet, I held my aching side and climbed into the back of the truck. Once there, I positioned myself against the cab. I was panting and screaming, knowing Trace was in hot pursuit.

He leaped on the truck's bed, and it gave way under his weight. With a demonic gleam in his eyes he stalked me, finally grabbing me and pinning me against the cab. Then, puffing with exhaustion, he grew quiet, then kissed me. His kiss was laden with mustard from my vicious hotdog attack. While the sun beat down on us, Trace kissed me while caressing my body against the cab. When his breathing grew erratic, he stopped and gazed into my eyes. "You're in real danger now." He pushed against his hard member and groaned. "That should hold you until I can teach you a proper lesson." Suddenly he backed up, then jumped from the truck's bed and onto the ground. Like a gallant knight, he then extended his hand toward mine. Together we walked along the shore and explored the beach. Trace was very knowledgeable about camping and fishing—pastimes he took seriously.

* * * *

Later that evening, Trace got a frantic call from the center. A terrible fight had erupted among the men, and several were badly injured. Concern filled his face as he paced the grounds holding his phone to his ear. Attempting to instruct Jasper, his assistant, was futile. Periodically, Trace yelled, as Jasper seemed too hysterical to understand his instructions. From the stress in Trace's voice, Jasper hardly contained his own composure.

Finally, Trace hung up the phone. He stroked his forehead, then sat quietly on his cot to meditate. Occasionally, he stroked his chin and sighed, but he said nothing. Seeing him distraught touched my heart. I wanted so badly to comfort him. When I reached out to him, I discovered the ground surrounding his cot was covered with daddy longlegs.

Trace didn't seem worried about them. However, I was deeply concerned. I paced nervously, watching the spiders as they walked freely about. When it seemed they were crawling on my body, I asked softly, "Let's move your cot, okay?"

While frowning, Trace lifted his eyes. "Why," he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I just need a few moments to think, before I call Jasper back." He gazed through me absently. "You don't mind do you, Nandi?"

Not wanting to appear insensitive, I replied, "No, I understand. You need to sort things out. I want to sit near you, but I'm deathly afraid of spiders." With my last words I grimaced, then reached for the bug spray.

"What?" Trace searched the grasses around his cot and his eyes softened. "You aren't afraid of a little spider, are you?"

Now, holding a can of insect spray, I stood silently.

Trace threw his hands in the air. “Nandi, they only eat vegetation and wood decay. They don’t eat people.”

“Do they bite?” I asked, with my hand poised on the spray nozzle.

Trace scratched his head. “Yes, it’s possible. I guess.”

“Well,” I started to drench the ground with spray. “I don’t like spiders.”

While I sprayed, Trace sputtered. Finally he reached for the can. “Nandi,” he coughed, waving his hand to fan the spray. “Please give me the spray. I know you’re afraid, Kitten. But give me a moment, okay?”

I felt like an insensitive heel and gave Trace a fragile smile. Taking my thumb I pointed toward the shore, then backed out of the shelter we’d put together earlier. “I’ll just—walk—down by the water.”

While Trace sat meditating, I walked along the beach and waded through the clear water. The sun was setting, and the day had been spectacular. There was no way I wanted it to end. Everything about Trace made me happy. At this point, Trace wasn’t taboo in my book, and I didn’t care what Dee thought. If her heart felt as light as mine, she’d burst from glee.

I wished for her happiness, but she was a miserable wretch. Would she ever meet Mr. Right? Would she ever venture out? She was happy being second or third, but I wasn’t. It must have been a self-esteem issue. I knew who I was, and I deserved better. While I stepped through the warm water I wished that someday she, too, could enjoy the bliss I was feeling.

When I turned to see if Trace was still inside the tent, I found him missing. With a quick swoop he picked me up in his arms and kissed me. The water rushed toward the shore, lapping at my bottom. His kiss sealed the feelings I held in my heart. I wanted to pinch myself. Tears of joy ran down my face. We were a perfect—mismatch.

Chapter Nine

Night held its own enchantment. Several families camped around us. They sat in lawn chairs, played music, and watched the waves slam against the shore. Citronella candles bought our protection from biting mosquitoes, and their flames wavered lightly in the breeze. Trace had built another fire, and, although we had eaten like pigs, a snack seemed in order. An old CD player brought a touch of romance to our incredible night. Luckily, we agreed on most of our music as we discussed our likes and dislikes.

Like mischievous teens, we lay on an old quilt teasing each other and telling dirty jokes. I had never spent a night under the stars, but I was prepared to give it a try. When Traced reached for his Coke positioned behind me, he brushed my injured side by accident. "Ouch," I screeched, wincing as he withdrew his hand.

Trace's brows furrowed. "I'm sorry, did I hurt you? Did something bite you?"

Stroking my side, I admitted, "No. It just feels a little sore."

"Let's see." Trace raised my T-shirt, revealing a large bruise on my side. "Jesus! Nandi. What happened?"

"What," I asked, looking down at the bruise.

"That's quite a large bruise."

"On my side? Oh, yeah. I hit my side on the sink in the restroom."

"Damn!" Trace got on his knees to get a better look. "Why didn't you tell me, Kitten?"

Shrugging, I tenderly stroked the bruise, which was dark red, purple, and black. Then, I revealed, "Well, I thought it would get better."

Trace examined the injury, touching it lightly. "Looks like you cracked a rib. How can someone get banged up this badly and not know it?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just caught up in the moment." Removing Trace's hand from my side, I confessed. "It was kinda hurting when you picked me up in the water—but I was having too much fun."

"Sweetie, sweetie." Trace sought my eyes with a sympathetic gaze. "Let's get this x-rayed. It could be broken. Come here." He raised my shirt again.

Looking down at the injury, I uttered slowly, "Trace, if it's broken, it's been broken all day. I hit my side early this morning." The sink in the restroom had done more damage than I had imagined.

"Damn, Nandi, didn't you see the bruising?" He stroked a stray hair, putting it back in place. Compassion troubled his eyes.

