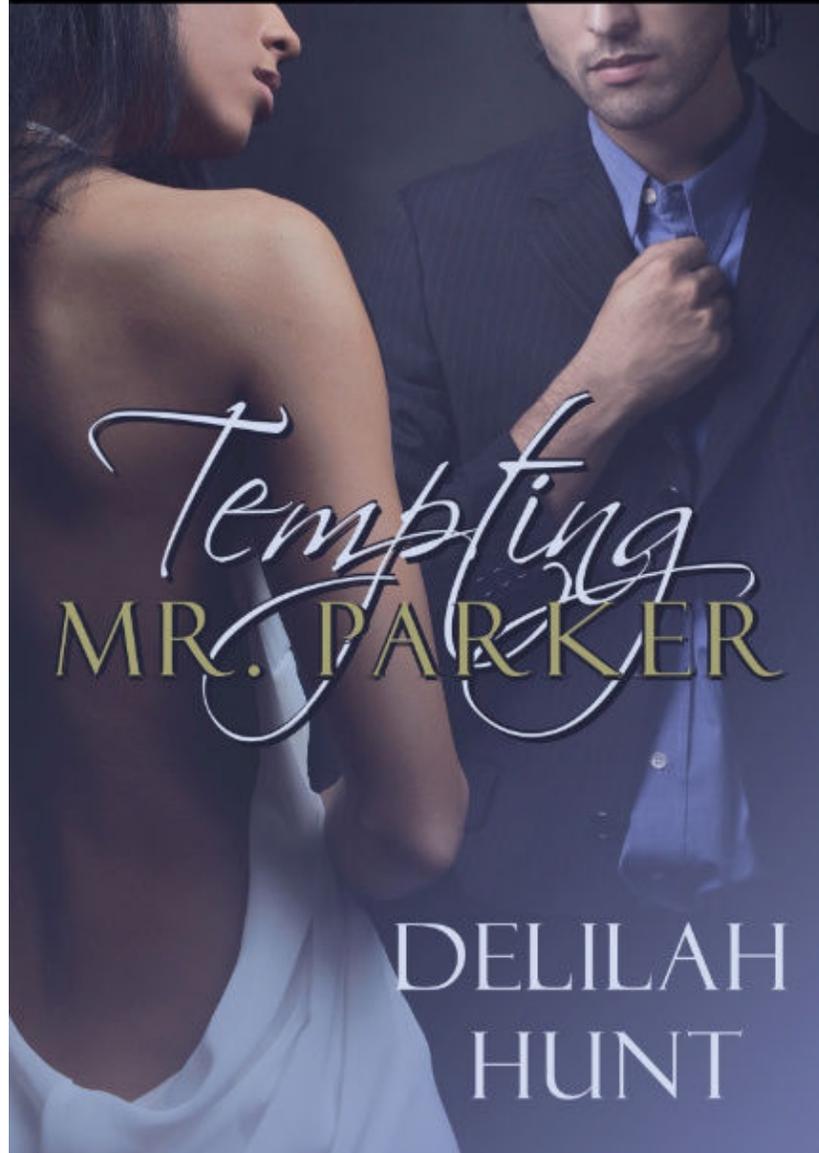


Evernight Publishing



Tempting
MR. PARKER

DELILAH
HUNT



Evernight Publishing

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DEDICATION

To Karice Rhule, because you're awesome and you enjoyed my writing before I knew what the heck I was doing!

Tempting Mr. Parker

Delilah Hunt

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Chapter One

Shakara James spun around hurriedly closing the refrigerator door behind her, the chilled bottle of Evian heating beneath her palm. Cade was home and making a beeline for her.

“What are you doing here?”

She sighed inwardly. Leave it to Julie to convince her to come inside for a few minutes. Neither of them expected him to arrive home so early.

“Trust me, if I had known you’d be here, I never would have stepped foot inside.”

He reclined against the marble counter top, studying her with narrowed eyes. God, she loved those eyes. A shade of green that reminded her of fresh grass, blending oh so heavenly with his trimmed dark blonde hair. He was tall, well over six feet, with a lean athletic frame that filled out his charcoal business suit.

Shakara’s fingers yearned to stroke the length of his silky blue tie. She looked down at her hands, scrutinizing the same fingers that, not so long ago, itched to slap the cruel arrogance from his jaw.

“Where is my sister?” he asked.

“Upstairs.”

His eyebrows shot up and he shook his head. “If my sister is upstairs, why are you still here? I thought I made my feelings apparent three weeks ago.”

“You did and I heard every single despicable word you said.” She glared at him. “Julie invited me inside. If you don’t like it then too bad.”

“In case you need a reminder, this is my house. Not Julie’s. If you wish to continue your visits with her, despite my opinion of you, I suggest you exhibit some respect in your tone.”

A cry of outrage sprang from her. “Respect? I’m supposed to show you respect because of what—your age or your money? You’re out of your mind, Cade. Oh, excuse me. I mean Mr. Parker.”

“Shakara,” he warned, advancing toward her.

“I’m not going to stand here and argue with you. I’m not one of your employees seeking a raise or approval. I’m twenty-one years old, an adult. I don’t have to take orders from you or anyone.”

The faint patter of footsteps silenced them, dragging their attention to the brown-haired girl bursting into the kitchen.

“I heard the two of you from upstairs. You can drop the act.”

Julie Parker shot her brother a deadly stare, switching a friendlier gaze to Shakara. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

She nodded and placed the unopened bottle of water she’d all but forgotten about on the counter.

“I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

Without sparing a backward glance she swung open the door, wandering out into the balmy summer evening. If she spent another minute inside the house, the shreds of self-respect she had left intact, the exact thing Cade accused her of lacking, might disintegrate before his very eyes.

Cade pivoted toward his sister the instant he could no longer see the brown-skinned girl’s retreating figure.

“Why did you invite her over?”

“Um, maybe because she’s my friend, and she’s been coming here for years. Seriously, Cade. You look like you’re about to have a stroke. Chill out. I have no idea what you have against her.”

He snorted loudly. The hell she didn’t. “Stop pretending. Do you honestly think if I’d known what she does for a living I would have permitted her in my home, or allowed you to carry on this inane friendship with her?”

“I’ve never said anything to you about Shakara. And the only reason you don’t like her is because you’re an elitist. Unlike you, I don’t care what the social snobs of Rhode Island think of me. No one is going to tell me who I can or can’t be friends with.”

The picture she painted of him hit a sore spot. His issues with Shakara had nothing to do with social standing. Furthermore, it was all too easy for Julie, who’d never worked a day in her life, to pass judgment on him.

“You have no reason to care what society thinks. Our parents left a sizeable inheritance for you. I go to work every day. I’ve supported you since you were ten. You have everything you want because I concern myself with these social snobs. I’m the one forced to do business with them. How much do you think our parents would have accomplished had they lived by the standards you’ve set?”

Julie’s faced burned with redness. “I appreciate what you do for us, Cade. I never meant to imply that I didn’t.”

He waved away her assurances. Her gratitude was unwarranted and irrelevant to the point he was attempting to make. There was no way she could have known his comments were geared toward the stumbling blocks impeding his path to a relationship with Shakara.

Chapter Two

A month later

Shakara wiped the sweat from her dark brows while balancing two rectangular trays laden with food. She kicked open the kitchen door with one of the trays on her hip cocked to the side and the other supported in her right hand.

Two more hours. Her feet ached and her breasts hovered dangerously over the bust of her uniform, which was hardly more than glorified lingerie a size too small.

The midriff top revealed her naked stomach and hips. The shorts provided even less coverage, fitting inches below her bellybutton and curving around her bottom.

She drew in a breath, dodging a groping hand in the narrow aisle of the restaurant.

“Shake a leg, sweet cheeks. Table four’s waiting on their food. Businessmen. Be a nice girl and hurry up. You don’t want to disappoint my important customers.”

Ronny. Shakara shifted her gaze to the owner and manager of Ron’s Famous. The man wagged a finger at her and Shakara could see his chest puffing with overblown pride for his cheap restaurant.

Oh well. As long as she was getting paid and he didn’t hitch up a ‘Live Nude Girls’ sign outside, she had no problem busting her ass in here.

Plus, he was right about one thing. It was Friday night and many of the wealthier businessmen who worked in the city often stopped by to take in the appealing view before going home. The majority of them were generous tippers. No complaints there.

Shakara hurried over to the table and the conversation halted. The three men seated around the wooden table perused her frame with open admiration.

“Sorry for the delay, gentlemen.”

A lazy smile spread across the lips of two of the men. The third seemed to be in a world of his own, occupied by him and her breasts.

She laid the tray on the table and removed the dishes one by one, her forehead crinkling. Had she gotten the order mixed up? There

were four dishes but only three men seated at the table.

“Oh, he’ll be right back,” the dark-haired man answered, plucking his gaze from her chest.

She nodded in relief. This was her second week on the job and so far she’d escaped any major mistakes. Hopefully it would remain that way.

“Enjoy your meal. If there’s anything else you need, let me know.”

A small chuckle escaped one of the men. “There are a few things I’m sure you could do for me.”

She brushed off his lame comment. One that she heard at least five times each day.

Heading back to the kitchen, Shakara paused, her breath catching in her throat at the sight of the man striding toward her. She clutched the empty trays to her chest like a lifeline.

How did he even know about this crappy restaurant? She watched him replace his BlackBerry into the pocket of his designer pants. His head lifted and she caught his look of surprise before he masked it with an air of indifference.

Shakara straightened her spine in retaliation, her eyes meeting his, unwilling to be the first one to look away.

She refused to feel ashamed for earning an honest living. What the hell did Cade know? There was never a day in his life he had to worry about where his next meal would come from or if he’d have a warm place to sleep that night.

She raised her chin a notch and scooted backward, bracing herself against a chair. He eased past her joining the three laughing men.

Dismissed. He fell into conversation without further acknowledging her presence.

The one and only time he’d made her the center of his attention was so he could deliver a verbal assault; because she had the gall to strip in order to support herself.

She stomped into the kitchen, slamming the trays on the cluttered shelving. Tears stung at the back of her eyes. Damn him. And her for caring what he thought. So what if his opinion of her slipped a notch? If that was even remotely possible, she thought, her mind conjuring up a memory, the humiliating reason for their argument inside his kitchen a month ago.

Nearly two months earlier

Shakara stood outside the house, checking her watch for the fifth time. Julie told her five minutes. Tops. She wasn't sure if Cade was home and didn't want to chance meeting up with him. His coldness toward her was getting tiring and it was becoming more difficult each day to pretend it didn't affect her.

A low hum whirred through the air and Shakara looked up to see a sleek black Mercedes-Benz rolling into the driveway. Speak of the devil. Cade exited the car and she knew he was out for blood.

"I had your number all along, didn't I?"

She frowned in confusion. What number was he talking about?

"You don't have to speak to me in codes. I can handle whatever it is you have to say."

His lips drew into a tight line. "I bet you can handle a lot more, isn't that right, Ms. James?"

Her eyes widened. A sexual innuendo? From Cade? "What do you mean by that?"

"It means I know my little sister has been spending time with a stripper. I love Julie and the last thing she needs is to get involved in your lifestyle."

Her lifestyle. He made her sound like a junkie who would do anything for her next hit. This was beyond ridiculous.

"What I do with my life and how I live it is none of your business. Matter of fact, I'm not even going to discuss this with you. It's a waste of time and I don't owe you an explanation."

She lengthened her stride, hoping to sidestep him. No such luck. He maneuvered in front of her, his athletic frame blocking her escape.

"I haven't decided to end this discussion." His fingers snaked out, encircling her wrist.

"Let go of my hands!"

To her surprise, he released her hand, making no attempt to widen their distance. Instead, he stepped forward, tracing the edges of her lips with this thumb.

She leaned into him, her eyes fluttering shut and her insides melting at the delicate caress.

"I'm curious," he purred. "How much would it cost to feel

those full lips wrapped around my cock?”

Her eyes snapped open, blistering ice slicing through her veins rendering her frozen, speechless against his attack.

He continued smoothly. “Five dollars, ten, maybe twenty if you pretend to enjoy it?”

She shook her head in anger, disbelief, but most of all, disappointment. Of all the people she’d expect such treatment from, Cade was among the last, regardless of his coldness toward her.

“Answer me!”

Her fingers itched to slap his face. And she would have had he not been so tall. “Fuck you.” She stomped past him wishing she had cracked his jaw.

Chapter Three

“Stop daydreaming on my time, James. Table four wants another set of drinks.”

Shakara’s head jerked up startled by the intrusive rumbling of her manager.

“I’m on it.” She piled four glasses of Coke onto the tray and headed out to the cramped dining area.

Setting the tray on the table, she avoided eye contact with Cade.

“So, darling, can I still hold you to that offer from earlier?”

She frowned, casting her gaze to the dark-haired man. “Excuse me?”

“You remember. Whatever we need... Just let you know.” His eyesight settled on his favorite spot once again. Her breasts.

“If you’re referring to food and drinks, then yes. Anything extra and you’re in the wrong place.”

A stout redhead, who’d kept his silence so far, chimed in.

“Hey, Parker, I’m thinking it’s you she wants. Could have sworn I saw her checking you out when you came back to the table.”

They all stared at her, making her want to dash back into the sweltering kitchen and call it a night.

“Is Parker here the one you want?” Her breast admirer asked, studying her with familiarity.

“I have to go. There are other customers waiting on me.” She shot Cade a look out the corner of her eyes. His boredom matched her level of discomfort.

“There’s no hurry,” her interrogator replied, aiming a grin in Cade’s direction before closing in on her. “Don’t take it the wrong way, sweetheart, but my friend here... Well he’s not really in to dark meat.” He winked at her. “You’ll have better luck with the rest of us.”

Against her better judgment, Shakara pointed her gaze toward Cade. Instead of returning her attention he let out a sigh of impatience.

“Leave the waitress alone, Radcliffe. I’m sure a pretty girl like her has no interest in an old white man.”

She blinked, absolute shock ringing in her ears at his defense of her. Sort of. Thankfully his comment muted the one called

Radcliffe.

She peeked at him noting that his attention centered on the burger and fries growing cold on his dish. Shakara lifted her shoulders in a shrug, resuming her focus on the other customers.

That was the first and last time he'd trust Andrew Radcliffe to choose a suitable place for them to eat. Although the man was one of his closest friends and business associates, Cade could not turn a blind eye to his flaws.

Radcliffe was a womanizer coming out of a disastrous third marriage at the age of thirty-eight, a year younger than he. Not only that, but the man's life revolved around women, using them one after the other.

Cade walked across his bedroom, massaging his temples after catching his reflection in the large dresser mirror. What the hell was Shakara doing working in that dump? First the strip club, now this?

His fist tightened and his jaw clenched. Her parents deserved a kick in the head for allowing her to live on her own. Shit. He didn't even know if her parents were alive. Asking questions posed the risk of rousing his sister's curiosity and suspicions.

Years ago, when Julie voluntarily informed him that Shakara lived alone in a neighborhood on the outskirts of town, he'd felt a wave of anger and deep concern for the seventeen year old. That was putting it mildly. He'd been downright furious.

It had baffled and upset him that no one was looking out for her, taking care of her. And to this day, the feeling continued. It shouldn't. He should have been able to move past his concern for her over the years. He combed a hand through his hair, knowing he wouldn't be in this mess if he hadn't gifted Julie with a car for her seventeenth birthday. She never would have ended up in that derelict neighborhood or befriended the lonely teen.

What those two had in common he had no idea, nor did he care. Their friendship remained rock solid unlike his "relationship" with her. Relationship. He curled his lips in self-contempt.

Thanks to her, there would be no liaisons or attachments for him. The last time he'd made love to a woman was well over a year ago. The one thing that kept him from disgracing himself during the act was thoughts of her. No woman would accuse Caden Parker of impotency.

Some days, he had to wonder how different his life might have been had he never encountered the girl. Would there be a leggy blonde lying in wait, keeping his bed warm? Perhaps his wife?

He shoved the traitorous image away. It disturbed him to picture his bed being occupied by a woman who wasn't Shakara.

Pathetic. The only word to describe his feelings. For four years, he'd been in love with her. The longest years of his life. By now he'd lost count of the number of times he scolded and berated himself for falling in love with Shakara.

Ridiculous, impossible love at first sight. That afternoon he'd return home from work to the sight of shapely brown legs and the firmest ass he'd ever seen bent over in his living room. He stood in silence, attempting to gather his thoughts as she straightened. She then flashed him the most adorable smile—shielding her embarrassment at being caught in such a provocative position.

It had taken all but a second for the girl to steal her way into his heart. Right then and there he knew it was over for him. He wanted her and he felt like a pervert for it.

He was thirty-five years old and lusting after his sister's friend. His little sister's black, seventeen-year-old friend. He had never dated or shown interest in a woman of a different race. He didn't have to guess what everyone would think of his sudden attraction to Shakara—Caden Parker had developed a fetish for young black girls. If she was older and higher educated it might not cause such a stir, but she wasn't. Having no other choice, Cade plastered a look of distaste and disinterest to his face. The years went by and he adjusted to the grave he dug for himself. Pushing her away while wearing his facade of superiority, assured that Shakara would never know the anguish that ate away at him each and every day from loving her and being unable to act on it.

He was a bastard. Regardless of what she did for a living it gave him no right to accost and insult her. Not even his jealousy and obsession with having her was reason enough for his cruelty.

Cade didn't need to close his eyes to picture her earlier tonight at the restaurant. She'd looked so vulnerable and tired. He sighed and grimaced, hating himself for ignoring her and allowing his colleagues to treat her like trash.

Coward. He was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, overseeing one of the most successful architectural firms in the state,

and yet he was afraid of admitting his emotions to a woman.

Not just any woman. The only one who had every right in the world to despise him. Not to mention he hadn't apologized for speaking to her like a common whore, insinuating that she took money in exchange for favors.

That conversation was awhile in the making. Ever since the day Cade overheard her telling Julie about an incident at the strip club, anger and betrayal festered in him. A stripper. The woman he loved received money for exposing herself to men. Strangers instead of him.

It was no longer just her age that stood in his way. She stood in the way of them being together. It took everything in his power not to go to Shakara and shake her, yell. Anything to get her to open her eyes and see how much it was hurting him. He should be the only one to see her, touch her with possessive intimacy.

Good luck. Shakara probably saw him as nothing more than a cold and bitter old man. She wouldn't be far off. Each year, month, that went by without confessing his love to her drove him one step closer to resentment.

Naturally, it led to the question he hesitated to ask. What prevented him from telling her? The obvious fear of rejection, or worse. Was he an elitist, apprehensive of what others might think? Caden Parker romancing a young girl of a different race, and a stripper no less.

He yanked down the navy and white sheets, climbing into bed with a sigh of resignation. Tonight would be no different from yesterday and the night before. Shakara would once again take center stage in his dreams. On top of him, under him in every way imaginable.

Christ. He was sick. Cade groaned out loud and scrubbed a hand over his face. This had to stop. This obsession. Shakara deserved better than a starring role in his wet dreams.

He hardened his jaw, determination coursing through his frame. It was time to come clean, rejection or not.

Chapter Four

“You can’t skip my party,” Julie whined.

Shakara pressed the phone against her ear. She put the paintbrush aside, dragging her attention away from the canvas to listen to her friend.

“If it’s because of Cade, you have nothing worry about. He hates parties.”

She wasn’t going to touch that. “I wish I could be there for you but I can’t. I have to work until closing.”

“Man, I must sound like the biggest bitch complaining about a party when you have to go to work.”

“Just a little,” Shakara joked. “But I do have a present for you.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Duh, I know that. I wanted to. There’s a big difference. It also means you have to like what I get you.”

Julie laughed. “I swear to it. Unlike my dear brother, it doesn’t take a minor miracle to get me smiling.”

“Was he always like that?”

“Always! Okay, maybe not. He used to be more laid-back. He was so much older. I remember he used to give me piggyback rides. Whenever he came home to visit he used to spend a lot of time with me. Cade would probably kill me if I told you this, but once he even sat down and had a princess tea party with me. It was awesome. Although I must say, raising me might have played a part in his madness.”

