

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx



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Funny Valentine

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Dedication & Thanks

To the fans of Mel and Tia for your continued support. A couple that has grown dear to my heart. Special thanks to my editor Rie Langdon, my critique partner Janet Tillman, and that sneaky devil Cupid who drew his bow and shot arrow flaming with common sense. Mel and Tia should be released for all to read.

Enjoy!

Chapter One

“That dirty dog-rat bastard!”

The cleaver landed with a solid chop, slicing through the gills. Red, yellow, and grey ooze squirted out. Veins and bones were completely severed. “Low down dirty-dog maggot-ass-bastard!”

My sister’s grip on the worn handle of the gleaming kitchen instrument was unnaturally tight. Her light brown eyes were dark, with amber sparks of mounting rage. She had a fierce, determined line to her lips that thinned what men would call a voluptuous pair. We call her Margie but her name is Margene and she is the oldest. Earvin Jackson, whom everyone refers to as just Jackson, had five daughters and we were raised by him alone, since Mommy died in childbirth with daughter number five. Of course, I was only three at the time, so Margie is and was the only mother I’d ever known.

And Margie, approaching fifty fast, is the prettiest of us all. Well, to me at least. My sister has what some black folks call ‘good hair’. It’s long and wavy in thick dark ringlets, which when pulled straight, reached to the middle of her back. Whether wet or blown-out, her hair always had a vibrant shine and soft bounce to it. But she didn’t care for it much. Normally you’d catch her with it pulled up in a messy mass of curls that kept falling forward into her face, or pushed behind a headband, wild and free.

Yes, to me, Margie is the pretty one. And I love her dearly. Except when she was a raving, cussing firecracker. Like now.

“You know,” Margie said, grabbing the tail of the newly-skinned 12-pound seabass and flipping it on the cutting board. She tossed those curls that covered her brow and leveled her eyes on me. “I should have Chuckie find him and kick his ass! What-chu think?”

Chuckie. That’s her husband. He’s damn near more intimidating than my sister. What she said wasn’t an idle threat. Chuckie could bring a man to a

stuttering mess of apologies and excuses with just a look. Once, Lucille's--our family restaurant--was robbed by a teenaged hood, a junkie with red-rimmed bug eyes. Scared the crap out of us. I was there, with Margie and my sister Alicia, until Chuckie stumbled on the scene and disarmed the fool with a backhanded slap, and grabbed the gun.

The meat cleaver came down again. A wet smack split the fish evenly down the middle. "That's what I oughta do, have Chuckie kick his ass," Margie grumbled.

"Calm down."

"Calm down?" she snorted.

What else could I say? This was my fault. I'd messed this one up, big time. Well maybe not entirely my fault. I told the lie to make them happy. So they wouldn't worry about me. Okay, let me explain. First, his name was John. Trust me, I struggled with the plain name thing, but sometimes you gotta go simple, and hell, I had to think on my feet.

John, for my sisters, is my imaginary boyfriend that they were all going to finally meet at my little sister Sherry's wedding. Margie in particular had been looking forward to this fantasy event.

She turned on me in an apron stained with fish guts and unidentifiable muck, hands reeking from the messy business of *Today's Chef Special*. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to say something, but fell shut, and those pretty features--age touched only the corners of her eyes--were twisted into an angry mask. She shook her head. She ran the flat blade cleanly under the shiny silver-black scaly skin of the bass and separated the pink meaty flesh.

Tomorrow was the biggest day for the restaurant. Lovers from every neighboring county would come to dine at the place named for our mother and run by her husband and oldest daughter since her death. We've even been featured on the Food Channel, which has business crazy now. Dinner reservations have us busting at the seams. And still, Margie runs this kitchen, just like she runs our lives.

I love her, though.

Oh, back to the little white lie: John. I came up with the idea right after Sherry announced her shotgun wedding at Thanksgiving dinner. A girl had to think fast or be subjected to ‘poor Tia’ for the rest of the holiday.

“I have something to say! Hey, everybody, listen to me! I have something to say!” Sherry’s squeaky voice rises just above the clinking dinnerware, the joke telling, the fussing children, and daddy groaning over the turkey looking dry as he cut into it and doled out slices.

As soon as she begins, I know something is up. For starters, her boyfriend and indentured servant—don’t ask, I’ll explain later--had been whispering and nudging her since they sat down. And Sherry, our youngest, kept blushing and giggling. When I arrived, I felt it in the air. Something was always up with my sisters, and this Thanksgiving would be no different. Call it a Jackson girl intuition. All of us got it.

So plates are passing. My sister Margie’s youngest boy, Chuck Jr., comes out complaining about being seated at the kids’ table. He wants his rightful place with the adults. His head is low and his thumbs are working that Nintendo contraption that I had to spend over 100 bucks for Christmas last year. The little hustler has me on the hook for a PSP this year. He grunts at his mom over the injustice of it all, never taking his eyes from the little color LCD screen. Margie dismisses him with a wave of her hand and the promise of a smack upside his head if he doesn’t go away. And he walks off again, never taking his eyes from the screen. All the while, Sherry is trying to get everyone’s attention.

“I have something to say!!!” she shouts over the rowdy bunch, and I’m telling you right then and there I feel my stomach flip. Please, if there is an angel of mercy riding with me, please don’t let it be what I think it is.

“What is it baby-girl?” Daddy says, smiling up at her. Silence falls over the table as Margie, Alicia, Pam, and their respective husbands all turn eyes to Sherry. My eyes? Well, they’re on my cranberry sauce that’s bleeding over into my stuffing as I stiffen and await the news.

“You got a job?” Margie asks. A hopeful ring in her voice and lifted brow drive a collective gasp through the family.

Sherry with a job was like catching the Pope at a Jay-Z concert. Un-frickin-believable. A career student that collects degrees like I do new Louis Vutton bags, the likelihood of Sherry joining the workforce was slim to none.

“Nah, she found a new major again,” Alicia sneered. “What is it now baby-girl, and how much will it cost us?”

Sherry rolled her eyes. Suddenly I didn’t feel as bad. It may be cruel, but there two things that were certain to happen. Sherry would get picked apart about not choosing a career and draining the family accounts with her never-ending studies. And I would get picked apart over being husband-less, boyfriend-less, and childless. Ridiculous, right? At least for me. In the era of girl-power you’d think my sisters would want me to be strong, successful, and doing my thang. Yeah, well. Long story there.

Margie smiled at Sherry and gave her blessing. “Go ’head, baby-girl. What is it?”

Sherry stood ramrod straight with her fingers spread and palm pressed into her lower belly, and the other hand casually to her hip. All the while I’m praying, silently hoping, desperately longing for it not to be.

“Kelvin proposed! We getting married!!! AND I’M PREGNANT!” Sherry squealed.

Bam. It was. I officially became the last, barren, spinster Jackson sister standing. My sisters give a collective gasp, my father falls in his seat, and then the rejoicing begins. Because of course her being knocked up and down the aisle is far greater than being a successful marketing executive, single, and with no prospects. My sisters are up hugging her, brothers in-law warning Kelvin what trouble he’d find with a Jackson woman and Jackson, my father, he’s staring directly at me silently saying: so when is it your turn?

“What kind of man cheats now-a-days, that’s what I wanna know?” Margie’s sharp tone shattered my thoughts. She’s cleaning the cutting board with a swipe of the guts and putrid organs into a waiting trashcan.

“It just wasn’t meant to be. I suppose.”

“Tia, that’s bullshit. You are 35 and damn well meant to be happily married like the rest of us. He’s a selfish rat-bastard, plain and simple!”

Did I mention that Margie curses worse than Jackson when upset?

“Here’s my thing,” she goes on, “We women face shit out there that can rot your coochie or kill you dead if a man breathes on it wrong. In 2011, cheating should be off the fuckin’ menu. Bastard!”

Margie’s voice boomed through the kitchen. I sighed, hoping she would run out of steam. To be honest, I’m tired of the charade.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, I’m really sorry, but shit like this pisses me off.” She walked over with her arms outstretched. Now I feel guilty, ’cause here I am lying to her ’cause I don’t have the guts to tell them that I’m fine *as-is* and not some spinster to be pitied. I think that’s what makes me a loser, my cowardice. She gives me a smelly hug, which singes my nose hairs. Shoving her off my \$800 power suit, I’m sneezing and wiping at my clothes.

“Good grief, Margie...”

She blinks, confused at first. Then sees the stains on the front of my suit and shrugs. “My bad. But you know not to come into my kitchen all haughty-taughty.”

There’s something mocking in her tone. Margie has never taken pride in my success outside of the family. All my sisters minus Sherry work here at the restaurant. Me and Sherry, being so close in age, were sent off to college. I’m the only one that’s joined the corporate arena.

“It’s okay. Really.” Here I am apologizing, for what I’m not sure. She’s the one that left me smelling like Shamu the whale. “I’ve been through this before. I’ll survive.”

“But we were looking forward to meeting him. I done told all the family about him,” Margie whines. “I mean how long has it been since you brought any

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man home? And this one being a pilot and all, me and Alicia were talking the other day. Finally you were going to get someone to take care of you.”

“Take care of me? I make three hundred thousand a year! What are you talking about?”

“You know what I mean. Money don’t mean a thing if you and old and grey and ain’t got a single person to come see about their mama. You wanna die that way? As ‘auntie’? That fancy job don’t keep you warm at night.”

“No, my vibrator does,” I mumble.

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘nothing does’.”

“Exactly. Piece of cow-shit-little-dick-dirty bastard!”

And she goes on, and on, and on. To this I can do nothing but let it flow. John The Pilot has broken my heart and I need to show it. Oh yeah, I made him a pilot. The last imaginary boyfriend that I conjured was a Commander in the Navy. Always off somewhere on the seven seas, *cough*. *Bullshit.*

Problem was, I kept getting hung up on the military details. One minute I’d have him in Jakarta, out in the Indian Ocean, and the next, I talk about him being near Iraq, totally forgetting which sea that was. Finally, tired of it, I just told them the long distance ‘lurvin wasn’t kickin’ and I had to end it. Now this one, being a pilot, gave me some breathing room. I could call and say I’m out with him and avoid a night of family bickering over what the business should do, or make excuses for his absence because of his flying the friendly skies. But the wedding was something I couldn’t get out of. And to make it worse, it’s on Valentine’s Day. So not only did I need a date, but I needed a *Valentine*. Unbelievable.

“Well, it won’t matter,” Margie said. “When I got your message yesterday, I hooked you up.

Wait, wait a damn minute. What did she say?

“Say that again?”

“I hooked you up.” Margie shrugged. “I figure if you can’t get it right, I’ll have to do it for you.”

“You have lost your mind.”

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She waved me off. “You know Ben who bowls with Chuckie?”

“Ben? Three-finger Ben?”

Margie shoots me a look from over her shoulder. “He’s missing thumbs. The man has a disability, Tia. He has his other fingers, though. And if he can still bowl atop 200 on average, that means he knows how to use what he got... to hit what he wants.”

“He’s fifty or sixty!”

“He’s forty-five, don’t exaggerate.” She dried her hands on her apron. “And that’s just ten years older than *you*.”

“I won’t have you setting me up, Margie.”

“Too late. This is Sherry’s wedding and Valentine’s Day. I got people from all over the family coming here. They won’t be ’round here whispering about poor Tia who still ain’t married.”

“C’mon, what year is it, 1820?”

“You will have a date,” Margie said in that voice that none of us question.

“What’s all the yelling for?” Chuckie says, coming through the back door to the kitchen. He holds it wide to allow Melvin’s crew’s delivery of fresh flowers. Immediately, the little devil on my shoulder whispers in my ear. A new plan is hatched.

“I don’t need your fix-up because I have a date. Melvin and I are seeing each other.”

Melvin stops. He eyes me. Not like a man surprised. Just curious. I don’t really know him from the neighborhood. Sherry and I went to private school. But the others do. He’s from around the way; I think he was adopted by a black family or something. He’s also tight with my brother-in-law. I give him the best smile I can. Margie blinks at our florist and Chuckie glares as if betrayed.

Melvin clears his throat. “Say what?”

“Don’t be shy,” I say, going over to stand by him. He’s tall, handsome in that homegrown kind of way. Could stand a manicure. His hands are always jacked. But the clear, green beauty of his eyes would give any girl pause. Yep, Melvin will

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do for the sake of argument. 'Cause I have every intention of winning this one with Margie.

Melvin's that out-doorsy kind of guy--blue collar and all. Not my type. I like my men a little refined. Definitely. Last time I had a man he was uptight and boring and the best part of the relationship was the ending. With my accomplishments, I need to be equal to my partner. That's why I'm so picky.

Melvin's aftershave is fresh, though, and hell, he can play along. I shoulda thought of this months ago. His green eyes focus on me. Standing this close with the smell of roses coming off his skin, I notice how beautiful they are. Then a smirk turns up the corner of his mouth as he reads my silent plea. A very secretive smirk.

"This true, Melvin? You seeing my sister?" Margie asked.

"Ah, yeah... we've been dating," he says and runs a hand down my back to rest at the base of my spine, just at the rise of my ass. *What the hell?* I move a little and his hand drops, with a not-so-innocent brush that makes me tense. I cut my eyes at him. He smirks. His two workers stop and look over at us, surprised.

Hell, it's my lie, so I own it. Flashing my sister a thousand-watt triumphant smile, I go for it. "There you have it. Got my man right here. So no need for the hook-up."

Chapter Two

Earlier that day

“Boss? Hey, I think we got a problem,” called Alejandro.

Yeah, yeah I can hear him. Doors to the back of my van are open and he and my crew are working a sweat trying to get the bed of roses and new plotted arrangements on the sidewalk. A good, tough lot of men, I trust them all. Everyone on my staff has served time. Paying homage. It’s the way I prefer it. I did time for a brief stint, so I know how hard it is to get right. Besides, no matter what the color, every man deserves a chance to be his *own* man. The system has a way of stripping that from you, by throwing you out on your ass with no options. I’m good with my hands, always have been, thanks to moms. So when I got out, it made sense that I take on her florist shop and make it something more. Too bad she died a year later. Too bad she never saw the fruits of her labor. Pops died six months after her from a broken heart. And my head still ain’t right over losing them both. So I did it for them, for me, and for my little brother Nicky who got jacked in those streets I introduced him to.

“Boss!”

“Fuck, man, I hear you.”

I can’t deal with his whining now. I have more pressing things on my mind. Like waiting for her to step out of the car. Didn’t know she’d be here this morning. Normally it’s just Margie and Alicia. Never Tia.

Here I am with dirt under my nails and faded jeans. She pulls up in a BMW two-seater ragtop that’s probably worth more than my house. And she’s the prettiest woman on two legs I know. Just sweetness from head to toe. Damn.

The door opens.

“Boss!”

“In a minute!”

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Alejandro groans and directs the other men to where they can unload the flowers. Her foot drops down, legs and all the rest concealed by the car door. But that foot, perfect in size and symmetry, it's in a dark blue stiletto pump with an open toe. Oh yeah, I'm a foot man. Hers is probably a size seven and the three-inch heel gives it this sexy arch. So damn feminine. C'mon baby, show me those legs.

She eases out of the car with sunglasses hiding those soft brown eyes of hers. Dressed in a navy blue suit, her skirt rides high on those chocolate thighs and hugs those sweet hips, which stirs something primal in me. The matching blazer is short on the waist and snug, with a single button. It defines the nice curve of her breasts--I'd cut off a testicle to know those breasts. She sees me. A small smile brings up dimples in her cheeks. She puts her sunglasses in her hair and closes the car door. Her eyes focus on me.

"Morning," she says in that sweet, soft voice I want to hear speak when I'm near her, in her, or just worshiping at her feet. Tia Jackson exemplifies all the things I've longed for in a woman, but haven't quite found. My crush is debilitating. I can barely speak. Thank God she does, again.

"At it already, huh?"

"Huh?"

Damn, does she know about my boner? My eyes drop for fear it's reaching out in greeting. She checks her watch, oblivious to my discomfort.

"Ummm... Valentine's Day?" She points at the red rose display coming off the truck.

"Oh, yep, best time of season for us, ya know?"

She nods. Denies a man the pleasure of a little more conversation and walks around the front of the car. Hell, even for that I'm grateful because now I can watch those long legs move and the way her curves play under that suit. She never looks back, never really sees me. I think I've had two actual conversations with her all these years. Now that is a shame.

"Boss!"

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She's gone. So goes the fantasy. That one there is out of my league so I won't even bother. But no harm in exercising a man's God-given right to dream.

"What is it? Can't you unload without..."

Fuck me! We have the wrong load. This isn't their order. The yellow roses are missing and the carnations are potted wrong. "What the hell is that?"

"I was tryin' to tell ya. We... I dunno how it happened, told these fools to load—"

"Fuck! Fuck me! Load the fucking truck--fuck! Chuck won't be here for another thirty, let's ride and fix this shit. You two stay here in case he arrives early." I'm screwed. Heading around my truck, I feel a headache forming.

"Why me?" I moan. My fantasy gets totaled by the same ole crap I always have to deal with.

Chapter Three

“Melvin, I didn’t know you were interested in my sister?” Margie asks, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

“Me either.” Chuck’s frown deepens. This I understand. The ladies don’t know about my past, but Chuck does. Too many beers at poker night got a man talking when he should just be fitting in. So he knows the whole sordid story, not just the one put out on the street when Nicky got capped and it all went wrong. Funny thing is, I grew up not far from their neighborhood. Irish boy adopted by a black family learned quick how to get down and hang with the toughest. Though moms and pops treated me as their own, it was hard gaining street cred. That’s how Nicky got hurt. Me trying to prove my worth, and not looking out for my little brother. Broke my mother’s heart. Nicky was her birth child. Though she never made that distinction, I did. And it keeps me up at night still.

“Oh, don’t make a big deal out of it.” Tia dismisses them, snapping the bubble of thoughts and questions hovering over my head. She moves away from me, leaving nothing but the faint sexy smell of that nameless perfume behind. “We just started dating. I didn’t want to mention it yet ’cause of John.”

John? Who’s John? Is he her boyfriend?

What have I stepped into? Why did I even jump into it? Well, I know the why. It’s her. She could have accused me of serial murder and I would have confessed. Now I have a window of opportunity. I could be a jerk and work it to my advantage, or I could be a man and work it to my advantage. Either way I’m going to work it to my advantage.

She looks back at me, and that smile. Hell, they should bottle it and sell it for Valentine’s Day.

“Melvin and I will be going to the wedding together. Did you get your tux? Oh wait, that’s right. You can’t go,” she said with a fake pout.

“Really?” I say smiling. She’s good... damn good.

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“Why can’t he go?” Margie asked. “Melvin, you should come. Jackson would want to meet you.”

“Well, I’d be happy to—”

“He can’t come because it’s Valentine’s Day. You know that’s the biggest delivery day for him. Right, Melvin?” She’s nodding her head as if I’m supposed to agree. Well, fuck that. Little Miz Cutie thinks she’s got it all worked out. This oughta be fun.

“Wrong.”

Tia’s smile fades.

“Excuse me?”

“I have Alejandro here...”

Alejandro is carrying flowers through the entryway and gives me a puzzled look. His bushy eyebrows draw together and his eyes bounce over the staring faces. He has never had the responsibility of running the show on a big delivery day. Everyone knows that I don’t let them get away with that. But this time... well for her, and a chance to get really close to the fantasy, I’m let it ride.

“I have my tux already, sweetheart,” I say looking her over. “I’ll be right by your side.” Giving her a wink, my chest kind of swells as my eyes keep going to those sweet-sweet hips of hers nicely tucked in that lucky skirt. She goes pale. Caught in her lie, she looks between me and her family.

“Well, uh...”

I reach for her hand and she frowns, her eyes lit with alarm.

“Besides, it’s Valentine’s Day. Do you really think we’d spend it apart?” I press a kiss into her palm, then pull her over toward me. She comes reluctantly into my arms. I’m hugging her from behind; with her facing her family, she’s forced to submit. For my part, I take the time to put to memory every single curve of her sweetness pressed into me. The cushion of her ass and the soft feel of her body are now burned into my brain. And what’s that she’s wearing? Oughta ask her, ’cause it’s fucking with my senses big-time. I know my scents... can tell you the difference between the bitter fragrance of newly bloomed orchids or the vanilla-crisp smell of a grown lily. Moms always said I had a nose, told me when I started picking out

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flowers in her shop as a little boy, that I could smell God. Well I think it's true, 'cause I have an angel in my arms.

"We will be there," I manage, then groan a little in her ear. It's hard not to laugh, man. She's all tight like she wants to knee me in the crotch.

Margie stares at us both. For a minute the silence is a bit awkward and I fear our cover is blown. Then her sister lets go a squeal of delight.

"I love it! I love it! You two look so cute together. I can't wait to tell Pam and Alicia. Don't they look cute together?"

Chuck is giving me the eye. The man's a big one, and not to be pushed around. He's also been a friend the past few months since the robbery. We both were hit by the same junkie. I think he can see through our lie.

"Yeah, well it's definitely unexpected," he mumbles.

She wiggles out of my hold and I have to let her go. Fixing her skirt, she doesn't look back at me, but I can feel the frost coming off her like icicles. Margie comes over and cups her face.

"Look at you, you're blushing. I thought that asshole had broken my baby's heart but she has a new prince." Margie looks to me when she speaks. "Girl, you so good at keeping secrets. Let me go and on and you seeing Melvin."

"Margie..."

She turns back to me. "We have a dinner tonight for both families here. I want you here. Okay? It's at seven."

"I'll be here."

Tia cuts her eyes at me and I can tell I've really played this wrong. Here I am, thinking she'd get a kick out of it. Those daggers flying my way look like she wants to kick my ass instead.

"Can I speak to you outside, for a minute?" she says, then stumps out of the kitchen. I throw up my hands in surrender and wink at Margie. "Princess and I had a little disagreement this morning. Lovers' spat. We'll be all right."

Margie steps in front of me. "Listen, my sister acts all tough, but she's a good girl. Now you don't give up on her. Okay? She's just getting over a breakup."

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“John?” I repeat, having caught the name. He’s a stupid bastard for letting this one go.

“Yeah, he was some airline pilot asshole.” Margie looks back. “Chuckie, you oughtta kick his ass.”

Chuck grumbles something and walks out. But I can’t help but be a little disappointed. If her heart is broken, then what chance do I have at getting to know it? About as much chance as I have of getting her to find the humor in my little touch-and-feel earlier. “I understand.”

Walking out, it’s not hard to find her. She’s over by her car, pacing a trail in front of it. She turns on me with a look of confused anger. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Being a friend.”

“I’m serious. You can’t just invite yourself on my family like that! That’s rude!”

“Wait, didn’t you invite me?”

“I did no such thing!”

“No, you just told everyone we were sleeping together.”

“Huh?” she blinked, shocked.

It’s hard not to smile. Her wide, doe-eyed look is doing things to me. “Dating. Sorry, you said dating.”

“Well, never mind that. You are not coming to my sister’s wedding. Let’s get that straight right now.”

“Okay,” I shrug. “I’ll just go back in and tell Margie.”

“Wait!” she says, catching up to me, taking my arm. My eyes cut back over to her and she has that lost-little-girl thing going. Strange to see the confidence fade from her eyes. “No. Don’t do that. I um, well, I will make up a...”

“Lie?”

Her hand falls away and she crosses her arms over her chest. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Ain’t that what you just did?”

“You don’t know me!”

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“Exactly. But I’d like to. Hey, I get it, okay? You just came out of a bad relationship and you want to make the guy jealous.”

She laughs at me. Laughs in my face. Not a good feeling, let me tell you. “What’s so funny?”

“Melvin, let’s just let this one go, okay? I’ll make up an excuse for you and then we’ll say we had nothing in common. Which we obviously don’t.” She looks me over and it pisses me off. Whether it’s my skin color or the grit under my nails, she sure as hell is acting like I’m some shit that she found in the back of the drain. Now my ego is hurt. Time to teach little princess a lesson.

“You know what? I think your family should know the games you play. I do business with them: don’t want to be mistaken with the foolery. Let me set it straight.”

“NO!!!”

She grabs my arm again. That makes twice—shall we go for three?

“Wait a minute. Cool it, okay?”

She’s pleading now. “No, baby, like you said we ain’t got nuthin’ in common.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Don’t be so sensitive. I’m sorry, okay? Just don’t go in there and blow my cover.”

“What difference does it make? You’re a grown woman.”

I touched a nerve. She actually winces, and her cheeks burn red. She opens her mouth to give me some of that sass again, then closes it. Suddenly her whole demeanor changes and she looks genuinely lost. What the hell is with her?

“It just does, okay?”

Now she’s winning points for being a little human and not some stuck-up bitch. But I ain’t sold yet. She doesn’t see me. Why should she? I’m just the delivery boy.

“Is it because I’m white?”

“Is what because you’re white?” She blinks.

“Why you keep acting like I’m invisible.”

