



Love's
ABANDON

Complete Collection

C. D. SAMUDA

Book 1

His Sacrifice for Love

Book 2

Breath of Fire

Book 3

Complete Abandon

LOVE'S ABANDON
Complete Series

C. D. SAMUDA



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BOOK 1

CHAPTER 1

Tedium was about the only thing Chase McMillan feared, but that was about to change. His life was about to change.

With droopy eyes, he scanned the horizon, contemplating returning to shore. Bored and agitated, he groaned in displeasure, giving an equally discontented sigh. It's been only a few hours since the Chasmac, his three hundred foot yacht set sail, but he was ready to turn around the vessel. Work would be a welcome reprieve to the drabness offered onboard.

Seven long days. Whatever had possessed him to plan such an outing! The yacht usually sailed only weekends, but being his birthday, he'd planned this exclusive vacation.

With a deep longing for something new, something different, he leaned against the rail on the captain's bridge. The heat from the metal scorched his bare forearm, sprinting up his arm. This, he ignored as the dullness threatened to overwhelm him.

He'd gone to see the captain for no reason in particular, other than for something to pass the time. Since they'd been at sea, he'd been nothing but restless. Questioning his plan to cruise for the seven straight days, he clenched and unclenched his jaw. An extreme bout of the doldrums threatened to send him over the edge.

Brittany, who should have accompanied him, was attending to business and could not make it aboard. He hated calling her his girlfriend, although they'd known each other for four years, officially dating for one. It wasn't his doing. He would have much preferred to keep things casual. Both their parents expected more, and that 'more' might end up happening.

He gritted his teeth against the thought, trying to console himself with the idea of a multibillion-dollar business deal. That's what this relationship was leading to... making more money.

Brittany's father, Antonio D'Morne, was one of the top successful oil barons in the world.

The man had bought the mining rights in one of the most lucrative areas in Kuwait. His only daughter was the sole heir to his estate, as well as being the CEO of the North American branch of their company.

He didn't mind her being absent. It wasn't as if her being there would have made much of a difference to his mood. Of course, she would have offered some amount of distraction and act as a shield to those he was trying to elude. The reason he liked her was that she was different. Unlike the other women in his circle, she liked having fun and was not afraid to get into a little trouble.

Her being absent, however, gave him too much time on his hands with nothing to do but watch the patrons binge on food and drink. Though the cruiser was originally meant for his personal use, he much preferred it earning its keep. One weekend on the Chasmac was anywhere between two hundred and three hundred and fifty thousand dollars per cabin.

Even the thought of making twenty five million dollars per weekend was not appealing to him as he squinted up to the glaring afternoon May sun. There were countless females on the yacht, most of whom he'd "dated" at one time or another, so there was no shortage of female company.

He could easily find someone with whom to pass the time. It wasn't as if he and Brittany were married, though the parents were pushing in that direction. He couldn't blame his father for that. A marriage between the two wealthiest heirs in Florida would mean a listing on the top five hundred wealthiest families in the world.

He snickered at the thought of settling with any one woman. If there was such a woman, he hadn't met her to this day. Still, he felt completely and utterly forlorn without the attention of the female species. On the other hand, he was getting bored with the ones he knew.

"I must be losing my edge," he mumbled as he gazed over the expanse of the Atlantic.

He sighed, raking his hand through his neatly cropped raven hair in frustrated fatigue. Lazily, he dragged his eyes along the lower deck where there was chatter and the occasional laughter. With a smirk, he closed his eyes for a second. He'd just about had enough of the group when a server came into view. She was skillfully hovering a tray on the tips of her fingers as she maneuvered through the small crowd.

Her short black skirt fitted snugly against her hips and his eyes glued to her curves. Below the hem of the skirt, he made out long slender honey-colored legs. His gaze cruised the swing

of her hips, traveled south to her shapely legs, and returned north, hoping to see more.

Long dark brown tresses obscured her face from his view. He kept his eyes on her until she emptied the tray and returned to the direction of the main dining room. As she shuffled through the gathering, he watched, hoping to get a glimpse of her face. It wasn't to be.

“Oh well,” he grunted, straightening himself.

For an instant, he was intrigued, but the moment quickly faded. Chase let go of the rail, was about to return to his cabin when the yacht's general manager and his trusted friend approached. He groaned, knowing there must be trouble. George would never find him unless something was amiss. He turned to the red-faced man expectantly.

“What's the matter, George?” he drawled.

“Chase, the channel is down, we can't communicate with anyone ashore, didn't the captain tell you?”

“Yeah, he did mention something,” he replied lazily in his rich baritone.