Shakara smiled. “I can definitely see that. He must really love you. You’re extremely lucky, Jules, to have a big brother who cares so much about you.”

“Yeah,” Julie agreed. “He’s not all that bad. I’m sure his mood would improve a ton if he had a girlfriend. Don’t you think so?”

Shakara furrowed her eyebrows. That was an odd question to ask her. “If he can find someone to put up with his attitude, then yeah. Good luck to them both.”

The line went silent and Shakara worried that Julie was offended. She should have kept her mouth shut.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sure he’s a nice person.” *To*

everyone else.

“That’s not it,” Julie said. “Cade isn’t so bad. I’ve seen him with women and he can be really charming. I guess that’s why I don’t understand his behavior toward you. I’ve never seen him show so much hostility to any other woman. It’s really weird.”

Shakara shrugged, trying not to let Julie’s words affect her. “It must be one of those things. Sometimes you meet a person and you automatically get a bad vibe. Maybe that’s what happened with Cade and me.”

“Don’t kill me for saying this, but I bet if Cade got to know you he’d really like you. I could totally see him chasing after you, disgusting as that sounded even to my own ears. But the point is you two would make a cute couple.”

Shakara forced a laugh. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“C’mon, I’m serious. It’s not that far-fetched.”

“Do you think I’d still have to call him Mr. Parker?”

Julie groaned. “I can’t believe he makes you call him that. Worse, I can’t believe you actually do it.”

“I didn’t mind it at first. I wanted to be respectful. Now, it’s just a power trip for him so I don’t take it seriously.”

The call ended soon after and Shakara snapped the cellphone close. She was going to have to stop by the house tomorrow to drop off the painting. If there was a higher power up there paying attention to her, she would be lucky and avoid running into Cade.

Shakara spun around, surveying the tiny apartment she had resided in for the last four years. It was a closet compared to Cade’s house in Warrington Hill. True, her location wasn’t ideal. Newcomb Park did have its fair share of crime—what place didn’t?

If anything, she’d be willing to bet what little money she had that there were just as many embezzlers and tax evaders thriving in wealthy suburbia as drug dealers and common thieves roaming these streets.

Then again, she was happy to not have any of that nastiness coming to her door. She had a roof over head and four walls to shelter her. Nothing and no one was going to take that away from her ever again.

Shakara shook her head and rubbed two fingers against her forehead smoothing away the tension. Dredging up those memories served no purpose. She had no reason to run away. Not from her

mother, foster parents, or even Cade.

She frowned, annoyed that her mind always seemed to find a way to fixate on the forbidding man. God she could see it now, the disgust on his face if he ever stepped foot inside her apartment. Her second-hand furniture was a lifetime away from his lavishly furnished house.

Well screw him and his money. His opinion didn't matter anyway. She could never be with someone who refused to see past her way of life. As if she'd been given a say in the matter.

Shakara blew out a breath and wrenched the ponytail holder from her hair. Cade was the last person she wanted to think about before getting into bed. It was obvious he viewed her as low-class. Why the hell she craved his attention was beyond her. Idiot. That's what she was. An idiot and a glutton for punishment.

Chapter Five

Cade sat at his desk attempting to concentrate. He raked a hand through his hair, staring unseeing at the thick stack of papers demanding his attention. He was spending too much time thinking about her and the fact that he hadn't seen her in a week, not since the night at the restaurant.

He glanced at the calendar on the wall, guilt weighing heavily on his mind. In three months he would be out of the country meeting with a prospective client. He needed to clear the air with her because he wasn't sure how he would be able to function abroad, so far away from her. Not with her hating him and believing he felt the same about her.

He prayed he hadn't burned that bridge. Cade didn't want to think about her reaching to a random guy for comfort. He curled his fist and a familiar knot twisted in the pit of his stomach. Shakara with another man.

He wasn't born yesterday and he damn sure didn't own a pair of rose-colored sunglasses. Shakara was a beautiful young woman who was too cute for her own good. Doe-shaped eyes set into a delicate round face. Her eyes were the darkest shade of brown he'd ever gazed into, and the most stunning.

Her looks were just the tip of the iceberg for him. Everything about her intrigued him. How many times had he lurked nearby when she sat watching a movie or chatting with his sister in hopes of catching a glimpse of her bright cheery smile or hearing her decadently rich husky laugh? Cade grimaced and swiped the sheets of paper across the desk. Exactly how many men were thinking of her in such a way right this moment? Shit. He didn't want to picture another man fucking her. More than likely someone younger and more suitable for her than he—an old white man.

He remembered saying those same words to Radcliffe, meaning them for himself. A rationale for why he needed to maintain his distance from her. Pointless. The only thing he'd accomplished was shooting himself in the foot before entering the race.

God he wanted her. Cade scrubbed his jaw, a combination of shame and lust waging a battle in him for the second time today. The first occurred earlier during his morning shower. His thoughts

inevitably wandered to her and within a minute he was stroking himself, coming so hard and fast it was a blessing the water washed away the sticky evidence before he could dwell on it.

He shook his head. Back to work. Shakara or not, he still had a business to run. He assembled the discarded files in order, pausing at the low chime of the doorbell.

He ignored it.

Ring.

He ignored it again, yet the sound kept vibrating throughout the house, halting his concentration. Pushing out his chair, Cade pounded outside his office and down the staircase. He stopped in front of the entryway, wrenching the door open.

Shakara shifted her weight preventing the vast canvas in her hand from slipping. For days she'd worked on the piece, pouring her heart into it. Art, her one and only talent, was her means of escaping the daily grind of everyday living. The door jerked open and a cheerful smile filtered across her lips. Fully expecting to see her friend, Shakara's smile faltered the instant she saw who it was.

"Where's Julie?" she blurted, cutting the agonizing silence.

"She isn't here."

She frowned. Julie knew she was coming by today. "Oh. I thought she'd be home."

"She left over an hour ago. What was it you needed?" he asked in a conversational tone.

Shakara blinked in astonishment. This was unexpected—Cade being civil toward her after treating her like a stranger in the restaurant.

"I wanted to drop off her birthday present." She hoisted the canvas under her arm.

"You have a present for her?"

"Yes," she clipped, offended by his assumption. "She's my best friend. Did you think I wouldn't get her anything?"

He sighed. "I never said that, Shakara. I'm scratching my head at what more my sister could possibly need."

He said her name. Cade rarely, if ever, referred to her by her name. Why the heck did it sound so elegant coming from his lips?

"That's why she has me. I don't have cobwebs in place of an imagination."

He smiled. An actual smile, aimed at her without the usual hint of mockery.

“What did you get her? Are you going to show it to me or is it top secret?”

She bit her lips and narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “I’ll let you see it as long as you can keep your mouth shut.”

His eyebrows went up. “You don’t trust me?”

“No,” she answered flatly.

He nodded slowly at her. “Fair enough. I’ve never given you an incentive to do so.” He issued her a pointed look. “That’s going to change.”

“Really?” Shakara raised her eyebrows, studying him with caution.

“Really,” Cade repeated, widening the frame of the door. “Are you coming inside?”

“I say that I don’t trust you and you invite me in. What am I missing here?”

His gaze sharpened on her. “I haven’t been the nicest person to you, Shakara. I’m more aware of it than you can imagine. However, I would like for things to be different between us.” He smiled. “Will you step inside now?”

She nodded, stifling a gasp as he leaned forward and removed the heavy canvas from her grasp.

“Thanks.” She entered the house, a nervous bubble forming in her stomach at the resounding click behind her.

Chapter Six

Cade strode toward the dining room, swerving around to see Shakara rooted to the spot by the main entrance. He cringed at the tension emanating from her. She was wary of him and his motives. He couldn't fault her. Hadn't he honed his bitterness and sharpened his contempt on her for years? It would take awhile for her to warm to him. With great care, he laid the canvas on the dining room table and turned to her.

"Why are you standing there?"

She lifted her shoulders. "You told me to come in. I wasn't sure how far inside your house I was allowed, Mr. Parker."

"Mr. Parker," he repeated in a self-deprecating manner. He felt like a bastard ten times over for demanding she refrain from using his given name, stemming from the fear of his reaction to the sound of his name rolling off her delectable lips.

"You don't have to be so formal. But you knew that, didn't you?" He smiled with tenderness and returned to her.

"How should I refer to you? Sir?" she asked.

He shook his head realizing she was teasing him. "Cade. Caden. Whichever you prefer." Daring to touch her face, he said in a low voice. "Pick one. I want to hear you say it."

Her eyes sparkled and Cade stroked beneath her chin urging her to look at him.

"Say it."

Swallowing, Shakara whispered, "Cade."

"That's what you're going to call me from now on. No more Mr. Parker."

"Why?" She glared at him. "Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?"

He averted his eyes toward the dining room. "I've already explained it."

"Yes. I heard you, but you didn't say how you wanted it to be different between us."

His muscles tensed. Shakara was giving him the opening he sought. With three simple words he could divulge the truth to her. But what if she wasn't ready to hear it? He ran the risk of embarrassing and alienating himself in the process.

“I want to see what you’ve brought for Julie.” Coward.

They entered the dining room. Cade stood watching her uncover the thin gray sheet protecting the canvas.

He let out a reverent breath and stared at her, then back at the painting. “This is absolutely amazing.”

Her exquisite face beamed with pride causing the lone dimple in her right cheek to deepen. She was so fucking sweet. His heart ached and his cock hardened for the girl smiling at him.

“Why are you working in that restaurant when you have such a wonderful talent?” he blurted.

She lifted a shoulder. “It’s a hobby. Painting isn’t going to pay the rent or buy food. It’s not that serious.”

He inhaled a sharp breath, loathed to be reminded of the means she relied on to provide for herself. “Are you still stripping?”

Shaking her head, she hastened toward the entrance and muttered a curse beneath her breath loud enough for him to hear. “Is this why you invited me in? For a replay of how disgusting I am and that I should be ashamed of myself.”

“Shakara,” he cried, rushing to the door. “Wait. You’re jumping to conclusions. Just wait. Please.”

“Wait for what? For you to pull out cash this time. Maybe you have some loose change you want to get rid of. Because everyone knows how easily I’d spread my legs for your almighty dollar, right, Mr. Parker?”

She placed a hand on her hip and cocked her head to the side. “Oh wait. If I recall correctly you were trying to find out my going rate for a blow job, wasn’t it?”

He had to stop her. Lifting her hand off the handle, Cade pulled her to him, uncaring of her struggles against his hold.

“Shakara. That’s not what I meant at all.” She wriggled in his arms, but he held her firm, yet gentle, seeking only to give comfort. “I’m sorry. I’m so damn sorry for insulting you, for everything I’ve ever done to upset you. I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. I didn’t ask with the intention of hurting you. I wanted to know because…” He stopped suddenly and jerked her head up to face him.

“Why didn’t you come and ask for my help? I would have done anything to prevent you from working in a strip club and that godforsaken restaurant.”

She let out an outraged cry and wrenched herself out of his

grasp. Shakara stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Damn. He'd revealed too much too soon.

"Are you out of your mind? You've made it clear since the first day we met that you had no interest in me."

"That's not true," he denied.

"It's the truth," she said, her tone flat. "I wouldn't have approached you even if we were friends. I don't need anyone's help. I've been on my own since I was fifteen. I've survived this long without begging for assistance. That's not about to change anytime soon. You can keep your charity, Cade. I'm sure it would have come with a price."

He ran a hand through his hair, not quite sure what to say or do. He was making a mess of this. Somehow he'd managed to offend and hurt her, when all he desired was gaining her trust.

"Shakara..." He reached for her then allowed his hands to fall.

She shook her head. "I have to go."

He stood there, his muscles taut with longing as she turned the handle. He couldn't stop her this time.

The door opened and she spun around to face him once more. "You promise to keep the painting a secret? I don't want Julie to look at it until her birthday, okay?"

Cade nodded to her, his heart lightening that she would still speak to him. "I give you my word, baby girl." He froze, realization dawning on him that he'd just revealed his secret endearment for her.

Shakara lifted a brow at him and the barest hint of a smile tugged at her full lips.

"See you around."

Chapter Seven

Shakara palmed a bottle of pepper spray, her thumb poised, relaxing on the trigger. Earlier this morning her car had decided it wasn't up to the task of taking her to work. She'd taken the city bus, walking the remaining distance to her apartment. The good thing was she didn't have to work until ten-thirty tonight, her usual shift. She hated walking the streets in the late hours of night.

She continued along the sidewalk, the cracks in the concrete highlighted by a flickering street lamp on the verge of outage. The houses and apartment buildings lining the treeless block were clustered together, distinguishable by their unique pattern of chipped paint.

Although the neighborhood was a lifetime away from Cade's affluent community sprawling with extravagant colonial mansions surrounded by well-manicured lawns, it was her home. A place she lived. The word home no longer carried a meaning. The house she had lived in with her mother was described as a home. Yeah right. More like a disaster.

For twelve years she had put up with the woman's physical and verbal abuse, not to mention the scores of men coming in and out of their lives. If it hadn't been for the state stepping in, she might have remained with her hateful mother, or even dead from one of her beatings. Not that things had improved by leaps and bound afterward. She had been in one foster home after the other, until she'd ran away.

Shakara kicked an empty soda can lying in her path. At least she was legal, never having to worry about anyone finding her and taking her back to the state-run homes. If it wasn't so painful, Cade's opinion of her doling out her favors, she'd consider it laughable.

If he knew the crap she'd endured all because of her refusal to relinquish control of her sexuality to the men in her life. Her lips curled into a sneer. Not men. Pathetic low lives preying on little children.

Regardless of the lust Cade felt toward her, Shakara knew he would never try and force himself on her. Cade desired her; it was evident on his face during their last encounter.

She didn't understand it. He was older, sophisticated, and wealthy. She wondered if he saw her as exotic. A thrill he fancied a

sample of, to see what the fuss was about. Her being a stripper—former stripper—made her an easier target to be used.

Her chest tightened and it was hard to breathe. She didn't want to be discarded by Cade. If only she'd kept her distance instead of allowing her crush on him to smolder through the years.

In the beginning, she'd assume it would evaporate. Having a crush on your best friend's older brother was a normal occurrence. One that eventually faded over time. Only thing was, hers persisted with no intention of leaving.

She'd witnessed his worst and it did nothing to tamper her feelings. Cade remained the only man she fantasized about, the two of them performing sexual acts she had no firsthand knowledge of.

She let out a breath and gave her head a shake. It made no sense. Just like her excuses for no longer visiting the house made no sense to Julie. Julie expected her to ignore Cade, the same as asking her to stop breathing.

Furthermore, she wasn't ready to see him. Not yet. His magnanimous offer of assistance struck a blow to her ego. She thought she was doing well. She had a roof over her head—an actual apartment in place of a dilapidated shelter. She wasn't starving and she wore decent clothing. Of course to him it wasn't good enough.

Making her way to the front of the stone building that housed her apartment, Shakara sighed. Maybe she was being too hard on Cade. She was aware that he hadn't meant to offend her. Not this time. The usual cynicism in his eyes had been replaced by warmth. She shivered remembering those beautiful green eyes peering at her.

She gave herself a mental kick. He'd probably written her off, she thought, digging her hand inside her pocket for the small cluster of keys. She stirred, snapping her head to the side at the sound of a car door slamming behind her.

Her mouth fell open. Cade was moving away from his black Mercedes-Benz sedan, striding toward her, looking stylishly out of place in his black pinstriped suit.

"What are you doing here?" Shakara asked, drawing her brows together. "Wait a minute. How did you get my address?"

"Nice to see you too." His lips thinned into a smile.

"Cade..." she began, closing her mouth on a horrible thought. Oh my God. "Did something happen to Julie?"

"Julie's fine, Shakara. That's not why I'm here."

“Why are you here?”

“I’m here because I became tired of waiting on you. You never planned on coming back to the house did you?” He glowered at her accusingly.

“I was going to stop by.” Shakara avoided his gaze. “I just needed some more time.”

“You mean time away from me.”

She shrugged and looked him right in the eye. “Yeah. I’m still trying to figure out why you’re so concerned with my activities. What it could possibly mean to you.”

“Would you believe me if I told you it meant everything to me. That you mean everything to me.”

She pulled out her keys. “No, I don’t buy it. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

His hands shot out thwarting her retreat. “Why don’t you believe me? I’ve already apologized for my treatment of you. Do you want me to bare my soul to you? I’ll do it, Shakara. I’ll give you the truth whether you’re prepared to hear it or not.”

“I already know all I need to,” she mumbled.

He let out a scornful laugh. “You think this is easy for me? Tracking you down like an obsessed stalker. It isn’t. I feel foolish. Take a look at us,” he said, lifting his hand in the air.

“I’m almost twice your age, we barely have anything in common, and I’m not even sure if you like me. Think back to four years ago. You were just a girl. I doubt you would have appreciated having a grown man panting after you. I did everything in my power to prevent becoming close to you. It was either that or let you know how aroused I was for you each day.”

Shakara widened her eyes. Was her mind playing tricks on her? Was this conversation taking place?

“I thought you hated me. I’ve never understood it. I knew I hadn’t done or said anything to upset you.”

She paused and looked at him again, searching his face.

“You wanted me all along?”

“Yes. To put it simply.”

She bit her lower lips, fighting the trace of unease settling in her stomach. “Strictly sex?”

He groaned softly and a glimpse of pain slashed across his features. “God no. I love you. I’ve loved you for so many years, baby

girl, it's eating me up inside. ”

Cade loved her. Her. Sweet Jesus. How was that possible? No one loved her. Cade barely knew her at all and he used the term love. She frowned, her suspicious nature working overtime. If her own mother didn't love her then why should he?

Shakara turned to Cade. “You don't have to say that. I'd like for us to start off on the right foot this time around. Please don't lie to me.”

His eyes darkened and he stiffened. “I'm speaking from my heart. I love you plain and simple.”

The air cracked with deafening silence. Shakara shifted her feet and glanced at Cade, his beautiful green eyes challenging hers to deny him his emotions. A pang of guilt assailed her, declaring her a hypocrite for pretending her own regard for him was nonexistent.

Shakara inched closer to Cade and touched his sleeve in what she hoped was an intimate gesture.

“I've waited years to hear you say those words.”

Chapter Eight

Cade groaned, a deep guttural sound erupting from his chest. She wanted him and was willing to gift him with a second chance.

“I’m going to be so good to you, baby girl. I’ll make it up to you. Every single opportunity I missed to show you how much I care. I swear to it.” He looked at her and she smiled up at him, his other reason for seeking her out emerging inside his head.

“Are you busy tonight?”

“I just finished my shift. Why?”

“I wanted to convince you to come over. I plan on making dinner for us.”

“You’re going to cook?” she asked.

He chuckled at the way her eyes rounded out. “It’s refreshing to see how highly you think of me.”

She rolled her eyes and gave him a wry grin. “I never took you for the type to cook.”

“Shows how little you know about me. Are you willing to chance my food?”

“All right. But if it’s awful you’re going to hear about it. I warn you, Mr. Parker.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

She flashed him a dazzling smile and he fought hard not to pull her to him, keeping her there forever. He grinned, overwhelmed with relief that the gamble he took in confessing to her had paid off. By a landslide.

“Will you give me a minute? I just need to run upstairs and drop this off.” She pointed to her nylon duffel bag.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She nodded and pushed her keys into the door, disappearing above the creaking staircase.

Cade waited outside the building taking note of the cracks in the walls, walls years overdue for a fresh coat of paint. Shakara deserved better. The bottle of pepper spray she’d stashed in her pocket upon his arrival hadn’t escaped his notice.

The woman he loved didn’t belong here. And snobbery had nothing to do with his opinion. Her place was with him where he could protect her.

A voice inside his head popped up urging him to not get ahead of himself. She'd only agreed to dine with him. No tender affirmation of love on her part. He wouldn't push her. When the timing was right, if he treated her well, she would reciprocate his affection.