In a way, I was enjoying having Trace fuss over me. His stare was intense—and his touch was loving and kind. “To be honest, it was kinda red earlier, but it wasn’t deep purple.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder and gazed into my eyes. “Kitten, does it hurt when you take a deep breath? I think we’d better go to the hospital. You might need a CT scan, just to make sure.” He rose to his feet.

I shook my head and looked up at him. “It only hurts a little when I breathe in, but I told you that earlier.” Trace lowered his hand toward mine.

“Kitten, sweetie. You didn’t tell me you had problems breathing.”

“Trace Wynn! You’ve been chasing me all day.”

Trace scratched his head, appearing pensive. “Now I remember. You have been holding your side all evening.”

“Exactly; I thought I had a catch in my side. I didn’t pay it any attention. If you insist, I’ll go to the hospital, but I think I’m fine.”

Without warning, Trace started to pull the quilt off the ground. “Come on, Nandi. I’ll pack this stuff up. You go sit in the truck.” Trace moved about like a man on a mission. He opened the tailgate and simply tossed supplies in the back.

I paraded back and forth, trying to lend a hand. “Trace, I can help. I’m telling you, I’ve been moving about all day. If this were serious, I’d be the first to know.”

He stopped breaking down the tent, caught me by the arm, and looked into my eyes. “Nandi, cracked ribs are not as serious as broken ribs, but who knows if they’re not broken without an x-ray. Look at the damage we could have done. Why didn’t you tell me?”

With an austere expression, I shrugged, “I was a little embarrassed.”

Trace shook his head and closed his eyes as if trying to understand my motives. “You were embarrassed? Why? What happened?”

I twisted my mouth pensively and gazed into the fire. After a few seconds, I spoke. “Well, when we first got here, I went to the bathroom. A squirrel ran up the wall inside my stall. It scared the crap outta me. I jumped up and slipped on the wet floor. Before I could get a grip, I slammed into that metal sink thingy.”

“Did you feel the bone snapping?” Trace brought his fists together as if breaking a stick.

“No. I thought I’d cut my side at first. But when I didn’t see any blood, I felt it would be okay.”

Trace pointed toward the cab of the truck. “Sit,” he said, his words calloused.

Like an angry child, I held my side and marched toward the truck. Trace could be right, but I didn't want him telling me what to do. When I walked past him, I frowned and pushed out my bottom lip. Once I reached the cab, I slid into the seat carefully and smiled. *Yeah, he loves me.*

* * * *

Small-town hospitals didn't set well with me, so I asked Trace to drive home. I felt our local hospital would be better. When we arrived, he got out and opened my door. Somehow, the long trip home had stiffened me, so I walked with a limp. Trace placed his arm around my waist, and I placed my arm over my shoulder. His sincerity warmed my heart, and I nuzzled against him.

Once inside the hospital, we filled out the paperwork. Afterward, we were instructed to wait. The waiting room was crowded. Finding a place to sit was difficult. Noticing that people sat moaning and groaning, I knew it would be a while before they called us. Trace located a couple of seats, then led me to the first chair. We sat quietly and watched television.

Suddenly, I saw a flash of light against the glass doors of the hospital's waiting room. Then a set of silver rims pulled into view. Immediately, I recognized Kirk's black car. As he pulled into the emergency lane, terror ran through my body. He opened his door and stuck out his legs. They had the skeletal appearance of a starving grasshopper. His sneaker-clad feet struck the pavement with urgency. When Kirk stood up, he towered above his car, then he peered inside the ER with huge round eyes. The bushy hair on his head was gnarled, twisted, and long. After rushing to the passenger side, he opened the door and reached inside to assist his younger sister. He walked her carefully toward the sliding doors of the ER. Kay-Kay, his sister, was leaning over, panting loudly, and holding her stomach. It was obvious her baby was on the way.

Like the scoundrel that he is, Kirk rushed into the waiting area and shouted obscenities at the nurses. The head nurse seemed annoyed by his dreadful behavior. She scowled, and then got up from her desk. On her command, two other nurses appeared. After receiving instructions, they scrambled about to scrounge up a wheelchair. After Kay-Kay sat down, they pushed her toward the locked double doors. As they wheeled her along, they questioned her about her labor pains. The security doors opened into a long hallway. Though Kay-Kay had gone down the hallway, Kirk held the door open with a lingering stare.

Seeing Kay-Kay in labor, I shook my head remorsefully. She had been one of my girls. While I fought desperately to save her, she felt she had no other alternative in life. Her goals consisted of having a baby, getting a food stamp card, and keeping a man in her sheets. Though she was only sixteen, she had loads of talent and career potential. I tried to encourage her and explained other alternatives to her chosen lifestyle.

Life is not about sex, babies, welfare, and food stamps, but none of that information sank in. Because this was Kay-Kay's second child, I was the last person she wanted to see. My heart wept for her. Although my side was throbbing, my spirit was hurting more. I had pledged my life to saving girls like her.

Trace sat beside me, while tears stung my eyes. I placed my head on his shoulder, and he stroked my cheek. "Was that one of your students?"

"Yes," I said, blotting my eye with my fingertips.

While Kay-Kay's life concerned me greatly, hiding from Kirk concerned me more. I turned my head so Kirk couldn't recognize me. That, however, was not the case. Because my legs are one of my greatest assets, Kirk acknowledged them right away. Like the uncouth simpleton that he is, he yelled loudly, in an irritated tone. "Hey—hey! Nandi!"

Ignoring Kirk, I gazed upward into Trace's face. He smiled. "Kitten. You've been summoned."

Automatically, my neck snapped from side to side. "I ain't thinkin' about Kirk."

Seeing my annoyance, Trace whispered in my ear sarcastically. "Apparently, he's thinking about you."

While Kirk held the door open, they wheeled his sister down the hall and out of sight. "Hey! I know you hear me talkin' to you."

Trace placed his fingers under my chin and turned my face upwards. Speaking calmly, he asked, "Sweet face, were you two seeing each other?"

I sighed then admitted, "For a minute. It was a mistake. Kirk was just a thing."

Trace's shoulder lurched forward in question. "A thing. Meaning?"

"Meaning, we saw each other every now and then."