Worry reflected on George's face. “I think we should return to shore. What if there's an emergency?”

Chase stepped closer to his friend, placing an arm around his shoulder. “You worry too much,” he casually said. “Let's just finish the night and we'll return in the morning.”

His eyes were drawn to the balcony below once more and the girl was returning with another tray. He still couldn't see her face.

“Who is that?” he asked George.

George followed his gaze, a frown furrowing his brows. “Who?” he asked scanning the crowd below.

There were about twenty people hanging out on the balcony near the main dining room. Below that were two more small dining areas; one Chase kept for his 'close' friends and the other reserved as his secret game room.

This was his playground away from the city. He had expected to have some fun on this sunny Friday afternoon, but the most fun he'd had since they left Downtown Tampa, was seeing the girl. Briefly, he wondered if her skin tasted as sweet as she looked.

“Who?” George asked. His voice penetrated Chase's thoughts.

He jutted his chin. “The girl... the one serving.”

At that moment, another server with a tray came out, making it two serving the deck.

“Which one?” George asked.

“The one with the dark hair,” he said, having no interest in the blonde server.

The red-haired man smiled and replied, “She’s Maggie, a nice girl who works hard.”

One brow shot up. “How long has she been working here?”

“Three months,” George replied. The smile faded, replaced by a puzzled expression. “Why?”

“I haven’t seen her before,” he said. “Are you sure she’s worked here every weekend for three months?”

“I hired her, I should know.”

Chase was surprised. He thought he knew all the women who worked on his yacht. Usually they made themselves known by asking to serve him at some point or another. Some of them had even made passes at him since he was only thirty-two and one of the most eligible bachelors in the state.

“How come I haven’t seen her before? Why hasn’t she served me?” His eyes fixed on her.

George let out a little breath and faced him. “I hate to break it to you, but Maggie isn’t like the other girls.”

He turned to George, glowering at him. “What do you mean?”

“She doesn’t care about your money or care to meet you,” was the reply.

Chase felt a stab in his chest as if someone put a small dagger there. The feeling was only fleeting, to be quickly replaced by curiosity. He wanted to know about her. He cast his eyes below, resting them on her. She turned her face up to the sun, directly in his line of view. His heart gave a leap and then settled down into a nice gallop.

His eyes riveted to her small pink glossy lips. He was getting his full when she turned away, trotting back to the dining room. Her face remained with him. Its oval shape and soft features were imprinted in his mind. He could not make out her eyes but he was sure they would be as enchanting as she was.

CHAPTER 2

Chase kept his eye on Maggie as she worked the largest dining area. The booth he found was dimly lit, and he slinked back into the seat. A number of the yacht's crewmembers knew him, as well as most of his guests. Disguised in baseball cap and dark glasses, he held his head low in order to sneak in. No one paid him any mind.

This was unlike him, never having to disguise himself before. However, since he heard that the girl had no interest in knowing him, he felt challenged to know about her. Doing it incognito was best.

Since seeing her earlier that day, she was all he could think about. His eyes pierced the dimness to find her scurrying through the crowded tables, serving drinks. She'd changed into a pair of skinny jeans that hugged her slender body like a second skin. She had her hair pulled back from her face, revealing her cheekbones and sensuous neckline.

As she approached his table, he lowered his head. His heart started racing, taking him unawares. Its erratic behavior was a foreign reaction, never before experienced in this manner. She planted a smile on her pretty lips, stopping a few feet away.

"Hello, can I get you anything?" she asked, in her sweet voice.

"Ah," he cleared his throat. "Scotch... on the rocks."

"Will you have a meal with that, sir?"

Should he risk having a meal? He'd have to take his disguise off. No, he'd wait until he returned to his cabin, though he was famished.

"No, thank you," he said with a smile, trying to lower his voice. "Just the scotch."

"I'll be back shortly," she replied, hurrying towards the bar.

True to her word, she was back within a minute with the order, along with a complimentary bowl of nuts. Chase could not help but be pleased at how thoughtful she was.

Nursing the drink, he watched as she meandered through the tables. On one occasion, she stopped at a table close by to take the order. As she scribbled on her notepad, one of the men patted her ass.

Chase's blood curdled in his veins. Instinctively he rose, then checked himself. He watched as Maggie leaned close to the man, whispering in his ear. Chase saw a flicker of discomfort cross the man's face. This made him grin, leaning back into his seat, curious as to what she said to the pervert.

She moved off, fetched the order, returning to serve the table with a smile. He sighed, still curious to know what Maggie said to the guy. Another girl came to his table and he ordered a scotch. He was tempted to wait for Maggie, but she was busy with other tables. After about half hour she returned to check on him.