"I'm ready."

Cade lifted his head to see her standing in front of him, her eyes lit with joy. Because of him? He hoped so.

"Let's go," he said, walking around the car to open the passenger side door for her. She sat inside with her slender hands resting on her thighs. Swallowing hard, he willed his erection to cooperate and remain hidden. He wished she'd chosen to wear a longer dress instead of one that threatened to give him a glimpse of heaven if she shifted in a certain direction.

He needed a kick in the groin. He was behaving like a horny teenager on his first date instead of a graying man in his prime. He got behind the steering wheel, gripping it hard to anchor his fingers away from the luscious girl seated opposite him. This was going to be one long drive home.

"I feel like a pig," Shakara groaned. "Why didn't you warn me you knew your way around a kitchen?"

"You're the one who assumed the worst," he countered, after taking a sip of red wine.

"I did not. Anyway, is this some form of Parker ritual to reel women in? Do you cook for all the women you're interested in?"

To her amazement, Cade's face reddened. Shakara wanted to laugh, then go over to him, kissing every inch that sported the heated shade.

"If there was a Parker way of reeling women in, I would have used it on you years ago."

Shakara blushed. "You might have been successful with it."

He grinned boyishly at her. "And to answer your other question. No. I only cook for the woman I'm in love with." He pinned her with an intense focus.

Shakara lowered her eyelids feeling strangely shy. He was being so open with her, sharing so much of himself. She wanted to do the same. It was only fair.

"Remember what you asked me that day when I brought over

the painting?”

He raised his head, absently pushing away the wine goblet, his expression indiscernible.

“I remember,” he said in a low voice.

“I’m not stripping anymore. I stopped almost two months ago after I got the job at the restaurant.” Shakara gauged his reaction. For reasons unknown, she hoped it made a difference to him.

He nodded. Although she got the impression he wanted to say more, he didn’t.

“I hated it,” she confessed quietly. “At first, I had to force myself to get on the stage, but after awhile I just stopped caring. It was a job like anything else. I did what was required of me. No more, no less. You shouldn’t be so quick to criticize me, Cade. If you were in my position, I’m sure you would have done the same thing.”

Shakara raised her eyes, taken aback at the ferocity of his gaze on her, sending delicious tingles throughout her entire body.

“Come here,” he whispered.

Shakara pushed her chair to the side, meeting him beside the table. Standing on her tiptoes she tilted her face, her lips pressing into his. Cade pushed his tongue inside her mouth, deepening the kiss. His erection nudge at her center and her cunt moistened in response.

“See what you do to me?”

She leaned into him, rubbing her sex to his groin. “It’s the same with me.”

He nipped her lower earlobe and ground his hips into her, his cock stroking her through the clothing separating them. “How do I make you feel?”

“Hot. It’s like I’m burning up.” She moaned. “It feels empty down there.”

“Is it wet?” He trailed his lips along her neck.

“Ye-Yes.”

Cade palmed a hand over her breast, squeezing and plucking at the nipple. She raised her leg and draped it across his lean hip, desperate to get closer to him.

“Tell me to stop,” he prompted. “I didn’t invite you over for sex, but God help me if I won’t take what you offer. It’s been so long for me, baby girl.”

Her nipples tightened under his fingers and her clitoris pulsed at his words. Cade was aching for her and she wanted him with the

same fevered passion.

“I don’t want you to stop,” she whispered, reaching down to stroke him through the jeans he’d changed into.

His hand fell from her breast to cup her bottom. His eyes darkened and his voice grew thick. “I’m giving you one last chance to change your mind, because once I start there’s no stopping. I’m going to come deep inside your luscious body.”

Her lids closed a fraction as it dawned on her what she was getting ready to do. Share the one thing she’d fought for and guarded with her heart. Her virginity. She wanted it. To make love with Cade, experience the passion with him.

“I’m not going to change my mind. I’m on the pill in case you were wondering. I want to feel you inside me. Without a condom. Just you and me.”

He grunted a low primitive cry that made the hairs on her nape sizzle in anticipation. His eyes pierced into her and his fingers tilted her chin as he spoke to her.

“I don’t want you spreading your legs for anyone else. Are we clear?”

She bit back a snide remark. There was no need to tell him she wasn’t sleeping with anyone. He’d recognize it for himself.

“If you’re making rules for me then it applies to you too. You’re not allowed to sleep with another woman.”

Holding her by the waist, he lifted her off the floor, his lips relaxing into a smile. She gasped, wrapping her legs around him. The hem of her dress bunched around her hips, allowing Cade to caress her skin.

She moaned softly, lacing her fingers through his hair, her lips buried beneath his in a sensuous kiss. By the time she lifted her face he had her up the staircase, his bedroom looming ahead, near the end of the long hallway.

Chapter Nine

The door slammed behind them and Cade quickened his steps. His cock felt full, straining with years of excitement. Shakara's lips brushed against his jaw enticing him to back her up against the wall, his hands delving under her dress, finding their target. Her panties.

"Oh my God."

Cade slid his fingers inside the cotton seam, stroking between the moist folds. He sucked in a breath, awed by the silkiness of her cunt. His thumb pressed gently on her pulsing clitoris.

"This feels so much better than I imagined." His fingers pulled at the tender bud, returning to stroking her labia. Soft and smooth.

His cock ached and his balls grew heavy, warming with cum. He was going to fill her good tonight.

"You like it?" She nibbled her lips in an achingly innocent way that tore at his heartstrings.

"Yes," He squeezed her thigh. "But I want to see more. I bet you have the prettiest cunt." He lifted her from the wall and moved toward the bed.

"Show me," he pleaded, laying her on the mattress. His hands gripped her ankles, gently parting her legs.

Shakara's hands went to the waistband of the bikini panties, peeling it to her knees, until Cade took over, removing the underwear.

His eyes fixated between her thighs, Cade threw the flimsy layer of cotton to the floor. "So fucking beautiful."

Her clitoris looked full and juicy above the tiny, narrow slit in the center. Her labia glistening with wetness, beckoning to him. She was ready.

"You're staring," Shakara told him. She placed both hands over the thin patch of curls.

Cade smiled at her shyness. Unsure if it was genuine or contrived. Regardless, it was sweet and stirred a powerful longing inside of him.

"Baby girl, I'm allowed to stare." He leaned over her and hooked two fingers under the thin straps of her dress.

Her breasts bounced free the instance the straps fell away. He groaned, aching with need at the sight. Naked, exquisitely round, and heavy. Her nipples were a darker shade of brown, pert and thick. Cade

saw himself spending hours at her breasts suckling to his heart's content.

"Your turn," she whispered suddenly. "I don't want to be the only one naked."

Her gaze drifted to the outline of his cock, lingering there for awhile. He hardened beneath her heated stare.

Cade pivoted away from the bed, relief and a hint of nerves burrowing into his stomach. How many nights had he dreamed of this moment? Her eyes on him. Shakara's hands on his sensitive flesh.

Now that the time had come, he felt like a teenager about to lose his virginity. His nerves were raw with doubt.

What if she found him lacking? He wasn't small, not by a long shot. But maybe she had been with men much larger. How the hell would he stack up compared to them? Worse. What if he wasn't able to please her, bring her to orgasm? Would she write him off, sticking to men closer to her age?

"Cade?" She was staring at him with her brows furrowed.

He closed his eyes then opened them, regaining his focus. No worries. Shakara, his sweet girl, was lying naked on his bed. Her cunt beautiful and dripping for him.

He tugged his shirt over his head. Shortly after, he stepped out of his pants and briefs, stiffening at the loud intake of breath that filtered across the bedroom.

Cade lifted his eyes, taking in the look of sheer awe and desire on Shakara's face. His cock jerked and swelled to its full size, curving up to his stomach.

He moved in front of her and ran his hands along the thick base, repeating her words. "Do you like it?"

"I like it." Her hand stretched out to touch him.

Her fingers closed over him and he moaned, looking up to the ceiling then downward. This was a thousand times better than he dreamed.

"It's so big. I never thought..." Her voice drifted as she slid a finger over the tiny opening on the broad head. His breathing stopped and his heart raced when she lifted her tender gaze to him.

"Can I taste it?"

Pre-cum flooded from him wetting her fingers. He gritted his teeth watching her tongue slide across her lips.

Clenching his jaw, he gave a sharp nod. "You can lick it."

She stuck out her pink tongue giving it a tentative flicker. He searched her face for any inkling of disgust. Nothing. Instead, she lowered her head until his cock was poised right above her lips.

Cade groaned out loud, as she wrapped her fingers around the base, laving the underside with her warm tongue.

“No more.”

He curled a lock of soft dark hair in his hand and lifted Shakara away from him. “I’m going to come if I let you keep that up. I want the first time to be inside your cunt.”

Cade gripped her waist and pushed her to lie on the mattress. Climbing on top of her, his eyes cut into hers, pinning her to the bed.

“I love you,” he said, holding himself against her entrance. She was so hot and moist. He wanted in.

He rubbed his cock to her slit and pressed into her. “You want this, don’t you?”

She wiggled underneath him raising her hips to his. “Oh God. Please don’t tease me. I want to feel you moving inside me.”

He lifted his head, withdrawing the tip from her entrance. “You will, baby girl, you will. I’m going to give you every single inch.” He knelt between her legs and pulled her knees up around his waist, pushing into her.

“C-C-Cade.”

He was scarcely inside her and she was already squeezing him. His nostrils flared and he pulled back, thinking of the vice-like grip she would have on his cock. He needed to go deeper, fuck her good. Using all the strength he could muster he thrust hard and forcefully.

Her scream echoed inside the room. Cade’s heart dropped and he froze above her, holding rigid. He didn’t dare move. A virgin. He stared at her, confusion blurring his thoughts. How the hell was that possible? Shit. He’d practically ripped her asunder. He had to say something.

“I didn’t know,” he whispered, terrified to move and heighten her pain. He gazed down at her, his cock full and excruciatingly hard inside her. Every instinct in him urged him to continue. He couldn’t. She was gnashing her teeth, pain visible on her lovely features.

Her lips trembled. “It’s not that bad. I just need to...get used to it.”

His heart flipped with love. She was his and his alone. He was

her first. Cade pressed a kiss to her temple, her cheek then along the side of her jaw.

“Good girl. I’m going to make sure you get used to it. Every chance I get. And you’re going to take it all, won’t you, Shakara?”

She moaned in response. Taking it as a sign he lowered his face to her neck, inhaling her delicious fragrance. He nuzzled the area above her collarbone, trying hard not to surge deep inside her body. A feat nearly impossible. Her cunt kept tightening around him with each kiss he dotted along her satiny skin.

“Is the pain lessening?”

“Yeah.” Shakara rolled her hips and ran her fingers along the corded muscles of his back. “I can’t believe you’re inside me. Feels like I’m dreaming.”

“It’s no dream. I’m going to be inside you all night, baby girl. I’m going to come so deep inside your sweet little cunt. You’ll like that, won’t you?” Cade pushed forward in a shallow gentle stroke.

“I’ll love it.”

Her legs rubbed against his back and he answered her silent plea, increasing the brunt of his thrust. He hardened his features and low grunts spilled from the back of his throat. Shakara, his sweet baby girl, was beneath him whimpering her pleasure.

Shakara’s breasts bounced in front of his face tempting him to fondle a dusky nipple. He shoved harder until his balls were slapping against her plump ass. Her head thrashed to the side and her fingernails scratched at his back.

“That’s it, baby girl. Come for me.”

Cade flattened his hands on the mattress bracing himself as he pumped into her cunt. His balls puckered and his seed churned within, aching for release. Moaning, he threw back his head, ejaculating thick spurts of cum in her honeyed warmth.

Chapter Ten

A streak of light burst through an opening between the velvet draperies. Shakara smiled with awareness, a subtle yet firm movement reminding her of how and where she'd fallen asleep. Cade. His cock stirred, buried in her cunt. Shakara bit back a slight wince, her discomfort waning at the glorious feel of his lips drawing on her nipple.

“Good morning.”

She brushed a hand through his hair, her fingers stroking the few strands of gray. Shakara wondered if it bothered him. After all, he was always mentioning the difference in their age. For her, it was trivial, a non-issue. So what if Cade was older? She adored the silver streaks. It made him appear more handsome. Distinguished.

Lowering her gaze, Shakara glanced down to see him peering at her. His mouth remained attached to her breast.

“Have you had your fill yet?” she teased.

“Your breasts are much too delectable to ignore.” Cade lifted his head, pressing a kiss to her lips. “Morning.”

She kissed him back and his cock swelled inside her. She bit her lips against a tremor of guilt.

“I can't.”

“You're sore aren't you?” Concern marred his features.

Shakara nodded her face heating. It felt strange to lay in bed discussing her soreness with Cade. Mr. Parker. Everything about this was almost surreal. Being here with him. Having him inside her. She'd fantasized about it not ever believing it would happen. That Cade would be the one to take her virginity. More so, his confession of love for her. And yet, it had to be real. How else could her flesh feel so...used? In the sweetest way possible.

Without a word to her, Shakara felt him withdraw then watched him make his way off the bed and toward the bathroom.

Frowning, she heard the sudden distinct sound of running water as he reentered the bedroom heading in her direction.

“I thought you were about to take a shower.”

He dragged the comforter off her. “I will. Later, after I take care of you.”

“Take care of me?”

Cade chuckled, his eyes gleaming at her. “You’ll see.”

Shakara arched her brows, crying out in protest at being lifted from the bed. He cradled her naked body to him as if she weighed nothing more than a feather.

“You’re not planning on throwing me out on the doorsteps are you, Mr. Parker?”

He threw back his head in laughter. “Only if you allow me to sit on the steps with you.”

They entered the bathroom and Shakara saw the large Jacuzzi tub filling, bubbles foaming at the top.

She turned to him, finding the situation amusing in an odd sort of way. “I’m going to have a bath?” She glanced toward the water, noting the inviting and relaxing wavelike motion.

He nodded. “With me serving as your, ah, lady’s maid—for lack of a better term.”

“*You’re* going to give me a bath?”

“Smart girl.” He laid her in the tub among the numerous bubbles, shielding her nakedness.

Shakara observed him moving about the spacious bathroom. Cade walked over to the sandy colored vanity, grabbing a bottle of body wash, then a washcloth from the linen closet on the other side of the room near the glass shower door.

He didn’t seem to care that her eyes were following his every step, taking in his nude form. Blushing, she speculated how he found the time in his busy schedule to maintain such a muscular physique. He was lean, not an ounce of fat on him, unlike her.

Shakara nibbled her lips. She wasn’t thin, nor was she even close to being obese. Maybe thick was the right word for it. Yeah, she’d heard that word used before by a few guys to describe her. Laughing inside her head, she tried to imagine that particular word coming out of Cade’s mouth to describe a woman.

“Are you finished inspecting me, Ms. James?” He glared at her, knocking her out of her musing with his feigned annoyance.

She looked up at him. He was holding the washcloth and soap in his hands, along with a large towel. “Not yet. Maybe if you turn to the side just a bit.”

“Another time.” Cade smiled and the lines around his eyes appeared softer than ever before. He walked to the edge of the tub, leaning over her with the lathered washcloth poised above her skin.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said, unease settled in her at having him attend to such an intimate task. It was almost more personal than their lovemaking.

“I don’t have to do anything when it comes to you. I want to.” He gazed at her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Please. Allow me to do this for you.”

Shakara nodded and swallowed her nerves. “Just don’t scrub too hard.”

His eyes twinkled with humor. “I won’t.”

She chewed her bottom lip, uncertain of how to react to his gesture. Still. She would just sit still, allowing him to hurry up and finish.

“Relax,” he whispered, running the washcloth against her chest. “You’re so tense.”

She expelled a deep breath. Perhaps he was correct and it would be better to just relax and enjoy it. He did seem dead set on doing this for her.

He washed her arms and, working from one breast to the other, he cupped the sensitive flesh in his hand, sweeping the washcloth over it.

Shakara suppressed a sigh of pleasure as he did the same with her other breast. Relaxing was easier than she thought.

“Enjoying yourself?” Cade lifted his eyes to her while stroking her stomach with the soapy rag.

“Mmm.” She sighed, parting her legs when the cloth brushed against the triangle of curls.

“I’ll be gentle,” he assured her with aching tenderness.

Shakara nodded, expecting a stark wave of shyness that refused to show. Her face heated at the feel of him cleansing between her swollen labia and down to her thighs.

“Better?” Cade asked, lifting her from the tub. He draped the towel across her body, giving it a gentle rub.

“I feel wonderful. Thank you.” She kissed the corner of his mouth.

They reentered the bedroom and Shakara bent to the floor beside the bed, retrieving her clothing.

“What are you doing today?”

She turned her head to his voice, relaxing at the feel of his fingers on her dress, hoisting up the zipper.

“Well, I’m hoping you’ll give me a ride back to my place sometime today. I have to work this afternoon. What about you? Don’t tell me you spend your weekends working?”

“I do. It keeps me occupied, but I would rather pass the time with you.”

Her heart ached, knowing she would have to deny him again. Her job was all she had, apart from him. She had to make him realize how important it was to her. It might not be designing the next state of the art hospital or skyscraper, but it was all she had to go on.

“Cade,” she said, stepping away from him. “I work every single day. I have to. It took me a long time to find this job and the only way I can keep it is if I comply with the schedule my manager gives me. It’s either that, or …” She let out a breath. “It doesn’t matter. All I’m trying to say is, I would love to be able to stay with you, but I can’t.”

Shakara glanced at him, taking note of the hardening of his features and the dark glitter in his eyes. Was he angry at her?

“You do understand, don’t you?” A cold, jittery feeling anchored in her stomach. Was her work going to come between them? She wasn’t stripping anymore—he should be glad.

Cade pivoted away from her and shoved a hand through his hair. “No. I don’t understand,” he snapped. “I have no idea why you were exposing yourself to all sorts of people in the first place and it astounds me that you mentioned hating having to display yourself, yet I see you running around serving food half naked.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Don’t you want more out of life? How can you be satisfied relying on your body to get you what you need?”

Shakara sucked in a breath. That’s how he saw it? Saw her? Anger rose inside her chest. Cade knew nothing about her life. He was born into money, never had to struggle a day in his life. He had no right to pass judgment on her. Weren’t they beyond this issue?

“I don’t have to explain anything to you,” she bit out. “If I want to use my body to keep me from having to sleep outside in the cold rain or to keep from starving, then that’s my business.” She stalked toward the door, glaring at him. “You got what you wanted and now you’re free to talk down to me again.”

His fingers closed over her hand, prying it away from the silver handle. “That’s not what I’m doing and we both know it. I love you. Why is it so difficult for you to be open with me? I know you

don't like what you're doing. I know it must be killing you having to exhibit yourself like that on a daily basis."

"I'm used to it. I don't need you feeling sorry for me."

"I don't. I told you. I love you. I care for you. Everything that happens to you concerns me, including the reason why you've been living alone and unprotected for so many years."

She bit the inside of her cheek, hating the effect his compassion had on her. Tears burned at the back of her eyes. She wanted desperately to talk to him, tell him things she'd never told anyone. Not even Julie. She couldn't. It was too embarrassing, shameful. She didn't want his love, the love she could see clear as day in his eyes, changing to pity.

"Shakara." He brought her with him to sit on the bed, pulling her onto his lap. "Don't be scared. You can tell me anything. I won't judge you. I can't. You're my world, baby girl."

She wiped away a tear. "I want to but you have to promise me something. I need you to promise me you'll end it, if you think different about me. I won't hold it against you. I just don't want you to stay with me if you're secretly disgusted by me."

Cade squeezed her to him, pressing his lips to the side of her head. "You have my word; however, there's nothing you could say that would turn me away from you. Love doesn't work like that."

Shakara swiped the back of her hand across her damp eyelashes. "All right." She had no idea where to begin. "What do you want to know?"

"Where are your parents?"