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“I don’t know what that means. I’m sorry about earlier, okay? I was in a bind and...”

“It’s cool, Princess. No need to apologize.”

She stares at me for a long time. Now she does see me. I watch her size me up and then refocus those deep brown eyes on mine again. “What’s your game?”

I shrug. “It could be fun.”

She looks away again. Okay, something is definitely behind this lie. “What time can I pick you up?”

“For what?”

“For dinner, tonight. What time?”

“Just meet me here.” She huffs, turns, and walks back toward the restaurant.

“I’ll do that!” I call after her.

She stops and frowns again, then tosses her long locks as she disappears inside. I can’t wipe the silly grin from my face.

“Boss?” Alejandro comes up behind me.

“Sup?”

“Trouble... that one’s trouble.”

I chuckle. “Watch your mouth, Alejandro. That’s my Valentine.”

* * *

What the hell just happened? I just made a date? What the hell? I’m so pissed at myself now I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. A little white lie, what’s the harm? Just to keep Margie off my back. Trouble is, I’ve told so many white lies to my sisters over the years that it’s becoming a nasty little habit. Damn. Now I’ve dragged this man into it. Melvin? Actually, he kind of stepped in willingly. Something’s not right about that, either.

“He gone?”

“Who?”

“Your boyfriend,” Margie smirks.

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“You know Margie, sometimes you push to hard and too much. Back off!” Snatching up my purse, I head out, ignoring her calls for me to come back and explain myself. I screwed this up, yes, but I know my problem and it starts and ends with pleasing my big sis.

“Tia, get back here!”

That was the last I heard of her as I pushed out the door and marched to my car. Melvin is talking to Chuckie and having him sign an invoice. The man’s eyes are on me. Strangely, when I glance over, I find myself blushing under that penetrating stare. What am I doing? Whatever it is, I better get it under control. I’m not sure if our delivery man is someone I want to tease. He nods at me, and damn it, I smile.

Well, a little flirting doesn’t hurt. Right?

Chapter Four

Where did all these cars come from? On either side of the road they're boxed in. Took me nearly twenty minutes to find a spot that wouldn't have me walking several blocks in the dark. Lucky for me on the third sweep there's an Armada, a block over, swerving out a space. I expertly wheel my beamer in its place. But unlucky for me, my tenacious pursuit of the perfect parking spot made me later than late. Grabbing my purse and putting the top up, I'm on the sidewalk in seconds.

Jake's Cleaners is closed? Didn't know that. That's a shame. It seems like a lot of the old-school shops are closing up in the neighborhood. All the more reason for Lucille's to relocate. Something that Margie is dead-set against. I could do so much in marketing and promoting the place, but she nixes every idea I dream up. Look at this place. Once a thriving pulse in our community, the streets got pawn shops, record stores, liquor stores, barbershops, and plenty of abandoned buildings. Squatters from all over the underbelly of this town roll this avenue. I worry constantly for my sisters after the latest robbery.

"Hey lady, spare some change?"

He leaps out in front of me from nowhere. A scruffy Hispanic male with red, swollen crusty eyes that are latched on to my purse. He pushes up in my face, scratching at himself. He scratches his arm, chin, then head and the stench comes off him like hot garbage. So pungent he is, my eyes water. Taking a step back, I struggle with a firm answer.

"No, sorry. I don't."

Circling him wide, I get a move on, quickening my steps. I can see guests and family further ahead walking inside. I'm close enough to not be in real danger. Though if he grabbed my purse right now I'd just let it ride. No way am I chasing some guy over credit cards and sixty dollars cash. He can have it. And apparently

scruffy here is a mind reader 'cause he's sniffing out my fear. So I hurry the pace with his footfalls in beat on the sidewalk behind me.

"Wait, lady. Damn. Why you got to be such a bitch about it? You can't spare a fucking dollar... I ain't ate in three days." He hooks his hand, fingers fastened like a claw, on my arm and yanks me back. He's so strong, I choke on the scream of protest in my throat. Then it happens: a swift jerk from behind that releases me and sends the vagrant flying to the side. The poor sap is body-slammed against the gate that shields the windows and doors to Jake's Cleaners.

"You got a problem keeping your hands to your self, bro?"

"Ugh, lemme... ugh... go..."

It's Melvin with his forearm pressed crushingly hard against the man's windpipe. The guy's terrified. He's gurgling through an apology. Melvin lets him drop and the homeless guy scurries away on all fours, then leaps to his feet and runs in the other direction. It happens so quick I'm standing there, gaping. Where did Melvin come from?

And when did he get all alpha-man fine on me? Check him out. He's in khaki pants starched crisply, a navy blazer that's smooth as velvet but rippled like corduroy over a white shirt that's tucked tight over a chest that's cut with hard angles beneath. His cologne replaces the stench of the arm-snatcher earlier. It's so sexy and strong that I breathe in deep and exhale slow. I'd say my flower guy is what my nephews would call a 'cool cat'.

My eyes lift again to his and I register the concern glistening there. I'm a little freaked, too. Not by the robber alone. I think it's that jump-out-of-nowhere-kick-ass thing he got going, or am I just over the top from too many nights of red wine and crossword puzzles?

"You look beautiful."

Three of the most seductive words a man could ever say to a lady. Like Cupid's arrow in the bump, I nearly jump from the surge of flattery.

"You sure you're okay?" he asks, then looks back over his shoulder. His jaw clenches with anger at what he walked up on. Those eyes return to me and

soften. So does his speak. “Been waiting on you. You’re late. Came out for a smoke and saw him before you did. Sorry he got so close.”

He smiles. Then he moves out of the shadows. Steps out from the overhang of the cleaners’ awning. He stops near me with the moon as his spotlight and I do get a little weak.

“I’m okay. Thank you. He probably was harmless,” I stammer.

“No man should handle a lady like that. If he does, it’s never harmless.”

Amen to that. He speaks the truth.

“Ready?” he asks. Again I’m caught in the hypnotic green blaze of his eyes. *This is Melvin the flower guy, right?* My lord, what a bar of soap and razor can do for a man. I just can’t get over the cleaned-up transformation. Was he always this handsome?

“Ready for what?” My voice cracks between syllables. Did he say he smoked? Hate smokers. Can’t stand the smell. But staring at those lips... I’d sweep my tongue over them and take a hit of tobacco any time he wants.

“To go inside.”

Inside. Damn. Yes...

He gives a patient smile, clearing the fog I’m slipping into and shattering my naughty thoughts. Sure I have a vibrator—just for rubbing, never penetration—and yes my libido is just fine, but I’m picky. And... well... I never really did the deed. Never met a man that made me want to share something like *that* with him, and trust me, many have tried. But I can talk a good game. I always could. Over the years, the older I got, the more embarrassed over my inexperience with men I became. Who wants to date a 35-year-old virgin who’s never truly been kissed? My sisters would have a field day if they knew. So I exaggerate, brag, and boast to keep the men at arm’s length. Funny thing, though, this one right here... it would be nice if he got a little close.

“Um, yes!” Throwing him a bright smile, I shake off the heat pulsating deep in my core and compose myself. I’m a master at restraint. “You know you really don’t have to do this. I feel really bad about my games earlier. You must think I’m crazy. I’m really not... it’s like this thing with my family and... it’s just Margie really,

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she's always trying to fix me up. Sometimes a little white lie is... well you know it's not good to lie, but sometimes..."

"Tia. Let's go inside." He offers me his arm.

Blushing, I hook mine through and step to his side. Suddenly I want to know more about Melvin.

"Hey, I don't know your last name."

He holds the door for me. As I pass, I'm rewarded with a stronger whiff of him and a closer look into those jeweled eyes of his. He smiles. A nice smile, which is good, 'cause I'm big on hygiene. This one here knows how to brush a tooth, 'cause his teeth are as bright a 100-watt bulb. I'm telling you, to look at him now, you wouldn't know he plays in dirt for a living.

"Melvin Reed," comes his reply in a smooth delivery so seductive it goes over like a lover's touch. My eyes are glued to his lips. I'm blocking the door. Sure would like for him to say something, anything, move those lips one more time, baby. What am I saying? A lie with a pretend man is one thing, but with a man that's close to members of my family, well that's something different. Maybe I should have kept it at first names. And let me stop staring at the man, jeez.

"Tia!!"

Spell broken. My name is being called from across the room. Pushing out of the force field he's erected around us, I'm freed from the green swirl of his eyes in time to regain my senses. It's Bet and Toya. I haven't seen them since last Christmas. Smiling at my cousins with arms open wide, we rush each other for a long-overdue hug. We all grew up together. These are my girls.

"When did you two get in?" I ask.

"Last night. We're staying at Jackson's... um, who is he?" Toya's eyeing my date. I don't even have to look back to know he's there. Strange enough, I can feel him close. Melvin is being a gentleman and giving us space, when I do turn. Sweet. This guy is really sweet.

"Toya, Bet, this is Melvin, he's um..."

"Her date." He extends his hand to Toya. She grips it firm. I can tell by the way Melvin's brows shoot up. It's hard to suppress a giggle. Toya doesn't mean any

harm, but the girl could learn a thing or two about boundaries. Finally she drops it, and he shakes Bet's hand politely.

"This you, cuz?" Bet says, checking him out.

I can't help but roll my eyes at the cougars. "Back off, girls. It's his first time to a Jackson affair."

"Well, let's get the man something to eat," Toya says, taking one arm. She's barely five feet, so her head goes way back to look up at him.

"Most definitely, and something to drink." Bet co-signs, hooking on to his other arm. Bet is tall and lean with a long neck. Growing up, we used to call her Ollie for Olive Oyl. Melvin looks to me for help as they lead him away. I give him a little wave bye-bye. Thank goodness. Now I can think straight. Man was giving off vibes that had me acting like a schoolgirl.

"Hey, sweetheart." A soft but deep familiar voice comes from behind. With a quick turn of my head, I'm greeted by the warmth and love in Jackson's smile. My dad's smile does something to me every time.

"Hi, Daddy." I kiss his cheek.

"How's my girl?" he says, pulling me in, hooking his arm around my waist so we stand side by side. We're looking over our guests, both seated and mingling.

"I'm good, Daddy. Sorry I was late."

Together we walk toward the table with Sherry and the family. Of course we stop to speak to several of them. My eyes continually are drawn to Melvin, who is smiling, listening to Toya and Bet tell him God knows what. Then we're moving, me and my father. Jackson is the heart of our family, extended family, blended family, all family. He has held the line on a sometimes-failing business and a mortgage. Never remarried, my father is the quintessential man. It was he that instilled in us such strength and confidence, that even now I feel like I can take on the world.

But within his love is a stark contradiction. For all his insight, there's a chauvinistic bend to his heart. It's very disappointing. He expects his girls to marry. Married or not, he expects us to bring him sons to hold up the Jackson family. To be prosperous, not just financially, but with expanding families of our own. He's

elected Margie as the shepherd to herd us, Jackson's girls, to the altar. After picking Chuckie as her husband, he unleashed our sister to rule over us each.

There are times when I want to ask him why. What is it really about? Do you not have faith in my ability to be my own person? Can I not make you proud without a man at my side? Does a husband validate my existence?

"So where is this guy Margie told me about? She said you broke up with the pilot and you dating a flower guy now. I think I've met him here once or twice. Where is he?" Jackson's eyes sweep the room.

To his question, I sigh. If only I had picked some man and just been done with it, maybe my other accomplishments would be given merit. I then point his eyes to Melvin. My father squeezes me. "Yes, yes, I met him before. Nice fella. That's Elaine Reed's son."

"Elaine Reed? Deacon Reed's wife from First Baptist?"

"Yep. They adopted him, as I recall. I remember him when Deacon was alive. Sad thing that happened to Nicky—"

"Nicky? Who is Nicky?"

"There you are, Jackson! I've been looking all over for you!" Auntie Deborah exclaimed. Woman has the widest hips on the planet. They stretch a yard. She's knocking one chair then the other as she beats a path through the tables. Many heads are bumped, and others look back in wonder at the punch of that hip swing. In a purple Evangelical dress complete with church hat sitting two feet off her head, she smiles.

But my eyes return to Melvin the florist. He's very comfortable in the sea of black faces surrounding him. Suddenly I'm a little curious about the man.

Aunt Deborah, mama's sister, goes on and on about daddy's toast. She takes his hand and pulls him along. He plants a parting kiss to my cheek. "Make sure you bring him to the family table. I want to meet him," Jackson says, then is dragged into the mix with Aunt Deborah's knock-'em-sock-'em hips clearing the way.

"Mmmhmm," I answer, my eyes never leaving Melvin. He's now by the open bar, staring back at me. There's this predator-come-hither thing he has going

in that stare. I shiver under the sexy. Smile at the flattery, and rub my thighs together to cool it. What is it about this one? Is it our little secret, or the way he just managed to get all up in mine with a simple slip on my part? Either way he's calling to me, and damn it, I have to answer.

* * *

Several Minutes Prior

"Let me ask you a question, so how you meet Tia?" Toya asked.

"Wait, your name is **Melvin Reed**? Are you any relation to **Nicky Reed**? He had an older brother name **Melvin** that was white—"

"Bet!" Toya hisses.

"Yeah, he was my little brother. I was adopted."

Bet looks from me to Toya. "Damn, wonder why we never met. Hey, I'm sorry about Nicky. He was cool peeps. Whenever I visited for the summer we would hang out at the **Rec Center**. Really nice guy. I heard about how—"

"Yeah, he was." I cut in. Last thing I want to be questioned about is my lil-brother. I'm not sure if I'm ready to share that tidbit of my history with Princess. Speaking of which, as the girls go on about the old neighborhood, my eyes and attention wander. They latch on to her. The goddess has my full attention now. She's wearing the hell out of her little black dress tonight. Damn, make a man go deep to keep from dropping his hand down those curves. Tightly fit, it's hitting all the right spots. My lips flatten together for restraint and my hand tightens on the cool glass of Hennessy.

Have to toss it back and let the alcohol burn over my tongue and throat to keep myself in check. That mermaid figure of hers leaves a man's heart punching like Tyson trying to break out. All these years and she's never even glanced my way. Never dropped a single opportunity to get close. Knew of her growing up, but saw so little of her. She didn't hang out at the usual spots. Didn't club when we were pushing fake IDs through the hood. Didn't meet at the **Rec Center** for a little bump and grind with the fellas. Nah, sweetness kept it locked away, as she should. But

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she's all grown up now. All woman. Giving a man heartburn just from a look. Based on the direction my life went, maybe it's best Tia Jackson stayed an enigma.

Her father pulls away and she looks at me--looks me dead in the eye. I will her to come to me. Put it hard in the stare I give her. To my delight, she responds, walking toward me with that sexy sway to her hips and the inner man in me speaks up as if I'm talking to her from across the room.

Baby, you just don't know how long I've waited and wanted you to look at me. How long I've waited to get next to you. How many nights you've visited my dreams after a simple sight of you the day before. But you will... if it's the last thing I do... you will...

If only I could will her to—

“Okay, girls. Jackson is about to make the toast, and I need Mr. Handsome here to take a seat at the family table.” She gives a wave of her hand to the ladies. Like shooing them away and staking claim. This I can dig.

Toya gives me another wink. “When the DJ gets crunk, I wanna dance.” She shoots a look my way and bats her eyes. If she wasn't standing next to Princess, I'd be tempted. But in comparison, yeah right. She sashays off. Bet rolls her eyes. “Sorry, girl. Nice to meet you, Melvin,” she says and hurries off.

“My cousins wear you out?”

“No, your family is nice.”

“Warning, say very little at dinner. I'll fill in the blanks. Nice can turn on a dime when you surrounded by Jackson women.”

“Blanks? Let me ask you a question, Princess. What's with the games and lies?” Her hand is in mine and a little pull draws her to me.

“No big deal, just a running thing I got going with my family. Keeps them out my business.”

“Woman like you shouldn't have to lie.”

“Woman like me? What does that mean?” she bristles.

What's up with her? She's getting my signals crossed. I feel her tug on her hand but I'm not ready to let go just yet.

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“Beautiful, smart, sexy. A woman like you has no reason to lie. I’m sure men are lining up just to get a hit of your perfume as you pass.”

Okay, I’m rusty. My game is off. I’m rushing it. Waxing poetic too soon. But she inspires me. I have to know, so why not ask?

She rips her hand down and narrows her eyes on me. “Melvin, let’s get something straight. Not interested, okay? This dinner here ends, so does this thing between us.” She smirks. I think she’s trying to bait me. Won’t work on me. Pushing up from the bar, I get up in her space and she takes a step back.

“However you want it, Princess.”

“Testing... testing... testing.” The DJ taps the microphone with his hand and it breaks the stand-off. She isn’t sure if she’s angry or flattered by the way I’ve got her number. I’ll give her time to marinate on it. Turning in those fuck me heels she’s wearing--in honesty, any shoe on her foot would be considered fuck-me pumps--she leads me through the maze of tables. Question and answer session over. I’m wiping my jaw hard to keep my eyes from dipping below. She’s a lady and I want to treat her like one. Her scent got me all off balance. It calls to me like the Pied Piper’s pipe, and I swear it has me wide open. Need to chill and slow down. The lady hasn’t had a simple conversation with me yet. Still, if I get a chance...

She tosses me a look and puts her finger to her lips, a warning to keep my mouth closed. And the mystery deepens. Why is a woman as fine as her filling in blanks?

We sit and everyone greets me. Chuck gives me a sideways glance again. Mental note: make sure to square things with my man. I think he’s the only person at the table that knows our game.

“Well, introduce him, Tia,” Margie says with a grin so wide she’s showing gums.

Jackson is up at the DJ booth trying to get his microphone to work. Tia rolls her eyes and cuts me a sweet smile.

“Melvin, this is my family: sister, Pam, her husband, Clarence, sister Alicia, her husband Mason, sister Sherry and her fiancé, Kelvin. You know Margie and Chuckie.”

“Hello.”

They all speak at once. Kind of freaks me out. Questions are thrown at me like stones. When did we start dating? How long? Did I eat? Am I coming to the wedding? Someone again mentions the pilot. Another says I’m familiar from back in the day... wants to know ‘who my people are’. Another reminds the little sister I’m just the flower guy. Damn, in an instant they can take a man’s ego and grind it to dust. How many times tonight will I be introduced as the flower guy?

“Ahem. Is this thing on?” Jackson asks. Feedback buzzes out of the speakers with a sharp, piercing whine. Jackson laughs and so does the family. I look over to Tia. She’s turned sideways in her chair. Her dress is tastefully cut low to the middle of her back. In the center of her spine is the cutest mole. Haven’t been this close to notice it before. Now I can’t look away from it. A dark spot on flawless brown skin, it’s the sexiest thing, next to her dimples.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming. It’s good to see family at a time like this. The Richards and the Jacksons have something to celebrate. This union is a blessing, in more ways than one.” He gives his daughter a wink. Wonder what that wink is about? Seems like there’s more to the reason why the youngest Jackson is heading to the altar.

“Tonight is a celebration. A celebration of love, family, and all the good things to come. For me, my only wish is for my girls to grow into the beautiful women they are today, and have families of their own. That’s true for Sherry. She and Kelvin have found that path, and the Lord is going to see them through. It’ll be his hand that covers yours both tomorrow when you become Mrs. Kelvin Richards.”

Everyone claps, as do I. Tia, however, is unusually still. I can’t see her face, but she seems tense, as if she wants to bolt. Strange.

“All right, settle down. Settle down. I just want to say daddy is proud of you baby-girl. Here’s to the youngest and newest member of the family.”

Glasses are raised. Again Tia is still, no movement. After a sip, I’m a little curious to the vibes I pick up from her. Then it’s clear, with the final words of her

father. "Eat, drink, and have a good time. Tia baby, you're next!" he says and winks at her.

Everyone laughs and claps. Eyes turn to our table. Tia turns around. A dark cloud has moved over that pretty face, and the light in her eyes has dimmed. She drops those long, even lashes and avoids the stares and joking of those seated around us. Damn, I want get into defensive mode and tell them cut the shit. Can't they see Princess isn't taking to the humor?

Without warning, she shoots straight up. "Excuse me."

Pulling out her chair, my instinct is again to help... but she shoots me a withering glare just from the offer of assistance and stumps off. I am kind of disappointed at her attitude.

"Don't mind her, Melvin. She gets testy when Jackson teases her," Margie says, picking up on the exchange between us.

"I see. I don't understand it though..." I mumble more to myself than the table. My eyes search for her fleeing form.

The one named Alicia sips her glass of wine. She's got a deep ebony shade to her skin and her hair is picked out in a curly black cloud that gives her this Cleopatra Jones thing. Very striking. All the Jackson sisters are striking in their own way.

Alicia sets the flute of wine down a little abruptly. The golden liquid splashes in the glass, licking all the way up to the rim. "Of course you don't understand. None of us do. Tia can never finish anything in a relationship, which is why we are just dying to know how you two met." Her eyes narrow a challenge on me. Looks like Tia isn't really fooling anyone at this table but herself. At the very least, Alicia, who I've worked with several times in handling deliveries, doesn't seem to be buying our act.

"Leave it alone, Alicia," sister Pam says. "The pilot cheated on her. She's just upset. Sorry, Melvin. Nothing against you, but I think she really liked this one."

"Oh, please! That's crap." Sister Sherry chimes in. "The pilot cheats, the Navy Commander—what was his name?"

"Steve?" Alicia laughs.

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“Yes, Steve. He drops her ’cause of the long distance thing, and Derrick the trucker... wait. What happened to Derrick? Wait, I think he cheated, too...”

“At least he actually made an appearance.” Alicia cuts in. “When was the last time any of these Mr. Wonderfals stopped by—”

“Enough, Alicia!” Margie snaps. “No more wine.” She then shoots Sherry a look that makes her eyes lower. “You know better to sit here and discuss her like that. What the hell is wrong with you two?”

Now I’m really confused. Are they mad ’cause she has bad luck with men, or that she just doesn’t have a man? The table goes silent when Margie speaks. She turns her eyes to me and gives me a polite smile that relaxes Sherry, who looks like she’s on the verge of tears. “Forgive my sisters. Their lips are as loose as their manners.”

Alicia rolls her eyes and her husband rubs her shoulders to the dis. Margie never takes her eyes off me. “Just know that Tia’s special, so treat her that way. Don’t want to have Chuckie here fuck you up.”

Clarence, Pam’s husband, laughs out loud and Margie smiles as if it’s a joke. That makes the others smile, too. However, from the cool gaze of Chuck my poker bud, I’m not so sure.

“So don’t give up. Tia deserves some happiness. She’s not getting any younger.”

“Amen to that.” Alicia burps.

Yeah, that’s it. Time to roll. I’ve heard enough.

“Excuse me.”

I push up from the table. All eyes lift as I do. Chuck frowns. “Where you headed, my man?”

“To check on the lady.”

“How about you and I chat later.” Chuck informs instead of asks. He cuts his eyes at me and I walk off, not sure which way she went. But I understand a little more about the dinner date and little more about her.

Chapter Five

Taking in a deep breath, I exhale another one slow. I need to get back to the table. No telling what's going on in my absence. But why does daddy do that? I'm so damn embarrassed. My hand grips the cool enamel of the sink. The smell of lavender soap mixes with the faint hint of pine from the scrubbing Pam put on the place before we opened. Waiting for my anxiety to pass, I'm practicing my breathing. Half of the reason my family treats me like an oddity is 'cause I won't be honest. Years of lying has gotten me here. I can't blame anyone but myself.

"Tia? You okay?"

My head swings up at the sound of his voice. He's outside the bathroom door. Did he follow me?

"Just a minute!" Washing my hands and wiping under my eyes, I dry them, toss the napkin, then throw open the door. Melvin is standing there watching me. Concern has caused his eyes to eclipse to a very dark shade of green.

"I'm fine."

"Need some air?" he asked.

The question catches me off guard. What is he, a mind reader now? "I sure do."

He smiles. "C'mon."

We walk through the narrow passageway out to the back emergency exit, into the night. Behind the store are Chuckie's Suburban and a closed green dumpster. Thankfully, it's empty, so the smells we get are those from the kitchen drifting up out of the top stack. Wonder who Margie let in the kitchen to tighten up dinner, since she's mingling? We walk the side of the Suburban and stop behind it. Stretched out in front, the alley empties to the sidewalk and street. Above us are a few stars. Most washed out by clouds and the lights from the city. Not like in the

country where you can see heaven at night. I like visiting Toya and Bet just for those starry nights.

“So you cool?” he asks again.

“Let me guess, my family gave you the whole sordid story?”

“Gave me what they think is the story,” he finishes.

“What?”

“John, Stevie, Derrick... those cats don’t exist, do they?”

I can’t believe the question. What, he’s known me all of a day and he peels off my mask as if it’s just something in the way. How dare he? “Of course they’re real.”

He chuckles, drops his shoulder to the back of the truck in a lean. He’s staring directly at me and I’m swallowing hard. Then it happens. Not something that happens often on this subject. In fact, I can’t say it’s ever happened since it began. I confess.