"Are you okay? I see you've ordered. I'm sorry I was busy, so I asked Emily to serve you."

Absently he removed the shades as he found it difficult to see through the already dim room. His heart jumped around his chest making him nervous. He'd never been unsure of himself before, yet here he was, at a loss for words. She waited a few seconds, still holding her smile.

"I'm fine, thanks," he finally managed. His voice sounded strange to him, like he'd swallowed a frog.

Her pleasant smile brought heat to his belly. "Would you like something else?" she asked. "Are you sure you don't want something to eat. The chef is really great."

His stomach was doing backflips and he was tempted, but that would mean removing his cap. He could not risk it.

"Just another drink, and I'd prefer you to bring it."

She nodded and started to move off. "What's your name?" he asked, though he knew it well. He just needed to hear her voice once more.

She paused, turning with a smile. "Maggie."

"That's a pretty name," he replied, his heart now racing like a sprinter down a hundred meter track.

"I'll be back shortly," she told him before moving off.

* * *

As Maggie made to move off, the man in the baseball cap asked her name. Usually she was uncomfortable getting too friendly with the guests, but there was something about him that put her at ease. He was alone, well-mannered and appeared shy. Certainly not the loud rambunctious perverts who thought it was okay to feel up the waitresses.

She paused, turning to face him with a smile on her lips. Then she caught the smile that creased the corners of his mouth and something strange happened, her stomach fluttered. It was a passing feeling, but one that left an impression.

“Maggie,” she replied, steadying her eyes on his mouth.

Only half his face was visible beneath the wide brim of the cap, but the part she could make out told her he was an attractive man. He had a day-old stubble on his face, with angular jaw and full sensuous lips.

“That’s a pretty name,” he replied. His voice sounded hoarse to her, that she couldn’t tell whether it was his normal tone.

The weirdest thing about the encounter was, in that moment she was nervous, feeling her confidence slip away. A few minutes earlier, one of the patrons slapped her ass. She knew he was drunk, and though she wanted to smack him silly, she didn’t. She leaned in and with all the confidence in the world asked him, “*Are you sure you can handle this black booty?*”

He quickly withdrew into his shell. Apparently, he wasn’t man enough to respond. It was a trick she learned from her friend Shequana, a real ghetto queen. The vivacious, big busted girl with a butt the size of a stadium told her that’s she should always remain confident as a woman. She told her that when a man, any man, wanted to sexualize her like a piece of meat, she should ask them that question.

So far, she’d asked exactly four men that particular question, three whites and one black. Of course, none of them had responded. According to Shequana, the men who did this to women had issues with their masculinity. They did this to boost their egos because they weren’t confident as men. Real men who could handle their business respected women. She was right.

The guy in the baseball cap hinted of a man who respected women. The bar was busy and it took more time to fill the order than normal. When she returned to the booth, her customer

was gone and in his place was two hundred dollars.

Picking up the money, she looked around to see if he was still around somewhere. A quick scan of the hall proved futile. This was a big tip for only having a couple of drinks. The guy didn't even have a meal. What was even stranger was that he had not mingled with any of the guests.

The cruiser was a place for the wealthy to have fun, a lucrative business for Chase. On any given weekend, there was more than one hundred and fifty guests on board, plus the crew. As far as Maggie knew, the cost per cabin was ten times that of her college fees. The eighty guest cabins always house two to three guests. From what she knew, no cabin was single booked.

This was the exact reason she found it strange that this particular guest was alone, unless he'd had enough of his companion. She giggled at the thought of him hiding from his girlfriend, or maybe a boyfriend.

As for her boss, she heard he was a philanderer holed up in his cabin with several women, two or three, maybe four. For three months, she'd worked the Chasmac and was yet to see him. She didn't even know what he looked like. But it didn't matter to her. Doing her job well was of utmost importance. In fact, based on his reputation alone, she had no desire in meeting him.

What Maggie was curious about was, why was this guest alone? He didn't seem to fit in, not even taking off his cap. It was as though he was hiding from the crowd. Could he be a celebrity who didn't want to be seen?

She returned to the bar with the drink and pocketed her tip. Troy, the bartender who was preparing cocktails, glanced her way. Her shift was about over and she needed some peace and quiet. She needed a shower and maybe a walk on the lower deck.

"I'm off," she told Troy. "See you tomorrow."

He smiled, his even white teeth showing. "See you in the morning Maggie."