"I don't know. I lived with my mother and she never mentioned who my father was. She didn't want me, told me so every opportunity she had. I stayed with her until the state took me from her." Shakara paused to take note of his reaction. His arms remained locked and his face betrayed no emotions. She was relieved. It made speaking easier.

"Did she hurt you?" he asked in a hushed tone.

Shakara sat up in his lap, straightening her shoulders. All the emotions she'd kept hidden came pouring out. "Of course she hurt me. The bitch thought I was trying to steal her latest boyfriend. I was twelve for God's sake. He had me on the floor..." Her voice broke into tears and she covered her face, her shoulders shaking violently.

"Shakara, baby, I'm so sorry, I had no idea..." Cade drew her

closer but she pulled back, shaking her head. She wanted to tell him because she knew he would be on her side.

“He was about to rape me and she got angry, beating the hell out of me. To be honest, I don’t even remember that much except waking up in the hospital and being told I wasn’t going back to her.”

Shakara felt him stiffen beneath her, yet he maintained his silence, allowing her to pour her heart out.

“I heard nothing from them afterward. I didn’t care. I had other worries. After I left the hospital they put me in a bunch of foster homes. Some of them were okay, others, not so much. I was sixteen when they sent me to the last one. It was horrible, the woman only kept us around for the money from the state. Her husband was worse. He drank all the time. One day he came on to me, basically ordering me to wait for him that night. I didn’t have to think twice. I bolted the first chance I had and never looked back.”

“My God. You were just a child. You had no one else. Where did you go?” His voice shook.

She averted her eyes for a second, then glanced up at him.

“You really want to know all this?”

“Yes. It hurts like hell to hear it, but I need to know.”

Shakara took a deep breath, mustering up the courage to bare her secret to him. “I had nowhere else to go. That didn’t stop me because I knew I couldn’t stay there. The first couple of nights I was terrified that someone would find me and force me to return. It never happened. So, I…” She looked away not wanting him to see her face. “I was homeless. I followed the lead of the others.” She fixed her gaze on him to drive her point home. “All those homeless people you see on television, on the news. The tattered clothing, rummaging for food, sleeping in alleyways, abandoned buildings—for me that was real life.”

She lowered her voice. “I know you think stripping is horrible, but the day I took a chance and went inside the club—it became a lifesaver for me, as ridiculous as it sounds.”

“I’m so fucking sorry.” Cade buried his face in her neck. “I wish I could go back in time and snatch you away from those hardships. You didn’t deserve it, baby girl, none of it. I hope you’re aware of that. You did absolutely nothing wrong.”

“I know.” She exhaled, forcing a smile to her lips. “There you have it. The life and times of Shakara James. I suppose that little

history lesson destroyed your fantasy of me, right?”

“I’ve never placed you on a pedestal Shakara. You’re as you’ve always been.”

Her eyes eyebrows went up. “Oh yeah. What am I?”

“The sweetest, bravest woman I know. The only woman I could ever—will ever love.”

Chapter Eleven

Despite only being a week into their relationship, Cade made sure to arrange his busy schedule around spending time with Shakara. Although he accepted her reasoning for working at the restaurant, it didn't diminish his distaste for the environment and attire. Still, he was wise enough to refrain from bringing it up—along with any offer of financial assistance.

Homeless. Beaten. Almost raped. Cade tightened his fist, unable to overcome the surge of anger and hatred for everyone who had done her wrong. How the hell could anyone look at Shakara and abuse her? It made him sick. And the feeling didn't end with those faceless strangers. He was included with that sorry bunch of assholes.

Even now he wanted to kick himself for his jealousy toward her dancing in the exotic club. A lifesaver, she'd said. It had been a way out for her and he, selfish bastard that he was, had dared to look down his superior nose at her.

He jammed a hand inside his pocket, swiveling around at the sound of the main entry door being closed in a jarring thud.

Julie rushed over, throwing her arms around him. "Have I told you lately that you're the most awesome brother in the whole wide world?"

He rolled his eyes and eased a booklet out of her hands. "There's no need to butter me up. I've already purchased the condo."

"I'm still in shock that after months of trying to convince you, you've finally agreed. I didn't even have to browbeat you."

He shot her a look telling her to quit while ahead. Laughing, Julie held up her hands in surrender. "Not that I'm complaining. Really, I'm not. I can't believe I have my own place."

"When are you thinking of moving in?" he asked, flipping through the pamphlet.

"Tomorrow, if you don't mind. I can pick up the keys in the morning."

Cade gave a sharp nod, taking note of the curious glint in his sister's eyes. *No questions, Julie.* He didn't have to share his motivation for buying the condo. It was none of her business if he wanted to move Shakara into the house. Hell, he did it for all of their sakes. If Julie remained in the house, there would be zero chance of

convincing Shakara to share his bedroom. Also, he doubted his little sister would be comfortable with her best friend and brother having sex under the same roof as her.

“Aren’t you going to be lonely in this big house without me?” Julie asked.

Cade laughed and ruffled her hair. “You mean will I miss reminding you to pick up after yourself?”

She stuck out her lip. “Whatever. You know you’re going to miss me, especially since Shakara won’t be coming around anymore.”

“What does your leaving the house have to do with me and Shakara?”

Her lips turned in a slow calculating manner. “She’s my friend. If I’m not here she has no reason to stop by. That means you’ve lost out on your chance with her.” Her smile shifted into accusation. “It’s your own damn fault. Why can’t you admit you like her? She’s a cool person. I’m sure if you beg, Shakara would forgive you for being such an ass to her.”

“I’d rather you not use that tone with me. And secondly, you need to stay out of this.”

“Stay out of what,” Julie snapped. “The fact that you refuse to recognize that you’re half in love with Shakara but too scared to do anything about it because you care what people might think. Or should I ignore that my dear brother is getting older and lonelier each year.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “C’mon, Cade. I love you. I worry about you, that’s all. Don’t you want to get married one day and have children?”

Sighing, Cade brushed away her hand. She may have had a point months ago. Things were different now. He no longer concerned himself with the opinions his friends and associates would form regarding his relationship with Shakara.

“I appreciate your concern. Enjoy this new stage in your life, Julie. Don’t worry about me.”

“What about Shakara? You like her, don’t you?”

He issued her a deadpan stare. “Like is not the word I’d choose. I love her.”

Julie gasped then smacked her hands together, her green eyes bulging. “I knew it!”

“Shakara knows how I feel about her. Don’t be upset with her for not confiding in you about our relationship. She would have told

you in her own time.”

“Oh my God. You two are together?”

Cade stiffened, feeling slightly uncomfortable having this talk with his sister. “We’re a couple.”

“Oh, Cade, I’m so happy for you guys.” Her arms crashed around him. A second later she was hurrying up the stairs, letting out a loud girlish squeal that made him cringe and thankful that she was moving out.

Chapter Twelve

Shakara smoothed her dress, adjusting the dark green material that stopped at the middle of her thigh. She'd taken the time before work to stop downtown and visit Julie's new place. As she'd expected, her best friend had wanted to hear the details of her relationship with Cade. Well, everything except their sex life, of course.

It was a huge relief seeing that her friend was happy for them. Despite Julie's earlier suggestion that she and Cade be a couple, Shakara worried that perhaps the reality of it would be strange for Julie. Her best friend dating her brother.

Dating. She disliked that word. It sounded too casual to describe what they felt for each other. She loved Cade, although she had yet to voice the words to him.

Soon, she thought, slipping past the revolving door into the towering skyscraper that housed Parker Architectural Design. This was her first time visiting him at work and she wanted to surprise him.

Shakara nodded to the security guard as her heels clicked on the slated marble tile. She quirked her lips in amusement at the obvious way the man's head dipped to the side, checking out her ass. Good. That meant she'd chosen the right dress to wear to see her man.

Moments later, she stepped onto the elevator. Cade's design firm was located on the last three floors, his private office at the highest level.

Shakara exited the elevator. She hadn't walked two steps before a crisp voice addressed her.

"Can I help you?"

She blinked, hesitating for a moment. "I'm not sure."

An older woman sat behind an impressive artistically designed desk, her dark hair held in a crisp bun at the back of her head. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't, but I'm—"

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you. Are you sure you are in the correct building? This is an architectural firm. That means—"

"I know what it means," Shakara snapped. Refusing to allow the woman to spoil her good nature, Shakara sighed, plastering on a

smile. "I'm here to see Mr. Parker."

The receptionist shook her head. "I'm sorry. Mr. Parker is an extremely busy man. You'll have to come back another time when you have an appointment."

"I'd like an appointment now."

The woman cast her eyes over Shakara's outfit, disapproval shining brightly. "That's not possible. If by some chance you do have legitimate business here, I can refer to you an associate." Her face lifted and the air of disdain vanished within an instant. "What exactly can we do for you?"

Shakara pursed her lips, feeling a tinge of regret in entering the building. Was there something wrong with what she wore? Her dress was perfectly normal. Sure, there was a bit of skin, but nothing that was too revealing. Her nerves began to take hold of her and she stomped it down. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I'm friends with Julie Parker. Mr. Parker's sister. It's important that I speak with him." Why didn't she say she was his girlfriend? That would have been so much easier. But there it was, the fear that by doing so she would jinx herself, ruin the luck she was having. Also, what if Cade didn't want anyone to know about them? God, that didn't bear contemplating. She wouldn't believe that, not for a second.

The receptionist relented, lifting the phone with her wrinkled hands while issuing Shakara a look of blatant suspicion.

"Parker." She could hear Cade's thick voice through the line.

"Yes. Mr. Parker, there's a woman—" She looked at Shakara. "I'm sorry what did you say your name was?"

"James. Just tell him Ms. James."

"Yes, Sir. There's a Ms. James here to see you. She claims to be a friend of your sister's." Shakara heard the question in the woman's tone.

"Send her in." She heard him say followed by a sharp click.

The receptionist gawked at the phone shocked Cade hadn't ordered her sent away for being a liar.

"Mr. Parker will see you now." She stood, leaning over the desk and pointed. "Go straight through that door and make a right. His office is the one on the left."

"Thanks," she muttered, pulling open the glass door.

Shakara raised her chin, aware of the eyes watching her. Did

they stare at all of Cade's clients like this? She had a sinking feeling they didn't.

To the right. Last door on the left. She stood in front of the door and gave it a single knock, then pushed on the handle. Her heart flipped at the sight of Cade striding toward her. He clutched her to him and lifted her off the ground.

"Why didn't you tell me you were stopping by?" He dropped a kiss on her lips.

"Where's the fun in that? It's called a surprise."

He swatted her on the ass and carried her over to his chair.

"I like surprises," Cade said, pulling her onto his lap. "Especially when they're wrapped in such a sweet little package." His fingers caressed the insides of her thighs.

She leaned into him. Her back rested against his chest and his lips brushed warm kisses along her neck.

"I know you do. So, here I am."

He chuckled low, nipping her earlobe. "Am I allowed to unwrap my package?"

"Maybe. If you tell me what you're going to with it." Shakara squirmed on the fingers stroking her folds.

"I could do a lot with you, and I think from the feel of your cunt you'd be more than willing to let me."

"Cade," she whispered. Why did he have to be right?

"Shh," He placed his hands behind her and she heard the sound of a zipper's undoing. Next, he lifted her dress, hiking it around her waist.

"What if someone comes in?" Shakara raised her hips allowing him easier access.

"No one would dare. I'm the boss. My office," he groaned, thrusting upward into her.

She bit her lips and fought the urge to moan aloud, unwilling to bring attention to their lascivious activity.

"I'm asking you one more time, Ms. James, what brings you here today?"

"This," she rasped. "I came for you to fuck me."

He accepted her answer then fastened his hand around her, pumping hard.

Shakara rode his cock, moaning at the feel of his warm lips on her back. Behind her Cade grunted, intensifying his thrusts.

“Is this what you had in mind?”

“Yes.” Shakara closed her eyes, overcome with joy. “I love having your cock inside me. I’ve never felt anything this amazing in my entire life.”

“You’ll have it, baby girl. Every chance I get I’m going to fuck your beautiful cunt.”

“Oh God,” Shakara cried, her entire body jerking on his shaft. She was about to come all over him—in the middle of the day in his office.

Cade shouted his release and held her in place, filling her with his semen. Shakara mewled, her cunt tightening around his pulsating cock. Planting a kiss on her temple, Cade withdrew, leaving her bereft except for the sticky residue between her thighs.

Clasping her arms around his neck, she turned to him. “I love you.” A heavy weight lifted from her. She kissed him and repeated. “I’ve always loved you.”

Cade’s heart slammed inside his chest. She loved him. Shakara had fulfilled his greatest desire.

He tipped her chin up, prompting her to look at him. His eyes bored into hers. “You’re mine, aren’t you?”

“I am,” she whispered. “I’ll always be your baby girl.”

Groaning, he hugged her to him, inhaling her scent. She smelled of lavender and vanilla. So damn feminine.

He held her close oblivious to the minutes ticking by, until Shakara shifted on his lap. “I should be going. I’m sure you have lots of important work to do. I don’t want to keep you from it.” She pulled out of his embrace.

“Nothing’s more important than you,” he told her, adjusting his pants.

“You do realize I don’t have any panties on for you to charm your way into?”

Chuckling low, Cade followed her to the door. Her luscious hips swayed with each step she took and he felt his cock swell.

“Go before I take you again on the floor.” He swatted her on the ass.

She laughed. “Now that’s a promise I’ll hold you to.”

Cade shook his head, smiling at her as she gripped the handle of the door. The door swung open before she had a chance to turn it

and he cursed under his breath. Andrew Radcliffe stood outside his office.

Chapter Thirteen

“I didn’t realize you had company, Parker.” Radcliffe said, fixing his eyes on Shakara. “I’ll stop by later.”

She issued him a furtive glance, then closed the door behind her, leaving the two men alone.

“Parker, you sneaky bastard.” Radcliffe grinned. “Leave the grind to us lowly employees, while you’re in here getting off.”

Before he had a chance to open his mouth, the man laughed, a loud, raucous noise booming with approval.

“Didn’t think you had it in you, man. Congratulations.” Radcliffe slapped him on the shoulder. “Did you go back to collect on the generous tip you left?”

Cade shoved away from his former college roommate. “Of course not. And it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Oh really?” Radcliffe stared incredulously. “You weren’t in here bouncing the girl on your—”

“She’s not a girl,” Cade snapped.

“She looks pretty young to me.”

Cade sighed and moved toward his desk, massaging the area above his right eyebrow. “Shakara’s twenty-one, well over the legal age. I’d appreciate it if you refrain from making assumptions.”

“There’s no need for me to make guesses about the girl. If anyone’s in the dark, it’s you.”

Cade’s jaw tightened. “What are you suggesting?”

“Your little waitress,” Radcliffe began, shifting his gaze toward the spot by the door where Shakara had stood moments earlier.

“I didn’t recognize her that night in the restaurant, but I kept thinking she looked familiar. It wasn’t until a couple of days later it hit me. I remembered her from a club I used to go to when I wanted to get away from Ash—before the divorce.”

A sliver of fear crept its way into his chest. He didn’t want Radcliffe or anyone to know about her stripping. “Hurry up and get to the point, Andrew.”

“I’m telling you that I saw her working in a strip club. Hottest dancer on the stage that night. Even wanted to buy a lap dance, but—”

“Shut up,” Cade barked. The man had no idea when to stop.

“Hey, I’m just telling you the truth.” Radcliffe lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “Why the hell should you care? You’re only getting your dick wet.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong. This isn’t a fling and it had nothing to do with being curious. I want her.”

“She’s a slut. What part don’t you understand? You picked her up half naked inside a wing joint.”

Cade lost it. Snarling, he yanked Radcliffe by the collar and forced himself to refrain from cramming his fist down the man’s throat. “If you value our friendship, you won’t repeat that term. You don’t know the first thing about her so keep your goddamn mouth shut.”

“Whoa. Relax, Parker.” Beads of sweat glistened on Radcliffe’s face.

He dropped his hands to his side and rubbed the back of his neck. He shouldn’t have lost his temper. But neither could he allow his friend, or anyone else for that matter, to refer to Shakara as a slut. Not after what she’d been through. How she’d been forced to survive on her own.

“She’s the furthest thing from what you’re imagining.” He shook his head and paused in his speech. Neither he nor Shakara owed explanations to anyone.

“Cade.” Radcliffe cut in. “It’s me you’re talking to. We fucking grew up together. Of all the women in Providence, you’re telling me you’d rather be with *her*? A black stripper who looks like jailbait.”

“And what’s so wrong with that? Why does her being black have to factor into this?”

Radcliffe snorted. “Save the p.c. bullshit for someone else. We both know it makes a difference. Everyone’s going to think you’re experiencing some kind of mid-life shit.”

Cade walked over to the window, staring at the flow of traffic on the bustling streets below. Radcliffe didn’t understand the half of it. Of course he was aware of the miniature firestorm of gossip his relationship with Shakara would ignite. He’d had four goddamn years to contemplate it.

“I’m not letting her go for the appeasement of society. My feelings for Shakara didn’t develop overnight. I’ve known her for years and wanted her forever.”

Radcliffe blew out a low whistle. “You’re in knee deep. What if she’s using you? Have you thought about that? Must be nice for a poor young girl to have an older rich sugar daddy. I’m sure she didn’t object to being your mistress. Did she demand a downtown apartment?”

Cade snorted. “She’s the only woman I’ve been with who has absolutely no interest in my money. None whatsoever.” He wasn’t going to touch the age issue Radcliffe kept reverting to. It was his weakness, a fear he held on to that one day Shakara would decide he was too old for her. Staid and boring.

“I’ll give her credit. She’s not a gold-digger. And maybe she is the fairy princess you make her out to be, but tell me this—are you going to invite her to the Gala next Saturday night?”

“Who else would I bring?” Cade asked, his eyes widening in disbelief. Radcliffe was taking this to the extremes, expecting him to keep Shakara hidden.

“I find it interesting, that’s all. Your willingness to risk your reputation, your family’s reputation. You can’t honestly think I’m the only one who visited that club. What happens when one of the guests recognizes your Shakara. What then? Are you going to spend the entire night defending her honor?”

The apprehension he’d felt earlier snaked its way into the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t given a thought to the situation his friend presented. Surely Radcliffe had to be exaggerating. So what if his name got tossed around a bit. He would still have Shakara and that was paramount.

His reputation could handle the minor assault. Parker Architectural Design wasn’t built on social reputation, it was founded on quality. As long as the standard to which his clients were accustomed remained steadfast, his company would continue to thrive. It was the “friends” who were caught up in societal standing that he chanced losing.

“Listen,” Radcliffe piped in. “What about Donna? You usually take her to all the events. Why not take her as your date. It’s not like the girl would have to find out.”

Cade walked over to his chair and for the briefest moment he considered his friend’s words. The exclusive party his company hosted annually featured members of Rhode Island’s most influential families. A few of them were considered to be among his more

substantial clientele.

“I can’t do that,” he said quietly, sinking into his chair. He couldn’t. There was no way he’d be able to look her in the eye afterward.

“Parker...” Radcliffe warned.

“I want to marry her.” He stared straight ahead, unseeing. “No party or customer is worth jeopardizing what I’m attempting to build with her.” He glanced toward Radcliffe who stared at him in disbelief. “You can’t even begin to imagine how much she means to me.”

Radcliffe shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “I hope to God you know what you’re doing.”

Chapter Fourteen

“You want me to go with you?” Shakara asked, warmth enveloping her. He didn’t want to keep their relationship behind closed doors.

He pulled her down to lay beside him. Her head rested on his chest. “You appear shocked. Or would you prefer I attended by myself?”

She lifted her head and smiled at him. “Of course not. I just wasn’t sure if you wanted people to know about us.”

He arched his brow at her. “You thought I was going to keep our relationship a secret?”

“It crossed my mind a couple of times, but I planned on mentioning it to you.”

“You thought I was ashamed of you?” He turned, facing her with a grim line around his mouth.

“No. Not ashamed.”

Cade stroked the side of her face. His voice lowered to a smooth pitch. “Then what did you assume? You must realize how much I love you.”