“No. They aren’t real.”

“Didn’t think so.”

Glancing over to him, I want to smack him for being so smart. And I want to move in closer from the warmth his gaze gives. “How do you know? They teach you that in flower-arranging class?”

He shrugs off the jab like a pro. Stick and move. He throws one back. “Nah, baby. I know a liar when I see one.”

“Hold up. Who are you calling a liar?”

He stares and I glare. I don’t need his condescension. Who does he think he is? “Forget this crap...” I step away, but he throws up his hand and presses his palm gently to my lower abdomen. He gives a gentle push that places my back against the cool, locked doors of the Suburban.

“Slow down, Princess. There’s more to it. Do you ever give a man a chance to explain?” He’s close now, his scent invading my senses. I open my mouth to speak and he moves in closer, puts a hand to the side of my head. He’s searching my eyes. What is he looking for? My soul?

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His voice drops an octave—Barry White low—and when he speaks, I get that tingly feeling between my legs. Squeezing my thighs tight, I try to focus on his flow.

“I know because there ain’t enough stupidity out there for three men in a row to let you slip away.” He touches my hair, just the ends. Kind of samples the texture like a winemaker in a vineyard. His eyes lower, half-mast, they’re heavy with desire. I may not be experienced, but I know that look. What’s happening? How did I end up here? The alley behind my family restaurant with some gardening dude setting me to drool. Is he for real?

“I can explain...” I croak.

To this, he smiles. “No need, Princess. You have your reasons. I respect that. Just know I’m the real thing. No need for games.”

* * *

She’s blowing my mind. Did she even know the power she wielded over men, me in particular? Either she’s the greatest tease or...

“So beautiful,” I mumble.

I want to share with her what being this close to her does to a man. My eyes lower to her exposed shoulders and I can see the tiny goose-pimples form. Baby-girl is cold. Stepping back, I remove my blazer. She hugs herself, watching me, but comes forward for me drop it around her shoulders. “Better?”

“Yeah,” she says in a soft voice. Ms. Sass has checked out. I’m standing face to face with Tia now. It’s about damn time.

“My father says that Deacon Reed is your dad. You’re adopted, right?”

“I am.”

“They were good people. I knew of them from church. I used to see you, and your brother, I think. Yeah, I used to see you there. Took me some time, but I remember now.”

Her mentioning Nicky lets the air out of the balloon I’m carrying for her. Dropping my hands in my pockets, I withdraw.

“Does he work with you?”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” she says, stepping forward. Her hand reaches out, then touches my arm. It is a touch that warms me against the night wind. “How’d he die?”

How’d the questions turn to me? She’s looking up at me, closer to me than she should be. The urge to curl up against those sexy breasts of hers and tell her the long story has me grinding hard on my molars for restraint. Then there’s a soft squeak. An unmistakable sound of scurrying that sets hell to break loose.

“RAT!!!!” she screams and leaps three feet from the ground, onto me. I catch her, but lean back. She’s kicking her feet. She buries her face deep into the side of my neck. Her sweet breath makes me loosen my hold. Her arms are so tight around my neck I’m strangling, stumbling. I can’t see down or around and she’s holding on for dear life.

“It’s gon’ be okay Prin-Princess... cal-calm down..” She’s in my arms, but my blazer drops from her shoulders as she tightens her hold on me. Kicking her feet and squealing, I’m positive she’s not listening. She keeps repeating ‘rat... rat... rat... rat...’

So I’m forced to put her up against the truck. Press my weight into her to hold her still. “Hey, it’s gone... I swear it, sweetheart.”

Her eyes are stretched so wide they look like they may drop from their sockets. “Y-y-you sure? It’s gone?”

“Yes. It’s gone.” I breathe hard and deep as adrenaline rushes through my veins, her body all up against mine. Fuck that. I’m not moving either. It was such sweet torture to be up on her like this. My face so close I can smell the mint she rolled over that sexy tongue of hers until it dissolved into nothing. Should I do it, go for it, take that plunge and ask for forgiveness later?

“I’ve wanted to kiss you since I laid eyes on you tonight,” I confess.

Fuck it. I’ll ask for permission. She’s the kind of woman you have to, because she reads all kinds of shit into a man just being a man. Sadly, she overthinks the feeling and misses the sexy pangs of desire in moments like this.

“You have?” she swallows.

“I have,” I say. And now my mouth is just centimeters from hers. She’s pinned up against the back of the Suburban. This isn’t where I had hoped it to happen. In my dreams, she would walk straight up to me in front of friends and family to stake her claim. Not ashamed or hesitant in any way. I’d be her King and she’d be my Queen, it’s done. Yeah, I like that, her boldly putting a kiss down on me until I drop to my knees for mercy. Hell yah, that’s how I wanted it. But right now, a man will take it anywhere he can. That is, especially now, ’cause I’m not leaving this alley without some sugar.

“I’m curious, Princess, what you taste like...” My eyes lower, our noses touch and our lips are so damn close.

“You know what they say.”

“No. What do they say?”

She gives a nervous chuckle. Again, she isn’t fighting me, trying to downplay the heat. Baby-girl feels it: those pretty tits are rising and falling with her attempts to breathe. In fact, her hands come to rest on my shoulders like a good girl. She’s knows it’s going down.

“Curiosity killed the cat.” She exhales and that mint-sweet breath curls up in my nostrils and warms my lips.

“Yeah, baby, but satisfaction brought him back.”

* * *

He’s going to kiss me. Before I can object, it happens. His lips press into mine and my eyes drop in pure feminine submission. I kissed Bobby Franks in the sixth grade with no tongue and Eddie Crane prom night with a little tongue and enough saliva to make me hate the action. A couple of other men have brushed my lips, but I keep them closed. I can’t stomach the thought of an exchange of body fluids. But this contact rocks me to my toes. My feet dangle from the way he has me pinned and I kick them lightly.

He sends all my denial into a downward spiral as the seal of my lips is broken. His tongue rolls in and grazes the roof of my mouth, with its tip shooting a

bolt through me. Then, with a controlled sweep, he devastates my mouth. It's a deep, probing kiss. The fusion of our mouths made his pent-up agony and mine explode. This is all nature. I didn't need practice to know where this was going. Gripping tight to the sides of his waist, a deep shudder ripples through my body like a free-flowing waterfall. But my heart can't take it. Spontaneous heart failure comes from lick after lick, and I swear my brain is about to melt. Too much pleasure, too quick. It's a junkie rush. And this man, this beautiful man has all his might up against me, making me wet my panties. Lord, help me. I can't breathe... I can't...

He caresses my hips with his open palms, flat, tracing them, pushing the boulder between his legs up against me. When did he get this power? The power to blast the wall of defenses it took me damn near twenty years to build. Damn him, yes! More... give me... take it there... do it...

"Tia!"

We both freeze. His lips lift from mine and air floods my lungs as I groan at the interruption.

"TIA! MELVIN!"

"Yeah, we here..." I say, stooping to pick up his blazer and dust it off. I can see his erection in the dark and pass him his jacket with a blush. Did I do that? He turns away from me to shake it off. Wow. I did do that.

"We're over here!" I walk around the truck. Margie is staring at me curiously.

"Well, come back in. Sherry is about to dance, then we doing the soul-train line. You know how we do it. Where is Melvin?"

"I'm here," he says, reappearing at my side. I'm too embarrassed to look over, but I think he's okay.

"What ya'll doing out here in this funky alley?"

"Get all out of my bizzness, please!"

Margie smirks. "Un huh, check you out, girl! You blushing!" Margie laughs. "Well come on... time to party. Show us what you working with, Melvin. See if you can hang." She throws her hips from side to side and goes through the door.

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Arms folded, I'm walking back inside with him. I should tell Margie the truth. He just showed me what he was working with, and damn it all to hell but it was nice. I likey... I likey a lot.

Chapter Six

Go Tia! Go Tia! Go Tia! Go Tia!

The crowd's chants are overwhelming the music. Tia struts down the line, striking a pose with hand to head and the other to her hip. Princess starts to work those hips. Moistening my lips, I'm watching them whirl, sway, then circle in ways that should be outlawed. I drop my body to the wall for support. My boy, Stevie Wonder, knows her. Fuck, he wrote a song just for her. *That-Girl*. Yeah. I know what Stevie had in mind when he penned those lyrics. 'Cause even a blind man can see it, when he so desperately needs to.

It's her song, and she's wearing me out dancing down the middle of the soul-train line. A sexy hip-rock, Tia's grooving in those heels. I'm itching to ease them from her feet. The Jackson and Richards families set off to the left and right, forming tight lines. Synchronized footsteps and clapping matches the rhythm of the beat. Tia spins, then drops down and comes up slow. Shit I tell you. I'm about to bust the seam in my pants. She's making me crazy.

"My man. Let me holla at you for a minute."

Chuck drops a wide, long-fingered hand on my shoulder and grips it tight. He stepped up smooth, 'cause normally I know when a person is this close. It's Tia and the spell she cast over me. Shaking loose of his hold, I try to tear my eyes away from Princess. Can't. It is just plain and simple. Can't. Chuck's timing blows.

Tia laughs.

She's at the end of the line chanting her sister's name. Party in full swing, Margie steps up. A little girl adorned with a mass of ponytails and ribbons holds fast to her leg. Margie reaches down and pries the three-year-old fingers off and spins her over to another sister. The child howls, preferring her Auntie Margie instead of mommy. Too late to re-negotiate auntie time, Margie really cuts loose. She's working her hips harder than Tia, showing up the young folk. Throwing her shoulders from side to side she goes old-school on them with a dance once called

the cabbage-patch. Pam breaks the line and starts doing the running man at her sister's side. Then Alicia gets in on the action doing the prep. The crowd goes wild with laughter and cheers. Man, I haven't had this kind of fun since—

“Mel. Now, bro,” Chuck snaps in my ear.

I can't miss the stone-cold stare he's locked on me. The ebony giant ain't playin on this one—he's pissed. *Fuck!* Nodding, I have to follow. Folks hurry to get out of the way when Chuck passes. He and Margie make an interesting pair. Chuck, or Chuckie as he's known to everyone inside the Jackson family, takes no shit from anyone. However, word has it that Margie is tougher. I've peeped it before and seen her shoot him a look that silences him and backs him down quick. I heard her cursing worse than a man with a bullet in him, then switch it up and turn on the charm. Chuck also carries his weight. When his firecracker wife gets too far out of hand, he calmly lays in his law and she falls in line. It's a weird balance that's all their own. I kind of envy that. It is like finding a woman that brings stability, my rib, my other half, the one that completes me. Yeah, I'm talking about the lady that can wipe the mean clean, but knows how and when to love her man all the same.

The music changes and I steal a final glance back. Tia's laughing, holding the hands of the little Ms. Ponytail. The two dance around, disappearing in the crowd of family. I know she's uptight and all, but I get this feeling...

I nearly collide with Chuck. He has turned and stopped. We're up in the cut by the bar. It is less populated over here.

“What's up, man?” I ask.

“You tell me. You up on my sister in-law now? What's up with that?”

Okay, this could go wrong fast and I need to be careful. Where mama bear Margie is trying to set her baby cub free, papa bear here ain't into loosening up that hold just yet. I can dig it. He's the man of the family and probably hassled every man that tried to roll on the Jackson sisters. If I had sisters or anything left of a family, I'd be the same way. Fuck, I was that way with Nicky on the flip side.

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I got mad respect for Chuck. He's a cool dude. Thing is, I answer to no man. Never have, since the joint, and never will. Stand or fall, I do it alone. "She and I are cool. End of story."

Chuck crosses his arms across that chest made of bricks. He's an inch or two taller than me and I'm no small cat. He's looking me in the eye, which I respect. I can't stand a man that won't look you in the eye.

"Tia has a big imagination. Always has, and it gives her blind spots to the truth. Margie's blind to it, but I'm not. Dig? I know you ain't playin' her. Right?"

"No games, man. I'm here 'cause I want to be. True, we ain't tight like I wish we were. But she needed a date and I stepped up. We cool?" I ask, putting down the sweet talk on the mean giant to keep him from rolling my ass up out the door.

"We cool." He pounds my fist and walks off. Just like that, it's settled, as long as I know my place. Don't think Chuck would take too kindly to that back-alley kiss that had left a man with a jones so bad, I've fixed myself in my pants several times since.

My eyes follow as he breezes, and then returns to Princess. Tia's locked in a circle of kids. They're teaching her moves to some dance tune I can't name, and she's catching on. Watching, my elbow drops to the bar. When the clock strikes twelve, the moment and all these little chances to be close to her are gone. I'll turn back into some shmo she wouldn't give a second glance. I can see it now. Princess returns to her crystal palace and I'm back at my flat above the flower shop. With a cold beer and some tunes, I'm sitting on the roof, waiting for the sun to rise. No chance of sleep after that kiss. Damn... what have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Seven

“Hey! You having a good time?”

He turns from the bar and his eyes take in mine. He isn't smiling, but there's the hint of pleasure on his lips causing them to curl slightly at the corners. Drink in hand, he's killing me with those looks. Again, why is it I never noticed him before?

“Yes, I'm having a good time.”

My hand goes to the whiskey glass and closes over his. Melvin's eyes drop to my touch and he lets go when I take the drink. “How does an Irish boy, you did say you were Irish, right? How does an Irish boy get a name like Melvin?”

To this, she flashes me a smile and those dimples deepen. Sexy. “Moms loved me. Marked me as hers when she held me as a baby. At the time she believed she couldn't have any. Found out different later though. So it is what it is. Melvin is my pop's name.”

“You a junior?”

“I'm a junior,” he winks.

It was the sweetest thing I've ever heard. The Reeds were nice people. I could see them taking him in as a baby and making him their own. But something is guarded in his look and I think I catch a glimpse of sadness in his eyes. From what I know, both of them are dead. That makes him alone.

“I think Melvin is a sexy name,” I gush, and his eyes flip back up to mine. There's a challenge in them. Not sure of what to say next, I can feel the weight of his drink in my hand. Out of some nervous impulse, I take the plunge and toss back a swallow of the dark liquid. My gag reflex is intense. I'm hacking and coughing.

“Whoa... Princess. Breathe,” he chuckles.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. What was I thinking? Hell, what is he drinking? Tastes like pure kerosene. “Wh-what is that?” I'm wheezing and the bartender is

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smirking, handing him a glass of water, which he gives while taking the empty whiskey glass from my hand. Let me tell you. Water does nothing for the burn. I think I put a hole in my tongue. It feels like someone set fire to my throat. He touches my face. That touch feels heavenly.

“You okay?”

“Embarrassed, but yes, I am.” I pass him the glass. “What was that?”

“Why, you want another?”

“Do you always answer a question with a question?” I get up in his face. My buzz is taking hold. Three glasses of wine and now a shot of pure machismo from his whiskey glass have me feeling no pain. If it weren’t for that look plucking at my heartstrings, I would hold fast to being a lady and make him chase. But somehow he makes me bold and confident. Let’s not forget the phantom tingles that linger over my lips from his kiss. My first real kiss will keep me warm many nights to come. Yes, I’m claiming it as my first. Hell, what I’ve had before can’t touch what I discovered between Melvin’s lips.

He’s watching me again with those roving, dreamy eyes of his. They drop to my cleavage and I can feel my breasts warm from the heat in his stare. That’s another thing. He keeps checking me out, like I’m some kind of supermodel. The man is good for my ego.

When they make a climb back up to my face, they’re intense. The green is so dark I nearly disappear in them. This isn’t a man I want to tease. I seriously don’t want to tease him. There’s only so far this can go anyway. But that kiss. It was like I finally woke up, or my body did, under that caress, the meeting of tongues, the touching of souls. A dose of something new, and I’m still stomping on clouds because of it.

“Ask a real question and I’ll answer truthfully.” He buzz-saws through my thoughts.

Eye to eye, he doesn’t blink. As if he’s some genie from a bottle ready to grant me my hearts desire. It’s not the wine. It’s not the hit from his whiskey glass. I know exactly what it is. *It’s him*. And the DJ, well he’s got it in for me. He puts on my record and I’m ready to set it all aside. My inhibitions that is.

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“Will you... will you dance with me?”

I hear it come from my mouth, but I’m not sure I actually spoke the words. That tone isn’t one of an Executive V.P. who scores million-dollar accounts without breaking a sweat. Nope. That voice is from a nerd, with thick-rimmed glasses and two large front teeth, who finally got noticed by Mr. All-American. Margie said I didn’t bloom until late. I sure as hell still see that same pimple-face freak when I look in the mirror. But with Melvin, it’s different. Although I’m not big on dancing with strange men I barely know. They always get too close, hold too tight, and don’t know where to end it. I get this feeling that if I step into Melvin’s arms it’ll be a perfect fit.

His hand eases into mine. The contact sends a flash of memory where I’m up against the truck and his tongue is tunneling. My eyes flutter for just a blink, so brief I hope he doesn’t notice. He leads me toward the dance floor. He’s bold with it too, as if a sea of faces don’t all turn at once to watch us.

Frankie Beverly is crooning *Lady of Magic* and that’s how it feels, like magic. It is so surreal, it has to be *magic*. As we pass the family table, Margie and Jackson both look up at me. Suddenly my boldness fades under their watchful gaze. I really do want to make them proud. I try so hard for them to believe in me. Both of them have always given me my praise over my accomplishments in school. When Pam and Sherry used to tease me over being buried in books, Margie would raise the roof and then take me to the bookstore and buy me three more. When tuition went up and I feared not being able to cover the last year at Yale, Margie and Jackson both took on catering gigs outside of running the restaurant six days a week to make sure I had the money. My family loves me, and are proud of me, but still. I just wish I could make them happy, just me.

The closer we get to the dance floor, the more nervous I get. But he’s a pro. Immediately, he spins me out and brings me into his arms. And damn if Frankie Beverly isn’t as convincing as Melvin is sexy. One dance won’t hurt. I can imagine the tales I could spin after this. Family will be off my back, right? ‘Cause that’s all it’s about. It’s not this man. I have nothing in common with this man.

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He draws me to him. My eyes drift shut from the contact. My arms drop to his shoulders and my fingers lace behind his neck. He's got only one arm around me. His palm rests at the base of my spine, fingers splayed so that they stretch to the curve of my bottom. In this simple hold, he leads me around in a semi-circle on the dance floor. He's looking directly at me and it's affecting my breathing, let me tell you. I want to look away but it's affecting something else, so I don't. There is movement in my peripheral view, but he holds my gaze. Finally, I break the trance to see Margie and Chuckie take to the floor, joined by Pam and Clarence, Alicia and Mason, Sherry and Kelvin. All of us are dancing. For the first time at a family affair, I'm not the one stuck dancing with daddy. My eyes shyly, slowly, drift back up to Melvin. He smiles and all my muscles, along with my defenses, relax.

Hall and Oates comes up next. *Sarah Smile* spins out in lyrical poetry that has me swaying in his arms, loving every minute of it.

"Thank you, Princess," he says, in a thick voice, as if he had to go deep to bring it forth.

"For what?" I answer, moving my body against him. Holy crap it feels good! My heart is working overtime and I'm taking in quick breaths, wanting more. More of what? I'm not sure. But yeah, just like the kiss and that womanly feeling that has my pelvis aching. Lawd, I want more.

He just smiles.

"For letting me hold you again." And if he says one more thing like that they will have to call in a cardiologist. I can't stand it, but I'm loving it all at the same time. Loving the hell out of it. My arms tighten around his neck and I press into him. I swear he moans from it. His hand rubs up and down my spine so gently I can feel the goose-pimples prickle across my skin. The side of my face is pressed into his chest and the strong beat of his heart mixing with the music is hypnotic. I drift. Float. Feel. Oh man, I can't tell you how it feels.

In a word: good.

He feels good, so warm and strong under his shirt, so solid and protective. I want this dance to last forever. And this is another first. First time I danced with a man and couldn't let go. The buzz is smoothing out, just like the music. I lift my

head and his lowers. He brings his face to the side of mine and rubs his cheek against it.

“If you want to be free, you know, all you got to do is say so, Princess... I’ll get you there,” he whispers in my ear, and my eyes flutter. “Tell me what you want...”

I can’t speak. Can’t utter a single syllable. My body against his, his breath at my cheek, his words in my ear, I can’t explain it. An electric jolt of desire I’ve never even imagined shoots up my spine and pierces my heart. Damn Cupid. I ought to beat him with his bow. He’s shot me with his arrow and I’m slipping fast. And it gets more intense. So good, especially under Melvin’s touch, like when his palms slowly go up and down my back. Stuff like that. Yeah, it’s nice... it’s more than nice... it’s—

“Can I cut in?”

My head lifts to see daddy. He’s smiling at us. Melvin nods and lets me go and I want to snatch him back. Love you daddy, but damn!

“Come here, baby-girl,” my father says, taking me into his arms. He calls me and Sherry baby-girl. Pretty much sees us both as the same. Except Sherry will be married soon and I’ll still be the last daughter standing.

“Hi, Daddy.” I pant, like I just ran a marathon.

“You having a good time tonight?” he asks, concerned over my flustered state.

“Mmmhmm.” My eyes follow Melvin. He’s walking away. Where’s he going? Now I know what a junkie feels when they crash from the high. My body feels like it’s being pricked with a thousand needles. I need that man to touch me again. Damn it, why did daddy—

“Nice young man. Hasn’t said much to me, though.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” I say, finally looking back to my father, up into his caring eyes. “Guess I haven’t taken the time to introduce you.”

“He should have introduced himself.”

“Right. Right.” Oh come on, song, and end already. Where did Melvin go?

“You seem to like him.”

“Mmmhmm,” I say under my breath. Toya squeals and my eyes lock on the source of the sound. She’s laughing loudly now, all in Melvin’s face. She’s too close.

“Well, he’s not the one for you, sweetie. Okay? I remember him being in some trouble... did you know that?”

“Mmmhmm...right. I remember that, too,” I mumble, retaining nothing. Toya better back the hell off. She takes Melvin’s hand and tries to pull him to the dance floor, but he doesn’t move. She’s giggling and falling all over him. “Excuse me, Daddy,” I say, walking off. I think my father is saying something more, but I don’t care. Toya can push things a little too far. He’s my date after all. I would hate to have to get Margie on her. That would surely turn the party out.

* * *

“Aaaw. One dance won’t hurt. I saw you out there.” Toya pouts, and then gets in real close. She smells fruity, like those perfumed lotions. Her round eyes bat several times as she runs her tongue up over her top lip. Babe got it all wrong. Not even close to wanting to venture in those waters, not after holding perfection in my arms.

“What’s going on, you two?” The question comes from behind with a tap to my shoulder. When I look back, it’s Tia standing there and the smile she’s wearing is as fake as the relationship we keep masquerading in front everyone. The one named Toya puts her hands to her hips and narrows her eyes. Sweetheart must be feeling the sauce ’cause it really ain’t that serious. Now I’m standing between two beautiful women, with only one on my mind and heart. I swear if I don’t get Tia alone again, and soon, I may never recover.

“I’m trying to sweet-talk Mel into a dance, but he won’t go. Girl, you got him whipped or something... he acting all shy. Tell him, Tia. It’s all good, we family.” Her eyes return to me and drop to my waist and do a climb. “We share.”

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“He said no, huh?” Tia smiles. “That’s because he’s a gentleman. You, on the other hand, have had too much to drink. Why don’t you go try to get Chuckie on the dance floor instead?” Tia smirks.

Toya’s eyes slip over to where Margie is hugging older family members and passing a baby, who’s crying and kicking her feet, to another. Those brown eyes then return to Tia, and I’m telling you, the spark of defiance dims. She gives an eye-roll as if it was all big joke and little giggles come out of her like she’s passing wind. “Aw girl. Whatever... I was just trying to have a little fun. Ain’t nobody got time for crazy-ass Margie.”

“Careful, Toya. I’ll tell her you called her crazy.”

She throws her hand back as she switches off. I’m impressed. Tia’s smooth in her delivery, all lady and class. Now that’s sexy.

“So... sorry about that.”

“It’s cool. I thought you were dancing with your father?”

She glances back in search of him. He’s standing next to Chuck and I got a good idea what the look they flash us both means. My man gave me up. Now I got two lions ready to do battle over their cub. Maybe I ought to just cut out.

“Ice cream?” she asks, smiling.

“Huh?”

“Party is winding down, and let me tell you, Margie is a drill sergeant. If we’re caught here when it does, she will put us both to work.”

“Okay?”

“I know a Carvel that is twenty-four-seven. We can get some ice cream and um, well maybe talk. Guess I got to get to know you a little better if you’re my escort for the Valentine wedding of the year.” She grins.

It’s the sauce. Princess has had a little too much to drink and she’s feeling no pain. I should sober her up and put down some meaningful words that carry her into her sleep tonight. Penetrate that mind and I’ll get to stroke that heart, among other things. ‘Cause she’s working me over with that smile and sexy pose in front of me. I can still feel her up against me. Her perfume is lingering on my shirt. Just maybe this farce isn’t all for naught.