"Oh," he nodded. "A booty call?"

"No," I sneered, picking up a magazine.

He leaned back in his seat. "Oh, then you guys were dating?"

"No." I absently thumbed through the magazine.

Trace turned my face and lifted my chin. "Come on, Nandi. Be upfront with me. If I need to defend myself, I must be prepared."

Absently, I closed the magazine and sighed. “I really don’t think there’ll be a problem, but you never know. Kirk does have a history of violence and drug use.”

“That . . . is exactly, what I mean,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

I kept my fingers crossed that Kirk would get busy and forget about me. What flamed his butt was Trace. I knew he hated Caucasian men, as he often spoke of harming them. Right now, I really needed to come clean with Trace. It was clear I had feelings for him.

Although Trace was well-trained, disciplined, and a martial arts expert, there was no way I wanted him to face Kirk. If my suspicions were correct, Kirk would be in for quite a battle. Perhaps we would be in the treatment room when he returned.

Chapter Ten

Turns out my ribs were only bruised. I didn't regret having them checked out. After careful deliberation, I confessed my immediate past to Trace. He explained that he was serious about us. Any luggage I had was relevant to our relationship, as well as our safety. As we drove home, our conversation grew deep. While I talked, Trace was quiet and listened carefully. My senses told me he was angry; it turns out I was mistaken. "Now that you know everything, are you still upset with me?"

"Nandi, let me explain." He watched the road as he drove. His voice rumbled deep in his throat. "I moved to this town three months ago. You've lived here all your life. You have a lifetime of relationships."

"Yes, and . . ."

"If you were on my territory, things would be the same. In the last town I lived in, I dated several women. If you were new on my turf, I promise I wouldn't leave you in the dark. It's too dangerous. Some women form attachments. Especially the ones with low self-esteem."

I hadn't thought about that. Trace was right. Some women and guys were hard to shake, even if you told them to get lost. Because I didn't want anyone treating Trace badly, I agreed that I'd make him aware of dangerous situations.

Soon, Trace delivered me safely to my apartment. While I washed away the essence of the beach, Trace unpacked the truck. When I stepped out of the shower, I had washed my hair. The delicate scent of clean female encompassed my body. While standing in a bath towel and turban, I noticed that Trace seemed haggard. After a long day at the beach, he still moved about briskly. I felt selfish when I saw how hard he was working. "Why don't you take a shower, too? You have clean clothes in the duffel bag."

There was no doubt, Trace needed a bath. He walked over and gave me a light hug. After inhaling my perfumed skin, he placed his bristly low growth against my face. "You smell so fresh. I just might take you up on that offer."

"Fine," I remarked, moving from his stinky grasp. "I'll get a towel and some shampoo."

"Please," he sighed, observing his empty arms. "I'd love a shower." He walked toward the kitchen and turned. "When I get out, I want you in bed resting."

"Resting." I tossed him a sidelong glance, then opened the closet door.

Trace pointed his finger. "I mean it, Nandi," he warned. "First, I'm going to take that fermented stench to the trash dumpster." Walking toward the overflowing trash in the kitchen, he finished his sentence. "Then, I'm going

to take a nice, hot shower. When I walk through that door,” he pointed toward the bathroom, “I want you in bed and resting.”

A take-charge man was always important to me, especially if my welfare came first. “Okay,” I said, holding a bottle of shampoo. “You win. I’ll rest.”

Snatching up the cumbersome trash bags, Trace walked toward the door. He winked his eye and puckered his lips into a kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

After Trace’s shower, we cuddled in bed and watched television. Though he was wearing shorts, my eyes enjoyed the view of his freshly showered body. He toyed with the silky strands of my hair. While watching the strands falling back into place, Trace started to talk. “I know you feel this relationship is going to be one-sided, but it isn’t.”

Using the remote, I was trying to find a good movie but stopped. “What makes you think I feel that way?”

Trace tilted his head to one side. “The conversation we had in the restaurant.”

“Oh,” I raised a brow.

“Listen.” Trace raised my blouse and surveyed my bruise. “I care about you. I want to learn all about you.” He pointed to himself. “Trace Wynn wants to know what makes *you* happy. Although I’m a good judge of character, I don’t want to pretend I know everything.” Trace paused. “Tell me.” He folded his darkly tanned arms. “What would Nandi like to do on our next date?”

My mouth flew open. “Oh, wow, that’s so sweet.” I reached out to embrace him. “I’m proud you feel that way. There is *someplace* I’d like to go.”

“And where is that?” He drummed his fingers against his arm.

“Although I love my family, they do get on my nerves. Next weekend we’re having our family reunion. Would you like to go—as my date, of course?”

“Sure.” Trace’s eyes widened with genuine concern. “Where?”

“Trace.” I narrowed my eyes and searched the brightness in his. “Are you sure you want to do this? Some of my family members are pretty unsavory.”

Trace smiled broadly. “Kitten, I work with unpleasant individuals every day. I understand them pretty well.”

Placing the remote on the bed, I demanded, “Don’t be a glutton for punishment. My Uncle Willie has this thing about white men. Think you can handle that?” This time, I folded my arms.

“We shall see,” he shrugged.

Reaching out, I tenderly stroked his freshly shaven face. “I’m nervous about this. Maybe we shouldn’t go.”

Trace placed his hand on mine. “Let’s do go. Your family could become my family.”

In a fit of frustration, I kicked a pillow from the bed. “Damn!”

Observing the pillow on the floor, Trace asked, “Is there a problem?”

“I just don’t want you to wear your feelings on your sleeve. I’ve got some pretty raunchy cousins, too.”

“Let me handle that.” Trace shook his head. “I’m not worried. Now, put those gorgeous lips on mine.”

Chapter Eleven

When Saturday arrived, I was on pins and needles. After a few drinks, Uncle Willie could start a race riot, and I knew it. He blamed the white man for all the injustice in the world. Although Trace never burned a cross on his yard, Uncle Willie would still hold him responsible for his woes.