She didn't like the way his eyes traveled over her as he spoke. With hastened steps, she left the dining area and took the exit to the left of the bar counter. Once inside the stairwell, she relaxed. Within a few minutes, she was inside the cabin that she shared with another girl who was now on duty.

George made certain that only one occupant of each employee cabin was on duty at the same time, allowing privacy for the other occupant. There were only a few hours overlapping which could be spent on deck or in the employee dining area.

After a much needed shower, she changed into shorts and t-shirt. The night air was cool, so she pulled on a jacket, in case it got chilly. Just outside the employees cabins was a deck which led up to the captain's bridge and beyond that, she had no clue.

She knew the yacht was large and usually referred to as a ship, but she hadn't paid the size much mind, until now. It was no smaller than a small cruise ship. Once when her high school had a field trip, they visited a cruise liner docked at the Tampa Harbor. It was like being in a city on the ocean. The ship had everything: a mini mall, restaurants, night club, sports facilities and three swimming pools! This vessel was just a bit smaller, but had similar amenities.

Her stroll took her along the captain's tier, then back down to another level she had never been before. No lights were on in this section, which signified mystery and seclusion.

She found she liked this part of the cruiser. The voices of the guests filtered to her, but not enough to disturb the tranquility. There were other boats at sea which she could see from her vantage point. One was close enough that she could hear Beethoven playing. The music was soothing, relaxing her after a long day on her feet.

A movement to her right made her turn. Someone entered the deck from a hatch she hadn't noticed, coming to stand a few feet away from her. Her heart gave a small leap, and started beating rapidly. Her hand flew to her chest, as she tried to calm her nerves. What was she to do now?

Peering in the dark, she made out that it was a male figure. She turned to leave before she realized she had to pass by him in order to get to the captain's floor.

Not knowing what to do, she inched away, hoping he would leave. When he turned to the door from which he came, she blew out a relieved breath. However, instead of him disappearing, he stopped at the door and then a dim light flicked on a few feet away, barely lighting the area.

"I'm sorry I scared you, I didn't know someone was out here," he said. His voice was deep and smooth.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to venture this far,” she apologized. “I’ll be going now.” She made a step forward, her heart beating fiercely out of fear.

“It’s a beautiful night, isn’t it?” she heard him say.

What was he doing? Why was he trying to talk to her? “Y-yes it is,” she stuttered.

Moving quickly, she brushed passed him, but he spoke again, making her halt her steps. “Would you like to stay and talk? I promise I’ll stay at least three feet apart from you.”

She whipped around to face him. “Why... why would you want to talk to me? I... you don’t know me.”

“You’re Maggie, you served me today.”

Her eyes widened, closely scrutinizing the six feet plus stature of the man before her. His face was partially obscured from wearing a baseball cap. The dim light also made it difficult to see anything more than the shade of his dark blue jeans and black top. What she could see was the breadth of his shoulders beneath his polo shirt, how his biceps bulged as he plunged his hand into his jeans pocket.

“You?” She was surprised. “You were in the corner in the baseball cap?”

“Yes, I hate crowds,” he replied, touching the tip of his cap.

Unable to see his face, she could not tell if he was someone famous or not. From what she could see, he had the physique for which many men would die. A few professions ran through her mind as she wondered who he was. Was he a musician, athlete, actor or just some random millionaire? She was afraid to ask his name. Maybe he trusted her because he knew she would not ask personal questions. She decided to trust him, and allow him to trust her.

Having a conversation in the dark with a man whose face you could not see, was never a wise decision. Still, Maggie was not afraid of the man she’d served earlier. The yacht was pretty secure, having a dozen or more security personnel, so she knew if she screamed someone would come to her rescue.

“Okay,” she smiled. “I’ll stay a few more minutes. I’m an early sleeper, so I must be in bed soon.”

“I promise, I won’t keep you,” he replied.

She went back to the rail, inhaling the cool sea air. It was refreshing feeling the sea breeze

on her face, in her hair.

“The night is indeed lovely,” she observed, turning her face up to the sky.

The twinkling stars and half moon told her that the night was indeed fair. Never had she seen a night like this or enjoyed it in this way. She’d never dreamed of being on a yacht and having a rendezvous with a stranger, because this was how it felt.

The feeling she had in her stomach from earlier in the dining hall returned tenfold. As they continued to talk about the stars, astrology, the ocean, sea critters and movies made featuring these creatures, the butterflies returned to her stomach. Her eyes kept glancing his way, and though she could not see him clearly, her heart made a few violent jolts when his head would turn her way.

“I’ve always liked the sea, there’s something mysterious about it.” His voice was smooth and rich, Maggie liked the sound of it.