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What the fuck am I thinking?

As soon as the buzz wears off, so will her vision. I'll go back to being invisible to this one.

She steps up to me. Bold and confident, she drops a hand to her hip and levels her eyes on mine. "Vanilla or chocolate. What's your flavor? Ice cream, I mean. I'm just dying to know."

She's playing a dangerous game. My eyes are glued to those plump lips of hers. Top part has this heart shape to it; the bottom is full and supple. Lickable, kissable, suckable, damn when I had my tongue between—

"Melvin? You going to answer me?"

"Yeah... yeah." I rub my jaw to keep from adjusting myself. "Chocolate, with a little vanilla mixed in. You know the swirl ain't that bad. You should try it."

She laughs and hits my arm playfully. "You're so funny."

"I'm not trying to be," I mumble, looking her over.

She waves off the look and tosses those curls. Her hair is blue-black in this lighting and moves around her shoulders with this feathered lightness. Part of her curls fall over one eye. And I'm hit with visions of burying my hands deep in the silky strands while I rest between her soft thighs. I bet it smells good, too.

"So we going to do this, or not?" she asks, returning those chestnut-brown eyes to me.

"Yeah, we gone do this," I answer, in a voice that reveals my true intention. Her brow lifts and she studies me for a minute. Then she laughs again. Kind of girly, too girly, hitting my arm playfully, as if we're teenagers with crushes. Now this does give me pause. I mean, she's so classy and in control, yet she gets a little ditzzy when I hint at something more. Is that part of her act? She's toying with me, giving me all this shyness when she's a firecracker underneath. I can dig it.

"Let me tell Margie, okay?" She grins and her eyes literally explode with life.

Before I can say a word, she hurries off, casting me backward glances over her shoulder and bumping into people and chairs. Her equilibrium is kind of off

and she tries to reclaim her cool, straightening herself and blushing hard. She's shy. Interesting. I can help her get over it.

Princess works fast. She's hugging everyone she passes, saying goodbye to those she can't reach, quickly collecting her purse, and making her way to the door. Margie is following her when I approach.

"What time do you want me at the house?" Tia asks.

"Be there by six. Carolyn is coming over to do everyone's hair," Margie says, fixing Tia's hair and fussing with her dress strap. Tia, frowning, keeps knocking her sister's hands away.

"Huh? No way is Carolyn putting a bunch of spritz and gel in my hair."

"Don't get all snazzy with me, Ms. Thang. I want us all to wear a tuck with pin curls. Carolyn may not be that high-priced, snooty-fruity, fairy-boy you go see, but she's a good whole beautician. Anybody can be a uppity stylist. And let's get something straight: she was doing your hair before you got all brand new. Now you got me fussing. Just have your narra ass over there by six, okay?"

I'm watching the blush stain Tia's cheeks. The way Margie speaks, you wouldn't think them to be sisters. Margie then turns on me. "And where y'all going? Do some more kissing, or a little something more?" she snickers.

"Margie!" Tia snaps. Her voice is pitched high and her eyes stretch wide. I don't know why she's getting all uptight. Margie is cool.

Margie folds her arms, ignoring her. "Ms. Priss here has to get up early, so don't keep her out all night. You can come to the house around one. We'll be taking a family photo before we head to the church. I got a feeling you'll be around for awhile, so I done decided you gone be in it. I like you."

Tia looks away, clearly uncomfortable. Margie grabs my face, startling me. Damn her hold is tight. She's looking me dead in the eye as she speaks. "Remember, Chuckie will fuck you up if you step wrong."

"Margie, leave him alone!" Tia whines.

I can't even speak. Margie lets go a peal of laughter and hugs me hard, grip tight like a wrestler. She pats my cheek and then breezes off, barking off more orders to family she sees gathering their purses. Tia is out the door before I can get

it for her and marching down the sidewalk like a drum major. Stiff and uptight. It's kind of cute.

"Hey, wait up."

"No! I changed my mind. Good night!" she snaps, walking faster, nearly running. She's cold and determined to put distance between us. Princess is stepping so hard in those heels, I fear for those pretty feet. Running a little to catch up, I grab her arm.

"Slow down. What's up?"

"Nothing, I have to get up in the morning is all."

"Tia, don't do this sweetheart. We were getting along just fine. Is it your sister?"

"Oh leave me alone," she huffs, trying to push past, which I block and prevent. She glares so I put my hands up. "Ice cream. One scoop, that's all. C'mon. Give a man a chance."

Now she has a man begging. I must be out of my fucking mind. What am I doing chasing the unattainable? All attitude and frost, we haven't generated enough heat for me to thaw that wall of defense erected around her. Plus, Princess is a little too hot and cold. One minute she's flirting, the next she's retreating. Got a man dizzy. Now look at her. She's avoiding my eyes, chewing on that bottom lip I should be sucking. Her eyes mist over and she looks away.

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me. I didn't mean—"

"I'm a big boy. How about I drive, and bring you back to your car?"

Tia shrugs. Have I've gotten to first base, shall I try for second? I better play this one cool. She's so touchy, I don't know what will set her off, though I get the feeling that if I can spend time with her away from the family, I might learn more of who she is. I just get that feeling.

"That's my ride, over there." When she looks back, I step close and capture her chin. Turning her face back, I move in and give her a kiss. Her eyes open wide, then lower at the meeting of our tongues. She behaves, gives a man another sample, and I'm ever-so-grateful.

"Damn. You sweet." I breathe into her mouth.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

She looks down shyly and it's turning me on.

"C'mon."

I slip my arm around her shoulders and she has no choice but to follow. Sometimes the lady wants a man to lead. We can go slowly, just as long we go somewhere, and I'm not ready to let this one go. I'm holding the door to the Navigator for her to get in. She barely looks at me, but she's in my ride behind a closed door. Finally, the night has promise.

* * *

My head is a little fuzzy. Why did I drink so much wine? Now ice cream? What was I thinking? He hops in the truck. A blast of clean leather and male spice hits me like a shot of adrenaline up my nose. I inhale again because it's so seductive. Everything is neatly in order, not a speck of dirt on the floormats or a discarded gum wrapper on the side dash. Impeccable. I like that. He's wheeling the big SUV out of the spot into the empty street and I relax. Margie can work a nerve. But in truth, it wasn't her this time. It was me. I'm just tired of the lies and games. I really just need to put an end to it.

"Where's the Carvel? Is it the one off 15th and Boulevard?"

"Yeah, that's it. Have you been before?"

He looks over at me and gives me a sly smile. In the darkness of his ride, I can see only partial features. Shadows play on them, making him even more mysteriously handsome. "So how long have you been delivering flowers... I mean, been in the flower business?"

"I know what you mean," he says, slinking back with his arm stretched, driving. "I'd say about four years now."

"Really? It's a family business like our restaurant?"

He nods.

"What did you do before then? Or were you born with green thumbs?"

He stares straight ahead. Goes silent on me. Stupid question. He was adopted, so of course he wasn't. I'm doing this all wrong, but he makes me

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

nervous. It's like a parent expecting you to stand up and walk when you just learned how to crawl. My dates are always formal. Dinner, a show, maybe a little conversation, whatever can be ended when I snap my fingers. But this? I'm in his ride, heading to the heart of the hood, for an ice cream cone? And I thought of it? He's still silent. I can see that steel jaw of his tense and lock tight. Makes him all the sexier.

"I said, what did you do before then?"

"I wasn't here... I'd been away. Trying to get my head right. When I got back, I decided to help out in the business."

"Oh, sorry. Your brother, huh?"

"Yeah, Nicky," he says sadly.

I can tell this is one thing he doesn't want to discuss. I should be able to read people better. Funny though, reading him ain't quite as easy, maybe because for the first time in a long time, I'm really curious. "You grow up with Chuckie?"

He looks over at me, then to the road. "Nah, but we grew up knowing each other. I was a few years behind. Played ball together at the Rec and cards every Thursday night."

"Hey, you went to Northside, right?"

"Yeah, I went to Northside."

"Margie and Alicia went to Northside. I went to private school."

"I know," he says.

"You do?"

"Yeah, I remember your family. Church and all that."

"Right? But you didn't come often... 'cause I don't... well, I can't quite remember you."

"Moms spoiled me. I always seemed to come down with a tummy ache when it was time to go."

"And she let you get away with that?"

He smiled. "For a little while. Then Pops put his foot down."

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“We didn’t go to First Baptist long. Margie picked Macedonia when they got a new preacher, so we switched. But daddy stayed though. He says he remembers your father and you.”

To this, he nods. Now I’m working hard to shuffle through the files of my memory for him. Checking for times or events where we’d seen each other in church or Sunday school, but I come up blank. That’s probably my fault. I was painfully shy then.

“You don’t wear glasses anymore,” he says, cutting his eyes over to me.

Shifting in my seat, my entire body goes stiff. Looks like he did know me. Bucktooth, four-eyed me. “You remember that, huh?”

“I remember.”

“I wear contacts now.”

“I liked the glasses. Always thought you were smart. Girls in glasses are hot.” He smirked and when I look over, he winks. I can’t help but laugh. God, he has a way of making me feel good. Here I am terrified of being caught in public with glasses perched on my nose from the constant teasing when I was young, and he just says something that makes me want to run to Lens Crafters and get a new pair.

He makes the next turn and we both frown. The big Carvel sign light is off, windows boarded up.

“It’s closed?”

“Looks that way,” he says, wheeling in the parking lot. Throwing the Navigator in park, he doesn’t seem surprised. Wait, did he know it was closed?

“Guess business wasn’t that great,” he shrugs.

“Wow, I need to come back to the neighborhood more often.”

He shrugs again. “It was open two weeks ago. This just went down.”

“Oh.” Now I’m in a pickle, because I seriously don’t want the night to end. How do I prolong it, though? Why should I? I barely know him. Maybe he’ll ask for my number and then we can start talking on the phone. Maybe he’ll ask me out on a date. Take me to that nice restaurant they opened up by the new stadium. He does clean up nice. My eyes slip over and he’s staring right at me. My heart stops.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You in a hurry to go back, to go home?”

“Hurry?”

“Hurry,” he repeats.

I know what hurry means, but how should I answer? I’m not in a hurry, but I sure as hell can’t play this game for long. I’m not good at it.

“Well... I do have to get up early.”

“Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day.”

“Okay?” I say curiously.

“Care to see what half the town thinks of when they are in love?”

Now he has me curious. “I don’t understand.”

He smirks. “It’s cool Princess. I rather show you than tell you anyway.”

He puts the big vehicle in reverse and we’re headed for The Avenue. Destination unknown, but after all the sweet-talk and soft touches tonight, I’m cool with it. Besides, I’m grown. Time to start acting like it.

Chapter Eight

It's dark, except for a single lamp at the street corner. Didn't he say: 'Care to see what half the town thinks of when they're in love?' Dare I say no one in love thinks of traveling into the boroughs this close to midnight. He must be crazy.

"You're safe, Princess." He chuckled, reading the frown on my face, he reaches to touch my thigh. I shift in my seat. I'm not opposed to the idea of his hand slipping between. I know. Brazen, right? So unlike me. Still...

He doesn't, of course. He pulls away, leaving my skin tingling from where his fingertips lay.

"Oh, I know it is," I stammer, trying to hide my disappointment. "Look at it now. This used to be the spot. Remember that? Before the riots? Everybody got their shop-on down here."

"Mmm... seems like a lifetime ago," he agrees. His head drops back on the headrest. Chin tilted upward, his lids are low, adding to his sexy. He stared ahead, seeing it as it used to be, just like me. My eyes go beyond the smoky tinted windows to the still streets. We used to call it *The Avenue*.

"Right there, used to be a store called Maxine's." I point it out to him and he nods in agreement. "And over there used to be—"

"A Jamaican joint that sold the best beef patties," he finished.

"Yeah, Palo's. Wow, it's been awhile since I've had one."

"I could go for some oxtails and rice right now." He groans. I can't help but look over to his lips when he says it. I could see him sucking the meat off the bone. Those lips...

"Yeah, me too." I breathe out and give a long sigh.

"Maybe I'll make it for you sometime." His voice drops an octave and those eyes, barely seen under his heavy lids, slip over to me.

"Are you serious? You can cook oxtails? Wait... you look like a man that could."

“I can burn sunshine, give me a chance. There’s plenty I can prove.”

Well all right! My blush isn’t as deep. He’s stroking the right spot with his words. Stroke again, baby, and you might just get that chance. Clearing my throat, I try again to steer the conversation somewhere else. “Maxine’s was our number one place though.”

The memory of the store and racks of beautiful clothes push aside the smoky voice in my head offering to make new memories with me. Sixteen years ago, people were shopping at the malls, but you had class when you had Maxine making you something original to wear, or even a piece out of her collection. She was the neighborhood Donatella Versace for church ladies. Her wardrobe included Evangelical suits with rhinestone lapels, cuffs, and matching hats that stopped traffic. There were many little-girl dresses that made every brown darling a princess.

“Yeah, moms had to have a new suit for every event from there,” he says in a wistful voice. He’s feeling it too.

“Un hunh, it sold such pretty things. We got all our Easter dresses from there. And the Easter hats, all of it.” I laugh. “Sherry and I bought a suit for Margie for Mother’s Day. We saved the money she stuffed in our pockets for treats and weekend fun. Of course Jackson had to foot the rest of the bill, but we felt like big-girls when we pulled out our share. It’s my favorite memory—”

“Why’s that, Princess?”

Princess. He calls me that often. Normally, I’d get irked by it. I mean, what is he trying to imply? That I’m prissy? Stuck-up? Then, all I have to do is look into his eyes when he says it and I know differently. It’s a term he savors before it rolls off his tongue. A secretive meaning behind it that he has yet to reveal. When this man will be clear to me, I’m not sure. I haven’t decided if I want to know more. But I sure do like the way he talks to me. Melvin’s a man of few words, but I swear when he speaks I get that warm, homey feel, like snuggling with your favorite blanket, but better. The timbre of his voice is always smooth but strong, and every time he calls me *Princess*, there’s such intimacy. I feel a little more at ease. Even now, I was talking to him about my family. I never talk about my family.

To his question I sigh, and dig deep for an answer, for the truth.

“Oh, I... um... it just was.” I say, hoping he doesn’t see how I’m blushing, in the dark. “If I wasn’t buying from the book fair, then I was using every penny toward a Saturday matinee whenever Pam would catch the bus with me and go.”

“Word?” he asks, as if he remembers those Saturday features at Sunset Cinema. Of course he does. It wasn’t far from here.

I clear my throat, run my hands over my lap to smooth out my dress. My coat is in the back seat of the truck. Doesn’t matter though, the warm air from the vents and the deep cushion of the leather seat have me all comfy.

“That spring we surprised Margie with the gift and it brought her to tears. Let me tell you, Margie isn’t a crier, so it kind of freaked us out.” I had to laugh at the memory. “She shed buckets full of them that day, cried like a baby. I thought it was the dress, but Margie remembered mommy in ways we didn’t. She missed her deeply, more than us, if that’s possible. It was a Mother’s Day gift, see. Jackson took us all out to dinner after church. We made Margie feel so good, she was so pretty, so happy. Maybe that’s when we all decided: Margie was Sister-Mom.”

“Wow, baby. That’s a tremendous burden for a young woman. How old was she?”

“Barely twenty. Her future planned. Life belonging to us and the restaurant, no college, no hang-out time. Jackson even picked out Chuckie to marry her.”

“Looks like Pops knows what he doing.” Melvin laughed.

“Yeah, okay, he was right on that one. No one else can handle Margie other than Jackson and Chuckie,” I say shaking my head. “But she was pregnant soon after. What real choices did she have?”

Suddenly it dawns on me. I was glad it was Margie and was perfectly fine with her being the firstborn. Glad that she had the burden, even if her life was traded so mine could be free. Maybe that’s why I carry so much guilt and want to please her so bad. To not disappoint her. Hell, I don’t know...

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

She talks a lot when she's nervous. Evidently, being alone with me right now has her on edge. It's cool, though. I like the sound of her voice. In the car with her now, the vents are blowing warmth and stirring up her scent. I take a hit of her, then another. Princess is so damn addictive.

My eyes move over to take in her profile. Those lips have been replenished with that rose- colored shine. I lick my own. I can't look away from them as she speaks in that voice that relaxes me. Soft and feminine, her speak is the last thing I want to hear before sleep and the first I want to hear when I wake. I watch her voluptuous pair move until I can't stand it. Then the pause goes longer than natural and I just have to get her talking once more.

"You okay?" I ask, my voice deep with yearning.

* * *

Melvin's staring again. The man is always staring! I can't even look over to him. I feel really ashamed. Lies, and games all for nothing, and it was the only reason we met. He must think I'm a real flake.

"Yes, I'm fine," I answer softly.

"Talk to me."

"About?"

"Whatever you want, Princess. Tell me what makes you smile. Just so I can be sure to get it right. Can't say I care to see you looking so unhappy. Not even for a moment."

Didn't he know? Since the moment he forced me to confess, he been getting it right. What was his deal? How did we go from a casual dinner date to me being in part of the city I wouldn't drive through in the daylight? How many times have I turned on the news to hear about innocent people getting robbed from a wrong turn on these same streets? Why the hell was he so comfortable in them? Was he a poser... did he think this would impress me? Suddenly I want to call him on his game. Demand he take me back. Without warning, his hand moves, just a fraction, and his fingers slip into my hair. The tips brush my neck lightly causing my

nipples to stiffen. A cooling sensation goes through me and I really hate it, the lack of control, especially since I want more.

“Don’t stop,” he breathed, his voice deep and seductive, as my lids went heavy. “I want to hear more.” The way he says it, it almost sounds like a plea. To add to my torment, his hand goes over my shoulder and his fingers ease around the back of my neck. Oh Jesus. The way it feels. I’m sucking in deep breaths from the currents traveling down my spine, pooling at my core. He’s working me over from this little touch, massaging and loosening tightness I didn’t know I had. Yeah, that feels good. Really good. My lips part and my head goes back just a little.

“Relax,” he says, and I obey. His pull on me is just that tight. He’s just that good.

“I feel really embarrassed, Melvin,” I manage to say.

Dazed, my eyes slip under my lids over to him. His dark green orbs glisten and drain me of the last vestige of resistance. That’s how intense the moment is—intense and strangely erotic. Those damn eyes. What a beautiful pair, like the lucky marbles you want to win as a child, or a pair of jewels a King would give his bride. They were so watchful, so alert, and always focused on me. This man had a way of peeling back layers. Gracious, it was unnerving. Taking a hard swallow, I blow out a long stream of breath and then inhale slow.

“You must think I’m weird, huh? Lying about um... men.”

“Weird? Nah, baby, I find it interesting. You like living a double life,” he chuckled.

“Huh?”

“One for your family and one for you.”

My chest heaves as his magic fingers pluck the right strings, and his eyes lower to my breasts now straining against the front of my square-cut bodice. I swear he moistens his lips again.

“I don’t enjoy it, Melvin. Why would you think I like deceiving my family?”

“Because you chose to do it. No one’s forcing you. My guess is you’re as smart as you are pretty. And if you’re smart, Princess, you know that there is nothing you can’t bring to your peeps.”

His reply stings. I don't want to mislead my family, I just can't help myself. He continues his massage, not shying away from my conflict. But I'm curling up inside with emotion. I know it's playing over my face like a picture show.

"Being a middle child is tough," he says as if leading me through my life story.

I nod. "Yes."

"Second-to-last in a family filled with girls, you got to find something to make you special," he adds.

I look over at him. He gives me a half-smile. "C'mon baby... who am I really? You can trust me with your secrets... I wanna know."

I nod again. "I... um... I'm the smartest. That made *me* special. Until it was expected of me to 'know' things, to get 'good' grades, to go to 'college', then not so special anymore. And if I wasn't." I clear my throat and suck in a deep breath. "If I wasn't special, then I was Margie and Alicia, pregnant out of high school with husbands. Or Pam, who has never left the city as an adult, with a husband who thinks her uterus is a trophy stand. She has six kids, for Christ's sake. I had to be special, to keep from... I don't know, from being invisible. I spent a lifetime behind my sisters being invisible."

"Nah, you can never be invisible," he says and I blush. Hearing myself say it aloud makes me sound so pathetic. When my eyes slip over to him, I don't see judgment at all. And he's listening. Hearing me. I like that. I can relax.

"Go on."

The pretend game had taken its toll, let me tell you. Keeping that four-eyed, pimple-faced girl locked up inside of me was the loneliest feeling.

"I can't explain it. Not really. If I were to try, I'd say it was like holding your breath under water, swimming hard as you can for the surface. Your arms are tired and your lungs are burning, but you got so much further to go. You exhale a little and it gives a little relief, but it doesn't stop, it doesn't lessen the pain."

"I know that feeling," he says in a whisper. He wants to hear my story, know my fears. The question is: why? My eyes meet his and again he's watching me. One arm rests on the inside of the window sill, the other hand stretches out to stroke the

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

erogenous zone of my neck, sending shards of wanton lust to my coochie. And let me tell you, the man is beautiful in moonlight. Damn beautiful. Or is it just this night, a night of laughing, fun, and flirting, that has me loosening up? I can admit to feeling less inhibited by the wine. I just can't say for certain that is the only cause. This is all new to me.

"I guess I'm not unique there," I mumble, then sigh. "How many people you know can tell you the day, the exact moment, the exact reason they screwed up? I've been at this for so long before it became an issue. Just wanting to be seen as perfect. I don't know why."

To this, he finally does look away. Is it me, or the question that makes his jaw turn to steel? When he speaks there's an empty sadness in his voice. It makes me want to touch him. I don't.

"Some can tell you the exact minute when we let the life we wanted get away. Some can never get that minute out of our minds."

"Some? We were talking about me here," I joke. It brings him back from whatever dark place I sensed him slipping to.

He winks. "We're just talking babe, if that's okay?"

"Yeah, it's okay," I nod. A calm silence settles between us. "This is it, huh? Your business?" I nod toward the floral shop on the empty strip. "Noticed the name..."

"Yeah, it's mine. And home."

"You live here?" My eyes switch back to the building. I lean forward to look up at it. He brought me to his place? What the hell?

"I turned the upstairs to a loft. I could never..." his voice falters.

"Never what?"

He doesn't answer. "Finish what you were going to say, please."

"I could never stay at my folks' place. Miss them too much," he mumbles. I reach and touch his hand. He immediately entwines his fingers in mine, but he doesn't look over. In fact, he looks out his window until whatever seizes him passes. It's brief, but like I said, our connection has me feeling this man on many levels.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“Why did you bring me here?” A cold knot of fear coils around my gut and squeezes. My fingers and palms tingle with a tinge of excitement over the forbidden. I would never go to a man’s place I didn’t know. Hell I wouldn’t go to a man’s place I do know. He has some nerve.

“Plan to show you.”

He opens his car door and the beep sounds off, prompting him to remove his keys. The interior light comes on. Bright. It blinds me at first.

“You want me to go in your house?” The pitch of my voice is high and squeaky with alarm.

Melvin chuckles. One foot out of the ride, his eyes cut over to me and a secretive smirk crosses his lips. “Nah, baby, not until you ask. It’s in the shop. Then I’ll take you back. On my word.”

His word, huh? Interesting. I’m really curious now. He crosses the vehicle and opens my door. Like a gentleman, he helps me step down out of the monster vehicle, but like a man he blocks my path.

Did I mention that this thing between us has made me bolder by the minute? Everything about him is a stimulus. Here he is bearing down on me just because he wants to. And me, I just fall in line. Wait for him to say something or do something, because I can’t seem to maintain enough composure to initiate anything on my own. Hell, I want to kiss him again, but I wouldn’t dare act on it. Unless...

The night air teases me with the fresh clean smell of him. I’m a little lightheaded from the constant pull his presence has. It’s like a magnet, this pull, and it’s getting stronger.

“You going to let me by?” I chuckle nervously.

He hesitates as if he wants to say something more, but eventually moves. Thank God.

Together, we walk side by side. I’m glancing around. This part of the city at night isn’t exactly where a girl like me wants to be. And it’s just too quiet.

“No worries, Princess. You’re safe with me. This won’t take long, I promise,” he says, again reading my thoughts.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“So you live here?”

“Yeah, this is me. I like it here. Reminds me of moms, among other things.”

“Other things? What is it, the quiet? Or being alone?”

“What man wants to be alone?” he asked.

Okay, I agree with him there. First lesson I’ve learned tonight after that mega-kiss is that women don’t like being alone either. At least this woman doesn’t anymore. The front of the floral shop has a bar-door. He unlocks it, then unlocks double bolts over the glass door. “Didn’t your place get burned out during the riots?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t here at the time but moms and pops rebuilt. Sad to say, but it was the best thing for the place. For them. They got the entire block cheap ’cause of it.”

“Wait. Building? Block? You own this block? Every building on this side of the block?”