To display our unity, I'd purchase Trace a family reunion shirt when we arrived. We both wore jeans, but I wore the turquoise family reunion shirt. When we arrived at the park, the reunion was in full swing. Kids ran about with loaded water guns, the men were playing dominoes under the tree, women were setting the picnic tables, and teens were behaving badly with their dates.

While we sat in the truck, Trace gazed out the window. "Looks like they're having a great time." He placed his hand on the door's handle. "Ready to go?"

I reached for his arm. "Wait," I stalled. "I need to find my lipstick."

"You look fine," he sighed, restlessly. Trace rolled down the window. Then he placed his hand above his brow to shade his view. "Are they playing football over there?"

Knowing that *all* my male cousins had the He-Man complex, I cringed.

"Oh," I shunned, flipping my wrist. "They're just out there baking in the sun and getting sweaty. You don't want to do that." I shook my head, and my ponytail agreed.

"Why not?" Trace eased back into his seat.

"Baby," I patted his thigh, "I don't want you to get hurt. Those guys are gigantic—grain-fed, cornbread-eating gorillas."

Trace sat staring. "I think I can hold my own. Don't try to shelter me."

Sighing loudly, I turned and looked out of my window, then I faced him. "I'm not trying to shelter you, sweetie. I know you can hold your own." I nodded innocently. "Jerome weighs a solid 380. He's six feet five inches." Inside, I felt Jerome would probably challenge Trace. Reaching up, I pinched his cheek and cooed, "I just want you to enjoy yourself."

Trace tossed me a stern expression. "It's motherly of you to consider my health."

I gave him a sidelong glance. *Do you really think I'm going to let you play with those ruffians?*

Trace contorted his face into a wicked frown. "If they ask me to play," he held his hands as if gripping a football, "it's on," he whispered, raising a brow.

"Tha—that's a death sentence, Trace!"

"No," he insisted. "That's what *men* do."

"Trace Wynn, you promise me right now that you won't play football with those mastodons."

"Scout's honor." Trace saluted, slyly cut his eyes to the side, then stepped out of the truck. He was lying, and I knew it.

As soon as we got out of the truck, we were greeted by a horde of children. Every year, I played a few games with them, now they were ready to get started. Some whined tearfully, pawed at me, and pulled at my blouse. "Okay, okay," I said, giving in. "Give me a moment to introduce Trace, then we'll do something fun, okay?"

The children quietly walked away; their faces proved their dissatisfaction. Dee's car was in the parking area, so she'd arrived early. I was anxious for her to meet Trace. He was not the monster she thought he was, and there was nothing taboo about him. While trying to locate Dee, I caught a strange vision from the corner of my eye. Alarms of horror electrified every nerve in my body, and I stopped walking. Out on the makeshift football field, Kirk prepared to catch the football. He had no reason to attend *my* family reunion, and it was beyond me why he was even here. After gathering my wits, I felt my shoulders slumped forward. The day was going to be ruined.

No one knew Trace was coming. The only person who would give Kirk an invitation was Dee. As I scanned the crowd, I saw her sitting comfortably in a lawn chair. Her khaki shorts hardly covered the dimples in her overweight butt. Although she wore an open shirt over her top, it still revealed she was braless. Ill thoughts ran through my mind. I felt like snatching her up and slamming her head into a large tree. But I had to remain calm for Trace. Dee was going to get hers soon enough.

While I contemplated my options, Trace knelt to fix my nephew's water gun. Mama, Aunt Grace, and Aunt Lessie were working the food. Like usual, they were making sure everyone would have enough to eat. This was my opportunity to break the ice. Touching Trace on the shoulder, I said, "Come on, baby. It's time to meet my mother."

Trace returned the toy, stood up, then ran his fingers through his light brown hair. "Indeed, let's meet her." I turned to check his appearance. His jeans were nice, his shoes were appropriate, and his shirt was rocking. Pride swelled inside. Placing my arms around his waist, we walked toward the cackling women. Mama, a slender and feisty woman, had her back turned. I surprised her with a kiss on her caramel cheek. "Hi, Mama." My arms wrapped around her with an intimate embrace.

When she turned completely around, the brilliance of her smile lit up the midday sky. Suddenly, her eyes fell on Trace standing beside me, and her

smile diminished. With narrowed eyes her face tore into a fiery scowl. "Oh," she snorted, grabbing him violently by the arm. "I'm glad you finally decided to come. Those portable potties are filthy! You should be ashamed of yourself," she scolded. "We paid good money to use those things. Can't you smell that shit? We can't eat our food smelling stuff like that!"

Trace did a double take. The expression on his face was priceless. Reaching to break Mama's hold, I finally broke her tirade. "Mama, Mama," I called, "this is not the park's maintenance man."

After taking Mama's hand, I held it tightly. Out of anger, she snatched her hand, then placed it on her hips. "We called this fool two hours ago, and he's just now getting here! She huffed, "I oughta call Willie over here; he'll tear you a new—"

"No, Mama!" I cried, gnashing my teeth. I stood between Mama's wrath and Trace's innocent spirit. "This is Trace. He's not the maintenance man." I quietly put my arms around his waist. "He's my date."

Mama stood still for a moment. Her jaw was tight and set. Her breathing was rapid as she looked Trace up and down. Then, she gawked at me. After a few moments, she blew off her frustration and extended her hand. "Pleased to meet you, Tracy." With a look of sheer embarrassment, Mama threw daggers at me. "Why didn't you tell us you were bringing a date?"

I giggled nervously. "Well, it was a last-minute thing."

"I see," she said sternly. "Have you introduced him to your Uncle Willie?"

"No, Mama." I cast my eyes toward the ground.

Trace leaned in and whispered sarcastically. "There's that name again. Should I get scared?"

"It's going to be fine," I murmured. "Uncle Willie is the least of my worries. He'll be too drunk to talk after a while."

"That's pertinent information." Trace patted my hand, which was now wrapped around his arm.

"Aunt Lessie, Aunt Grace, this is Trace." I pushed him forward and stepped back.

Aunt Grace leaned toward me. "Honey, my hearing ain't too good; is you saying Tracy?"

Speaking loudly, I repeated, "No, Aunt Grace. It's just Trace."