“I do, Cade. But I thought maybe you were afraid to introduce me to your friends. What if they ask what I do for a living? I’ll have to answer that I’m a waitress. Won’t you be embarrassed?”

“There’s no shame in waitressing. I don’t want to hear you mention it again. You have nothing to apologize for and you don’t owe anyone an explanation.”

She nodded and remained silent, touched by his staunch reassurance.

“What about you?”

Puzzled, Shakara raised her eyes to his. He gazed at her with an unexpected degree of vulnerability to him.

“Won’t you be embarrassed when you wake up one day and realize you’re in bed with a wrinkled old man?”

She gawked at him in disbelief. What on earth was he talking about? The few strands of gray he had on his head were hardly noticeable and he looked so fit and handsome.

Shakara narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re joking right?”

He let go of her and rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling.

“I’m serious. Years from now when I’m fifty, you’ll only be entering into your thirties. That’s still very young, Shakara. I’ve been thinking about this for awhile and I’m not going to lie to you. It scares the hell out of me, the idea of you wanting someone younger.” Cade spun on his side, his features harsh. “Will you leave me if I can no longer satisfy you? If I can’t get it up as fast as I used to?”

“Stop it,” she whispered. He was putting too much thought into this ridiculous hypothetical situation. Speaking as if he was halfway to the grave.

Cade pinned her with a glare, then closed his eye and sighed. “Answer the question.”

Shakara widened her eyes. My God, it was truly eating him up. “I’m not with you because of what we do in the bedroom. I love being around you, being with you. I would never leave you because of selfish reasons. Please don’t think I would do that to you, to us. It’s impossible. You mean too much to me.”

“No?” Cade lifted a cynical brow. “Then tell me, Ms. James, what will you do when it happens?”

Shakara gazed at him, not knowing what else to say. Her words did nothing to placate him. She had to show him what she meant. Wordlessly, she left his side, her eyes locked onto his outstretched legs. Kneeling between them, Shakara kissed the hard muscles on his thigh.

“You want to know what I’ll do.” She lifted a sultry gaze to his.

“Yes,” he rasped. He lifted his head a notch to observe her between his legs.

Shakara ran her hands along his inner thigh. Dark blonde hair covered the lightly tanned skin. She skimmed her fingers higher, brushing over the heavy sacs below his shaft.

“This.” She lowered her mouth blowing lightly on his flesh. “This is what you have to look forward to.” Her tongue darted out, licking the engorged head, laving along the rim.

His loud intake of breath heightened her pleasure. Shakara held the meaty shaft between her hands and lapped at the moisture that spilled coursing rivulets down his length. “I’ll do this for hours if that’s what it takes.”

“Love you so damn much, my sweet baby girl,” he choked. She closed her mouth over his cock. He tasted delicious and

salty. She raised her head, lusting for more.

“Cade,” she moaned. Her eyelids fluttered shut and she bit her lips, hunger gnawing at her as another fresh drop of pre-cum pooled at the tip.

“Lick it up,” he rasped. His eyes filled with tenderness. “I’ll give you more.”

She nodded and swept her tongue across him, then slid her mouth over him, the slick head tapping at the back of her throat.

“You were made for this, baby girl. Your full lips stretched around my cock, so loving and ready to accept my cum.”

Her cunt tightened at his words and she suckled hungrily, pulling on the dilated opening, milking him of the slippery fluid. His hips rose inches off the bed, pumping into her mouth.

“I’m coming.”

His cock shook inside her mouth and Shakara blinked, caught off guard by thick spurt of seed shooting down her throat.

“Swallow.”

Shakara jerked her head, swallowing ravenously the creamy liquid swirling above her tongue.

Chapter Fifteen

Cade felt the faint stirrings of apprehension. Damn Radcliffe, he thought, slamming the car door harder than intended. His friend's prediction kept ringing in his ears, regardless of his efforts to ignore it. Would he spend the entire night looking at each man, wondering if they too had enjoyed the luscious weight of Shakara on their laps? How many of them had paid for a dance with her, issued money to her in return for a glimpse of her naked body?

He gritted his teeth and forced himself not to dwell on the image. On the other hand, Radcliffe could be mistaken. Perhaps no one in his social circle had ever set foot in the exotic club, apart from his friend. For a few precious moments, Cade assured himself of that.

Then again, he mused, if Radcliffe's presumption did have a trace of truth in it, how many of those men would admit to having visited the club and witnessed her. None. He'd be willing to bet money on that. Not if they valued their marriages and relationships.

Marriage. His features relaxed. He was being sincere when he'd mentioned to Radcliffe he wanted to marry Shakara. He still wanted it, above all else. The meddling doubts he had regarding tomorrow night would have to take a back seat. The idea of another woman on his arms left a sour taste in his mouth and he knew he'd made the right—the only choice.

Cade entered the luxury condominium, satisfaction soaring through his veins. Shakara loved him and no matter how often she told him those words, he would never get used to or tired of hearing them. His sweet, beautiful girl had somehow managed to forgive him for his cold treatment of her.

Cade pushed the button and stepped into the elevator, all the previous worries forgotten. His life was changed and there was no turning back. Shakara was his. Their relationship was tangible. He could touch her, taste her, and marvel in the feel of her delicate hands on his skin. The special place he'd reserved in his heart for her—whether or not she chose to accept and return his affection—was replete with contentment and love.

Shaking his head, Cade curved his lips into a smile. Had someone told him that one day he'd be tickled into submission, literally, by a slight girl, or that he'd sit at her feet painting her

toenails a ridiculous shade of blue, he would have been insulted.

Oh yes, insulted at curling up with Shakara on the sofa watching movies or observing her as she painted in silence across from his desk on those nights when he had to work an extra hour or two. Shakara was the only person he tolerated inside his home office. Had it been anyone else seeking to share his space of solitude, whether it be Julie or a previous girlfriend, his answer would have been a resounding no.

Not to say he'd ever issued an invitation of living with him to any of the women he dated. After the car crash that took the life of his parents, the responsibility of raising his ten-year-old sister had fallen to him. He had taken it seriously and had made sure to keep his personal life away from Julie. The women he dated were among Providence's elite, those he considered a good role model for his little sister.

There were quite a few who fit the bill, but none of them stirred him. None of them made him feel in the months they dated the emotions Shakara incited in him within seconds of meeting her. She was the only woman he wanted to share his bedroom and his life with. Tomorrow night would not make any difference to him. She was his. Nothing was worth risking his future with her, especially not the opinions of hypocritical socialites.

His mind at ease, Cade exited the elevator on the fifth floor, stopping in front of his sister's door. He knocked twice and a bright-faced Julie greeted him.

"Guess what?" She brimmed with excitement.

"What?" He sighed. "I don't have time for guessing games, hon." God, he hoped she wasn't going to say she met a guy and was planning on getting married. She was way too young for that. He gritted his teeth. The same age as Shakara.

"You're no fun, you know that?" Julie walked over to the coffee machine and poured two cups.

"Here." She shoved one into his hands. "So, aren't you wondering why I'm so excited?"

"Not really. You get worked up about so many things I lost count after the acting lessons."

She rolled her eyes. "My poor friend. How she must be suffering having to put up with you." Julie sighed, revealing a flair for dramatics.

“Out with it. I have to get back to the office soon. Which, coincidentally, is something I’ve been meaning to discuss with you—”

“Aha,” Julie cried, snapping her fingers. “That’s what I wanted to tell you. I’m getting a job.”

Sputtering, Cade swallowed his coffee, pushing away the mug before it splashed onto his shirt. “This is a shock to say the least. When did you come to this decision?”

“I don’t know.” She sat down and played with the edges of her cup. “I guess it finally hit me. I mean, I have my own place, well thanks to you that is. But that’s it. You have Shakara and... she’s always working. I don’t really have anything else. I spend my days shopping and hanging out. It’s starting to feel kind of silly, like I have no purpose. I can’t even make a withdrawal from the trust fund mom and dad left until I’m twenty-five. It’s not fair of me to expect you to support me for four more years. You’ve already done so much.” She looked around the condo.

His gaze followed hers, noting the spot on the wall opposite the couch where her birthday painting from Shakara hung.

She looked at him and said, “this place is awesome, Cade. I’m starting to feel guilty. I’ve been taking advantage of your generosity.”

He smiled at her with fatherly affection. “Remove such thoughts from your mind. I’ve enjoyed taking care of you and I always will. However, I won’t challenge you on this issue. You’re correct. It will be good for you. Self-reliance.” He pulled out a chair, sitting next to her. “You forgot to mention the job.”

“Duh.” She smiled, her face lighting up. “Donna Bainbridge. She offered me a position in the interior decorating company she’s starting up.”

“You’ve never taken a decorating course in your entire life. Why would she offer you a job?” He had nothing against Donna Bainbridge. They had an amicable working relationship, but her speaking with his sister was always cause for suspicion.

Julie raised her brows and spun on him. “Oh yeah. Why wouldn’t she? I’m a fast learner. You don’t think I can do it?”

“I was merely voicing a concern. I’m not a hundred percent convinced she isn’t above using you.”

“Whatever, Cade.” She rose from the chair glaring at him. “Not everything is about you and I’m not going to let you ruin this for

me. Next time something good happens, I'll keep it to myself."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He was handling this badly. Maybe she was right and this had nothing to do with him. It better not.

"I'm sorry. I'm proud of you. Julie. I'm sure Donna saw promise in you or else she wouldn't have hired you."

"You mean it?" she asked, her expression brightening.

"Definitely." Cade smiled at her, taking a furtive glance down at his watch. He needed to get back to work, but first he had to ask her for a favor.

"Shakara told me the two of you are heading to the mall."

"Yeah, I'm going to help her pick out a dress. I bet she's going to look so hot tomorrow night." She grinned and fixed her eyes on him.

Cade's face heated under his sister's stare. He'd have to ask Shakara if she'd divulged the details of their intimate life to Julie. His stomach turned at the idea. He coughed. "Anyway. I need you to find a way of persuading Shakara to buy the dress and whatever else she wants. I tried to hand her my credit card this morning. She refused it. I'm having a hard time getting through to her that it's acceptable to let me do things for her sometimes."

Julie held up her hands, halting his speech. "I got it, Cade. Shakara's been my friend for years. Trust me, I know. I'll handle this. I only ask that you promise not to have a heart attack when you see her before the party." She giggled.

"Charge it on your card." He gave her a pointed look and headed toward the door. "I'll pay the balance until you've settled into your new job."

With a sheepish smile on her face, Julie kissed him on the cheek. "World's best brother."

Cade pretended annoyance while pulling her away from him. "All right. I have to get back to work. Please don't let her know I spoke to you about this, okay?"

"Cade put you up to this, didn't he?" Shakara threw a dress over the fitting room door.

"Oh c'mon Shakara, he only wants to make you happy." Julie handed a sheer magenta strapless dress to Shakara's waiting hands.

Sighing, she pulled the satin gown over her hips. "I know he

does, but I'm still not comfortable with him spending money on me.”
“Why? He wants to.”

“I don't want Cade to think I care about his wealth, or that if he does something for me once, I'll keep expecting it. I just want to be his girlfriend, not a responsibility. If I let that happen, he'll end up resenting me.”

She opened the door, spinning around for Julie to inspect the fit. “What do you think?” She struck a pose with her chest sticking out and a hand on her hip.

“I think my brother is going to be pissed when he sees all those men staring at you.”

“Jules.” Shakara dropped her hand from her hip. “Be serious. Is this the one? I want to look good. Sexy, but not slutty. I have to make a good impression on his friends. I don't want to embarrass him.”

“You won't. And honestly, Cade isn't going to start resenting you any time soon. It's not possible.”

“Hmm.” She turned toward the full length mirror attached to the wall. “I'll think about it. It's only because I love him so much. I'm terrified I'll somehow figure out a way to mess up what we have.”

“Stop stressing about it. And please don't ever go into details with me about what you and Cade have or what you two do together.” Julie crossed her arms over her chest pretending to shiver. “We have the outfit, so now it's time for my favorite part. Shopping for shoes.”

After they paid for the dress, Shakara looked over at her friend, wondering if Julie minded how quickly she'd moved into the house. All of her belongings remained inside her small apartment except for the few pieces of clothing and toiletries she'd brought. Her lease would be up soon and she wanted to make sure Julie had no issue with her living arrangements before she terminated the agreement and officially move in with him.

“How's the new place? Is living on your own all you thought it was cracked up to be?”

“There's nothing like it. You know all about it, though. It's like I told Cade this morning, living alone is doing absolute wonders for me. I bet you were stunned to hear I was getting a job.”

Shakara laughed. It was true; she had wondered how long Julie planned on breezing her way through life.

“I thought I was going to pass out when you told me.”

Julie slapped her on the hand. “No wonder you and my brother are meant for each other. You’re both cruel.”

“We’re not. You’re the one out to get us with all this talk of working, knowing we wouldn’t be able to handle it,” Shakara joked, swinging her arms around Julie’s shoulder. “I was curious because I’ve been staying over at the house and I didn’t want there to be any hard feelings between us.”

“Hard feelings?” Julie screeched, looking at her as if she’d lost her mind. “Not likely. Cade and I both got what we wanted. I get to live in the city and Cade has you, or you have him, whatever. Let’s just say, I’m thrilled at how it all worked out. Aren’t you?”

Shakara nodded. Words were not enough to say how delighted she was with her new life. What would her mother say if she could see that she hadn’t been broken? She had taken care of herself, a complaint the woman constantly threw in her face as a child—being stuck taking care of a brat she should have aborted. Too bad for her. She hadn’t killed Shakara then and her last beating hadn’t done the job either. In fact, thanks to her, Shakara was finally happy and far away from her.

“These match. What do you think?”

Shakara shifted her head, suddenly aware of Julie’s question. She was pointing to a pair of black ankle strap pumps. The shoes looked expensive, making her hesitate to give an answer. Then again, it would complement her dress.

“This one. Definitely.” Tonight was an exception to her rule of accepting help from Cade.

“Now you’re getting the hang of it,” Julie cried. “Let’s go find your size.”

Chapter Sixteen

Cade stepped out of the car, handing his keys to the young valet rushing over to his side. Another valet held the passenger door open and Shakara exited onto the sidewalk. Cade took his time appreciating the vision of loveliness standing in front of the hotel.

Earlier this evening, he'd nearly swallowed his tongue after she stepped out of the bathroom requesting he zip up the back of her dress. She was a goddess sent down to torment and fulfill his every fantasy. Her curly ebony hair was pinned up high, while some unruly strands hung beside her ears, framing her face. He was glad she hadn't opted to straighten it for tonight. Her tiny curls were so adorable and unique to her.

Walking over to her, Cade laid a gentle hand on her arm. She gave him a nervous smile, drawing closer to him. His heart melted and he experienced a bout of shame for the apprehension he'd felt the day before. She was sweet perfection in heels.

"You have nothing to be afraid of, baby girl."

She held onto him in a death-like grip, lifting her chin. "I'm not scared."

His lips quirked at her attempt of bravery and he placed his hand around her waist. "I'll always be by your side."

She nodded, the tension radiating from her body as they entered the hall that was already buzzing with chatter. Cade glanced upward, greeted by the sight of Radcliffe taking a swig of liquor, then slamming the empty glass onto the tray of a nearby server.

"Isn't that your friend?" Shakara asked, shifting her gaze to him.

"Yes, it is. Andrew Radcliffe. He talks more than he should. Please ignore everything that comes out of his mouth."

She lifted a smooth brow, gazing at him in question. Her features went neutral the moment Radcliffe's voice rang out.

"Parker. I swore you were going to skip out on us tonight."

"You thought wrong." Cade tightened his arm around Shakara. He didn't like the way the shorter man was looking at her with unguarded interest.

"I see you brought your lovely guest from the office." Radcliffe extended his hand to Shakara. "Andrew Radcliffe and you

are Shakara, I presume. Did I pronounce it correctly?"

"You did," she answered, her tone flat. She accepted his handshake. "It's nice to meet you again."

He laughed. "Yes. But this setting is a lot different than that restaurant you work in."

"That's obvious. I wouldn't expect anything less than elegance from Cade."

She turned to him, her eyes shiny and her lips widening into a smile. His heart slammed inside chest, soaring from the way she was looking at him, in spite of Radcliffe's intrusive presence.

Radcliffe let out a low whistle. "Guess you wouldn't believe any of my outrageous stories about Parker in college." He shifted his eyes to Cade. "I see you've got yourself a devotee here."

"Haven't you ever had a girlfriend?" Shakara asked without missing a beat. "Because I think you're a bit confused."

Cade cocked his brow at Radcliffe, daring the man to rebuff Shakara.

Radcliffe, taking a hint, shook his head and said, "my apologies. You're right, there is a difference. Perhaps Cade can steer me toward an esteemed young lady. One like you."

"Don't you have anyone else to harass?"

Radcliffe grinned and spun around, his eyes fixing on another drink-filled tray. "Indeed, I do. Catch you two lovebirds later." He walked away winking to them.

Shakara crinkled her forehead and shook her head. "Wow, he is, um..."

Cade sighed. He knew what she meant. "He's not all that bad, apart from the occasional habit of putting his foot in his mouth." He grinned sheepishly. "I, too, suffered from that affliction not so long ago."

"I remember." She squeezed his hand. "I'm glad you recovered."

He laughed softly and guided her toward an elderly man who was walking away from a small circle. "It took quite awhile, but I did get cured."

"Angus," Cade called out to the seventy-year-old man, a longtime friend of his deceased father.

He adjusted his glasses and a smile broke out across his withered face.

Cade shook his hand. "How are you doing?"

The man made a low sound and waved away the question in good humor. "Enough about me. Who is this magnificent creature and where did you find her?" Angus beamed at Shakara through his bifocal lenses. "Ah, if I was five years younger."

Cade laughed out loud and pulled Shakara to him. "This is Shakara James. Shakara, Angus Donaldson, a friend of the family."

Shakara smiled, her eyes lighting up in lieu of the old man's comment. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Donaldson."

The three fell into light conversation with Angus relaying to them the latest ongoing of his grandchildren. Unwilling to show disrespect to the older man, Cade tried his best to keep up with Angus's stories, which were of no interest to him. He didn't notice the tall blonde-haired woman strutting in his direction.

"Caden," Donna drawled, kissing his jaw before he had a chance to evade her affection. "I thought for sure you wouldn't be in attendance." She drew back and peered at him. "Where's your date?" Her brown eyes gleamed, looking past Shakara. "Did you arrive by yourself?"

"No, I didn't come alone." He laid a hand on Shakara's shoulder. "Shakara, this is Donna Bainbridge, another friend of the family."

His jaw clenched and he watched the astonishment and confusion wash over the woman's face. She had no reason. They dined together once, more than a year ago. His heart had not been into it and he'd told her so. He'd admitted that it would be best to remain platonic friends and co-workers on the rare instances that she was contracted by his company for her skills as a structural engineer. He wanted nothing in the form of an intimate relationship with her.

"Are you an intern at the company?" Donna asked, recovering from her apparent shock.

Shakara smiled and shook her head. "No."

Cade studied Donna, sensing the air of disappointment wafting off the woman when Shakara refused to disperse the details.

"I didn't think so." Donna fastened her gaze on Shakara. "Why, you look as if you're barely out of high school."

Shakara stiffen beside him and laughed. "Not barely, but Cade did have the patience to wait for me."

Cade groaned inside his head, fearing a war of words between

the women. He made a mental note to remind Donna that their involvement was strictly business and friendship, though not so much the latter. He opened his mouth to diffuse the situation when suddenly the music came on. Angus, smart man that he was, held Donna's hand, insisting on a dance.

Cade saw the hesitation on her face, knowing she wouldn't deny the elderly man, a close friend of her family as well. Returning his attention to Shakara, he asked, "do you trust me to not step on your toes?"

"Is that your way of requesting a dance?" She fought back a smile.

His eyes coursed over her body, the swell of her luscious breasts rising above the satin. "Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

"What about Donna?" She fixed him with a skeptical look and it pained him that she'd given the woman a second thought.