I step back and look at him. He barely shrugs off a yes. My eyes cut from left to right. The other stores aren’t abandoned, they’re boarded down. The only store on this side of the street is his.

“Yeah, I own it all.”

I can’t hide my shock. I just assumed that he was some flower guy. Independent, yes, but nothing more. This place could be prime real estate if used right. I turn to look to the street. Suddenly the emptiness doesn’t seem like an accident. I can’t explain it but I feel it.

When I turn around, he’s on me. The heat from his body goes right through my clothes.

“Care to see what love looks like in this city?” he asks.

I look up at him and nod and his hand goes into mine. Together we enter the dark store. My senses go into overload. I never paid attention to the smell of flowers, until now. I can’t miss them now.

“Strong, isn’t it?” He asks from behind me and I jump.

“Yeah. I mean, wow.”

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

He comes to me in the dark. His hand goes around my waist, pressing me close to him. "Close your eyes."

I do.

"Inhale."

I do.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Take your time. Tell me," he says, his breath warming my cheek.

I relax in his hold, in the dark. "Okay."

"Now tell me, what do you smell?"

Easier said than done, but I concentrate on one scent then the next. Soon they separate and my mind begins to catalogue. "It's almond, cherry, and apricot."

"Geranium. Go on."

"Honey... yeah kinda woodsy, leafy... but honey and... I... it's like a medley of fall scents. I don't know."

"Honeysuckle, jonquil, oleander, and fennel," he says, his lips brushing my ear.

He runs his hand softly over my lower abdomen and I inhale again. My eyes flutter but remain shut. "You're doing very good," he says and I can tell he's impressed. I'm grinning wide as his pupil. It feels glorious in this moment. The smells give me the feeling of a fresh, clean autumn day.

"Give me one more, Princess. Name another smell."

"There's another..."

"Go on," he says, brushing his lips over my ear.

He's rubbing under the crease of my breasts, close, but not crossing the line. He's covering me with his arms. I'm trying not to slip from the sheer ecstasy it's driving through me. "I... don't know. It's clean, fresh, an outdoorsy smell. What is it?"

"Pussy-willow," he whispers and bites my ear lobe.

My eyes flip open and I gasp. He lets me go, laughing. I can't stop laughing either. The both of us laugh, unable to speak. I hit him hard on his arm. "Don't do that."

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“What? That right there is pussy—”

“Aah! I got it! No need to say it again,” I say, rolling my eyes but smiling. “Place smells beautiful though,” I mumble, shaking it off. I scan the assortment of gorgeous flowers left on display. There’s a counter in the center with the register and a card wheel to the left. It’s stacked with Valentine wishes and promises. The store is dark but colorful. I can see the arrangements of pinks and reds, the rainbow assortment of lilies, daisies, carnations, birds of paradise wrapped in clear cellophane. They are rolled into cones in rows, and on and on. It’s a flower shop and very modest. So he wants me to see some Valentine flowers. Is that it?

He takes my hand without question. We head to the back of the store, through double doors, into the dark. With him, I’m not afraid. In fact, I’m a little giddy over where this all leads. The store stretches further than I imagined. At the end of the breezeway he looks back at me. I can see him wink in the dark. Then we go through a final set of doors. At first I see nothing, but he moves out of my line of sight and I take it all in.

Dropping his hand, I step forward, looking around. It was as if the entire holiday had decided to gather in this one spot and patiently wait for its moment of glory. That’s what it appeared to me. Glorious. I saw rows, walls of beautiful flowers in shades and shapes I never could conceive: an assortment of reds, yellows, blues, shades of lavender, peach, and white. Flowers I can’t name. Some tall stems reaching out of long necks of crystal vases. Others were short with round cylinder vases and many have stuffed animals attached, hanging off. Some are wild and exotically arranged; others are simple with splashes of baby’s breath, bay wreath, begonia and nicely spruced leaves. Cards, balloons, streamers, candy, decorative ribbons...

“Impressive,” I say, a little dizzy and overwhelmed.

“Ya think?”

“I do. Let me guess, this is what the city thinks of when in love? Or how they show it, huh?”

“What do you think?”

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“Oh definitely, I just had no concept of it. Look at these, right there. My guess they are from a husband celebrating his first Valentine’s since tying the knot. Really big and overdone,” I laugh at the gaudy arrangement. “And those are from a husband celebrating his fiftieth.” I note the subtlety. “Those are make-up flowers. Those are I got a crush on you. Those are I just want to get freaky with you...”

I laugh and he smiles.

“I get it. Nice. Kind of nauseatingly sweet, but yeah. I get it.”

“You’re not big on the holiday?” he asks.

“I don’t have a Valentine. Why would I be?”

“True, true.” His eyes move past me to a closed door. I look back, curious as to what lies behind it. “More flowers?”

“Something like that,” he says mysteriously.

“Well, let’s have it! If it’s closed up behind a door then it must be the real hardcore stuff, huh?”

“C’mere...” He gestures.

“There?”

“Here,” he says.

I walk over to him and he takes my hand, pressing my palm to his face. “You talk a lot, Princess. I make you nervous?”

“No.”

“Good, it’s not the feeling I want from you.” He leads me to the back of the storeroom.

The place is cooler to the back. Really cool. Suddenly I regret leaving my coat behind. My guess is the drop in temperature is to preserve the delicate petals and arrangements for the big day. These flowers are a lot more festive. Celebratory. Some have children’s toys: dolls, and racecars or action figures.

“What’s this?” I chuckle.

“Something I came up with. Every year after we near filling our orders we do this.”

“Okay?”

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Walking over, I pick up a card. “You try to get a little extra money on the side?”

“Nah, I don’t sell these.”

“Then what do you do with them?”

“The Women’s Shelter on Heathcliff. We deliver them there, for the ladies and kids.” He walked over to me and took my hand and turned over the heart-shaped card. “Try to give them something, ya know?”

My eyes are now open to the display, to the generosity. It’s amazing. “That’s really sweet, very sweet.” I finally look back into his eyes. “You’re quite the guy Melvin. Really. Quite the guy.”

“They don’t know it’s me. Not into charity, so I don’t want to force it on anyone. They have no idea where it comes from. Don’t do it for that reason.”

“Then why do you do it?”

He smiles but says nothing. So frustrating. It’s the hardest thing to get this man to talk about himself. I can do nothing but shake my head. He comes closer. Really close. Stops in front of me. He turns the card around for me to read it. *Be My Valentine* is scribbled in wide, cursive lettering.

“Will you, Princess?”

“Depends, Melvin. What does it mean to be your Valentine?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“For starters, another kiss. The one that we never finished.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think we finished it.”

“Then I’m not on my job. Because that’s not how I want to kiss you. How I need to kiss you.” His eyes smolder as he moves in closer. I’m trapped between him and a bouquet stuffed with heart-shaped cards broadcasting the message that lingers in my heart. There really is no escape now. No excuses. And at this point I just want to be done with it. Maybe another kiss will take this yearning I have for him and satisfy it.

Maybe. I stare up at him and dare him to go there.

What kind of man would I be if I didn't try? Just another taste, a kiss goodnight, a promise of more, and then I'll return her to her world and be at peace. What she's doing to me isn't fair. I've met desire and her name is Tia.

Her head goes back from the sheer force of my will. I can sense her tensing ever so slightly. As if the action itself is one she has to brace for. This I understand. There are all kinds of lines I don't want to cross, so I have to be careful with princess. Still. Look at her. Damn.

"Answer my question."

Her heat pulls me in. My lips travel over her shoulder to her neck and her hair falls back. A light sweep, not my usual style, but this one here cries for subtlety. Check her out. She's so damn tense. Every time I move on her, she freezes up. Is she feeling me? Is it because of the dirt under my nails? The color of my skin? What holds her back?

Fuck it. I plan to go for it. She can say when to stop. My tongue is the negotiator of our passion. It glides up to her diamond-studded earlobe and I draw it in my mouth. Her skin's an aphrodisiac just like her scent, just like her laugh, just like her curves. One kiss and I release her. I've shown her enough of me, as much as I can give. Maybe it will bring her into my world. Maybe it will grant me permission into hers.

"I'm waiting..."

"I forgot the question," she says in a breathless voice.

"My Valentine. Will you be mine?"

"Oh that." She gives that quirky nervous girly laugh of hers, but her body is all woman, even if she wants to retreat. It responds, pushing up into my mine, making my dick erect and stretch between my legs. Her arms lift to circle my neck and her head goes back to look me in the eye. "What are my options again?" she asks.

Smooth. Real smooth. She's teasing me. She was in my lair now and dancing really close to the flame. One kiss, I keep telling myself. But natural law superseded any other laws I could levy and I go for the full-monty anyway. She

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pulls back in time for me to miss my mark. We lock eyes. And baby-girl isn't bowing down. She's owning it. That's turning me on. I knew the shy-girl thing was just an act.

Somehow I'm silenced, just when I'm ready to let her know the deal. She seals the small space between our lips, tilting her chin up, and delivering a kiss that sets a man on edge. I like it. The slow tease of her tongue easing in my mouth, at first innocent, is driving me to near delirium. The sweetness within the warm cavern of her mouth draws me even deeper in to her and I'm struggling not to lose control. I grip her hair and pull it back, making her gasp as I ravish her throat. She trembles within my hold, bumps the table, sending the roses to wobbling in their vases, before I return my lips to her mouth. Now it's my turn...

* * *

Oh, God, yes.

His mouth is a sweet quenching for what is burning me up from the inside. Soft, gentle, but firming when he goes deep, he waits for me to catch up and keep pace, dueling with my tongue, plundering, drawing a moan from me that is so foreign, yet revealing of my mounting desire. This kiss. It's sending pleasure through every cell in my body.

I push into him, needing that place that ached between my thighs to make contact with that bulge between his. One brush of our pelvises and a deep agonizing groan slides up his throat into my mouth. My hands tighten into fists; I'm clutching his shirt trying to hold on. The intensity of the kiss changes. I pushed the wrong button, because he assumes I know what this means. I mean I know, but...

His tongue is tunneling. He's gripping my butt cheeks and squeezing me up against him. His other hand is in my hair, fingers scraping and massaging my scalp as he pulls my head back. His mouth is on my cheek, tongue under my chin, lips pressed at the pulse in my throat, sucking, kissing, licking, yes the licking, then the sucking again. The attention he spent there nuzzling my overly sensitive skin and

then going rough with passionate nips and sucks has me digging my nails into his shoulders. My heart is racing so fast I fear it may explode but I hold on.

“Mel... Mel... wait...”

His name exits my body as I spiral into a torrent of emotions, like I’d been punched. I struggle against him and he devours my mouth again, drowning out my plea to slow down. His tongue sweeps mine. My eyes are rolling in my head. He rubs my ass tenderly, then squeezes, grinding into me. I’m losing control.

* * *

“Relax, Princess... it’ll be good,” I stammer.

She shudders against me, moans and stiffens, and I can’t stop myself. I should stop, but damn it, I don’t know if I can.

“Mel, stop!” She shoves hard, breaking the bond.

Finally I hear her. *Finally*. Panting, lungs burning, I can’t look away from her. She blushes and looks away for the both of us.

“You wouldn’t stop,” she says softly.

Fuck me! I feel like an ass.

Stepping back, I’m wiping the taste of her from my mouth. I’m sure I’ll do it again if I stay too close. Damn, what was that? Why did I jump her like that?

“It’s okay, it’s just we were going fast, you know?”

She’s trying to talk the situation down. Make light of the shit I just pulled. Damn, woman has me going fucking crazy. Hell, I don’t know her, not really.

“I-I... I’ll take you back,” I manage and continue to step back as if she’d drawn on me. It’s time to end this shit and get my head right.

“No,” she says.

“No?”

“I don’t want to... I mean, that’s not why I stopped you.”

“Let’s go.” I’m heading out fast. Behind me, she hurries, her heels clicking over the linoleum and I can imagine how those damn dangerous hips of hers sway.

Babe needs to back off, because I'm beyond it now. I can't deal with this hot-and-cold shit anymore.

"Stop it. Wait a second."

"Not a problem, Princess. It's getting late... I can—"

"Hey!" She snatches my arm firm. "Would you slow down?"

I brave a peek. She has a lopsided smile to her face. It's playful and flirty. I can't tell you how fucking relieved I am. I lost my head. Some of the babes I've had lately, well, they're as aggressive as me. But she's special and I got to keep telling myself that. Besides, she's so jumpy the last thing I want her to think is that I forced her, or set her up, or whatever the fuck a woman thinks when we get it wrong. Fucking mixed signals and all that shit. My game is off. My smooth wouldn't be this raggedy if I didn't keep the babes at bay and opened up more. Nah, I just get what I need and bounce. Usually try not to dip twice so no one gets too clingy. I like my space. I rather let folks think whatever than actually join the living. I'm like this one in that way. Except with me, I don't deserve to be happy after Nicky.

Damn. I can't read people anymore. Fuck!

"I want to see your place upstairs," she announces.

To this I freeze. Even my balls tense. No fucking way. No fucking way, man! Not playing this game anymore tonight. I'm done.

"Nah, baby it's late. Let's—"

"I want to go upstairs and see it!" she pouts.

"What? Why?"

"Why not? I want to see where you live."

"You're looking at it, sweetheart."

"You know what I mean. I want to see it now!"

I can't help but smile, she's damn near demanding it. Doesn't she know not to ask Dracula for a peek into his coffin? Shaking my head, I run my hand back through my hair and calm myself. The tightening around my lungs relaxes. The pain in my dick, well that's a different story. I'll be stroking it until I have a bicep cramp tonight after this teasing finally ends. But the crisis is averted. I'm not the

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bad guy here. Just the man with a raging hard-on that she keeps poking at. Honey better be careful: this snake spits.

“So what’s it gone be?”

“Not a good idea. Not a good idea at all.”

“Why?”

“Let me take you back, Princess.”

“Why?” she demands. “Why do you keep retreating? You want to know everything about me and only give me pieces. What’s that about? Kissing all up on me and stuff, but I can’t see your place? What you hiding up there?” her eyes cut up to the ceiling and I catch a hint of... jealousy?

“I’m not retreating or hiding a thing. I’m trying to respect your boundaries and shit.”

“Excuse me? Trying to? Is that what ‘trying to’ was, back there? When you were gripping all over my ass!”

My nostrils flare and I can feel the muscles in my jaw tighten. “Like I said, I’ll take you back sweetheart. Nite ova.”

“NO.”

“Prim—”

“NO! I’m not being a brat about this—”

“Yes you are,” I chuckle, more than confused about why she’s pushing so hard.

“Are you going to take me upstairs so I can see it or not?” she glares. Now she’s angry. All cute and glaring at me. What just happened here? She’s mad because I won’t take her upstairs, and I’m scared because she wants to go? What the fuck is this?

“Melvin, I want...”

“You want to go upstairs. Yes, yes I know.” I silence her finally. “Look. You only want to go up there ’cause you think I’m hiding something. I’m not. It’s nothing but a busted TV, old bed, and empty fridge. Not a place for a lady like yourself.”

“Then let’s see it.”

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With that, she turns and sashays to the stairs. I'm standing here like a punk, not sure if I should follow. But when those long brown legs start to climb I'm damn near running up behind her. She's at the door before me, cutting me a sideways glance as if she thinks I'll back out. Princess likes to play next to the lion's cage, thinking I won't snatch her pretty ass up and brand her with my loving. Once she goes through those doors all bets are off. She's mine.

* * *

My heart is pounding so hard I don't think I can hear my own thoughts. No I can't, because if I could, they would have told me to take my silly ass back downstairs and go home. Exactly what is my plan?

What the hell am I doing?

Did I actually demand the man take me up to his place? Good grief. Okay, calm down. Breathe. He holds the door open for me. I walk into the cool dark without hesitation. The smell of pine and his aftershave linger in the air. Well, at least he's clean. The glass fixture in the ceiling spills light over the foyer at the flip of the switch.

All the shadows are chased away. I can now see the place clearly. Not much to it. He didn't lie. The foyer, if you could call it that, stretches out to an open airy space. The kitchen table, sofa set, TV, and bed are all in the same living area, but relegated to the corners. Only thing segmented is the kitchen, set off by an open partition and what I think is the bathroom or closet or both.

"Nice," I say. He's behind me, watching.

I'm not too crazy. I figure out my plan quick. If I can get the man to open up to me, really open up to me, then he'll get the most unexpected gift. My long-guarded virginity that's been around my neck like an anchor. Why not? He's sexy, he's evidently smarter than I thought, and so damn interesting. What's with owning half of the avenue, living up here alone, delivering flowers to battered women all anonymous-like? Who is he? I've learned all this and I don't know who the hell he is.

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He's back there, behind me, emptying his pockets and dropping the contents to the table. At least he's not tackling me to the bed. The bed is one thing I'll try to avoid for the time being. First I find out who is **Melvin Reed**.

"So what do you think?" he asks.

"Huh, oh, yeah... it's nice. Cozy," I say, looking to the wall, to the ceiling, to the mostly-covered storefront windows. "Must get bright in here during the day, though," I say, pointing up. His eyes follow my point.

"Yeah, it does. My wake-up call. You want something to drink? I got beer and milk," he says, heading to the fridge.

That leaves me exactly one choice. "A beer."

He gives me a look. He nearly says something, but decides against it and goes into the kitchen. Good, I have a moment to breathe and think. I'm talking about giving up my virginity because a guy is cute and has a sensitive side. Is that enough reason? Hell, I don't know...

* * *

A twist and I drop the cap from the beer in the trash. It's cool going down and I need it. I'm halfway done with it when I turn. She's standing right behind me, staring. Eyes bright and questioning. Innocent, almost. I'm still wondering where the babe in the fierce sports car that cuts a man down with her tongue is. She seems so much softer now, for some reason. Unless it's just me projecting again, 'cause Honey keeps my head spinning.

"Here."

She takes it and smiles. We stand there drinking, staring, smiling, swallowing. It's weird, but neither of us can break the silence. Finally, I do. "So you've seen it and—"

"What happened to your brother?"

Damn, from nowhere she hits me, and she hits me hard. I'd rather her ask what being locked up behind bars for five years did to a man, than this. Because this is a place I have no intention of going.

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“He died,” I answer, walking out of the kitchen with her following.

“I gather.”

“End of story,” I say, going for the table to get my keys and end this night. I turn and she goes the opposite way, sits on the edge of my bed, then looks directly at me.

“Melvin.”

“You’ve seen the place, Princess. It’s getting late.” I warn her through an impatient sigh.

She places the glass bottle on the floor and sits straight, with her hands to her knees. “Do you find me attractive?”

“You know I do.”

“Tell me what happened to your brother. Please.”

“What does that have to do with you being attractive?”

“I see the way you look at me. I feel it, too. You can trust me, and I get this feeling... well I get this feeling it would do you some good to talk about him. Nicky.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Melvin. You helped me through my stuff earlier, talked me through so much, that I was bold enough to lead you here. That’s a leap for me.”

“Good. Let’s roll.”

“You get one chance at this, Melvin. You open up to me now or I’ll walk out and it’s goodbye.”

I turn and look at her. She has a serious glint to her eye that’s unmistakable. She nods that she means it. “I’ll tell my family the truth about us, I don’t want you at the wedding and I won’t see you again. My granny used to say to us that *even swap ain’t no swindle*. Do you know what that means, Melvin? It means I gave you the most personal part of me but that wasn’t for free. It was an exchange of trust between me and you. If you don’t trust me then—”

“It’s not that.”

“Then tell me. I want to know. What happened to him?”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ!” I blaspheme. She blinks and I heave a burden. “Fine! Fine! I got restless. After high school, moms and pops wanted me to go to college. But my grades weren’t shit. Then it was trade school, but I’m no fucking mechanic. Next I’m working here and working with Pops and Nicky in the landscaping business. It wasn’t fucking enough. Not for me. Not then. And to be honest, I was tired of not getting it right, of being different.”

“Different how?” she asks in a small voice.

“How? Look at me! What do you see? That’s right, you didn’t see me at all until you had to scam your folks.”

She looks away, embarrassed, and I’m trying hard to bring the beast back in. But she pushed for this and it’s too much pain not to show her the dark side of it all. Now that I’m talking I can’t stop.

“I had some boys from a spot I used to hang out at on the west side. Some Irish boys. They were into things. Making money. The more I was with them the more I belonged. Started skipping out on work. Had moms crying and pops pacing, and Nicky... he...”

“Melvin—”

I close my eyes to her offer of her hand. To her offer of comfort. I don’t want to be comforted for this. *Not this shit.* This pain I own. It’s mine and I’m not letting it go, not even for her.

“I got in bad with the Donnelly family. Nicky started following me trying to figure out what was going on with me. Why I wasn’t coming home. He was in high school. Set to go All American. He...”

“Oh, Melvin. I’m sorry...”

She’s standing in front of me. Her hands go to my face and I’m turning and backing away from her. “Stop it!” I snap, walking around her. I need her to step off. Give me space, but she doesn’t. Damn it, she follows. Now at the foot of my bed, she stops me.

“Tell me what the Donnellys did to him.”

“Damn it, Tia, leave it alone.”

“Say it, Melvin. The worst has happened.”

“You don’t have any idea what the worst can be.”

“Then tell me,” she pleads, touching my face.

“My friend fucked over some money and they thought it was because of me. He got in a jam. Nicky got caught in the crossfire. They killed him, after they did things to him that I’ll never be able to get out of my head,” I hear myself say. “My folks’ only son. I got him killed. That’s what happened.”

And it was done. At least part of the truth. I could barely look up from the confession. But she doesn’t back away. She takes hold of my face wet with tears I didn’t know I shed.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. So sorry,” she says, kissing me. Soft kisses to my lips and face is too much of a comfort because she’s in my arms next, giving me more. I can taste the beer on her tongue. Who knew it could taste so sweet? We bump the bed and she goes down. She sits down looking up at me, our connection temporarily severed. Going to my knees before her, I can’t believe she’s there, with me, when I need someone the most. Because right now it would literally kill me if she left.

And she sees it. Her hand reaches out and her legs part to bring me between. She presses my face to her breasts. Holding me to her heart, she rubs my back. She’s so soft. So fine. I can’t stop running my hands up and down her back in return. I nuzzle her breasts, loving those firm yet yielding mounds of hers. “Damn baby,” I groan, dropping my face to her lap. She keeps rubbing my back. Not sure of my intention. My hands go down to her tiny ankles and my fingers tickle a path up her shapely calves.

I lift my head and look up at her. She smiles sweetly. Again that innocent questioning look that I can’t place is in her eyes. When my hands reach her thighs she begins to understand my intent. Her hands stop rubbing my back. I take up the hem of her dress.

She doesn’t stop me. I push her dress back up to her hips. She freezes. My eyes drop down. These legs are silky soft. My palms graze over them to the inside of her thighs and part them gently. Wider. Her dress gathers above the rise of her perfect-shaped ass, just as my head lowers to her, and I press multiple kisses along

the inside of her thigh. I can hear her gasp, trying to breathe and not move at the same time. She's tense. But when my tongue goes flat and runs up the middle of her thigh, she sighs deeply. I know she's relaxing and I'm grateful for it. Because I need this, I need her.

My face dips further between her legs, drawing a slow hiss from her. My tongue leads the way. The soft feminine smell of her unleashes bands of colors behind my closed lids. I'm soon at the lacy confection of her panty, covering such a treasure. Finding her unspoiled, I lick, and she grips my shoulder immediately, then pushes at it.

Her skirt rides at her waist now, and she's mine, all mine. I lift my head to meet her eyes. She's panting as if I'm already in her. Her face is flushed, with a dilated, dazed look in her eyes. Damn, she is uptight. "Relax, Princess."

She does. Her breathing slows and she drops her hands from my shoulders to her sides.

"That's what I'm talking about. It's going to be good. I promise you."

She nods that she believes me. I reach for the thin string holding her panty to those sexy hips. She lifts a little so I can bring them all the way down. Parting her thighs, I go in again. I bury my nose in the downy forest of curls where I smell the delicious scent of pure want from her plump slit. A flick of my tongue, just once, sends shivers through her, and me. Oh man... she's so wet. It's dissolving my control. And I'm not kidding. The scent of her sex is like an aphrodisiac for me. Her pussy is so swollen that when my lips press into it, I can feel the pulse of her heartbeat.

My flattened tongue runs up the length of her slit and I moan so deep it travels through her channel and into her quaking pussy, causing her to grip tight to the bed sheets. Only then do I mentally tell her the true words of my Valentine...

You just don't know, baby. I've wanted to eat this pussy from the first day I saw you. Wanted to run my tongue deep and then fuck you so hard you'd never be able to pass me by in the street. Want to get it from the back, from the side, hit it until it's mine... And damn it, baby, tonight you're all mine.