She fixed a long gray curl hanging beside her face. "My, my he's a handsome thing." She hoisted her sagging breasts. "Yes, he is."

Aunt Lessie looked him up and down. Her large cheeks sputtered, "You can't do no better than this! This man is too handsome to be left outside."

Sugah, you better find a shade tree and sit him down. That sun is gonna burn him clean up!”

Trace grinned. In a deeply masculine voice, he responded, “I’ll be fine, Aunt Lessie.” He patted her on the shoulder affectionately. While Trace made small talk with my mother and aunts, Kirk was resting under a tree. He gave me the evil eye, took a swallow of his beer, then slowly nodded his head. I knew that look. It was his intentions to put a kink in my day.

Dee was fanning herself as she watched the men playing dominoes. When I found a few precious moments, her spiteful fat butt was mine. She intended to ruin my day, just to prove Trace wouldn’t fit in.

As the day wore on, I introduced Trace to almost everyone. He was well received. All seemed impressed by his cordial nature and unusual occupation. There was no way I was going to introduce him to Dee or Kirk. They were now officially on my list.

When Uncle Willie heard that Trace was the administrator at Choices, he avoided deep conversation. I had no idea that Uncle Willie was a Choices drop-out. He must have felt a lecture brewing about his slothful behavior. Knowing that information, Trace tastefully kept him in check.

When Dee looked in my direction, I turned my head. We had worked together for four years, and I knew her well. Just to be nice, I had given her an open invitation to my family’s reunion the past three years. From the corner of my eye, I could tell she really wanted to meet Trace. She did everything but walk right up to us. If she had, I probably would have jumped on her chest.

Because I planned the festivities, Dee was not included in anything we did. Monday was going to be hell at work.

Chapter Twelve

After lunch, things slowed down a bit. We sat on a blanket under a tree and enjoyed each other's company. Out of the blue, Kirk walked over and stood on our blanket. "Did you bring your balls with you—fag?" His voice was terse and demanding.

Trace gazed into my eyes, then he looked up at Kirk's ugly face. "By using the term *fag*," he cocked his head to one side, "are you referring to your own sexual preference?"

Kirk snorted and snapped his chin upwards. "Bring it." He curled his top lip and beckoned Trace by waving the tips of his fingers upward. "Bring it, now," he growled.

Trace clenched his teeth as he stood to his feet. With his stare locked on Kirk, annoyance burned in his eyes. Without breaking his intense gaze, he thoughtfully stroked his chin, bent his neck from side to side, then cracked his knuckles. Seeing Trace's reaction to Kirk's challenge frightened me. I reached out for him, but he moved from my grasp.

As if walking in slow motion, Trace's body became fixed and rigid. Finally, he met Kirk on the field. Though Trace could be persuasive, they were on opposite sides of the law. Kirk was a professional criminal.

There was no doubt, Kirk intended to harm Trace. We had discussed Kirk's vile behavior earlier that day, and although I begged him *not* to play, something inside him must have snapped. Because I was so distraught, I could hardly watch the horrifying game. Each time Trace was hit, I covered my eyes and screamed loudly.

I was not having fun. Instead, I was terror-stricken. When the ball was tossed to Trace, Kirk tried to mow him down like grass. Knowing Kirk, he intended to make a fool out of Trace. However, years of martial arts had prepared him for this day. He was light on his feet, wiry, agile, and difficult to tackle. Like a hero, Trace earned several points for his team, making Kirk look like an idiot. Each time Trace survived a tackle, I cheered loudly.

When I saw Kirk huddled with my cousins, I knew things were going to turn bitter. In my spirit, I knew they were capable of anything, especially dangerous stunts. The burly men ran Trace into a hazardous pattern. From their positions on the field, they intended to clothesline him. Unexpectedly, Trace ducked under their strong arms and carried the ball to victory.

His artistic footwork angered Kirk. He was fuming. He ran behind Trace and snatched him by the shoulder. When Trace turned, he was face to chest with Kirk. "I guess you thought that was funny, huh?"

Trace grinned. “Naw, man,” he tossed the football to his opposite hand, “just playing the game.”

My family rallied around the two, so I couldn’t see anything but the top of Kirk’s head. I knew my cousins loved a good fight, no matter who was fighting. Because Kirk was taller than those surrounding him, I saw his hands when he reached back to Africa to shove Trace. Fortunately, Trace stepped to the side and Kirk fell into the crowd of onlookers.

When Kirk gathered his wits, he wiped his nose, then charged at Trace with fist extended. This time Trace ducked, stepped to the side, then shoved Kirk to the ground with an open hand.

In his martial arts stance, Trace prepared to face Kirk again. When he rushed upon him, Trace delivered a blow to his chest and stomach. This time, when Kirk fell, he didn’t get up. Onlookers yelled and cheered. The crowd was so thick I couldn’t get through.

Finally, Kirk shook off the blows, got to his feet, then charged Trace once again. Trace stepped aside, and Kirk tripped, falling directly into the crowd. Immediately, they tossed him back to Trace for more of the same.

When Uncle Willie saw what was happening, he put down his dominoes and whiskey bottle, then rose. “Oh, hell—naw!” he croaked, scrambling to his feet. With the speed of a bolt of lightning, he rushed to break up the brawl. When he reached the crowd, he flung young men left and right. They dared not face him. He finally reached Kirk, then grabbed his fist. “Boy, you done lost your mind. What you mean, tearing up my family’s reunion? Ain’t you Earline’s baby boy?”

Kirk paced about, and he was ready to strike at any opportunity. “Yes, sah,” he mumbled, brushing dirt from his clothes.

Uncle Willie looked into his face. “Didn’t you come here with that human garbage disposal, Dee?”

“Yes, sah.” Kirk wiped the sweat forming on his nose.

Catching him by the shoulder, Uncle Willie lectured, “When somebody invites you to break bread wit ’em, you don’t start no fight.” He turned toward Trace. “That’s my niece’s boyfriend, and I loves my peoples. He’s welcome here, and you ain’t. Now, git your gangly ass on away from here, and take *baby fat* with you . . . eating up all the food.”