"A friend and nothing more." His fingertips stroked the back of her hand. "I love you. Don't you ever forget it." Cade took her hand and led her on the dance floor.

"There's no chance of that. I just hope blondie knows you're not interested, because she won't like it if I have to break the news to her."

Cade chuckled and leaned closer, his lips brushing against her ear. "Save all that fight for tonight, baby girl. That woman is the furthest thing from my mind right now." He held her hand and spun her.

"Oh yeah. Now you have me curious, Mr. Parker. What's going to happen tonight? It wouldn't happen to involve me, would it?"

His hand fell to her lower back, right above her plump ass. Their feet moved in unison. "It does," he whispered, amid the soft music flowing in the background. "You, me. My mouth on your juicy little clit, drawing it between my teeth."

"I love your tongue." Shakara sighed and locked her arms around his neck, her hips swaying to the measure of the live instruments.

He dipped his head and kissed her cheek, ignoring the curious eyes fastened on them. "I love your cunt," he rasped. He did. It was as if God himself had created her specifically for him, a tailor-made

glove, warm and snug.

The music ended and he inched away from her, once again baffled by the notion that she belonged to him. Shakara was his and, God help him, she would remain as such for the rest of their lives. He looked around taking note of the lack of inquiring looks or stares directed their way. Radcliffe prediction gained no momentum. He and Shakara had faded into the background, becoming just another couple in the decorated hall.

“Would you like something to drink?”

She nodded. “Nothing too strong.” He smiled at her and made his way to the bar across the room.

Chapter Seventeen

Shakara didn't want to stand in the middle of the hall waiting on him. She strode over to a nearby wall, smiling to herself. The night was going better than she expected. Cade's friends were welcoming, all except for Donna. As for Radcliffe, she didn't know what to make of the man, so she reserved her judgment for later.

Shakara glanced across the hall, a frown pulling at the corner of her mouth. Donna was making her way over to the bar, smoothing back her long hair with each stride. God, she hated the woman.

"We meet again, Shakara."

Shakara rolled her eyes, immediately recognizing the voice coming up beside her. *Be nice*, she reminded herself. *He's a friend of Cade's.*

"If you're looking for Cade, he's over by the bar."

"I know. Why else do you think I'm over here?" Radcliffe gazed casually at her.

Shakara blinked, taken aback by the man's boldness. Was this the onslaught of a verbal attack or did he wish to indulge in a "friendly" conversation. She had no idea.

"What do you want?"

He held up his hands. "Calm down. We have a mutual interest here. I only want to talk."

She lifted an eyebrow and folded her arms. *Yeah right.* "We have nothing to talk about. I hardly even know you."

"Funny," he remarked, his calmness rattling her. "Because I know all about you. Waitress, stripper—"

Shakara opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off, holding up a hand again—which was beginning to irritate her.

"No, I'm not accusing you of anything. I can see that you have feelings for Parker. You love him, he loves you. I get it. I know you're wondering if he told me about you being a stripper. He didn't. I've been to the club. I've seen you."

Her breathing labored and bile rose to the forefront of her throat. She wanted to yell at him, demanding to know where this was heading, instead she quietly asked, "why are you telling me this?"

Radcliffe ran a finger along his jaw and shifted his gaze toward the bar. "Listen, Shakara. It's clear you care about my friend. I

do too. You don't need me to sugarcoat anything for you and I wouldn't. I'm not the only man in here who recognizes you. They might not say anything, but I know for a fact a couple of them have seen you naked. Not trying to be crude. Just saying."

"What the fuck is your point." she snapped, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"I don't want Parker to lose his company. His grandfather started it. Did he tell you that? He loves you, but this is his life. He worked his ass off after his father's death to make the company the success it is. Shit, myself included. We've all worked the extra hours to get where we are."

"What does that have to do with me? I'm not following how I factor into all of this. What's the big deal if they've seen me dancing? I don't care and it's not like I kept it a secret from Cade. He knows and it doesn't bother him."

"How do you think it's going to reflect on him when word gets out about you? Parker has a lot of class. His clients respect him. They hold him to the same high standards they did his father and grandfather. You don't think they're going to wonder what's gotten into him? Becoming involved with a stripper whose half his age. I don't care if I offend you. I'm speaking the truth. If this company goes down he'll never be the same and you'll be to blame."

"You're exaggerating. It's not like he's the President of the United States. What does his private life have to do with his business? I don't believe you." She wanted to cry, to punch Radcliffe in his long face for bringing this up and making her feel guilty.

"Parker and I, we've discussed this..."

Her eyes widened and her heart stilled. "I'm sure he didn't agree with you either."

"He wasn't sure if he should bring you."

"You're lying." She folded her arms. "Who else would he take besides me?"

Radcliffe turned his head and Shakara mimicked his action. Cade stood in conversation with Donna, who was clearly flirting with him. He was going to take her?

"They're just friends," Radcliffe added. "It's you he loves. That's not the question."

She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath, aware of Radcliffe's voiceless demand. "You want to know if I'll listen to your

inane ranting and break up with Cade. Is that about right?"

Radcliffe clicked his tongue and cast a quick look toward the bar. Her gaze followed his, seeing that Cade was approaching them, a drink in each hand.

"That's the idea." Radcliffe winked at her, lengthening his stride to walk away before Cade reached the wall.

Shakara sucked in a breath, mustering up her brightest smile. Cade stepped in front of her, giving her a questioning look.

"What did he want?" He turned to glance back at Radcliffe, who was now chattering lively amid a group of women, his arm around the waist of a slender brunette.

She waved her hand and rolled her eyes. "I had no idea what he was saying. He talks too much and makes no sense at all." She forced a small laugh, taking the glass he offered.

Cade grinned and sipped his drink. "Believe me, I know. We were roommates during our freshman year at university. The next year I almost barred him from my private room."

"You guys are close then?" she asked, lifting her eyes to his. She needed to hear him say they weren't, that Radcliffe knew absolutely nothing about him. The man was only spouting nonsense because he didn't like her. So what if he sounded sincere, pretending he had Cade's best interest at heart?

"We are. We used to play together as boys, went to the same schools, and later on we entered the architectural program together. It was pure coincidence that we both wanted to be architects. After we graduated, my father offered him a position. He's good at what he does, but his personal life can be a wreck sometimes. Overall, I'd say he was dependable in the grand scheme of things."

Her heart plummeted. Cade's view of the man crumbled her doubts of his intentions and motive.

For the rest of the evening her frozen smile remained in place. She greeted his friends and acquaintances, masking her anxiety. Radcliffe hadn't specified, but she experienced a tinge of embarrassment with each new person she encountered. The lanky redhead they'd just spoken with—had he seen her without her clothes? Or was it the short, fifty-something hotelier? Was Cade wondering the same thing? It never bothered her before, but this was different. These were people Cade associated with, did business with.

Shakara looked over at Radcliffe who had his head tilted back

in laughter. How easy it was for him to tell her these things, yet continue with his flirting and smiles. Asshole. Her fist tightened and she gazed over at Cade, deep in conversation with Angus Donaldson again.

Cade meant everything to her. Radcliffe was wrong. Not just wrong. He was a miserable bastard and a hypocrite, who visited exotic clubs then dared to look down on her for providing the entertainment he paid for. Her relationship with Cade was none of his damn business and furthermore she would not affect his company.

By the time they reached home, it was near midnight. Her mood was considerably lighter. She followed Cade into the bedroom, closing the door behind them. She rose on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his.

“I’ve been looking forward to this all evening,” she whispered. Her bottom lips brushed over the prickly hairs on his jaw.

“You’re not the only one.”

His fingers tugged at the back of her dress, peeling it down until it fell in a puddle of satin at her feet. She stepped out of it and kicked off her shoes. His hands guided her backward to the bed, easing her onto the mattress.

“I’m going to spread your legs so I can look at you while I undress.” He parted her knees.

Shakara lay there, watching him step away from her, his eyes fastened on her body. Cade’s fingers loosened the knot in his tie. “I believe I was promised a taste of your lovely cunt.” He climbed on the bed, bringing her knees onto his shoulder.

Her eyes fluttered closed and her lips parted on a sigh. He slid his hand underneath and cupped her ass, lifting her to his face.

“Cade,” she moaned, her head thrashing from side to side. His tongue sought out the drenched folds, lapping at the tingling flesh. He fixed his eyes on her and tapped his middle finger to her pulsing clitoris. Shakara squirmed, tiny cries escaping her throat.

“Such a deliciously ripe clit you have. It’s begging for my mouth. You want me to suck it don’t you, baby girl?”

She bit her lips and made a strangled sound. He issued her a stern, pointed look, and flicked the finger again, harder. Oh God, he was spanking her clitoris.

“Do you or do you not want my attention on your sweet little

bud?”

Jesus, not that voice. Her cunt throbbed and wetness flowed onto his fingers. “Yes. Mr. Parker. I want you to suck my clit. I need it so badly. Please.”

“Good girl. Next time you’ll give me an answer much sooner.” He lowered his mouth over the engorged bud.

Shakara dug her hands into the sheets, hanging on for support. He drew her between his teeth, sucking until a pained expression swept across her face and her legs threatened to buckle. Without warning, his head lifted, causing her to cry out in protest.

Hush,” Cade soothed, climbing on top of her. He gripped his cock, rubbing it between her sensitive labia. “I used to dream about this. How wet and aroused you would be for me. Needing. The way you are right now. It pleases me beyond words.”

Shakara moaned, and his eyes darkened, looking between her legs. Her hips rose and her mouth opened as the heavy tip slapped against her clitoris.

“Oh, baby girl, I can see how badly you crave this.” He gazed at her tenderly, in agonizing opposite of the roughness to his strokes. Holding her arms above her head with one arm, Cade used the other to position himself between her thighs, his thick cock spanking her exposed cunt.

“Oh, it feels amazing.” She writhed underneath him, reveling in the decadent form of pleasure punishment. Her entire body shook and she gasped, a feeling of utter completeness washing over her as he thrust into her, seating himself to the hilt.

Cade withdrew from her, then reached forward, pinning her shoulders to the bed. “What do you need, sweet?”

“You. I need you, Cade. All the way inside me until I can’t tell where you end and I begin.”

His face hardened and he pushed inside her cunt, thrusting harder and deeper, hitting the entrance to her cervix. She arched her back, rising to meet his long, powerful strokes. This was her man, the only man she would ever love. Her heart swelled and she yearned for his orgasm, the moment he would fill her with his seed.

“Shakara,” he groaned. “My sweet, sweet girl. Always so fucking eager for my cock. You can’t know how much that means to me—owning this sexy little cunt.

“Oh my God,” she screamed, clutching his broad shoulders.

Cade held her close to him and grunted his release. Within seconds he leaned forward closing his mouth over a nipple. Shakara closed her eyes, stroking his thick head of hair.

“This feels wonderful.” Her lips relaxed into a blissful smile. “I love knowing there’s a part of you inside me.”

He lifted his head and grinned, his eyes sparkling. “You can’t begin to understand how much I love you, especially when you say such things to me.”

“I can. It’s the same way I love you.” *The way I’m right where I belong.*

Chapter Eighteen

Cade touched the velvet-lined box, popping it open for the fifth time since he collected it from the jeweler. The emerald encrusted diamond shone back at him and he tilted his head toward the glass door, looking out at the indoor pool. Wearing an orange bikini, Shakara floated on her back, her lips moving in laughter at something his sister must have related to her.

He fingered the white gold band and felt fourteen all over again, only this time it wasn't as simple as asking his freshman crush out on a date. He was going to ask Shakara, his baby girl, to spend the rest of her life with him. He closed the box, carefully placing it behind a row of books on the carved antique shelf.

He'd always known it would come to this, but it was his upcoming trip abroad that fueled his desire to see his ring on her finger. Traveling overseas never bothered him before; he'd done it for years, overseeing the more crucial projects. It was different now that he had Shakara. Cade no longer looked forward to spending his nights alone in a foreign hotel. If he had to be away, he needed to make sure Shakara would always be here awaiting his return.

She mentioned having a day off tomorrow which prompted him to amend his schedule. He was going to take his own day off to be with her, keeping his fingers crossed the entire day. He hoped his after dinner proposal to her would end with a resounding yes, that she wanted to be his wife.

Cade glanced out the door again and Shakara turned in the same moment catching his gaze. She waved at him, the top of her breasts visible above the water. He wanted to join her in the pool but it was impossible. Julie was swimming in the deep end, completing laps. Plus, he was waiting on a business call from Radcliffe.

He pushed the door open and stepped onto the stucco pavement. Fascinated, Cade watched Shakara climb out of the pool, the bikini clinging to her skin. Droplets of water fell from her hair, trickling over her breast and down to her flat stomach.

Swallowing hard, he snatched up a yellow towel slung over the edge of a chair. He draped it across her shoulder.

“Did you finish up in there?”

“Almost. I'll do the rest of the paperwork after you leave.”

Cade patted the towel to her damp skin and spun her around to face him, her wet hair sticking to her head.

“Will you miss me when I depart on Tuesday?”

She flattened her hands to his chest and lowered her voice. “I already miss you and you haven’t even left. I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“Trust me, baby girl, I hate leaving you, but I’m working on changing that. Next time I’ll delegate the responsibility to Radcliffe.”

“You’d trust him with such an important task, closing a deal for you?”

He chuckled at her shocked expression. “He’s not a vice president because of our friendship. I know he didn’t make such a good impression on you, but he’s extremely qualified.”

She shrugged and took the towel out of his grasp. “He’s your friend. It doesn’t matter what I think of him.”

He narrowed his eyes, wondering if the man had said something troubling to her. “It matters greatly. You don’t like him do you?”

Shakara rolled her eyes, scrubbing the towel through her hair. “I never said that.” She threw the damp cloth to the ground and kissed him. “I’m going to work soon and the last thing I want is to think about anyone else except you.”

“Good answer,” he murmured against her lips.

“That’s really nasty,” Julie complained, strolling past them. “Find a room, you guys, or better yet, wait until I’m not around.”

“Sorry, Jules, forgot you were still here.” Smiling apologetically, Shakara pulled out of his touch. Her gaze shifted to his sister, lounging on a chair at the far end of the deck.

“It’s fine. I’m expecting a phone call any minute.”

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek and sank down beside Julie, the two lapsing into conversation.

“So, when’s my brother officially going to make you my sister?”

Laughing, Shakara answered. “I don’t know, Jules, you’d have to ask him that.” She moved to her back and stared up at the sky. “Then again, maybe you should keep it to yourself. I don’t think Cade would appreciate being ambushed about marriage.”

“Why not? He’s old enough. You know, studies show the

older a man gets the lower his, um, quality becomes. So if you guys ever want to have children and all that good stuff he'd better start thinking about putting a ring on your finger."

Shakara shook her head in amusement. "You're sick, and I'm offended on behalf of my man."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Julie lifted her thin brows and pulled her sunglasses over her eyes.

"Shouldn't you be studying up on how to be a decorator instead of worrying about your brother's...stuff?"

"Do you think Cade would be pissed if I barfed on the ground?" Julie opened her mouth pretending to vomit.

Shakara stood up and turned in the direction of the door. "Not as long as you clean it up. I'll be back in a minute. I'm going to get us some drinks."

She entered the living room, her heart secretly soaring at the thought of her and Cade married. Glancing down, she laid her palm to her stomach, imagining Cade's child growing inside her. Her cunt tightened with the need. Oh, how she would gladly throw out her pills and take him inside her.

Shakara flushed and shook her head. What the hell was she thinking? A freaking baby? No kid in their right mind would want her for a mother. More important, the notion of Cade marrying her was ridiculous in and of itself. Marriage was so definite, final. She had too much baggage for him to make such a commitment.

Sighing, she entered the kitchen, taking a step back at the harsh sound of Cade's voice lashing into the phone.

"Shakara has nothing to do with this."

Her eyes widened upon hearing her name. Oh my God. Was this the call he'd been waiting on from Radcliffe?

"If he backs out that means we lose the contract from Exeter Corp too."

She watched as he ran a hand through his hair, pacing from the granite island to the sink and back.

Her stomach sank as she listened closer, his final words slamming into her heart.

"What are you doing?"

Whirling, Shakara clutched her heart, glaring at her friend.

"Don't sneak up on me like that."

Julie shrank back, issuing her a peculiar look. "Calm down. I

was just wondering what was taking you so long.”

“Sorry, Jules.” She needed to get some space. “Do you mind getting the drink yourself? I completely forgot that I have to show up at work an hour early today.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Julie frowned.

Forcing a smile to her lips, she ran up the stairs, realizing she hadn’t given her friend an answer.

Unseeing, Shakara grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt out of the closet, berating herself a thousand times over.

“Stupid idiot,” she muttered, shrugging into her clothes. Not just stupid, selfish. Deep inside, she’d acknowledged that Radcliffe spoke the truth. Cade had to have been aware of it too, which meant the bastard wasn’t lying when he mentioned Cade considered bringing Donna to the party.

She snatched her handbag off the dresser and headed down the stairs. She didn’t want to see him on the way out, terrified he’d read her thoughts.

Cade stood at the bottom of the staircase, his eyes troubled.

“Julie says you’re leaving.”

“Yes. I promised one of the other waitresses that I’d fill in an hour for her. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know. It slipped my mind.”

Shakara shuffled her feet, guilt gnawing at her soul. Her first conscious lie to the man she loved. Straightening, she brushed a kiss to his lips. “I’ll see you tonight.” She hurried away from him toward the entrance to the garage.

“Shakara.”

She glanced backward and the sight of him leaning against the wall watching her made her breath catch in her throat.

“Yeah.”

“I love you, baby girl.”

She clutched the frame of her Toyota for support. “I love you too.”

The moment he retreated into the house, Shakara staggered into the seat of her car, slumping her head to the steering wheel. Come tomorrow, he’d regret ever uttering those words to her. Cade’s company, his legacy, would not fall into the gutters, not by the likes of her.

Chapter Nineteen

“Feeling better?” Cade tugged a strand of hair behind Shakara’s ear.

“Yeah,” she answered quietly. “The ibuprofen helped a lot.”

“Glad to hear it, because I have big plans for us today.” He dropped a handful of blueberries, her favorite, into the smooth batter. He planned on dedicating the entire day to her, pleasing her, charming her, before popping the question.

Her eyes shifted to the stove. “You didn’t have to make breakfast, especially not pancakes, which you don’t even like.”

“Baby girl, I know I don’t have to do it. I like taking care of you.”

Shakara sighed and leaned against the counter, her eyes geared toward the living room. Arms folded she turned to him. “I don’t need you to take care of me. You’re not my father, Cade.”

His brows went up, taken aback by her attack. *Was he missing something? It was pancakes, for God’s sake.*

“I get it. You’re a big girl and you have your pride. I’m not trying to be your father. That’s the last thing I’d want to be accused of.” He pushed the spatula under the two pancakes, flipping them from the skillet to a dish.

“Can you please turn that off? I need to talk to you.”

He looked at her in puzzlement, stunned by the caustic tone of her voice and the shadows on her face. Her large brown eyes appeared lackluster, missing their usual sparkle. The lids were puffed out, telling him she hadn’t slept well. Grimacing, the thought struck him that something might have happened to her at the restaurant last night to explain her out-of-the-ordinary headache.

He turned the knob on the gas oven and the flames vanished. “First, I need you to tell me if someone hurt you last night?”

“I’m fine. Work has nothing to do with this. I want to talk about us.”

His heart stopped and the blood in his veins froze. “What about us do you feel the need to discuss?” he asked with maximum composure.

She closed her eyes, opening them on a harsh breath. “I thought this was what I wanted but it’s not. You’ve been great to me,

more than I deserve to be truthful, and I know it's not fair to you. I—”

His patience snapped, anger and betrayal bubbling to the surface.

“Say it,” he demanded, slapping his hand on the granite counter top. “Whatever it is you’ve been meaning to tell me since last night. I assume this is the source of your mysterious headache.”