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I part the thick lips to her sex with my tongue and open her up for me. Let her feel the softness of my mouth against the soft slickness of her, 'cause I'm preparing her to receive the exact opposite of it when I get up in her. My tongue goes to work and Princess grabs my hair. She tries to keep my face in place as she thrusts at me, wanting more. She has no worries. I have no intention of abandoning her now.

Instead, I caress her hips with my open palms while my tongue drizzles pleasure into her sweet folds and flicks at her engorged bud. I let my tongue go back down into the slick cavity and tunnel so deep she's breathing hard and on the verge of crying out. Drawing out, I lick at the rim of her opening, causing her aches to intensify. She flops back on the bed, squirming, shuddering, as her pussy responds with contractions.

I'm not done with you yet.

My tongue claims her sweet territory, masterfully. She's crying out loudly and arching off the bed now, owning the first of many orgasms she will have tonight. I lift my head just to witness my handiwork: a sheen of fresh perspiration makes her skin glisten. My head drops once more to push her over the edge, giving her a full French kiss, with my tongue working a figure-eight over her pussy until her cries are bouncing off the ceiling and reverberating back down over us. Even when she begs for mercy, I refuse to let go, draining her of every drop, loving every ounce of the salty, forbidden taste of her.

"Melvin, puhleeeeaasee," she cries out, writhing through the ecstasy. I want to get all caveman and take her right there. On the edge of the bed. But I got to take it slow. I have *Tia Jackson* in my bed. I've been jonesing over her since I was eleven. Can't get her out of my mind and now my heart. Because one hit of this woman and I'm in love.

I'm ripping off my clothes, shedding them quick as she's rolling over in her dress, now pushed up to her stomach, bottomless. She curls and shakes through the last of her orgasm.

Princess is acting like it's her first. I'm good, but I'm not that good...

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I run my hand up her thigh. She shivers again. Her eyes are squeezed tightly shut and she's giving off breathless moans.

"Baby relax... relax," I whisper, going for her zipper. I ease down the tab, peeling open the fabric to the black dress that's been torturing me all night. Turning her, I'm sliding it off those sexy curves of hers to find her petite breasts in a half-bra. I dispose of that as well. That's when her eyes flip open.

"It's okay, Princess. I got protection." I chuckle, seeing the worry in her eyes. While I'm reaching over to my nightstand and fishing for it, I feel her moving away from me. No way am I letting her go now. My arm drops over her waist and I drag her back over. I'd go back to prison just to have a hit of this pussy. Tia Jackson, you're in for it, baby. So get ready.

"Is it going to hurt?" she asks in a small voice that should never be heard from my bed.

Confused, I look back over to her. "Is what going to hurt?"

Her eyes glisten with tears. She tries to give me a brave smile, her thick curls now pressed flat to her forehead from sweat. Worry fills her eyes to the brim. She looks a lot more vulnerable than she did working those hips on the dance floor tonight, or kissing me in the alley. She looks too delicate.

"Sex."

"Is sex going to hurt?" What kind of fucking question is that? What did she think I would do to her? What kind of cats had she had before? Turning over with condom in hand, I'm looking deep into her eyes. "Talk to me, Princess."

She covers herself and looks away shyly. At first I can't make sense of it. But I see how she trembles and it hits me like an anvil to the top of my head. I shoot straight up.

"Oh, fuck!"

"Melvin, wait—"

"You're a virgin?"

"Is that... a problem?"

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I can't believe it. I don't know what to make of it. A virgin? How old is she? How is that possible? And here's the rub. She chose me? Again, I ask how is that possible?

"Melvin," she says softly, reaching for me. Then she gets on all fours and crawls over the bed to me. "Is it? A problem? My not being experienced, I mean?"

"What? No. No!" I say, turning on her. "The problem is you have to give that to someone you love. You don't waste something that precious on a loser like me—"

She pressed her fingers to my lips. "You aren't a loser. I've never met a man that I wanted to give it to until tonight. I want you... teach me. Show me. I'm ready." She went back into the pillows, holding my stare. My eyes go over her naked body, hovering again on those petite breasts, then the swell of her hips, the nice trim to her sweet-tasting pussy, and all the way down her agile thighs to her tapered calves. Perfection.

Of course I wanted her, but her virginity? How could I ever let her go after this? I'm talking myself down, trying to figure out what the hell to say to her. How to make myself say no, when every piece of me, right down to my fingernails, wants this. Wants *her*.

She parts her legs for me, showing me the glistening softness that awaits me. My cock springs up, so rigid now that I find myself stroking it just to ease the pressure, so I can think.

"I want it, Melvin... I do. I want you to be my first."

I know my mouth must be open, so I close it.

I slide up along her like we share the same skin. I have to slow my row. Do it right. The night is ours. Still. She has never been with a man before. I can't break the seal on this package too fast. I got to go in like a pro, keep her relaxed, and make sure she enjoys it.

Kissing her pretty brow, the strained look on her face eases, but not her hold on my shoulders. I rub my lips over hers, my breath still carrying her scent. She takes a hit of herself from my tongue as I possess her mouth. She loosens her grip on my shoulders as I rub my length between the quivering lips of her virginal

pussy. She wraps her arms tight around my neck for support. Her body's now moving against mine, daring me to take her, pushing a man beyond his limits.

I abandon the kiss and her mouth, but not the glorious sensation that carries through my veins from kissing her again. I apply those same kisses to the pleasure points in her neck. Damn right, the road to Hell was paved with good intentions. I hadn't told her about prison yet. And that was on purpose. I just couldn't risk losing this, losing her. I intend to tell her all of it once I've gained her trust. Good intentions? Yeah, I got the best of intentions.

I reach for it. The sound of the foil tearing makes her close her eyes. I make quick work of the rubber, touching myself as little as possible, 'cause she got me high and tight. Her eyes stay closed the entire time. It's my duty to relax her. So I love her again, kissing her neck, the spot that makes her move with me.

"Yes, Melvin. Like that," she moans, working that ass in circular motions and giving my cock seizures.

"Slow it down, woman... wait... you're going to want this to last. I promise you."

She obeys. It's my goal to make every kiss claim her and every brush of her earlobe devastate her. I want to be able to glance over at her from across a room and take her to the edge from a simple look. I plan to rewire this sexy body beneath me until I'm the only man who can partake. Remember, she's mine. I'm not playing over this one, partner. I'll cut a man down to the bone over my sweet lady.

I can feel her tense once my tip brushes her center. Taking her head in my hands, I force her to look at me. "I promise to be gentle, Princess. Make it hurt so good, you won't be sorry. I don't want you to ever associate pain with me loving you. Understand?"

She nodded. I can't help but kiss both lids shut as I pull her under me and push her thighs further apart. Opening her fully for my descent, I then slide my hand down the center of her back, to the base of her spine to hold her close, and give her a little bit of what we both crave, just the tip. My weight presses her down into the mattress.

"Let me work it in, Tia... slow... trust me..."

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And a smooth thrust bought me in, but damn it was so good, I almost bust a nut. I have to focus. Locking my eyes on a point on the headboard, I try hard to fight the urge to go in balls-deep and give her another thrust.

Tia gasps in both pleasure and pain and I grunt as her hands glide over my body, smoothly landing on my clenched butt cheeks to hold on. Again, it's fucking willpower, and I'm struggling 'cause she's so ripe and tight. It's just not fair. Another thrust, then another and soon I'm in, with her moving beneath me like a good girl, a quick study. Her pretty face plays a gamut of emotions. I kiss her quivering lips, easing out of her only to go in deep. Her mouth forms a perfect O as she takes it and I give it. I'm putting down thrust after thrust until her pussy behaves and gives a man his way.

Now, I'm in and I plan to stay. Oh... .shit... she's good. I look down at her as I'm riding her hard, pumping fast, no longer in control of my lower half. My cock's jerking and tunneling, and I'm shuddering from restraint.

Tears pool under her closed lids and spill out of the corners of her eyes and down the side of her face. Sweat travels down the bridge of my nose and from the temples, over the sides of my face. Neither of us can stop.

"Baby, hold on for me... please... 'cause I can't stop... I'm sorry, Princess, but I... I won't stop..." I wheeze, dropping on her. It's so damn good. She clings to me and matches my thrusts though I know it has to be torture for her too. Our bodies locked and twined, I'm now pumping harder and harder, the orgasm tight in my gut, my balls clenching and my cock jerking as I'm nearing the edge. Holding on to her and burying my face in her neck, I'm saying all kinds of wild shit as I squirt all my desire into the rubber's reservoir.

It's over and I'm nearly insane from enduring. Still clutching her tight to me, it takes a minute before I realize that we've done, and that I could be hurting her.

Lifting up off her, I search her face. Her smile turns to giggles. "Wow," she says, smacking my ass.

I shake my head, dropping it to the pillow, disbelieving. "Wow is right."

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* * *

My body wakes before my eyes open. Delicious aches from his loving throb dully between my thighs. I yawn and open my eyes. It's not a dream. My lover is next to me, snuggling me close as if we'd been sleeping together always. I have to smile at my night. I feel different. Not the ways I thought I would. Skip the pain in my coochie, I feel freer.

Fighting off the urge to pee, I have to work at detangling myself from him, which eventually I do. He snores. Shaking my head, I think about last night. I want to wake him up and have him kiss me again in that place no other man has ever ventured. I think that was the best part for me. Everything else was such a mixture of pleasure and pain that I can't decide on it. Maybe it gets better.

Quietly, I creep from the bed to what I think is the bathroom. I'm relieved to find it is. I'm freezing, but I relieve myself, double wipe, then flush before slipping on his robe. I'm in front of the mirror, washing my hands, when the door opens. He's standing there staring at me, completely nude. I try not to look at his curled-up penis. But my Lord, it's angrily veined and pointing accusingly at me. I'm glad I didn't see it before we—

“You okay, Princess?”

“Yeah, I'm okay,” I answer, checking myself in the mirror. My hair is a hot mess: flat on one side, puffed and frizzing on the other. Damn, the whole wake up in the morning with some exotic shake of curls that your lover finds sexy thing is a myth. I'm damned embarrassed at my jacked appearance. He steps up behind me while I fuss with my tangles. His hands go to my waist. There he unties my robe. “What are you...” His hand glides between my legs and cups me below, catching me off guard.

“I'm not done with you,” he breathes, and reveals a condom he must have had in his hand all along. Tearing at the foil wrapper, he's working it on and I'm nervous as hell. Will it hurt more? I'm not ready, but still I can feel the tingles of anticipation saying I am.

“Can't get enough of you, Princess.”

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He breathes huskily, rubbing the mushroom cap of his cock against my tender spot. Then, smoothly, he slips in. I gasp and rise on my toes to be filled with him. Gripping the sink, I drop my head forward.

The front of my robe is open, the back hiked up to my hips, and his pump-action has my breasts bouncing. He reaches to grab the achy nipple that's been screaming for his attention. He holds to my hip and I work my ass to alleviate some of the force of his entry. It's a hard dance, but I like it. God help me, I like it. He hits a new spot, one that acts like a lightning rod, sending flaming darts of erotic sensations through my pelvis. He, finds my core, slick and ready, and I can feel the muscles of my channel stretch to accommodate his growing length.

"Work it for me... move that ass like... yeah... yah... yeah... like that," he groans, gripping my shoulder and pumping harder, faster, and so strong, I'm crying out for mercy.

"Fuck this!"

He pulls out and turns me to lift me into his arms. He throws me up against the bathroom door. I hook my legs around his waist, instinctively knowing what comes next.

It's so much better riding his dick this way, with him protectively covering me.

"You like that, Princess? Open your eyes and talk to me."

I manage it and nod as my eyes fall shut and I hold on. He's thrusting up in me, long and hard.

"Talk to me. Tell me how you like it. C'mon baby. I need to hear it. Tell me what you like. I'll give it to you however you want it." He nips my bottom lip, continuing his thrusts. "Yeah, baby. Move that ass. Now tell me... tell me, Princess. Talk to me."

"I can't, please... just don't stop. Please, Mel..."

"Aww, hell. Never!"

My head goes back and I arch into it as he grips the bottom of my ass and forces as much of himself in me as I can stand. Holding on, I'm singing his name in G flat until I see stars. Then we crash together. In a word?

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Glorious.

* * *

I roll over onto something soft, which sticks to my naked body. My lashes are heavy with sleep, but the warmth of the new sun on my cheeks pushes me to part them. Opening them, I try to focus on the room. My vision clears as the overwhelming floral scent fills my nose. Blinking, confused, I sit up to a bed covered in rose petals. White, yellow, red, peach are strewn all over me.

“Omigod...”

“Morning,” he says, watching me from across the room in a chair.

He’s in his robe. “What did you do?” I smile, running my hands through the sweet, silky petals.

“I wanted to show you.”

“Show me what?”

“How easy it is for me to fall in love with you.”

My eyes flip up to his. The words he said ring in my ears. It’s the sweetest thing I have ever heard but...

“Melvin, what time is it?”

“Seven, why?”

“Shit! The wedding! I have to go!”

I’m falling out of the bed trying to find my things. He sits there, just watching.

“I’m serious! C’mon!”

He rises and I think it’s to help. But he captures me by the wrists and pulls me to him. He wraps his arms around me as I struggle.

“Stop it! I’m serious! Margie is going to have my head. Literally!”

“Hey,” he captures my chin, with one arm locking me to him. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

I can’t help but smile. “Cute, Mel. Cute.”

“Thank you, Princess. For last night.”

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“You want to save me? Stop black-on-black crime and get me to my sister’s house before Margie kills me. Okay?”

He laughs and I run out of the room holding my clothes to me, giving him one last look over my shoulder. Lord, this man. Can a girl fall so quick? Help me...

Chapter Nine

I don't give a monkey's tit! Y'all think I'm playing up in heah! Take me for a fool. Went out last night after I told your asses not to! I shut down the business to give you a party of your own, Sherry. But nooooo... No. You gots to hang out in dem dayum streets like teenagers instead of grown-ass women. Now look at you! I ain't having it. Gat damn it! Where the hell is Tia? Call her cell phone again! Call it, damn it!

She's in rare form this morning. Not sure if the walls are just that thin or Margie's voice is just that loud, but she's bringing down the house with her long-winded tirade. I'm really not in the mood for this. Especially since it was hard as hell to leave Melvin. He's like a shiny new toy on Christmas morning. Boy, would I like to play with him all day long. The man has my nose wide open.

Oh, and to make matters worse, he joined me in the shower. Yes! Omigod! Dude was giving me oral pleasure until I was screaming his name like an opera singer. Even now I blush, then cream myself from the mere thought of it. If I had known sex could be this good... well, hell. Put it this way. I got a lot of time to make up for.

"Girl, where have you been?"

It's Pam. My head turns to find my sister with a ghastly up-do. This monstrosity is a shiny display of freeze-curls spiraling out of the top center of her head, where the back of her hair is rolled into a tuck. Spritzed and gelled down on the sides, the style is finished off with baby's breath. Baby's. Breath. And wait... is that... is that *glitter*? Christ save us all!

"Margie is pissed," Pam smiles. This one here loves to be the bearer of bad news. She shifts the baby on her hip and looks me up and down while Margie stomps a hole in the ceiling above. Her left eyebrow lifts as if the sins of the night before were written out in detail over my clothes. My niece, only six months old,

peeks at me over her bottle with the same questioning look in her eyes. Khai has a yellow ribbon tying down the only thatch of hair on her round head.

I kiss the baby's fat jaw and stroke her cheek. The battle to ignore the throbbing in my temples and the aching phantom pangs from loving a man like Melvin wages on.

"What happened last night?" I ask, removing my sunglasses. My eyes burn from the inside light.

Pam shakes her head in smug judgment of my appearance. I had put on a pink velour track suit and smoothed my hair back into a bun. Best I could do. If I hadn't sweated it out in the bed, it was through after the shower. My eyes are puffy. No amount of Preparation H under my lids would fix them. I'm screwed. Happily screwed, that is.

"Sherry, Alicia, Toya, and Bet all went to Club X last night. They got in about three hours ago. Margie is pissed. What happened to you? We've been calling you all morning. You were with that gardener. Weren't you?"

"You didn't go?" I yawned, ignoring the question.

"I'm a Christian," Pam snapped. My niece starts to whine. Her fat jaws deflate and pump harder, sucking down air instead of formula. Pam's too busy minding my business to worry about the immediate need of a second round for Khai.

"Don't make me go there. I knew you before you were a *Christian*, and you would be the first leading the *freak* train," I smirk.

"Point is that was *before*. I have no time for the debauchery," she snorts. "Or fornicating, which evidently somebody--not saying you--but *somebody* was doing something last night they shouldn't be. Huh?" Pam's mouth curled into a sardonic smile.

"Girl, don't even go there. Okay? 'Cause--"

"Well, well, if it isn't Ms. Sunshine, finally deciding to roll up in this piece," Margie snaps, coming down the stairs. I look back and my sister's eyes are narrow slits of fury. Her usually beautiful long hair is twisted into the same style as Pam's, making them both look like cut-outs from a hair show gone bad. She glares at me. I

can barely see the hazel in her eyes between those thick lashes. She's itching for a fight, and all I want is Tylenol.

"Sorry," I groan.

"Sorry? You're sorry? Carolyn up in here dealing with your ungrateful sisters charging me by the head, by the hour, and you sorry? Between all of you, the best one looking is Pam."

It's hard not to laugh. I'm trying real hard, almost choking. Margie marches down the stairs like she wants to get her belt to me. I swear, my sister can just be over the top sometimes. Pam bows out with the baby screaming in her face and bucking in her arms. Those screams are torture. Like a million needles into my skull all at once, it damn near gives me the shakes.

"Pam was here at five in the morning. The only one in this gat damn family that pays attention to me!"

"Margie... c'mon. Pam is scared of you. That's why she pays attention."

"Well, you need to get scared, Ms. Thang, 'cause I'm pissed off."

I look back and see Pam peeking out of the kitchen with a smug grin. Sometimes I can't stand her goody-two-shoes self. Sighing, I toss my purse. "I have a headache. It really hurts, Margie."

"DO YOU? MAYBE I SHOULD TALK LOUDER!"

I smile and hug her, which sends her arms flailing and her mouth foaming with expletives. "It's Sherry's wedding. Everybody's excited. Can you chill?" I kiss her cheek.

She pushes out of my hold, glaring. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Don't get slick, slick--you know who. He kept you up all night doing God knows what and then drops you off at the curb? Least he could do is come in and face the family. Better be glad Jackson isn't here. What were you thinking, on today of all days?"

I can see Chuckie enter the room from my peripheral vision. The last thing I want is to have my business all through the family. "Margie, give it a rest. I drove

myself and Melvin had nothing to do with it. Where's Carolyn? Might as well get this over with."

"You hear that, Chuckie? *NOW* she's ready. After her and Melvin—"

"Oh, give it a rest!"

Climbing the stairs, I hear Chuckie questioning Margie about Melvin. From over my shoulder I see an angry scowl cover his face. What is he mad about? He ain't my father. I'm grown, pay taxes, and have been on my own for fifteen years now. Let me tell you, if it weren't for my headache, I'd set them both straight, but that battle's not worth it. Now I got to fight with Carolyn over how much product she uses in my hair. I love her, but that sticky brown gel eats at my ends. No way am I dealing with glitter spray. After Pam's wedding, it took a month of washing to get my hair to stop sparkling in the sun.

The hall is crammed with family.

"Hey, Tia!" Jason says.

"Hey, Auntie Tia," says Max.

"Ms. Tia," laughs Indigo.

Toya and several of my cousins pass me by. Some dressed, some not. A family full of girls spawned a legion of little boys. I mean, out of all my sisters' children we got three girls, including Pam's youngest, Khai. Folks talk about biological clocks ticking. Well, mine is unplugged. I'm not a baby kind of person. Margie swears it's different when you have your own, but I've been wiping enough Jackson family tail in this family to have filled my quota.

I wonder if Melvin wants kids?

What am I thinking? One night and I'm already pondering the future. Get it together, Tia, the man and you can be friends. You enjoy each other, but nothing has changed. Not really. Well, maybe a little has changed. I laugh to myself.

"Girl, where you been?" Alicia asks, coming up the hall in Margie's pink robe we gave her two Christmases ago. Alicia, too, had fallen prey to Carolyn's deadly hair-comb. Her twin sons nearly bowl me over running down the hall, shoving the smaller kids out of the way.

My head. I'd trade my BMW for just one capsule of Tylenol.

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“Hey.”

“Margie is gunning for you.”

I wave her warning off. “She’s downstairs raising the roof. You got some Tylenol?” I moan.

Alicia laughs. “Check my purse, in there with Sherry and Carolyn.”

“Auntie Tia! Auntie Tia! Auntie Tia!” Jeremy yells, jumping up and down on my toes. I reach down to lift the four-year-old wild-one and I’m tackled from behind by his brother, Mason Jr.

“Y’all get off her! Leave her alone! Go downstairs now!” Alicia orders. I swear, I’m ready to crumble. Hand to my head, I’m down the hall praying for the little red-and-white pill to give just a slither or relief. Why did I ever leave Melvin’s bed?

“I hate it!” Sherry wails as I open the door. She’s sitting in front of the mirror in full blown Sherry-hysteria, a state we’ve all witnessed many times since she was two. Tears, screams, pouts, a complete fallout that only Margie could handle. Cute at two, not so much at 32. Of course, it would be today that she goes for the gold. My cousin Bet is laughing. I can see the drama heading at me, like a bullet in slo-mo. I should grab the purse and dash out.

“Girl, it don’t look that bad,” Bet snickers.

“Shut up!” Sherry shouts. “Yes it does! Look at it!! I wanted waterfall curls. I wanted everybody to have waterfall curls! These are freeze curls!!! Waterfall curls are soft and loose! Look at my hair. It doesn’t even move! AAAAAAGGGGHHH!!”

Carolyn looks to me for help, just as I try to close the door. Bet and Sherry look for backup, too. I have no choice. Walking into the room, I suck in a deep breath for strength.

“Look at my hair, Tia. I look like some country-western singer! All these tight curls are not what I wanted. The veil sits on top of my head like a hat. I hate it! I hate it!”

Carolyn blushes. It’s damn embarrassing the way Sherry is carrying on. I give up! No hope. None. I roll my eyes to the ceiling just as my sister bursts into

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tears. Maybe it's hormones. All I know is if Margie gets wind of it, my head will explode from the drama.

"Can you give us a minute, please? Carolyn, if you can do my hair next that would be great." I'm trying to ease the humiliation inflicted on her by Sherry's rudeness, sacrificing my hair in the process. Try to forget the fact that Melvin will be here to see it in that tacky 'do.

Carolyn recovers. She flashes me a bright smile. "Sure thing, Tia. I've been dying to fix your hair since you started going to Too Groovy. It always looks so flat and boring. Need some style."

What the hell does she mean: flat and boring?

Carolyn gathers her things then walks out with her head high. Bet is sitting in the same spot. I cross my arms with my left brow raised. Bet sighs, rises, then leaves. When I close the door, I can breathe again.

"I can't do it! I can't get married like this! I won't!" Sherry whines.

"Sherry, stop it. You look beautiful."

I go for the Tylenol. Digging deep in Alicia's purse, I'm taking out her wallet, lipsticks, comb, hair ties, checkbook. At the very bottom of the fake Gucci bag is the pill bottle.

Empty.

"Sweet Merciful God." A painful moan escapes me and I plop down on the mattress.

"Tell Margie to call Daddy. We have to call off the wedding. I just can't do it."

"What are you talking about? You sound crazy." I look up and she's pacing. Sherry is always a little high maintenance, but this is a bit extreme. Though I'd admit to her hair being a bit overworked, her hysteria sounds like something else. Like second thoughts?

"I'll be a terrible wife," she admits, then turns to me with eyes that look like mine. They are wide with the same fears I've carried around for so long. Rising, I shake my head. "Sherry, Kelvin loves you."

"So what? So that means I have to marry him?"

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"You *chose* to marry him."

"I'm pregnant! Damn it! What choice do I have?"

"Girl, you're 32. You have choices."

"I haven't finished school. I'm a Ph.D. candidate."

I roll my eyes. "You have three degrees, Sherry."

"I'm not ready. I can't. I can't. I change my mind. I can't."

"Okay," I say.

She stops and frowns. "What do you mean, okay?"

"You don't have to do it if you don't want to. If you're not in love with him."

"I didn't say I wasn't."

"Well, you're confused. You need time."

"Stop putting words in my mouth!" She plops down. Dropping her head, she starts to cry, something she's really good at. Instead of being a career student she should have pursued theater. Joining her, I put my arm around her shoulder and draw her close. "You're scared. I understand that. After today, you will be a wife and then a mother. That's a big change."

"I should be like you. Hate men."

"I do not hate men," I gasp.

"That's what Alicia says," she sniffs. "Alicia says you lie a lot to cover up the truth: that you hate men."

I sigh. "Well, Alicia says that you have ADD and that's why you can't get out of school."

She laughs. "Right. Alicia doesn't know shit."

"Exactly."