Kirk walked heatedly toward Dee’s car while Uncle Willie addressed Trace. Trace’s shirt was badly damaged and hanging by a thread. He dusted Trace off and put his arm around his neck. “Son,” he said, ushering Trace back to the shade tree, “I liked the way you handle yourself. If the truth be told, all these assholes is scared to put that punk in line. Ain’t a whole brain between ’em.” He slapped him on the back, and Trace nodded. “I like you,

son.” Then Uncle Willie addressed me, “Hey! Nandi! Git him one of them family reunion shirts.” He picked up the tail of the tattered shirt. “This here cute shirt is all tore up.”

When Uncle Willie saw Dee making plates to take home, he yelled like he was scaring off crows. “Leave my food alone, gal! And git on way from here!” He pointed his fingers accusingly. “Don’t you touch another thing! Trifling—I used to like you, but you is messy.” He shook his large gray head. “I can’t stand a messy woman. Now g’won now. That grasshopper is already in your car. A messy heifer.”

Dee put down the plate and scampered toward her car. Uncle Willie had done what I wanted to do all day. I was still waiting for Monday.

After Uncle Willie made friends with Trace, they played dominoes all evening. Before the day was over, he had taught Trace how to talk noise while playing dominoes. From under the tree I heard Trace call, “Two shiny red apples and one fat hog!” I guess he had twenty points.

Chapter Thirteen

The months marched on, and our relationship blossomed. We had withstood almost every obstacle. Due to our hostility, Dee quit her job at the center and moved on. She and Kirk were expecting a daughter.

Mama was loving Trace more each day. Not just because he was good to me, but also because he treated her with respect and kindness. For Trace, Mama's cooking was a bonus. When we went to visit Uncle Willie, a fast-paced game of dominoes was always in order. Trace was learning my idiosyncrasies, and I was learning his.

* * * *

As movies were among my favorite hobbies, Trace often found time to sit through even the worst show. There was a well-publicized premiere at the cinema. The ticket line was wrapped around the theater. A blockbuster release with rave reviews was my weakness, and, of course, I wanted to be there. It was a sweltering evening. People were getting uncomfortable and irritated. When we finally purchased our tickets, we strolled into the air-conditioned lobby, taking pleasure in the cooling relief.

The concession line was outrageous. While I got popcorn, Trace walked toward the wall to wait. Over the noisy crowd, I heard a woman calling out Trace's name. When he didn't respond, she ran toward him. "Trace Hamilton Wynn, you hear me calling you!" A sexy blonde in tight jeans rushed up to him. She threw her bare arms around his neck. "Hi, sexy," she said, putting her face directly in his. Grinning seductively, she admitted. "I haven't seen you in like, forever." She started to fan herself. "Seeing you is like, oh my god. Are you here for the premiere?"

Trace's expression was one of confusion. He caught my concerned gaze from the concession stand and nodded absently. His face was solemn as the woman locked arms with his and chatted away. "We can sit together," she said excitedly. "Imagine seeing you after all these years. I haven't seen you since college."

Trace kept continual eye contact with me. From his expression, he was only being polite. "Ah, Sandy. I have a date."

Sandy searched the room. "Oh, I get it. She's in the powder room, right?"

"No," he pointed above her shoulder. "She's standing behind you."

I was holding a large tub of popcorn and two drinks on a tray, and Sandy looked over my shoulder, searching the lobby. "Where," she asked, stamping

her feet. "I really want to meet her. I'll bet you're dating Karren or Carlie." She continued to look past me.

Finally, Trace reached out and removed his drink from my tray. "Sandy, this is Nandi." He caught me by the arm and pulled me right into her face.

Sandy's jubilant expression froze, and then a frown contorted her face. "Is she from the islands, or is she American?"

"African American," I disclosed, turning to walk away with Trace. As we walked down the corridor, Trace looked behind him. "Good to see you again, Sandy."

From Sandy's physical stance earlier, I could tell our relationship didn't set well with her. The scowl on her face had told the entire story. How she chose to feel about our relationship was her own personal decision. Nevertheless, I was going to enjoy our movie.

Just as soon as the movie started, I felt a jolt behind my chair. It had the gritty sound and feel of someone's foot. Annoyed, I took my hand and swept my hair out of the way. The person continued to grind their feet into the back of my chair, so I finally turned around. "What is your prob . . ." It was Sandy from the lobby. "Excuse me," I said nicely. I really didn't want to get crunk with this hag. She had no idea who she was messing with. So, I tried to keep my cool. Trace had never seen me twisted before, and I wanted to keep it that way.

When the movie started to get good, I saw popcorn flying over my head. Some landed in my hair, in my lap, and on my shoulders. I angrily brushed the greasy popcorn from my clothes. Now, it was on! That was the last straw. I politely gave the popcorn bucket to Trace, stood up, and turned around. He must have assumed I was going to the bathroom. I took my finger and beckoned Sandy into my space.

Sandy leaned forward and tossed popcorn directly into my breasts. "I'm not coming to you—you skank whore."

Before Trace realized it, I had stepped over the back of the theater seat and had a fistful of Sandy's blonde hair. Trace tossed the bucket and tried to pull us apart. Security arrived and broke up the altercation. Before I knew it, we were being ushered out of the theater. As we walked along, Sandy continued to call me names. "You nigger, whore."

Trace put his arms around me and covered my ears. "Keep walking, Kitten. She's got issues. Don't lose your job because of her. You're a professional. Hold your temper."

Trace was right; I was a professional. I had my buttons pushed all day long. But being picked on chapped my butt. After so many wonderful

memories with Trace, had Dee's words come back to haunt me? If Sandy didn't feel Trace was taboo, would she have attacked me unjustly?

When we finally made it home, I stormed across the floor, apologizing ten times over. I had ruined the evening and missed the entire movie. After letting me blow off steam, Trace sat smirking. I took in his sarcastic expression. "What is so funny?"

In defense, Trace threw up his hands. "Don't get mad. But there's just something strange about having women fight over you."

"Oh, really." I placed my hands on my hips and blew my bangs out of my face.