She raised her chin a notch, looking him square in the face. “I didn’t want to tell you like this. I…” She paused and shook her head. “It’s over.”

Cade stood with his feet planted to the ground, unable to move. His chest tightened with pain and his heart rose to the front of his throat. She was leaving him. His baby girl had decided she no longer loved him.

“Why?”

Her eyes widened and a single tear made its way past her lashes. That angered him beyond reasoning. She had no reason to cry. He wasn’t the one terminating the relationship. It was all on her.

“I asked you a question. Why now? I’m leaving to go abroad in two days and you choose to do this now.”

“Oh God, Cade I—”

“You didn’t remember? I should be thankful, I suppose. At least I wouldn’t have returned home expecting to see you only to encounter an empty house.”

“I’d never do that.”

His lips thinned into a hard line and he felt a hand twist itself around his heart. She was a liar. She had used those same deceptive words, assuring him she would never leave him in old age. He needed her out. Away from his house and out of his life. Another minute looking at her and he’d shame himself, begging her to change her mind.

“Get out,” he grated. Her reasons were no longer a source of relevance to him. “I don’t want to see a single item of yours inside this house.”

She pressed her lips together and another tear fell from her eye. He hated her for crying. Worse, he despised himself for wanting to comfort her.

“I don’t want you to hate me,” she whispered.

Cade hardened his jaw, pulling her to him. “Tell me you made a mistake, you didn’t mean it. If you say it, we’ll move on and forget

this.”

She shook her head slowly, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you. I really didn’t.”

“If you go, I don’t ever want to see you here again. You have so much goddamn pride let’s see how far it takes you in life. I swear to you, Shakara, if you walk out of here and I see you on the streets, I won’t hesitate to turn the other way.”

Her shoulders stiffened and she swiped at her eyes. “I’ve never asked you for anything and I never will.”

“No, you haven’t, but now I’m asking you to get your things and get the hell out of my house.”

“I heard you the first time,” Shakara said, striding past him.

His gaze fell to the cold pancakes. Cade curled his lips into a sneer, hurling the dish into the sink, the enamel shattering.

Lowering his head, he laid it on the counter top. His chest ached with each breath he took and tears burned at the back of his eyes. Emptiness and longing assailed him. He loved her more than life itself, and she’d thrown it back in his face.

Cade lifted his head and made his way to the bookshelf across the living room. What a fool he was, imagining that later tonight they would cuddle up in bed, with the engagement ring fastened around her slender finger. At least he wouldn’t have to suffer the humiliation of being dumped while proposing.

He pushed a dusty book out of the way and grabbed the ring box, pocketing it. Useless. Shakara’s eyes would never glimpse the inside of the box he so desperately wanted to hand her. Not her or any other woman. Although the cost of the ring set him back a couple thousand dollars, it was not enough to leave a dent in his bank account. That dissolved all rationale for selling it.

Sighing, he shoved it deeper into his pocket, forcing it out of his mind. A soft thud caught his attention and he turned his head to the side.

Shakara was climbing down the winding staircase, struggling with a dull suitcase that banged against the hardwood with each step she took.

Cade gritted his teeth, refusing to take notice of how vulnerable she looked with the worn suitcase in her small hands. He planted his feet on the ground and watched her go to the door.

“One day you’re going to understand it’s for the best. Our

relationship wouldn't have survived anyway.”

He scowled and closed the distance between them in a vengeful stride. Grasping the handle, he wrenched it open, ushering her out. “I realize it already. You're a mistake I won't repeat, Shakara.”

He slammed the door, unable to bear the hurt in her expression. What did she expect from him? Laughter and joy that his greatest fear came to fruition. He had no right falling in love with her yet it happened and for the briefest time life was great. Better than great. Exquisite, perfection, bliss. She was his sweet baby girl and the only woman to rip his heart to shreds.

Chapter Twenty

Shakara stroked her fingers over Cade's cheek. Her heart twisted inside her chest. He appeared stern and unbending, the complete opposite of the man she loved. The man who treated her with utmost gentleness and care, as if she were his queen. It pained her that all he had to show for it were callous words and a missing photograph.

She meticulously laid the stolen photo in her bedside table drawer. She'd look at it again later today, returning her most treasured possession to its rightful place on top of the chipped wooden table. The first and last thing she saw each day.

Julie was coming over and she didn't want to rouse her suspicion by parading Cade's picture in her bedroom. It surprised her that Julie wished to continue their friendship. Silently, she said a 'thank you' to Cade for hiding the details of their breakup. Someday she would let him know the truth, but first he needed to move on and let go of his pain.

Shakara sighed, hating the idea of him moving on, lumping her into his past. She didn't want to see his arms around another woman. A nameless, faceless woman wearing his ring while pregnant with his child. It should be her.

She shook her head and her lashes fluttered with wetness. This had to stop, the on and off crying for the past five days.

A sharp knock from outside urged her to swipe the back of her hand across her eyes.

Drawing in a deep breath, she opened the door. Julie stood in the dim hallway, a solemn look on her oval face.

"What the hell is going on between you and my brother?" she asked, sitting on the couch. "I called and asked to speak with you and out of the blue he snaps that you're no longer his concern. Just like that. He wouldn't say anything more. And you, I tried calling you like fifty times and you wouldn't pick up. Hello, this is me. Your best friend. I expected my brother to be tight-lipped, but not you."

Shakara fastened her gaze to a blank spot on the wall. "The relationship wasn't working, Jules. I care about him but I don't think we're meant to be more than friends."

Julie's eyes widened. "Friends? You really think Cade wants

friendship? Not after this. He loves you and it doesn't make sense to me that all of a sudden you decide it's not worth it. I'm not buying it."

"Why? What's so hard to believe? I thought I was in love with him. I was wrong. Cade and I are a world apart."

"Is that so?"

She lifted her eyebrows at the sarcasm and censure in Julie's voice. "Yes. It is."

"I hope to God, you're not going to mention your race because we both know that has nothing to do with this. Cade couldn't care less and neither should you."

Shakara narrowed her eyes and stood up, her hands resting on her hips. "I never said it was about race. I don't even know why you're asking all these questions. It's over and it's private."

"It's not private. He's my brother and I love him to death. From what you just said it sounds like you were the one who broke up with him."

Damn. She didn't want to get into it with Julie. Not like this. "Jules, seriously, it's none of your business. The fact that you're his sister doesn't carry any weight. Not in this situation."

Julie gasped. "I didn't come over here with the intention of defending Cade, but listening to you, seeing you. It's like you don't even care that he's hurting." Julie stared at her and laughed bitterly. "Friends or not, Shakara, we both know you could do a hell of a lot worse than my brother. You were lucky he wanted to take you out of this dump."

Shakara stiffened, convincing herself that those words had not just left the mouth of her best friend. "What did you say?"

Julie cocked her brow and folded her arms. "You heard me. I'll be happy to let Cade know that he was wasting his time on you. He deserves a lot better than the person standing in front of me. I didn't think you would break his heart."

"Jesus Christ, you make me sound like a heartless bitch. I never lied about my feelings for him and as for breaking his heart; we both know Cade won't have a hard time finding someone new."

Julie smirked and Shakara wanted to slap the grin off her face. "Of course he won't. Luckily he has Donna, my wonderful boss, to help him pick up the pieces."

Fiery dots of red flared before Shakara's eyes. "Cade has no interest in her," she countered, unable to rein in her jealousy.

“She’s closer to him than you are at this point. Guess who he took with him to Singapore? Yep, that’s right. Donna’s with him. So you see you might have done him a favor anyway.”

Shakara’s heart hammered wildly and it felt hard to breathe. Not once had he mentioned that Donna would be accompanying him. Why didn’t he tell her? She touched her throat. It felt tight as if the air was being sucked out of her. Cade and another woman. How could he move on so quickly? He loved her. Didn’t that count for anything?

She blinked back a teardrop and looked up to see Julie staring at her, mild concern on her features.

“You should go now, Jules.” She picked Julie’s handbag up off the coffee table and handed it to her.

“Yeah. I think its best.” Julie headed to the doorway and paused. “Maybe I’ll stop by and we can talk or something another time.”

Shaking her head, Shakara lifted her shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know. I’m going to be busy, plus I probably won’t be here much longer. My lease is about to end and I have to find a new place. I’ll be occupied with sorting it out.”

Julie nodded, a hint of relief flickering across her face at Shakara’s babbled out excuses.

And just like that, Shakara watched as her last connection to Cade made a hurried exit away from her apartment and, possibly, her life.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shakara plucked a strand of hair from her lips, tucking it behind her ear. The bristling autumn wind whipped through the air and she drew her shoulders together.

The walk from the bus stop to the lavish two-story colonial house took longer than she had expected. Her car was low on gas and she wanted to save the remaining fuel for tonight. Pursing her lips, she dreading the hours to come.

Shakara reached the house, stopping in the front yard. She wondered if Cade knew the restaurant had closed. Ronny, asshole that he was, waited until the last week to tell her and the other girl that he no longer owned the place. A couple from Massachusetts held the ownership and Ronny didn't hesitate to mince his words, letting them know their services would not be welcome at the future home of the family-friendly restaurant and arcade.

If it wasn't for her daily task of job hunting and filling out applications she would have broken down sooner. Much sooner than today. Over a month had passed since she'd last seen and spoken to Cade. Biting her lips, Shakara pulled her jacket toward her center, crossing her fingers in hopes that he would hear her out.

Another hour without him and she was likely to go insane. The emptiness inside her heart was becoming harder to deal with each day. It also shamed her to admit her decision to seek him out today of all days was not without motive. She needed a place to sleep and, pride be damned, she needed his help.

She needed him. Shakara pressed a shaky finger to the doorbell, regretting the action a second too late. What was she doing? He'd warned her that he would look the other way. There was also his company to think about. Oh God, she was being selfish.

Panicking, she spun in the direction of the street. This was by far her dumbest idea yet.

Almost immediately, the door opened, stopping her furtive lunge for escape.

"Cade." Her heart stopped and her mouth felt dry.

His eyes darkened. "What are you doing here?"

She flinched. Her mouth opened and closed. She didn't know what to say. His impatient look wasn't helping either.

“I wanted to see you.” *I missed. I love you. I’m sorry.*

His fingers curled around the door frame. She stepped back, expecting him to slam it in her face.

“I can’t imagine for what reason. You made it plain how you felt and so did I. We’re nothing to each other. There’s no need for you to see me.”

She swallowed hard. “I know what I said, but I wanted to explain it to you. And I remember you told me once that I could come to you if I needed help.”

“If you’ll recall, I said those words when I had feelings for you, cared about you.” He ran a hand through his hair and shook his beautiful head. “Our situation isn’t the same anymore, Shakara. Whatever it is, I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“I get it,” she whispered. Tears welled in her eyes, washing away her visions of him calling her his baby girl and lifting her up in his arms. She gave a slight nod. “I suppose I deserve that. It’s not like what I had to say was important.”

“If we’re through here, I’d like to return inside.” He avoided her gaze.

Her stomach knotted at his impatience to leave her. She wanted to ask him if Donna awaited him in his bedroom. She bit her tongue and, above all else, kept silent, resisting the urge to blurt out the truth.

He was over her, unaffected by their break up. Her heartache tripled. She knew she had to find a way to be happy for him. He wouldn’t care one way or the other about her reasoning. If she spoke up, the only thing she’d accomplish would be to make a fool of herself for the second time this evening.

Shakara went to him ignoring the cautious reproach in his eyes and kissed his rigid jaw line. She felt his muscles relax beneath her lips and she pulled away, satisfied to have given him a real goodbye.

“I’ll see you around.” Her fingers curled into a tiny wave as she retreated toward the pavement. The bitter wind that nipped at her neck went unnoticed. Shakara felt numb. Maybe it was for the best. The emptiness would become her ally.

Cade parted the drapes on the window in his office, glancing out. The moonlight shone on the oak lined street. It pained him to

know that less than two hours before, Shakara had walked among them, strolling out of his life for the second time.

“Fuck.”

He pushed away from the window and sank into his chair, his shoulders slumped. She needed help and he'd sent her away. What else could he have done?

He buried his face in his hands. The wounds were too raw. Shakara couldn't expect to trample on his heart in one moment and ask for his assistance in the next. Damn, he didn't even know what form of help she wanted.

His shoulders shook as he recalled the tears that pooled at the edges of her eyelids. She looked thinner. Oh God. What if she hadn't been eating well?

Cade lifted his head and rubbed his temples. He should have tried harder to contact her. The one and only time he'd sought her out, with the excuse of returning her canvas, she'd been absent from her apartment. He'd taken it as a sign, deciding to cut his losses and focus on purging her from his mind. No luck there.

He still loved her. Her visit today made him yearn for her all the more. She wanted him too. Her eyes reflected the heartbreak he felt and that confused the hell out of him. How do you look at someone with love pouring out of your eyes and rip their hearts to pieces? It made no sense.

Cade picked up his cell phone, scrolling through the list of names until he came to Julie's.

He punched the button and breathed a sigh of relief the moment she answered.

“Hey, big bro.”

Cade didn't want to waste any time. “I'm calling about Shakara. Do you know what's going on with her? I'm concerned that she might be having problems?”

A long pause stretched between them. “I haven't spoken to her in a quite awhile, to be honest.”

“How long?”

“Not since you were in Singapore. We sort of got into an argument. I haven't seen or heard from her. I feel awful about it.”

His fingers tightened on the phone. “You're telling me that she's been alone all this time. My God, Julie, I assumed you were keeping in touch with her. She doesn't deserve to be without a friend,

regardless of what happened between us.”

“Well, it wasn’t right how she broke up with you. I had to defend you. I refused sit and let her act as if your feelings don’t count. I had to let her know how disappointed I was. She hurt you, Cade, and I can’t forgive her for that.”

“What did you say to her?” Cade narrowed his eyes with worry.

“I told her that you were with Donna and that you were better off without her.”

“She’s your best friend. Why the hell would you say that to her?” He shook his head in anguish. “You weren’t doing me any favors. Now, I have to consider that she more than likely thinks I lied to her about my feelings for Donna. What if she believes that I was cheating on her during our relationship?”

“You’re loyal. She knows you wouldn’t do that to her. That’s not the real issue. Shakara has more on her plate to worry about than if you cheated on her. I drove by the restaurant she works at. Actually, I should say worked at, because there was a big sign that read ‘closed’ on the window. I hope she found a new job.”

Cade got up and paced across his office. Shit. She was having a difficult time. He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll talk to you later. I’m going over to her apartment. I can’t believe I let her go without allowing her to explain.”

“She won’t be there. Her lease ran out. The last time we spoke she mentioned that she needed to find a new apartment. I have no idea where her new place is. I’m sorry, Cade. I should have been a better friend.” Julie sniffled.

His heart sank and he felt ill. Less than two hours ago she’d stood on his doorsteps within his reach and now he hadn’t the faintest idea where to begin searching for her. He deserved to be shot.

“Julie,” he clipped, reverting to his business voice. “I need you to think hard for me. Where do you think she could be? Did she mention another job to you, maybe in a passing statement that you forgot.” Her silence cut into him, persuading him to bare his heart to his little sister.

“I have to find her. She came to me today asking for my help. I wouldn’t listen to her. I sent her away, Julie. Do you understand? I love her and I don’t care that she broke my heart. I’ll never stop loving her. So please, sweetheart, can’t you think of any other place

Shakara could be.”

A loud gasp ricocheted in his ear as he heard Julie’s frantic whisper.

“Oh my God, Cade. I think I know where she might be. Think about it. Where would she go if she was having a hard time finding another job?”

Cade jammed his fist into the wall. Shit. He knew exactly what Julie meant. No wonder she came to him. Shakara had promised herself she wouldn’t go back to stripping.

“Which one is it?”

“Falcon. Falcon something, I can’t remember. I only remember that first part because I thought the name was cool.”

He rolled his eyes in frustration. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Cade ended the call and reached for the computer mouse, searching the internet for the club’s location. Within minutes of finding the information, he grabbed his keys and jumped into his car. For the first time, he was praying he’d find Shakara inside the strip club, his sole clue to her whereabouts.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Shakara gazed at her reflection, her skin layered to perfection with too much makeup. She dabbed a bit of gloss on her lips.

“Shakara girl, we missed you.” A petite blonde called out, sticking two flower-shaped pasties on her nipples.

Can’t say the same, Shakara thought. A sharp smack echoed on her ass and Shakara jumped, relaxing her stance at the sight of her attacker walking completely nude in the dressing room.

“Lost some of that thickness too.”

Shakara smiled. “Yeah, and I keep telling you I don’t swing that way, Pepper.”

The light-skinned woman laughed and swung her arms around Shakara. “Aw, you know I’m just messing with you. The men loved that big booty of yours. You better eat up girl or you’re gonna lose out on your customers.”

Shakara forced a grin. “I’m more focused on not breaking my ass if I fall off that pole tonight. Haven’t used one in awhile.”

“You’re a pro. You’ll get the hang of it in no time,” the blonde chimed in. “Keep those titties bouncing and you’ll be alright. Isn’t that right, Pepper?”

Shakara groaned in silence at the two snickering women. She liked them both. Pepper was a single mother to an adorable little girl. The woman was also bisexual and made it a point to flirt with her whenever possible.

Lara, the blonde, was an aspiring actress, saving up to move to Los Angeles. She began working at the club a few weeks before Shakara quit to take the waitressing position.

Anger simmered in her at the reminder of the restaurant and the underhanded way Ronny screwed her and the other waitresses out of their last paycheck. If it wasn’t for him, she might have been able to put a deposit down on an apartment instead of having to sleep in her car tonight. Asshole.

The music stopped and her palms misted with sweat. What she wouldn’t give for some liquid courage, but in the totally nude club alcohol was prohibited.

This was her first dance of the night, enabling her to wear the sheer mini bra, which covered her nipples, along with G-string

underwear. Later tonight she'd have to take it all off and work the stripper pole.

Her legs trembled at the start of the music. *You've done it before. Pretend you're dancing for him. It's only you and him. No one else in the place.* She let out a breath, willing her mind to see only Cade.

Shakara strutted onto the stage, her hips gyrating to the bass in the music. Looking out toward the floor, her lips widened into a sensual line directed at the wallets of each of the men in the room.

She bent her knees and dipped to the floor, her back arching, rounding out the beat as she crawled on all fours to the edge of the stage. A teenage boy whistled, then shot out his hand to grab her breasts. Shakara kept her smile while moving away from the horny teenager. The boy grinned and placed two bills on the lit stage.

She switched her gaze across the room to expand her target customers and her heart plummeted, wishing the ground would open and swallow her. Sitting in a corner beside a tacky purple and red lava lamp was Cade. Her step faltered but she bounced back into the rhythm, her eyes refusing to look away. He stared at her, a mixture of bewilderment and disgust on his face.

Her chest felt heavy, making it hard to breathe. Shakara tore her eyes away, begging the music to stop.

Luckily it ended. Spinning around, she dashed for the dressing room. She didn't care that her money lay scattered on the stage or that she needed to work the floor selling lap dances and cheap talk. Cade had seen her at her worst and the look on his face said it all.

Cade's hands curled around the frame of the metal chair as he fought for restraint. He was forced to watch the men, one after the other, scamper to the stage, peering at her body, while throwing their cash at her. Nothing pissed him off more than the audacity of the teenage boy. If Shakara had allowed him to stroke her thigh, he would have lost it, walking out of the club—after doing some damage to the kid. As for Shakara, he'd simply wait for her outside the club then remind her to whom she belonged. Relationship withstanding or not.

Cade cringed, stunned by his range of jealousy and the violence he was contemplating.

He couldn't fault the boy or any of the other men who leered at her. One look at her and every cock in the room was bound to be

hard and aching. However, seeing her on stage flaunting her body did nothing to entice him. How could it? He knew she didn't want to be up there. Shakara wouldn't have worked seven days a week at that restaurant if she wanted to be here.