I smile. Sherry sits up and wipes her tears. "I love Kelvin, but I just didn't think things would change so fast. A baby? You see all these rug-rats round here. Now I got one?"

"Change is good. I learned that last night. Life isn't what we expect. Where's the fun in that?"

Sherry nods. "Are you serious about the lawn man? Marvin?"

“Melvin. He’s a florist and a friend. I’m getting to know him. So apparently I don’t hate men.”

It irked me that Alicia was running her mouth. It also unnerved me that my games and white lies didn’t fool them as much as I thought. But what did that matter now? I have the real deal and his name is Melvin.

“You two look cute together. I hope he lasts,” Sherry adds. She rises and goes to the mirror and frowns at her hair.

I nod. “Me too.”

* * *

The Jackson family looks to be thirty deep. A noisy yet joyful bunch crowds the front lawn taking pictures. And of course I’m late. Damn, I’m really feeling Princess to leave Alejandro in charge today. It took forever for me to get him on track. He fucks up today’s delivery and I’m putting his ass down. He knows it.

As I hop out of my ride, my eyes scan the mix for Tia. The bridesmaids are identical in red taffeta dresses holding bouquets of red and white roses from my shop. Tia’s pulling the flower girl along by the hand. Her dress is strapless, with a tight corset bodice that puts those lovelies sweetly on display. Wrapped around her shoulders and tucked over her arms is a matching red shawl. She’s beautiful.

The photographer urges the Jacksons to move in closer and smile for the lens. Dropping my back to my truck, I watch the random snaps, never taking my eyes from her. Tia strikes a playful pose with her sisters toward the end, eyes bright, dimples deep, and then our eyes meet. It’s hard to explain what that connection does to me. I’m still head-trippin’ over the night we shared. Not often does the lady of your dreams walk right in and give you her everything. A man feels like a newly-made millionaire from the way she let me love her. Not going to fuck this up. And I’ve fucked up plenty in my life. Tia Jackson won’t be one of them.

“Hi!” she says, hurrying from the crowd to me. Stepping away from the truck, I’m in awe.

“You look sexy.”

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She touches her hair nervously. “Really?”

“Tia! Let’s go!” Margie calls out to her and waves at me. I wave back. The family’s heading to the cars. The sisters are moving in a clutch of red, toward the limo with the bride.

“So, pretty lady, could you ride with me to the church?” I ask. I know the answer is probably no, but...

“Oh, yes! I’m dying for a minute alone with you,” she gushes. She actually gushed? It appears I’ve knocked down a couple of walls last night. After a double blink, I reclaim my cool. She moves in close, bringing her fresh floral scent up into my nose. Lifting on her pretty toes, she plants a kiss on me in front of her family and friends before turning and hurrying off.

“Let me get my purse.”

I can’t speak. Several are watching us, openly. Margie’s smiling. Chuck’s glaring. Then I remember my promise to my man Chuck. Told him I’d keep it light. He and I will have to talk, and soon. Tia reappears, holding to the side of her dress, careful of the hem, with the bouquet in her other hand and her purse hanging from her shoulder. I start bugging. The sight of her crossing the lawn takes me to a place a man like me rarely visits. Our future, babies and all. I guess every man is entitled to his dreams.

I hold the door open and help her step into my ride, then hurry around. Inside, my tint is a godsend. I can’t wait. Hand to her face, and tongue down her throat, I kiss her long and hard, tasting the mint she loves to suck, smelling the fruity scent of her hairspray. I’m nearly over in her seat, I want her so bad. She giggles and squirms, pushing at me, and I have to pull it back in.

“Sorry, babe.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry.” She leans over and looks me in the eye. “Come closer...”

I lean in and she moves in, slow, causing my breath to hitch in my throat. Her sweet lips press to mine and that candy tongue eases out into my mouth, doing things to this man that should be outlawed from a kiss. I’m so hard, my Johnson is punching a hole through my zipper. Her hand goes down the front of my shirt, past

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my belt, and she boldly strokes me there. Like I said, she's a smart girl, a good girl, and she knows this man. Yeah, I'm digging her.

"Scandalous..." she says, drawing back, not stopping with her touches. Is she teasing me? Madness.

"All right, Princess." I take hold of her wrist and stop the motion. "I'll drop the seat and show you scandalous."

"Mmmm... I've been thinking about you all morning," she pouts, drawing away.

"Yeah. Well how long can this wedding be?"

Again, she blinks out of this thing between us and looks to the street. "Melvin, we need to go. I can't be late to the church..."

"I gotcha." Throwing the truck in drive we take to the streets. She wants me to hold her hand, like teenagers. So I do. Steering with one hand, I keep looking over to her as she talks a mile a minute. Damn, I love the way she speaks. She's complaining about glitter and gel in her hair, going on and on about family issues as I half-listen. My mind is fucking with me, flashing images of her naked, reminding me of the feel of her skin and the soft purrs that escape her when I go deep. I literally have to adjust myself in my pants. The action causes her eyes to cut over. She laughs and reaches for my dick. I smack her hand. And then the fun comes to an end. We're at the church.

Parking on the street, I can't help but feel a little disappointed. "So, after the reception, maybe dinner?"

"No, lets just go to my place," she says, cutting me a sideways glance.

My arm over the back of her seat, I lean in and kiss her shoulder. "Let me take you out for dinner."

She throws her head back and laughs. "Are you serious? Do you know how much food will be at the reception? We can take some food to-go and grub out at my place. Plus, I was thinking..."

"What were you thinking?" I ask when her eyes slip away.

"I dunno. That maybe... you know."

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

I touch the lobe of her ear and let my finger run a trail down over her shoulder. She turns to look at me with those smoldering brown eyes. Honey is so fine and so hot. I'm contemplating doing some sinful stuff on hallowed ground. She reads my mind and shakes her head. "I really have to go, Melvin, for real."

"Yeah, I know," I mumble and kiss her shoulder. "It's cool, Princess. I'll take you out the next night then."

"Mmm... maybe," she shrugs, "I kind of just like hanging out with you. We've already consummated this, soo..."

"So?" I frown. "My shit ain't raggedy, baby. I can treat you like a lady and take you to those fancy restaurants I know you dig. Out to a show, you know. A musical or whatever. I wanna treat you right."

She kisses my nose. "No hurry. We're just having fun."

Before I can say more, she's out the truck, telling me to get a good seat. I smile, watching her go.

* * *

Melvin is killing me. He really needs to stop smelling and looking so good right now. I'm getting vaginal sensations just thinking about the possibilities of tonight. A look back over my shoulder at him getting out of the truck and I can't help but smile. I really can't help but grin at how suddenly my life has changed. I understand this feeling. It's all new and sweet, and it feels good. We can have a lot of fun together. He's a good guy too.

"Tia, come here," Margie says.

Pushing through the small crowd gathering to the side of the church, I have the silliest lopsided grin on my face. Sherry's hidden in the thick of aunts, sisters, friends in another room. Brightly colored dresses jockey for position, spilling out into the hall. Everyone wants to dote on the bride and make her every wish a reality. That was one thing about getting married in my family. Talk about being Queen for a day. Funny, I didn't have to get married to feel that way, thanks to Melvin.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

Margie walks out of the exit. Unfortunately, we have to step outside for a moment of privacy. It's so loud in here.

"What is it?" I ask. I'm not late. Not really.

"You tell me. It looks like you're really serious with Melvin." She turns. Her eyes lock on mine.

* * *

Hmmm... she left her purse. Now I really feel like her man. Taking the beaded bag from the cramped space between the seat and side dash, I head in search of her. Maybe I can get another kiss before she becomes part of the festivities and I'm returned to bystander status. Something to get a man through.

The gathering at the front of the church is thick. I know First Baptist well. I'll go around and give her her purse by catching up with her through the side entrance.

Walking along the sidewalk, I hit the curve. What do I see, Princess—and get this. She's talking about me...

* * *

"Saw you with Melvin. You two look 'close'."

"Girl, please. I'm not trying to get close with anyone. I just came out of a relationship." I chuckle nervously.

Margie's eyes harden with a look of disapproval. Why is she looking at me like that? I can feel the muscles around my smile weaken as I wait for her to speak. She shakes her head and it's a look of disappointment, hurt, and a little anger.

"What is it, Margie?"

"No more of this."

"Huh?"

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“Chuckie told me about the bargain you two struck. You did this to fool me? Fool me to believe that you were dating him? Chuckie says you’ve been lying to me. Even before Melvin. Is that true?”

My chest constricts. My heart stutters. I look back at the door to the church as if escape were an option. The web of lies I’ve woven around my relationships suddenly tightens and holds me still.

“Did you lie to me?” Margie asks, her voice breaking with emotion.

“The wedding, Marge. We should get inside. It’ll be starting soon—”

“Answer me.”

My lashes flash upward. I’m eye to eye with the only mother I’ve known. Margie’s eyes glisten but the makings of tears cause them to shimmer and grow sadder with each passing second. I feel like I’m three again. I’m climbing in her bed, scared. Confused. Missing a mommy that everyone says went to heaven and left behind a useless baby. I hold on to my sister, who hums my favorite nursery rhyme, just like mommy used to, until I go to sleep. It’s crazy. I’m 35. A grown woman. My own woman. I’ve gone out in the world and done it all: traveled, bought property, graduated from an Ivy League college. I’ve done it all, except please this family.

“How long have you been lying to me?” Margie asks, her voice breaking between syllables. I look up at her and she’s searching my face for the truth.

“I um...”

“Why, Tia? Why would you do this?”

“Margie, I need help with this,” Jackson says, waving a bow tie at his daughters. My back is to daddy, but Margie shoots him a look that sends him back inside without another word.

“I’m sorry. I just... I’m sorry.”

Margie shakes her head. She steps forward and I step back. Not sure what she’d do next. Instead of shaking or yelling at me she embraces me. Stunned, I’m standing there unable to respond. By the time I reach to hug her back, she lets me go. There’s a smile on her lips, but her eyes spill tears. She cups my face. “You have always been the smartest. Kept me out of your business by giving me someone

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

else's, huh?" She laughs to cover her pain. "It's okay. If you don't trust me, I understand. In a family full of girls, I've had to be the bad guy a lot. I know I can be a bit much. I just love you so much and with momma gone, I just wanted to do what I thought momma would want. Make sure you were happy. I owe that to you."

"No Margie, you didn't owe it to any of us. None of us. I didn't lie because I didn't trust you. I lied because I *do*."

She looks at me, shaking her head that she doesn't understand. That's not surprising. I don't understand. Not fully. "I wanted to make you proud. You've done so much for us. I just wanted to do my part, be what you thought I should be—"

"Wait a minute." Margie waves off the rest of my explanation. "You are more than Jackson and I ever dreamed. More than momma would dream. I was standing right there with you when you accepted your degree. I was so proud of you when you got your promotion. Hell, I took pictures of you after you came home from work that day!"

I had to laugh at the memory of Margie fussing over me and snapping pictures of me that day. It was insane. But it was my sister. I shake my head. Tears glisten at the corners of my eyes. I've hurt her. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her.

"I'm sorry."

"It's my fault. I've been hard on you, always have. Jackson has, too. We only wanted you happy. We family, Tia. It's our job to work a nerve, girl. Maybe we're not the family you deserve, but damn sure we the one you got. I love you to death, with or without a pilot. Okay?"

"I don't know what came over me. I hated lying, but I just couldn't help myself. I guess I wanted to make you think that my being single wasn't a curse."

"Of course it's not. And if you're happy, then I'm happy." Margie wipes at my tears, kissing my face as a mother would. I can feel the boulder lift from my shoulders. She draws back, grinning.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“Now what’s up with Melvin? ’Cause that kiss at the house didn’t look like an act. You coming in late this morning wasn’t an accident. Tell me, girl. You like him?”

I nod, laughing. “Oh yes, Margie. I like him a lot.”

We both laugh. She hugs me once more. “I knew it. When I saw you two together I just knew it. Chuckie’s talking trash about his past and all, but that’s stuff that don’t matter. Chuckie wasn’t no saint. Let me tell you. He ain’t got no right to judge that man. Got Jackson all worked up. Don’t you worry. I got your back.”

“I know about his brother and what went down. What is Chuckie’s problem? Got daddy worked up how?”

“Girl, he thinks he’s being protective. Wanna flex. Told him I’m the only chief in this family. I set him straight. Ain’t having it. Finally, baby-girl brings home the real thing. Lord, I always knew you’d bring home a white boy. Just glad this one got flavor.” Margie grinned.

I laugh, shaking my head. “You’re a mess.”

* * *

I do feel bad about eavesdropping. I admit to wondering if Princess would see me as I see her. In time, I think we can get there. And like I said, I’m a patient man. There’s this feeling of triumph I got spreading through my chest. It’s like scaling a mountain and planting my flag there. This is a man’s lucky day. Stepping back, I turn from the truth, glad to have heard it from her.

“What’s up, man?” It’s Chuck. He’s stepping to me on the sidewalk.

I still. My smile fades. “Yo, man. Whassup?”

“Tell me. You and Tia?”

My hand tightens on her purse. The urge to hide it moves in as if caught with my hand in the cookie jar. Shit is stupid. Tia is a grown woman, and I don’t owe my man any explanation. Still, we did start out wrong, and he has reason for concern.

“Look, Chuck.”

“Game. Seems like you got plenty. I’m letting you know now, partner. It ain’t going down like that.”

* * *

“Hey! We need some mascara that ain’t cheap? Tia! Where’s your purse? We need some of that fancy overpriced crap you got,” Alicia shouts, sticking her head out of the side door to the church. It dawns on me that I left my purse in Melvin’s truck. Maybe I can catch him to the front of the church.

“Let me go find Melvin. My purse is in his truck.”

“Hurry up. They are getting ready. Margie, Jackson won’t let anybody fix his tie but you. He’s getting all grumpy about it. What y’all doing out here, anyway—”

“Hush, I’m coming,” Margie says. She grabs my hand before I rush off. “Don’t you ever lie to me like that again, Ms. Thang. Tell me it’s none of my business or whatever, but don’t lie... ya hear? No more games, okay? Oh, and I want to know the real story about Melvin. Get me some yella babies up in here.” She winks.

“Wha—babies...”

Margie walks off, fussing at Alicia. My family. She’s wrong. This is the one I deserve and I wouldn’t trade any of them. Turning on the sidewalk, I hurry to the front of the church. Melvin is probably inside, seated already. Before I abandon the effort, I hear them. I’m stepping quickly in my heels on the sidewalk, toward the escalating voices. Melvin and Chuckie are getting in each other’s face.

* * *

“Man, you got it wrong!”

“Got it wrong? Nah, I ain’t got it wrong. Saw you giving her drinks last night.” He stepped closer with nostrils flared like a bull, readying for the charge. His eyes darken with fury. His solid chest heaves and expands as he takes in a deep breath to cool himself. “You got out of there quick, Playa. Whassup with that?”

“Whoa. You saying I got her drunk? That I took advantage?”

“Is that how it went down?” Chuck ground out.

So my boy wanted to push me into a fight on his sister in-law’s wedding day. For what? Now I’m mad. Anger only picks at the scabs of battle scars Chuck don’t know shit about. He step. We dance. Point blank. My eyes narrow, every muscle in my body tenses like a panther eyeing a gazelle ready to leap. Out of reflex, my hand tightens into a fist. I will give the man respect, but my tolerance level matches his when it comes to bullshit. Me hurting Tia for sport is pure bullshit!

“Like I said, you got it wrong,” I manage, eyeing him up and down.

“Did you tell her the truth? Tell her what you are? My guess is no. Do I have that wrong?” Chuck seethes.

“*Stop it!*” a voice snaps behind me, but I’m seeing red right now. It doesn’t even register in my mind that it’s Princess. I got my eyes locked on Chuck, daring him to make a move. When anger and pride mixes in front of the lady you’re falling in love with, it makes you stupid. In my case, quite stupid.

“I said stop it! What is going on with you two?” she marches over and gets in between us. First she turns to me. A look of confused embarrassment turns her cheeks red. She runs her hand on the side of my arm, now looking between us both. Neither Chuck nor I take our eyes off one another.

“I said stop it, Melvin!” she whispers, forcing me to step back, breaking the spell. She turns on him.

“What is wrong with you, Chuckie?” she drops her voice, looking around at family stopping to gawk. “Go inside. The wedding is about to start.”

“Tell her the truth, Playa.”

“Chuckie, I’m serious!”

“Back the fuck off, Chuck!” I lose it on him. She whirls on me, shocked.

“Melvin, we’re in front of a church.”

“What does he care? Ain’t like he came outta prison all church-ed-up,” Chuckie snaps.

Princess’ head turns slowly to look back at her brother in-law and I swear I’d throw the first punch if she wasn’t in between us. He glares at me.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“I told you not to mess with my family. Tell her the truth. That you were locked up for murder. Tell her!”

“Murder?” She gasps and looks at me. “Murder?”

Part of me shrivels at the look she gives me. It’s the same one my mother gave me when the judge read the verdict.

“Is that true, Melvin? Were you in prison?”

“*What is going on out here!*” Margie runs out of the front of the church, having been summoned by others. She’s followed by Tia’s father and I see how this will play out. I need to reclaim cool and do it quick.

“Chuckie, what are you doing!” Margie snaps. She gets in her husband’s face and she speaks fast but so low no one but she and he can hear it. Damage done. My lady is looking at me like I’m the serpent that slithered into the garden of Eden.

“I don’t know you at all,” she says, taking a step back from me.

“Let’s talk—”

“No. Just give me an answer. Now.” She drops her voice and looks me in the eye when she speaks. “Did you kill people?”

What does she expect me to say to that? Did I kill people? Yeah, Sunshine. I did. And I’m not sorry for it. In fact, the only reason I can sleep at night is because I did. And if I had to choose between her and doing it again, I wouldn’t hesitate, I’d do it all over again.

“Not *people*, right Mel? Tell her who,” Chuck yells back as Margie shoves him toward the church. Jackson and the other men pull him in. Tia’s eyes are trained on me.

“Why didn’t you tell me this? After what we shared last night? Why? You let me... I let you...”

“I want to explain. Give me a chance... last night was special.”

“Special? Are you kidding?” She looks around then steps close. “You tricked me into thinking you were a...”

“A what? Say it, Tia! A man worthy of you?”

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

She glares, but doesn't deny it. Now that hurts. "We were so close, baby. Almost there." I sigh in defeat.

"You seemed to be the perfect one for me. It's not true. I don't know you."

"You know me. Look at me. You know me."

She steps back, out of my touch. More like recoils from it. Another blow. I feel the eyes of her family members on me. I swear, it makes me desperate. I reach for her and take her arm, holding her still. "Princess, not here, not like this. Okay?"

She looks back at her family. Then nods. "Fine. After the ceremony. Stay or go. It's up to you." She shakes me off and walks away. Chuck's inside. The others cast me one last look of suspicion and follow. I'm left standing there, holding her purse in one hand and my heart in the other.

* * *

Sherry looks beautiful. She's reciting her vows with me standing next to her. Trust me, I'm trying hard to pay attention. I can't. *Murder? Prison?* My eyes drift to the side. A sea of brown faces, not a pale one in the mix. Where is he? I haven't seen him since I left him on the sidewalk. This hurts. My heart hurts. I feel sick. I just can't get control over my emotions. Am I afraid, angry, sad? A little of all three? I don't know this man. Nothing about him. I just jumped into bed with him because he showed me some flowers. My God, he's a... a murderer... an ex-con?

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.

Everyone claps. Everyone but me. I do force a smile with my sisters. Sherry has her tongue so far down Kelvin's throat, the preacher is looking away. I tap her hip discreetly to remind her of the audience and she lets the man up for air, then turns and grins across the pews.

She's nothing like the crying mess of nerves we saw earlier. This is her moment and she waves her fingers to the applause, soaking up every minute.

Now, I can look out over the congregation. Look for him. A cool sense of relief floods me when I finally locate him. He's there. To the back of the church,

watching me. His eyes glue to mine. I immediately look away, a bit satisfied that he stayed but still clinging to my self-righteous anger.

“Go, girl,” Alicia grunts. It’s my turn to take the best man by the arm and follow the newlyweds. Doing so, I have a singular focus. Getting out of the church, past this minute until the next, where I can get Melvin alone. But no such luck. We’re ordered by my sister that the bride and her party have to stay behind for pictures. I want to scream in protest. I’m so frustrated. I catch a cramp in my hand from holding the bouquet so tight.

“You look pretty,” a guy named Tone says in my ear. Apparently he’s Kelvin’s older brother. Nice looking chocolate specimen that smells nice, too. I cut my eyes over to him.

He throws up his hands. “Sorry, sweetheart. Just trying to give you a compliment.” He thinks my coolness is from him. Far from it. He could be Denzel at this moment and I wouldn’t see it. All I can think of is Melvin.

This is making me crazy. The ball of emotion in my throat is making it hard to swallow. We pose together for the photographer and I lie for the lens, grinning through it. When Tone’s arm goes around my waist and he draws me closer than required, I barely notice. He whispers in my ear that he likes my perfume, and I force a polite smile, allowing him to hold me. All the while I count down the seconds. That is, until I look up to see Melvin watching. He’d slipped back into the sanctuary. Our eyes meet, and from across the church we speak. I shake my head at him, slowly. He drops his eyes, backs away, and then walks out.

“Your sister says you have a boyfriend. Is that true?” Tone whispers.

“Excuse me,” I say, shrugging him off. I walk out of the picture, mid-snap, and toss the flowers to the pew.

“Where are you going?” Pam calls after me. I think it’s Margie who tells her to let it alone. I don’t care. I have to find him, speak my mind. He owes me answers. I’m the one that should be walking away. Not him.

“Baby-girl,” my father says, stopping me just at the church doors.

“Be right back, Daddy.”

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“I want to talk to you. Now,” he says firmly. The doors to the church open. I get a glimpse outside. Melvin is headed for his truck. Is he leaving? “Be right back, Daddy,” I say, going for the door.

“Let him go,” my father says, grabbing my arm. The stern look he gives me stops me.

“What do you mean let him go?”

“He’s a troublemaker. I’ve asked him to leave. This is Sherry’s day and—”

“You had no right to do that!”

“I have every right to be concerned for your safety. The man was out in front of a church cursing and picking fights.”

“That’s not wha—”

“Tia Nicole. That man has spent time in prison. He’s violent and quick-tempered. I don’t want you seeing him.”

Snatching from my father, I run out of the front of the church. The spot Melvin parked is empty. He’s gone. My father comes out behind me and I want to scream in frustration.

“Here.” He hands me my purse. I look back at the beaded bag left behind and try not to cry. Crying is ridiculous. It’s not that deep, though the pain cuts to the bone. My father is smiling at me. “Come in and let’s take a picture. I want one with my girl. Please”

I take his hand and go inside, looking back once more before we do.

* * *

“Boss?”

The door pushes open. A slither of light spills in. It is more than I require. I’d rather keep to the dark. It suits me. Alejandro bravely sticks his head inside my office, after being warned not to. I don’t really give a fuck. I reach for the neck of the Henn. Another swallow gives a smooth burn to my tongue and throat, which numbs me. I’m dying inside, and have been for quite a time. It’s all for the best. She was never supposed to happen anyway.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“Boss, you have a visitor,” Alejandro whispers, as if saying it low would make the news less unwanted.

“I’m not here,” I say as I roll my head back. My eyes close.

“Melvin?”

Her voice causes my lids to flutter, but the bottle of Hennessy keeps them glued in place. I can hear her telling Alejandro to leave us. The door closes. Darkness comes again. I exhale slowly. It’s the cognac, that slow burn that’s keeping me warm, as opposed to the touch of the woman I desire. It’ll have to do. I was wrong. It wasn’t her. Just me conjuring her up again in my mind. I used to lie in a cell and do this all the time. No liquor to help. I’d just let my mind go. No Princess to fantasize about. Instead I’d see Moms and Nicky. Fixing his racing track, teaching him to ride his bike, fighting with him over his screwing with my shit, memories I probably never deserved.

Now I got her, and what could’ve been, to add to my haunts. She’s all in my fucking head under my skin. Yeah, the alcohol helps.

There’s movement. The lamp to my desk is clicked on, as if she knows I can’t take the overhead light. I’m grateful she understands at least that.

“I can’t do this. Leave, Princess.”

“I will after we talk,” she says firmly.

I have to smile at that.

“Nothing to talk about.”

“Melvin, look at me. Please. You owe me that much.”

What choice do I have? She has to have her say. The sooner she does, the sooner she can leave me to my misery. I open my eyes, wait for my vision to clear. She’s still in her bridesmaid dress. The light from the lamp has her in partial shadows, but it’s still too hard to look at her. Maybe if I had played it straight. Been a good son, brother, then maybe a woman like her would have been possible.

Hell, does it really matter? The what-ifs are a waste of energy, waste of my fucking time. “Talk to me, Princess,” I sigh, lifting the bottle again.

She’s quick. Bottle out of my hand and mouth gaping, I’m blinking, trying to focus on what happened.