Trace nodded. "You really tore into her."

"Trace Hamilton Wynn, I did not. There were no licks passed between us."

"I know, but my version sounds better." He tugged at his earlobe. "Truthfully, Sandy was always strange. I avoided her in college."

"She's strange alright. I hope I don't run into her anymore. If so, I might have to dust her butt off."

Trace shunned, "Sandy's all talk. I don't think you'll hear from her again. She's probably trying to hide that bald spot on her head." He sat down on the sofa and grabbed the remote.

"But, Trace," I pleaded, sitting beside him. "I was minding my own business. You saw that. She started kicking the back of my seat and then she started throwing popcorn in my hair. And you know how much this hairstyle cost me."

"Yes, I do." Trace stroked his forehead. "I'll never drive you to the salon again and wait. It was time-consuming and expensive." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Seven damn hours in one chair." Scooting to the edge of the sofa, he narrowed his eyes and declared, "You were at that salon so long, you needed meal delivery."

"Exactly." I folded my arms. "Now you know why I was pissed."

Chapter Fourteen

Although I was calming down, I was still angry. Trace played a large part in my composure. After I went to the refrigerator for a soda, he trapped me against the wall in the hallway. With his forehead pressed against mine he said, "As I was saying—all of this cat-fighting has affected me."

I took a swallow of my soda, then replaced the top. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, I have more testosterone than I need right now."

"Oh, wow. And you want to work some of it off."

Trace kissed the end of my nose. "You're so perceptive. That's why I love you."

"Guess what?" I whispered. "I need to work off a little anger myself." I placed my soda on the shelf behind me. Using a self-defense move, I grabbed Trace by the arm and twisted it behind his back.

"No, Kitten!" he yelled playfully. "That's *not* what I need! I need to make love right now." After I released his arm, he rubbed his wrist.

"Trace Wynn, that does *not* sound romantic at all." I grabbed my soda and took a large swallow.

"I'm sorry," he said, pushing me against the wall. "I'm a little over the edge to be romantic."

"Can that happen?" My brows knitted a frown.

"Yes, it can. I need you." He kissed my lips between words. "And I want you right this second." Trace took the soda from my hand and placed it on the shelf. After grasping my hand, he placed it on the fabric below his belt. Beneath the denim, his mast was engorged. "Can't you feel that?"

He closed his eyes and pushed his body against my hand. Feeling his solid rod, I knew he wasn't kidding. "You're hard as a brick," I whispered.

"I know." He nuzzled my neck while pushing rhythmically against me.

Trace pulled me toward the bedroom, and I didn't object. Because he knew my apartment well, he walked backward toward the bed. I was wearing jeans and stilettos and asked the question, "Panties, bra, and stilettos?"

Trace nodded and licked his ruddy lips. "You know me so well." He unzipped his jeans, and his manhood strained against the fabric of his underwear. "You won't mind if we skip the foreplay, will you?"

"Of course not, Baby." I lay back on my bed and slid my panties to one side. "Come on, stud."

On calling Trace a stud, he crawled on the bed, then pulled my legs toward him.

"Protection." I reminded him.

His face became blood red. "Of course. However, we've been seeing each other for four months. You're on the pill, and we've been tested for HIV." His eyes held an amorous stare. "We're both clean."

After Trace's speech, I finally caved in. "You're right, but you're wrong. For all I know, you could have been with that Sandy creature."

Trace slapped my rear and grinned. Grabbing his shaft, he milked it between his fingers. It oozed heavily, ripe for making love. "If I must use protection, I will."

"Just a while longer," I crooned, stroking my covered breasts.

Trace covered up, then plunged deep into my creamy center. "This is excellent," he droned, never breaking his stride.

And it was. Trace had perfected a technique that drove me completely insane. For that, I thank The Fred Astaire School of Dance. The caress of his hands and the thrust of his hips created a dangerous combination. Within seconds, Trace had me wailing loudly and hanging on for dear life. His swollen mast was a power drill of sensual pleasure, and I flailed against the ecstasy. Pushing my hips with a saucy stride, Trace groaned, and his ruddy lips trembled with desire.

Suddenly, he ceased all movement, flipped me over, then placed me upon his waiting shaft. While caressing my hips, he slammed my body against his. This fiery combustion released my juices. They flooded his powerful mast. He sampled my slippery goods, then circled it between his fingers. Feeling the slickness of my cream was like an aphrodisiac. It always drove him over the edge. While pushing the boundaries of ecstasy, Trace called out, "Go with me, Kitten." He panted, thrashing his head. "Go. With. Me. Kitten—go with . . ."

As usual, I was already on my way. Powerful contractions massaged his rod while stealing my breath. Trace gave up the last of his stream with jerking movements. Then sweating and out of breath, he smiled. "Our future together looks bright."

Chapter Fifteen

During the next few weeks, Trace became adamant that I meet his mom. As it stood, I was in no hurry. I loved Trace so much, it would break my heart if she didn't accept me. Although Trace tried to assure me that things would be okay, something just didn't feel right. He asked if I'd cook dinner at his apartment while he picked up his mom at the airport. This was fine with me, as I loved to cook anyway.

Saturday morning I arrived early, prepared to clean up Trace's messy apartment. Much to my surprise, he had already erased that chore. I never liked cooking in anyone's kitchen but my own. Under the circumstances, his meager seasonings would have to do. Because I had cooked the dressing at my house, I placed it in a plastic container and brought it along. The roasted chicken was marinating in its own juices. Green beans and buttery mashed potatoes were always fine for any occasion.

By four o'clock I heard Trace's voice as he walked down the hallway. There was a casual exchange of conversation, with a female voice taking the lead. Rushing toward the mirror, I fixed my makeup, checked my dress, then took a deep breath. Simultaneously, Trace placed his key in the door. As soon as the door opened, his mother stood before me. She was a frail woman with thinning brunette hair. Her skin was sun-deprived and did not appear healthy. Because she had large blue eyes, I surmised Trace had his father's features.