When their eyes connected, he'd felt the ground move beneath his feet. His heart ached for the intense flash of shame he saw on her face. No doubt she assumed he'd be the last person on earth to amble through those doors.

Cade pushed out of the chair. He had to talk to her. His sweet baby girl was upset, crying out for the comfort he should have provided to her this afternoon.

He headed out to the parking lot and sat in his car, determined to wait hours if he had to for her to come outside.

She didn't waste any time exiting the club. Cade straightened in his seat, feeling more like a stalker while watching her slam the door. A large garbage can obscured his view and seconds later she reappeared, a nylon duffel bag slung over her thin shoulders. It was his move now.

Cade opened and closed the door with a soft thud making his presence known. Shakara whipped her head in the direction of the sound. Her dark eyes widened as she glanced at him, quickening her steps.

He sprinted toward her. "Shakara!"

She stopped and lifted her chin. The whites of her eyes were streaked red. Damn, he'd made her cry.

"Did you come here to further my humiliation?" she snapped. "Wasn't it enough for you to make me feel like shit back at your house?" She pinned her hand to her hip. "Well I have news for you. I don't give a fuck what you think about me. You or your sister. I made a stupid mistake coming to you today. It won't happen again."

He felt a lump in his throat, making it hard to speak. "Shakara, I didn't come here to judge you or make you feel ashamed. I was worried about you. I'm the one who made the mistake today. I let my pride stand in the way of listening to you."

She sighed in a tired way and gave her head a shake. "Whatever, Cade. It doesn't make a difference. I shouldn't have gone to you. I'm just an ex and I know you have a new girlfriend so you don't have to pretend otherwise. The only thing I want to know is why you didn't tell me you were taking Donna with you on your trip.

Were you lying to me about your feelings for her?"

"I told you the truth. She means nothing to me. Bringing her along with me to Singapore was a matter of necessity. She works closely with the engineer I was slated to take the trip with. He was injured and Donna had to take over the project. That's the only reason. I swear to you, Shakara, I never lied about her. I don't want her or any other woman. I love you." He felt something warm roll down his cheek.

Damn. He was crying in front of a woman who wasn't his mother. Worst of all, he wanted her to see his tears.

Her hand fell from her hip and she let out an audible breath. Seizing his chance, Cade grasped her hand, drawing her to him.

"Baby girl, I'm so sorry. I don't ever want you to be afraid of coming to me for help. The size of the problem is irrelevant. I'll always be there for you."

She relaxed into his touch and he continued. "You still love me, don't you? No lies, Shakara. You have to be straightforward with me. I can't handle anymore deception."

"It's true," she whispered. "I've never stopped loving you. Not for one minute."

Shakara was telling him everything he longed to hear. He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her to him. She returned the embrace, clinging to him with her dark head resting on his chest.

"Do you want to go home?"

She lifted her shoulder and looked out into the night. "I don't have a place right now. I'm staying in my car until I can find a new apartment. You can go if you like. It's getting late and you have to work tomorrow."

"Shakara, you can't possibly believe I'm going to leave you here tonight. I was referring to my house. Our house. Are you ready to go home?"

"I've been ready since the day I left." She cocked her head, a shy smile forming on her lips. "I don't understand how you can forgive me so easily. I'm happy, of course, but don't you want to know why I did it?"

"I do," Cade admitted. "The details can wait. The most important thing is that I have you in my life again."

Her lips melted into a smile and she crushed her mouth to his. He trailed his hands along her back deepening the kiss.

“I love you so damn much.” He lifted her off the ground holding her in front of him.

“Don't ever do that to me again. I don't care what was going on in that beautiful head of yours. My heart isn't up for another round of 'Where's Shakara'. You should see the gray hairs I've gained in the past month.”

Cade set her on her feet and gestured to his hair. Shakara giggled and his heart melted.

“Let's go home, baby girl. You can explain it all to me later.” He led her to his car, unable to take his eyes off her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shakara reached into her duffel bag and pulled out the framed photograph, replacing it on the fireplace mantel.

“Your girlfriend is a thief.” She grinned into his astonished face.

“I had no idea it was missing.” He looked at the picture then turned to her. He narrowed his eyes and she could tell he was fighting a smile.

Cade stroked a finger along her jaw. “What am I going to do with you? I feel like this is another one of my dreams and tomorrow I’ll wake up and you’ll be somewhere out of reach.”

She snuggled into his hand, a low moan rising from her throat. His erection pushed into her center through the material of her jeans. Heat spiraled into her, sending her gaze on a downward drift, settling on his groin.

“I’m right here and I’m still your girl, Cade. I’ll always be your baby girl.”

He held her tight. “I missed you. I missed this. The way you get that hungry look in your eyes when you’re ready for my cock. I can see how much you want me and I love it.”

He was right. She wanted him. Hard and thick, filling her mouth, his seed trickling down her throat.

“Give it to me.” Shakara lowered to the floor, kneeling between his powerful legs. Her eyes lifted and the intense arousal on his face stole her breath, shattering her senses. His fingers yanked at his waistband and within seconds he was kicking his pants and underwear to the side.

His cock sprang out, full and heavy, bright with a deep shade of red. Her lips parted and she leaned forward, bracing her hands on the floor. Shakara nuzzled her face against his cock, inhaling his rich musky scent. Her cunt throbbed and her mouth watered.

“Open your mouth.” Cade tapped the slick head to her lips.

Her mouth widened and he pushed inside. Gently, he smoothed the back of her head, eliciting a strangled cry from her. Moisture pooled in her eyes when their gazes locked. He was going to hold back.

Running his fingers along her nape, his eyes darkened and a

near pained expression cut across his masculine features.

Her heart swelled watching the effort he exerted in allowing her to suckle him, instead of thrusting hard and fucking her mouth as he would have liked.

“Suck it, baby girl. I’m loving it too. Feels so damn good. I love it when you pull on it like that, like a thirsty little kitten.”

Closing her eyes, Shakara locked her arms around his hips, latching her mouth firmer on his cock. She drew on the leaking head and salty liquid pooled on her tongue. Shakara swallowed, suckling harder, once again rewarded for her efforts by a delicious drop of his pre-cum. There was no shame. His cock provided a luxuriant comfort to her and she’d never hide it from him.

Cade rocked his hips into her face and tangled his fingers in her hair, forcing her to look at him.

“It’s been over a month since I’ve fucked your cunt. One long, frustrating month, baby girl. Are you ready to take that on? All the pain you gave me. Will you let me work it out inside your sweet little body?”

Oh God. Her eyelids hooded over and she gazed up at him. He was hers. All hers. Her lips tightened around him and she swirled her tongue around the sensitive rim. Cade shuddered above her, withdrawing his cock until only the broad head remained in her mouth.

“I can’t hold it back any longer. Have to feed it to you,” he groaned, raising her chin.

Her knees shook and she scraped her fingernails along his skin. His hand formed a fist gathering the hair at her nape, tilting her head to meet his thrusts.

“Did I ever tell you how beautiful you look with my cock in your mouth?”

She shook her head ever so slightly. Any compliment from Cade was welcomed. His praises molded around her heart and she thrived on it.

“You do.” He pumped hard. “So fucking gorgeous. Your cheeks rounded, completely stuffed with cock. I love it when you swallow. You have no idea what it does to me knowing that you love the taste of my cum.”

Moisture seeped from her cunt, wetting her thighs. His thrust came harder and faster and his prick jerked against the soft palate of

her throat.

“Milk it, baby girl. I want you to show me how much you missed me.”

Shakara’s eyes burned and her breath came in tiny rasps through her nose as a thick stream of cum shot from the head. She swallowed, closing her eyes in bliss, drinking every single drop he gave her. Moments later, Cade withdrew from her mouth, scooping her up off the floor.

If there was an inkling of misgiving about returning to him, it vanished with each step he took, cradling her in his arms. They went up the winding staircase and down the long hallway leading to the master bedroom.

A picture on the beige wall caught her eyes, forcing her to swallow her guilt. Cade, looking ten years younger, stood beside an older man seated in a large chair. His father. Their eyes held the identical shade of green, both reflecting pride and triumph amid the backdrop of awards on the wall. Cade’s office.

Shakara lowered her eyes and buried her face in his neck. She couldn’t allow guilt to stop her. Love was too important. Screw Radcliffe and anyone else. Cade belonged to her.

“Are you ready to talk?” Cade asked, heading into the room. He didn’t want to push but he deserved an explanation for her behavior.

She nodded after he sat on the bed with his arms around her waist. “I was only thinking of you and Julie. Your friend Radcliffe warned me that you might be judged because of me. He mentioned that your company would suffer. At first, I didn’t believe him. I thought he was only being a jealous asshole.”

His lean frame tautened. He knew what was coming and his fingers itched to wring Radcliffe’s neck. He opened his mouth to assure her that his friend was out of line and wrong, but kept his silence and allowed her to continue.

“It wasn’t until the day Julie came over for a swim that I took his words to heart. I heard you on the phone and I knew you were talking to him. It sounded as if you two were arguing because of me. You said something about losing a client and then I heard you defending me to him.”

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, his love for

her heightening. “I wish you would have told me about your conversation with Radcliffe the night of the party. I’m not going to lie to you. For awhile I did believe it credible, that some of my clients would abandon the firm. The hypocrites. It would have been quite fine with me. There’s nothing you could have done to interfere with my company. That phone call, yes, Radcliffe was blaming you but again he was wrong. You weren’t at fault. That client had to declare bankruptcy. He could barely finance his own mortgage much less a hotel.”

She stared at him in earnest. “Do you give me your word that you won’t hold it against me if later on there’s talk about us. If it really does threaten your business.”

His chest tightened at the desperation in her words. “I swear to it, baby girl. I’m going to spend the rest of our lives demonstrating my love to you.”

“You’ve already proven your devotion to me and I love you so much for it.” She curled into his chest, her eyes moistening. “All the struggles I’ve been through. I’d relive it in a heartbeat. There’s nothing I would change because this is the path that led me to you.”

“Hush,” he purred, laying her flat on the bed. His fingers worked at the buttons on her shirt, peeling it away along with her jeans and underwear.

Shakara opened her legs teasing him with soft delicate folds that beckoned for his touch. Her clitoris swelled, ripening under his gaze, and wetness seeped from her cunt, surrounding the tiny slit.

He had to hurry. Wordlessly he shrugged off his clothes then reached into the dresser drawer, fingering the velvet box. He returned to her and ever so gently grasped her by the ankles until they hung from the bottom of the bed. Towering in front of her, Cade gazed into her eyes, a silent prayer on his lips. *Baby girl, please say yes. Give me the pleasure of fucking you with my ring on your finger.*

“Look at me.”

Her eyes rounded with caution and he realized he’d spoken harsher than intended.

Ask her, ask her. Cade brought his hand forward and popped open the box, displaying the princess cut diamond ring to her.

“Will you marry me?”

She gasped and, after what seemed an eternity, she bolted upright, casting him a wary look of bliss.

“You want to marry me?”

Cade couldn't help but laugh despite his nerves. “Yes. I want to marry you. The question is do you want to marry me?”

“Jesus Christ.” Shakara launched herself into him. “Yes, I want to marry you. Yes. A million times yes.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

His hands shook as he lifted the ring from the box, placing it around her slender finger. *His fiancée.*

She held out her hand and practiced the name on her lips. “Mrs. Caden Parker. Shakara Parker.”

Grinning, Cade planted a kiss on her fingers. “You like the ring?”

She nodded. “I adore it. The gemstones are gorgeous but it’s the meaning I treasure.” She smiled at him and his chest tightened.

“I’m going to be your wife.”

He had to kiss her. She was too damn adorable. He leaned forward and covered his mouth to hers, devouring her lips with pent-up aggression. Never again would she leave him.

“Lay down.”

She relaxed on the bed, her feet brushing against his legs.

“Who do you belong to?” An archaic desire to exert his ownership of her took precedence in him. The sooner she accepted her role in his life, the easier it would be to relinquish her guarded pride. No more stripping or working at hole-in-the-wall restaurants.

“I, Shakara James, belong to Caden Parker wholeheartedly; mind, body, and soul.”

He nodded, her words warming his heart and filling the dull ache that lingered. She was the loveliest woman to walk the earth and she was in his bed. His jaw hardened, thinking of her sleeping inside her car in the cold dead of night. He couldn’t take it anymore.

Cade shoved his hands behind her knees jerking her legs upward. “I love you but you put me through hell when you left. I’m aching to teach you a lesson in case you ever think of lying to me or leaving me again. I’m going to fuck you raw, Shakara. Before the night is over, you won’t be able to lift a muscle from this bed.”

Her low whimpers went straight to his prick, the shaft twitched in response to her cries. Cade ran a finger along the center of her opening, dipping gently into the slippery heat. She felt amazing, the sweetest little cunt.

“Oh, Cade,” she moaned, “fuck your baby girl. Please. Take me as you would have on the first day we met.”

“Ahh, shit,” he groaned. Shakara was taking him back, making

him relive his fantasies of her. His hands tightened on her shapely brown legs, just as he remembered them sticking out from her miniskirt in his living room so long ago. A ragged cry ripped from his chest and he thrust deep, uncaring if he hurt her.

“You wanted me, didn’t you? Did you imagine me shoving you to the ground and tearing off that pitiful excuse for a skirt you wore?” He pushed into her cunt with ruthless force, his balls slapping against her ass.

“I rubbed my clit that night. First time I did it.”

Christ. Not what he expected to hear. Cade dragged her closer to him and she raised her hips inviting him into her heat.

“So tight. I can feel you stretching. Almost like the night I took your virginity.” He grunted. “I thought I was going to split you in two. Best feeling in the world. It’s like that now. So fucking tight. You’ll get used to me again. In here and your softly rounded ass.”

Shakara moaned, her cunt contracting around his enflamed cock as it pounded into her.

Cade closed his hand over a large breast, rolling the nipple between his fingertips. God they felt good. He licked his lips, hungrily eyeing the soft flesh. Later. His eyes shifted to her belly and he remembered the way her throat worked ravenously swallowing his warm seed. His cock swelled within her, plowing her with a ferocity borne of love, anger, and obsession.

Low cries tore from her throat and her body surged upward with each brutal thrust, her breasts bouncing against her chest. He didn’t care. She was his for God’s sake. Shakara would take as much as he gave her and beg for more.

“I’m coming,” Shakara mewled, her eyes trained on him.

The tension on her face coupled with her neediness drove him wild. He refused to let up on her. Cade glared at her, daring her to deny him his right of ownership. She didn’t. Her cries became louder and her body trembled amid his powerful thrusts. He kept on pumping, pushing through until his balls drew up and he felt the cum rising up his shaft, spilling into her.

He slid out of her and creamy globs of semen trickled from her cunt to the insides of her thighs. Sighing, Cade sank onto the mattress and pulled her to his side, her head resting on his chest.

He flattened his palm to her stomach, lazily caressing it when a thought struck him. He braced himself above her on his elbows.

“Have you been taking the pill?”

She slapped a hand over her mouth and released a strangled cry. “It slipped my mind. I only took them in the beginning to help with my monthly cramping. I was planning on doing without this month because I didn’t have enough money to afford them, even with the discount I get. It wasn’t intentional. I swear it.” She turned, facing him. “Will you be disappointed if I get pregnant?”

He eased back on the bed and folded his arms behind his head. He was past the age when most men became fathers for the first time. How many times had he envisioned her swollen with his child? Only a hundred and ten. He wasn’t counting.

“It wouldn’t bother me. I don’t mind children. I’ve raised my sister and I love her. Undoubtedly, I’d love our children even more. How would you feel about becoming pregnant at such a young age?”

Her face softened into wistful longing. “I told you I’d never lie to you again, so I won’t. I want to have your babies. I really do, but think about it, Cade. What the hell do I know about being a good mother? I had such a pitiful example. What if one day our child finds out what I used to do, that I’ve been homeless. They’d be so ashamed of me.” Her voice shook and she snuggled her head above his shoulder blade, giving up her explanation.

With aching tenderness he caressed her ebony curls, coaxing her to look at him. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of. What you did was brave. You took yourself out of a horrendous situation and you survived. On your own. Not many people have that strength, baby girl. Our children will be proud of you; but most of all, they’re going to love you. You don’t have to worry that you’ll become like your mother. You’re the sweetest, most caring person I know.”

Cade smiled in relief when he felt her lips move against his skin, the soft nip of her teeth on his earlobe.

“If I agree with what you’ve just said, will you come inside me again?”

“No less than twice a day for the next fifty years,” Cade replied, flipping Shakara onto her stomach.

Epilogue

Shakara curled her hand over the warm tiny fingers pressing into her palm. She gazed down at the chestnut-haired girl, her heart warming as eye, the same shade as Cade's, peered up at her with eager anticipation.

"I miss daddy."

Shakara smiled at her and opened the door leading to the mall's parking garage. "I miss daddy too, and your little brother. That's why we're going home after a wonderful day of shopping, right?"

"Yes, momma."

Shakara bent and swiped her thumb on Arissa's chubby cheeks where remnants of strawberry ice cream remained. She'd taken the day to spend special alone time with her daughter. Her life was busy enough these days with her artwork selling like wildfire at a local gallery and the demands of taking care of a three year old and a two month old. She loved every minute of it and so did Cade.

The thought of her husband brought a smile to her face and she tightened her hold on Arissa's little hands. She didn't know how, but it seemed that each day she found something new to love about the man. He'd taken to fatherhood so well from the moment her pregnancy test showed positive two weeks after their engagement. Less than three months later, they'd flown to Bermuda for a simple wedding on the beach, with Julie as her maid of honor and a repentant Radcliffe standing beside Cade.

"It's you, mommy." Arissa shouted with childish excitement.

Shakara blinked and smiled at her daughter, unsure what the little girl meant. Her gaze followed Arissa's toward a slender dark-skinned older woman cutting across the parking lot. Shakara froze, her heart pounding inside her chest. Regaining her composure, she chuckled airily. "That lady is nothing like your momma." She lifted the little girl into her car seat and kissed her cheek.

Minutes later, Shakara hit the brakes, parking her SUV in the driveway of their home. Stepping out of the car, she found herself swept up in a pair of strong masculine arms. Shakara grinned and lifted her mouth for his kiss.

"Did you have fun, baby girl?" Cade asked against her lips.

“Yeah but there might not be any money left in our bank account,” Shakara joked.

Cade laughed and set her on the ground. “I suggest you start thinking of ways to earn back some of that money.”

Excitement simmered in her lower belly as she stared longingly after her husband who was lifting their sleeping daughter into his arms. Shakara strolled ahead of him and held the main door open. They headed up the stairs, laying Arissa in her white canopied bed then checking on baby Noah, who was fast asleep in his crib.

Shakara turned to Cade after they had entered their own bedroom. “I saw her today, Cade. My mother. Can you believe it?”

He pulled her into his arms, cupping her chin, his eyes wide with concern. “Did she speak to you?”

Shakara shook her head. “No, we barely looked at each other, but I knew it was her. I’m glad she didn’t recognize me because it would have taken all my strength not to lose it with her. I didn’t want our daughter to witness any ugliness.”

“Oh, baby girl,” he groaned above her head. “Come here.” Cade drew her to the bed with him, holding her to his heart. “I love you so much. I’m sorry you had to deal with that today.”

Her stomach flipped and she clung to him, feeding off the tenderness he showed her each and every day. “Yes, but it makes it all the more worthwhile knowing I have you to find comfort in.”

“You’ll always have me. Even after I take my last breath, I’ll still be watching out for you.” Cade stroked her hair and kissed her on the forehead.

Shakara shifted her head to gaze at him, her heart pounding with love and admiration for her husband. “You won’t have to watch out for me because I’ll always remain at your side.” She kissed his jaw and winked. “If that’s all right with you, Mr. Parker.”

Laughing, he tumbled to the mattress with her locked in his embrace. “Agreed. But please don’t send me to an early grave tonight while paying off your debts, baby girl.”

She rolled her eyes and chuckled, then pushed him to his back and began planting butterfly kisses on every inch of his body available to her lips.

The End



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