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Didn’t lie. That’s your thing, remember?” I wait for her to react. She doesn’t.

“You never told me you went to prison,” she said again.

“You never asked.”

She pauses. Several heartbeats and she says nothing. Staring at me the way she does, I’m not really sure what she will say or do next.

“Okay, we didn’t take the time to know each other. Besides, to be honest, I’m not completely without sin, as you pointed out. But what we shared, I mean I thought you opened up to me. How could you not... how could you not tell me...”

With the side of my face propped between my thumb and index finger and my elbow to the arm of the chair, I watch her. Funny how close we were just the night before. If I had known it was just a dream I would have made it last a little longer. She’s wringing her hands, talking the way she does, telling me how she never rushes into things, that she should have been more cautious, period. How did she get caught up? It was the wine. The night. It was everything but me and her. I can’t take any more of it.

“It’s done. You said what you had to. Now go,” I grunt, leaning forward for my bottle. She grabs it up again.

“Did you kill a person?”

“Among other things.”

“Was it the people that hurt your brother? Was it an accident? It was an accident, right?”

“Nah, baby, it wasn’t.”

“Melvin—”

“Stop it, Tia!” I snap at her and she tenses. Rightly so. I wipe my hand down my face. “I should have never gone here...”

“Gone where?”

“Here. Just go. Please.”

“Melvin, talk to me. I’ll leave but I gave... I felt something and I...”

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“You want to be released.” She shakes her head to deny it, but I laugh. “Okay, baby, I’ll release you. Here’s the ugly truth. It went wrong the night Nicky found me at a bar the Donnelly’s owned. Came in and got in my face about hurting moms. Said he was taking me home. Made quite the scene. Guess baby-brother thought he could snap me out of it. He thought it was his duty to save me. I threw him out. But it was too late. Enough people had seen him to know who he was, and who I was... how we were connected. Irish boy with a black family that I kept secretly hidden just to fit in,” my voice trails off. “I resented him like hell for that. Actually, I shoved him around.” Now, it’s hard to speak. My head drops back.

“Mel...”

I throw up my hand for her to stop. To just let me get it all out. I’m numb enough to get it out, to tell her every dirty detail. Then we can part ways. I’m focused, looking forward to that moment, the one where she walks out and I’m left to my misery. Can’t wait for it.

“Go on,” she encourages.

“Even after I denounced him, hurt him, he kept at it. Following me around like he always did. Skipping football practice to drive the streets and look for me. Didn’t know. I didn’t know... not until it was too late. Things got fucked up and they took him off the street. Held him until I was to give them the money they thought I stole. He was seventeen. Only seventeen...” It’s like a stone. No, like a fucking mountain, sitting on my chest. The harder I try to breathe, the weaker I get from it all. “I didn’t have the money. It was my friend, my closest friend who stole it and pinned me for the take.”

“So they killed him?”

Her question is like a hammer to the back of my skull. Sucking in deep, I blow out slow until the pressure eases.

“Melvin, baby...”

“They tortured him. Did shit I won’t tell you. By the time I raised the money from my contacts on the streets, he was near dead. They kept him alive long enough for me to see them pull the trigger.”

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

When I look up, she's pale and staring blankly with the same look my mother wore when she and Pops had to identify his body. Me? I was out there with such a fucking bloodlust I couldn't even warn them that they were set to lose both their sons. No. I wanted vengeance. I hunted down each of those fucking bastards and killed them myself. Got pinched for one, but there were more. They follow me now. Haunt my sleep, as they do most nights. Just as Nicky does. My eyes go to the bottle and my mouth waters. I can't finish it without another drink. One more drink and I can think...

Rising, unsteady, I reach and grab it from her hand. She lets it go without a fight. Dropping back into my seat, I stare her directly in the eye when I speak. "Found Tommy Donnelly last. Tommy and I spent a lot of time together before the end. Just to make sure we were even. He didn't die, which is why I'm out after only five years instead of twenty. He won't walk again, though." I chuckle taking a drink.

"I thought you went to jail for murder?" she stammers. "If he's alive..."

"I did, just wasn't charged with murder." She looks on shaking her head. Finally, it sinks in. "That's right. I'm what daddy warned you about. Now go."

"Stop drinking, Melvin."

"Go run back to your palace. I'm not your prince. Not close. Don't worry. I'm clean. You're in no trouble there. We used protection." Putting the bottle down, I rise and let the swirl take its root so I can be steady on my feet. "I'll walk you to your car, this being a bad neighborhood and all."

"Wait." Her hand goes to mine as I pass. Or maybe it brushes it, but I don't even look over. She grips it firmly. "Would you stop trying to prove to me how much you want me to go when we both know you want me to stay?"

My eyes cut to her. "What do you know about what I want? You don't know me, remember?"

"I know enough now," she says, her voice wavering.

"I scare you?"

"No."

"I do. You think I'll hurt you."

Funny Valentine by Sienna Mynx

“No more than you’ll hurt yourself if I go,” she says bravely.

“Your family would never accept me.”

“My family has no say in this.”

“You sure about that, Princess? You want to play this game with me? Now?”

“No game, Melvin. No more lies, no more secrets. Just us. And, yes... if that’s the way it is, I want to play.”

I laugh a hard, bitter laugh. I step toward her; she steps back. Another step and she’s up against the door. I look her over. “You know how many days I’ve watched you from the back of a delivery truck? Wanted to just have a conversation with you?”

“You’re drunk, sweetie,” she says softly. “Stop this and just—”

“Do you?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head.

My hand goes to the side of her head and my forehead drops to hers. She’s breathing hard but she’s not leaving, not moving. Why? “What do you want, Tia? You got your answers. Why are you still here?”

“Because you need me,” she says, taking hold of both sides of my face. My eyes lift to hers. I turn my face toward the inside of her palm that smells as sweet as the rest of her skin. Her scent always fucks with me, lowers my defenses. This woman could be my undoing. But still, she could be so much more. My eyes roll as I rub my cheek and lips into that soft palm. “Melvin... I need you too.”

My eyes return to hers. She doesn’t blink. “I can’t let you go. If you stay. You know that don’t you? You have to be sure. This is all I am. There’s nothing more.”

She nods. “I understand.”

She draws my face to hers. “I want you as you are,” she says against my lips, then deepens the kiss.

And I’m hers.

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His lips burn a path from my mouth to my neck. The entire time, his big open palm strokes the curve of my hip and I have to remember to breathe. I didn't know what would happen. I had no plan other than I had to see him. Now I just want to keep him close. He's kissing my neck again, my face. His tongue's in my mouth driving tingles through my limbs.

"It's okay... I'm here." I lift my arms to his neck and he lifts me into his arms and holds me crushingly tight to him. The bitter taste of alcohol on his breath mixes with the scent of so many flowers, enough to make my head spin. He steps away and turns me to the sofa in his office and comes down with me.

My tongue's warring with his. He's forcing the material of my dress up my thighs. I can hear the slide of his zipper over our own panting. I brace myself for what is to come next. I welcome it. My legs part to let him rest between them. There's no coordination to our passion. It consumes us both. I'm just as desperate to have him back inside me. The seat of my panty is pulled aside for his freed cock to inch in with ease.

Sweet merciful God, he doesn't have a condom and I can't summon the strength to stop him.

"Oh..." I gasp to the feel of him, feeling myself open to the rigid stiff length of him. I arch into him as he grunts into my neck, holding tight to me. Desperately tight. The final thrust has him sucking in deep. We both hold that moment for all the delicious glory it brings, then release it, with him pumping in and out, in and out. He's driving himself deeper and deeper, so painfully slow it makes tears slip from my eyes.

"Don't ever go," he says.

"Never."

"Promise."

"I promise," I say, holding on to him. He's freed. Not entirely, but enough. And I keep him close to remind him that he's not alone. All the passion I carry for him takes me under the currents of his loving. He goes slower than I can bear. My hips instinctively tense as he sets a rhythm that nearly makes me insane. His mouth

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covers mine. His kiss is so painfully sweet, a cool shudder goes over me, through me, quelling the fire blazing under my skin. And soon, my world turns to a crazy mix of heat, cold, scent, and feelings I can't name, before we both go over the edge.

Together.

Chapter Ten

One Year Later

“Princess, please. I’ll beg if I have to. Open the door.”

His voice comes through the wood in a seductive plea that grips and squeezes my heart. My head is against the door with my back pressed hard into the carved oak paneling for strength. His voice is as enticing as his touch and it’s not fair that he keeps pushing like this.

“Mel.” My throat is dry so I swallow again. “I-I just can’t. Now go.”

He’s quiet. Too quiet. The silence is worse than his pleading. The pace of my heart is unreal. I can literally feel each pulsating beat through every nerve-ending in my body, even my fingertips. Why is he doing this? We said all we needed to say.

Minutes tick by and nothing. Did he leave? God, I hope so, or I’m going to break. Going to give in and that would be wrong, for so many reasons.

“I love you,” he says simply. The three words send a ripple through me, all the way through my bones. Oh, I love him too. Doesn’t he know?

“Princess, do you know how much? For how long? Have I told you enough?”

“I know. I know.”

“Then open the door. Let me hold you. Give me that much.”

This man is killing me. And my nausea, well that’s another story.

“Mel, I can’t and you told me that you wouldn’t push—”

“The baby. How’s my baby?”

I press my hand to my stomach and can’t help but smile. Our baby. Under my dress, growing each day. We made this baby out of love. A year ago, I couldn’t conceive it. Didn’t even want it. Now...

“The baby’s fine. I would tell you if something is wrong with the baby. You know that.”

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“Good. Look I’m not good at this. I’m going crazy, Princess. Just open the door.”

He loves me so hard, so strong sometimes, it’s all I can do to maintain. And since I told him he was going to be a father, well. I can’t even explain it. The man won’t give me an inch.

“If you won’t let me in, then listen to me,” he begins. And I do. The sound of his smoky voice wraps thickly around each syllable and I smile. He’s a man of few words, but when he speaks... Well, it’s why I’ve always been weak for him, even after our first pretend date. Though things have been crazy, I can always come down from just him saying my name.

“You know, I made a lot of mistakes, a lot of them.” He mumbles something I can’t hear and I turn to press the side of my face to the door. Then he speaks again. “I know you said it doesn’t matter. I know that. But they do. I want our kid to be better than me. No, I mean to be the *best* of me. I plan to do this right. Not fuc—I mean, screw it up, ya know?”

“Yes. I know,” I say softly.

“So, I’m thinking of investing, leasing out The Avenue. Rebuilding the neighborhood. The stuff... I mean the ideas you had. I’m a do it, no... no. *We’ll* do it. How does that sound? We can bring in new business and you know... the stuff you were talking about, ’cause I was listening. You think I don’t, but I always listen to you.”

Smiling, I lift from the door and my hand reaches for the knob. The steel of it is cool to the touch. Maybe I should let him in. Why am I fighting this?

“Please, baby. I’ll be good. I promise. Let me in. Open the door.”

I nod. “Okay... okay,” I say, turning the doorknob.

* * *

I’m close to having my lady when a sharp voice snaps behind me. Takes a minute for me to even register it, I’m so desperate to get in.

“What in Hades do you think you are doing? Freeze! Both of you freeze!”

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Margie's stumping my way. I don't even bother to look back as I hear the door lock fall back in place. "Damn!"

"I knew you were going to try me. The wedding is about to start. Jackson was looking for you and you're up here? Were you trying to get in there? You were, weren't you?"

"I got to see her. Marge, you've kept me from her for two days."

Margie crosses her arms and taps her foot. "Go."

I look to the door. My hand goes to it as if I can send her my touch, then drops away. "I'll be waiting for you downstairs."

"I love you," she says.

"Ah, baby, you have no idea," I say, walking away.

* * *

Wiping under my eyes to keep my mascara from smearing I step away from the door as Margie enters. Crisis averted. My gaze switches to my reflection in the mirror.

"You were going to let him in, weren't you?"

"He needs me. I need him..."

Margie rolls her eyes behind my back, which I see in the mirror. "You two are the most sickening couple I've ever known. Y'all see each other every damn day. It's bad luck to see him on your wedding day and you aren't even out of your first trimester."

I drop my head and cry. Margie comes over, frowning. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm so happy," I moan.

Margie hugs me and I laugh through my tears. "It's my hormones. I cry when I'm happy, when I'm sad, when I'm hungry, during sex. I just cry all the time. It's making me crazy. And he's been really jumpy... keeps trying to convince me that marrying him is the right thing to do. I don't think he believes I love him, Margie."

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“Girl, stop it! Can’t blame the man for giving you the side-eye. We had to nearly arm wrestle you to set the date.”

“Not because I didn’t want to marry him. I just wanted time for us to be together as a couple—”

“Nonsense, whether you do it now or ten years from now, he’ll still be that man who leaves the toilet seat up and his socks on the floor. Screw being a couple. I say marry his ass and make him miserable now.”

I smile.

Margie drops her hands to her hip and looks around. “Where is Alicia and Pam? Why aren’t they in here with you? I told them to keep Melvin away.”

“Alicia forgot the veil in the limo and Pam had to go to the bathroom. She—”

“I saw Melvin in the hall,” Pam said hurrying in. She nearly tripped over herself when she saw Margie glaring. “I wasn’t gone that long. Did he get in?”

“Almost!” Margie snapped.

Ignoring my sisters, I can’t help but smile at my dress. Its momma’s dress, redone for me. Well, not really. Every Jackson girl has had something from mama’s dress woven into hers. Margie made her own and all ours, too, exactly to our taste. By the time the dress was passed down to me there was nothing left to the material but the bodice. I’m the only one out of us all that’s not heavy-chested. So the best part of the dress was always to be mine.

Look at it. The sewn-in pearls haven’t lost their shine, even after all these years. Margie preserved it well. Cut like an Elizabethan gown, its squared front pressed my now-swollen breasts tastefully up. Melvin claims to be in love with my hips and ass, but I notice he’s paying quite a bit of attention to the changes in my breasts lately. He’ll love this.

“You look beautiful,” Margie says from behind me. Sherry comes in, talking on her cell phone. She pretty much ignores all of us, plopping down in a chair, laughing with someone. Margie rolls her eyes at her, then returns her attention to me. She rests her hands on my shoulders. We stare at my reflection. “You look like momma.”

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“No, she don’t,” Alicia says, coming in with my veil. “I look like momma.”

“Yeah, right.” Pam has to join in, fixing her make-up. “Jackson always said I looked like momma the most.

Margie kisses my cheek. “Today is Tia’s day and she looks like momma.”

I run my hands over the front of my dress, trying to see my mother. Trying to channel how she felt on her wedding day. A day for the most part I avoided, until love ran up and caught me by the hand, pushed me up against a truck and gave me my first kiss, swept me to his bed and took me over until my eyes crossed, poured out his soul, and gave me a new life that belongs to me and him. Oh, yes. I believe.

“Yeah, yeah. She looks like mama a little bit,” Alicia concedes, handing over the veil.

“Is it time already? My breasts are leaking. Kelvin junior needs a feeding,” Sherry moans, checking the front of her bridesmaid dress.

“Everybody out. I’ll take it from here,” Margie orders.

“I told you to wear the pads I bought you.” Pam fusses over Sherry, who knocks her hands away and switches out. Alicia shoots me a wink that I catch in the mirror before closing the door behind them.

Margie turns with the veil held out in front of her like it was my royal crown. “You ready, Ms. Thang, ’cause I sure am. Y’all done wore me out. Finally I can rest, once I get you over the broom. Whew!”

I smile. That’s code for Margie saying she wasn’t quite looking forward to taking off her mother hat and retiring it. Her own children are leaving the nest, and since they are all boys they don’t necessarily need mama anymore. I’m the last for her to mother. Now she will finally have a life of her own.

“Half the city is here to see you two get married. Even some of Melvin’s parents’ people came. I swear, this wedding is going to break me. I got them working double shifts at the restaurant,” she says, placing the veil to the back of my head and pinning it within my nest of curls. A few fall over my eye and I move them out of the way.

“I told you I can pay for this, Margie.”

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“Hush. Of course you won’t pay. We take care of our own. I paid for every one of your sisters to get married, and cooked too. This ain’t no different.”

“Well, I love you for it,” I say with a smile.

“You feeling nauseous? I got peeled ginger root in my purse. I brought some just in case,” she says, fixing my dress.

“I’m okay,” I tell her quickly. Last night, I was missing my man badly. We had the reception dinner earlier that week. Margie wanted for all of us to go away to do spa and sister-time. Since I was the last to get married, we made two days of it. The entire time she’s been Nurse Betty. She had me sniffing lemon peels, eating salty, crunchy foods, and wearing motion-sickness bands on my wrists. Weird, but with two days of her mothering me, I think I got this morning sickness thing beat.

Margie steps back, giving me a once-over. “So this is it. Can’t tell you nothing, Ms. Priss. You the prettiest thing in the entire church today.”

“Looks that way.”

“I... I want you to know that it was never a burden, Tia. Not one day.”

I look over to my sister, who for the first time struggles with her words. “What are we talking about?”

“I promised mama, but it was never a burden. I want you to know that. It’s been the most important thing I’ve done in my life. Look at you... you don’t need me no more,” she says, forcing a smile.

“Not need you? Are you kidding? Who’s going to tell me what to do with a baby that won’t sleep through the night? Who’s going to tell me how to keep from killing Melvin when he’s working a nerve? Who?”

“You don’t need me for that,” Margie grins, nodding that she will be on the job.

I touch her face. “I need you, period. You’re the only mother I got. Nothing will change that.”

The door opens and my father steps in. He’s wearing that same grumpy frown he wears every time he escorts one of his little girls into another man’s arms. “Time, baby-girl. They’re playing our song.”

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I turn and go into his arms, hugging him tightly. Out of everyone in the family, it seems Jackson took to Melvin the strongest, shocking us both, since the first month he refused to even speak to him. That is, until I sat him down and told him that I loved Melvin and we were going to be together, with or without his blessing. Jackson got up and walked out of the room. He called Melvin the next day and told him he had to go fishing with him. Had to. They've been tight ever since. I asked Melvin what happened. He just shrugged and said: *Pops gets it. We cool.*

It was true. He and Melvin spend every Sunday watching some game, or every other weekend fishing. I never said it to my sweetheart, but I think he sees some of his father in mine. Funny how family comes to you in the most unexpected of packages.

"Okay! Okay! Let's go!" Margie claps her hands and nearly pushes me out the door.

* * *

Chuck hits my back. We're forced to wait in the hall to be ushered in, and let me tell you I'm losing my cool. With no brother of my own, Alejandro is my best man. The husbands of the Jackson sisters make up my groomsmen, with Chuck leading the charge.

"Here, bro. Drink this." Chuckie hands me a bottle of water. I'm sweating buckets. I want to rip this fucking bowtie off. Instead, I give a tight-lipped grin and pop the cap to the water, downing the cool drink.

"You cool?" Chuckie asks.

"Nah, I aint."

He laughs. "Just nerves, man. Chill."

I can't explain it. I just never been this close to having something or someone I wanted this badly. And to top it off, I'm having a kid. A kid? Shit has me trippin'. What if she realizes it's a mistake? What if she changes her mind? Fuck, if I had just seen her, explained that I'll make her happy, just reassured her

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once more. I wanted to look into those brown eyes I give my soul to and tell her she's my life. I'll get it right. She can trust me. Explain it one more time.

Chuckie sits next to me. "You know, man, I know we squashed our beef long ago, but—"

"No need. Never was a beef. She's worth ten of you protecting her. I'm cool."

Chuckie nods. "I just wanted to say that you're part of this family." He looks up to the others. "We got to stick together. These Jackson women, I'm telling you... you gonna need some allies."

Kelvin nods. "Yeah, well where was my talk last year, Chuck?"

"Hell, you knew what was up with Sherry, been following her around since what, her second degree?" He drops his hand on my back. "My man, here, is new to the game. Only been with Tia a year, and Tia the most high-maintenance of them all." He laughs.

"Watch how you speak about my lady."

Chuckie throws his hands up in surrender, laughing. "My bad."

They all laugh. I'm not sure what's funny. It's like I'm entering some fraternal brotherhood. Guess I'll know the code soon enough. Hell, I don't give a fuck. Somebody needs to check on Princess and make sure she hasn't left the church.

Chuckie rises when the organ music plays. "It's time, partner. You thinking of cutting out, better do it now."

"Not a chance," I say, drinking the last of the water. "Let's do this."

Sucking in a deep breath, we march in, my nerves steady. I am praying silently that she makes it down that aisle, and if she does, I vow to never let her regret it.

* * *

"Daddy?" I whisper.

He looked down at me. "Yes, baby-girl?"

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“I’m pregnant.”

“Whaa?”

The door opens and everyone rises. I giggle at my father’s face as he struggles to recover. Okay, I know it’s a cruel practical joke, but we are notorious for them. He squeezes my hand and gives me a side look before leading me in.

Now I’m not the only one nervous going down the aisle. I hold tight to his arm, while my cousin Toya, sings *Ribbon in the Sky*, and for once her ghetto voice sounds like an angel. I feel like I’m gliding. Everything seems so surreal. I’m so glad for the veil. I can’t hide the tears ’cause I’m crying like a baby. *Damn hormones*. When I look at Melvin, he has that cocky smirk to his lips. Calm and cool, that’s my baby. Does he ever get nervous? Nope, not his style. That’s okay, because I’m nervous for us both.

Standing before him and the reverend, I give him the biggest smile I can afford without getting lipstick on my teeth. The reverend prays. I can’t take my eyes off my husband-to-be. He mouths *I love you* to me. I mouth it back. Then I give my life and heart to him.

Epilogue: Mr. & Mrs. Reed

“I’m ready to go,” I whisper in her ear.

She cuts her eyes over to me, then returns her attention to Aunt Bettie, Hettie, Lettie. I can’t keep up. When this aunt steps off, another steps up. I swear it’ll never end. They’re all so happy for us, and I can appreciate that, but damn...

I want my baby alone. A man just got married to the woman of his dreams, after all.

Another member of the family comes over to the table to congratulate us. I smile and nod while Tia chats them up. Princess loves to talk. She’s been showing everyone the ring I gave her. Goes on and on about the white-gold setting that was once my mother’s. I had it cut and more stones put in it for her. I had no idea it would affect her the way it did. But from the moment I’ve put it on her finger, she’s brandished it to any passerby. I got to admit it makes a man feel good. Tia deserves the best and I struggle with wanting to give it to her constantly.

Now I’m suffering, ’cause that’s not all I want to give her...

Running my hand over her thigh under the table, I nod at someone who says she knew me as a baby. Yeah, well lady, I don’t know you, okay?

Sigh. Don’t get me wrong. The wedding was a dream. Fuck, my entire life since she became mine has been a dream. But I’ve had barely ten minutes alone with my wife since we said those blessed words. Isn’t there a law or some shit against that?

Is it rude if I look at my watch again?

“You having a good time?” Princess asks, her eyes sparkling with excitement. I smile and swallow the lump of guilt for trying to rush her day.

“Long as I’m with you baby, it’s all good,” I say.

She grins and speaks to some uncle she hasn’t seen since Sherry’s wedding. Then the toasts are going and they’re pretty good, laughs and all. The entire time

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I'm touching her back, hand, thigh, which keeps me on the edge content, for the moment.

Just when I think I can't stomach another minute, it's announced. I completely forgot. Our first dance. Tia's barely setting down her glass before I'm pulling her up to her feet and leading her to the floor. When she's in my arms, I can finally breathe again.

"You look beautiful," I say, kissing her nose.

"You like my dress?" she beams.

"Mmhmm... especially the front," I say, lifting a brow and eyeing the brown swell of her newly-enlarged breasts to the front of it.

She chuckles, then presses her face to my chest as I hold her close. When she lifts her eyes once more, I can't stop looking down at her with love.

"Melvin?"

"Yes..."

"If it's a girl, you're going to have to give her another name. There's only one Princess."

I smile. "And if it's a boy?"

"There's only one Melvin. No juniors."

"Sho' you right."

Capturing her lips with mine, I draw her in closer and kiss her again as my wife. Maybe I was wrong to not believe in second chances; maybe I had to earn it. Whatever the reasons are, I freely admit that it was all worth it, if this is my ending. She draws back her thick lashes. Her eyes are heavy with love.

"I'm ready to go..." she breathes.

'Bout time. Baby only had to say those words.

"I'll make that happen, and soon," I promise.

"Good," she says, holding to me.

That's my lady... perfectly made, for me.

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About the Author

Sienna Mynx is your naughty writer of Paranormal, Contemporary, and Historical Interracial Romance. Her tales are for readers that love the bad boys but desire to be the women that tame them. A current resident of southern Georgia, Sienna Mynx has just emerged into the e-publishing scene. Her novellas reflect her thirst for romance told from a dark, sensual perspective with the diversity women of all colors crave in Erotic Romance. Look for more to come. Visit Sienna Mynx at <http://siennamynx.com>