With hand extended, I walked toward her. However, I was caught off guard by the sound of a male's voice behind her. Standing in the hallway was a medium build black man. He carried luggage in each hand. Trace stepped between my hand and his mother's unfriendly gaze. "Mom. This . . . is Nandi." As if proudly displaying his favorite toy, he pushed me directly into her face.

Trace's mother seemed pleasant enough, but she appeared agitated. "Nancy." She nodded. "It's good to finally meet you." She gave me a haphazard hug, then strutted past. "Where's the bedroom?" she asked, walking as if she already knew.

Trace drew his shoulders tight, picked up her luggage, then walked toward his bedroom. Suddenly, he froze. Turning slowly toward the opened door he said, "Come inside, Norman. Make yourself at home."

Norman walked cautiously into the apartment. He placed the luggage by the sofa and sat down. I reached out to shake his hand. "Hi, I'm Nandi."

Norman stood up and extended his hand. "I'm Norman Walker." He sat down again and anxiously scratched his head. "Got anything to drink?"

As soon as Norman's request sank in, my heart started to race. "I'm so sorry, Norman. Sure, you can have a drink. What would you like?"

An uneasy smile curled his lips, and he wrung his large hands. "A soda would do nicely, thank you." His hooded eyes appeared troubled.

On the way to the kitchen as I walked past the bedroom door, I could hear Trace arguing loudly with his mother. After giving Norman the soda, my curiosity got the best of me. I couldn't help but to peek inside the bedroom. Of course, their argument was none of my business, but somehow I felt I could help.

After knocking on the door, I slowly twisted the doorknob then peered inside. Just as soon as Trace saw me, he called me to his side. "Great. Nandi, come here." He was seated on the bed and patted the space beside him. "I need your professional opinion."

Trace's mother was standing beside the bed. She gritted her teeth as she tossed clothes out of her suitcase. "It's a family matter," she warned.

Trace reached for his mother's arm and scowled. "Nandi *is* my family. I have no secrets from her."

To appease Trace, I timidly eased into the door, and sat down on the bed. "What's wrong?" I asked softly, stroking his tight shoulders.

With narrowed eyes Trace explained his concerns. "Mother is planning to marry Norman."

Cocking my head to one side I asked, "Why is that a bad thing?"

He gawked at his mother. "Tell her why, Mom."

His mother slammed her suitcase closed and folded her arms. "If you must know, Trace doesn't want us to get married."

I placed my hands in my lap. "Well, Mrs. Wynn, why don't you explain the pros and cons of your relationship with Norman?"

Trace threw up his hands and interrupted, "Never mind. I can make this short and sweet." He held up two fingers. "Number one, he doesn't have a job, so he can't support you. Are you two still living together?"

Mrs. Wynn rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Yes, Trace."

"Number two, he's an alcoholic." He folded his arms and shook his head. "That's a doomed relationship."

Mrs. Wynn was furious when she raised a finger in front of Trace's face. "Now you listen to me. Norman doesn't hit me like your father did."

"Mom," he stated, in an aggravated tone, "let's be realistic." He watched the bitterness in her eyes as she presented her case.

"Let's discuss the *real* reason you don't like Norman, Trace Hamilton Wynn. It's simply because he's black."

Trace stood up. He addressed his mother boldly. "No, Mother, it isn't because he's black. It's because he's a bum." He shoved his hands into his pocket and walked away. I had never seen Trace so angry. "He's a bum that just happens to be *black*. Not all black men are bums, Mother!"

Mrs. Wynn's voice cracked. "You know nothing about Norman."

"Mom," Trace stroked his forehead, "I've known Norman since I was in tenth grade. He's never held a job, plus the cops arrest him for vagrancy every chance they get. Mother, love of my life! You can do better."

This scorching conversation was more than I had bargained for. I got up from my seat, backed up to the door, and hoped poor Norman couldn't hear the ranting. He seemed nice enough, but Trace was concerned for his mother's welfare.

Out of the blue, Mrs. Wynn elevated her voice above Trace's baritone meandering. "Trace Hamilton. You have been the man in my life long enough!" She pointed toward the door. "Norman Walker is a good man. He's trying to get his act together."

"Mother—Mother, he's forty-five years old. If he hasn't gotten it together by now, he won't."

She shook her finger at Trace. "Don't you dare be judgmental. Norman has started a new job. He's been working for three solid months. Plus, he hasn't had a drink in six months. He's in the twelve-step program. And, for your information, we have a new car."

Trace sighed, and his shoulders slumped forward. He hung his head, then raised his hazel eyes to look at his frazzled mother with remorse. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"You should be. I can't believe you're condemning me. You want to be happy, right? How would you feel if I said Nancy wasn't good enough for you, especially when you know better?"

My eyes grew large. "Oh, wow."

"You're right, you're right. I'm sorry." He cast his eyes toward the floor and softened his voice. "So, you guys are getting married, huh?" Trace walked over and hugged his mom. "It's going to take me a minute to get used to this. Norman is alright, I guess. I wish you the best."

Seeing Trace hugging his mom, I smiled broadly. "Now, that's better. Is anyone hungry?"

Mrs. Wynn reached out to caress my hand. "Yes, I'm famished, Nandi. Dinner smells wonderful."

When Mrs. Wynn walked out to the living room, Norman stood up to greet her. She took him by the arm and kissed his lips. "It's going to be alright."

While we stood in the bedroom, Trace pulled me aside. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. He closed the bedroom door behind us, placed his arms around my waist, and pressed his forehead to mine. After looking into my eyes, he gave me a gentle kiss. "Thank you, Kitten. You're a fantastic woman. I'm sorry you saw me acting foolish." He sought my lips with a meaningful kiss. "In a few months, we might be having a similar conversation with your Mama."

Pretending to be dumb, I grinned. "Let's hope not!"

The End

About the Author

Empress LaBlaque is a connoisseur of fine romance. Her love for writing romance dates back to high school where her studies took a back seat to her writing. As punishment for her lack of attention, the teacher pulled her forward and demanded that she read her paper. He admitted that her story was good but sent her to the office anyway. Here's to you, Mr. English, and thanks. Visit her on the web at www.empresslablaque.com.