Unwittingly, she found herself getting closer to him until they were about two feet apart. She turned, taking in his profile, liking his presence. He was comfortable to be around, not asking any personal questions or making passes at her, something she’d come to expect in the opposite sex.

“Yes, there is, isn’t there?” she said, her breathing a little shallow. “I’ve always been fascinated with mermaids and other sea myths.”

He turned as she did. It was as though their eyes connected in the dim light.

“I don’t think they’re myths,” he said. “Somehow, I get the feeling a mermaid is watching us right now.” She detected amusement in his voice.

Maggie settled her eyes on the rippling surface of the dark waters, her imagination wandering far below to the deep. Could there be real half-human creatures living below? What if those stories she’d heard as a child were real?

“I liked the Little Mermaid,” she said in a quiet tone.

“Finding Nemo,” he said.

She looked at him wide eyed. “You watched Finding Nemo?”

“Yep, my cousin has three kids. I took them to the movies and they insisted on watching that. Of course, I had to watch it too. It was fun.”

“I would never take you for a guy who watches Disney movies,” she laughed.

“Me neither, but don’t you tell anyone,” he teased.

She smiled. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

An hour later, Maggie found that she was completely relaxed and enjoying the conversation, so much that she was reluctant to tear herself away. But she must, as she had the early shift in the morning.

“I have to go,” she said, her voice soft. Her heart was heavy, a feeling she didn’t often experience.

He turned to face her fully, the deck light showing the lower half of his face. Though his face was partially visible, she could not make out the color of his eyes. However, the flecks of light from them made her intake her breath. Like butterfly wings, her stomach fluttered as his eyes seem to pull her in.

“Good night,” he replied, holding out his hand to her, his tone soft and low.

Hesitantly, she placed her hand in his for the handshake. As their hands touched, a rush of heat sprinted up her arm, causing her to withdraw quickly.

“Goodnight,” she breathed, breaking away. Hastening her steps almost to a trot, she placed a hand on her racing heart.

“I’ll perhaps never see him again,” Maggie groaned, as she made it to her cabin.

Disappointment settled in her chest as she lay her head on her pillow. Her mind went back to the past hour, the ease with which they conversed.

She never asked his name, because he was a guest on the yacht and she was just a server. It was not her place to fraternize with the guests. If George found out she’d be reprimanded severely and she could never allow Mr. McMillan to know about this. She must avoid this man at all cost during the balance of the time at sea if she wanted to keep her job.

That night, her dreams were filled with mermaids and sea nymphs, meeting and kissing, stolen looks and gentle touches.

CHAPTER 3

Maggie was left with a feeling of disenchantment as her shift ended. Since she started serving the following morning, she'd hoped to see her friend in his disguise, the way he was the day before. He didn't show.

"Maggie." Her head snapped up at Troy's voice.

She was just about ready to leave for the evening, while Troy polished highball glasses behind the counter. Her eyes met his, noticing how he looked at her with concern creasing his forehead.

"Yes?"

His voice was soft. "Is something bothering you? You haven't been your usual cheerful self today."

She managed a smile. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You've been quiet all day and looking sad."

"I've got things on my mind, nothing serious," she replied. He didn't seem convinced so she reiterated with a smile. "I'm fine, Troy. Stop fussing."

Troy's eyes followed her as she exited the dining room through the door at the back of the

room. She was glad when she entered the stairwell, descending to her cabin.

Agitated with herself for letting her disappointment show, she told herself she had no right to expect this stranger to show up just so she could be happy. What if he had shown up today, what could they have done anyway? He would order and she would serve, that was all. It's not like she could have sat down to a conversation in the dining hall.

"Forget about him, Maggie. You had one conversation with the man and you're acting like you're dating," she scolded herself.

With her frustration rising, she showered and changed, deciding upon a walk to clear her mood. It was near nine and the night air was cool. Perhaps a walk would do her some good as she put her mystery man out of her mind.

As she strolled the deck along her level, she found herself skimming the same path she took last evening. She climbed to the captain's tier; coming back down to the exact spot she'd met her stranger.

"Jeez!" she muttered, realizing where she'd ventured.

The deck was dark, the way it had been before. Her eyes scanned the stretch, trying to make out any figures there. As she was about to breathe a sigh of relief, she saw him. Standing about twenty feet away, with his profile to her, he was staring into the darkness. Wearing his baseball cap, he stood with his hands in his pocket the exact way he'd done before.

Her heart somersaulted, then took off like Usain Bolt down the hundred meter stretch. What to do now? Hoping not to alert him of her presence, she made a few steps back. About to turn and flee when his voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

"I was hoping you'd come," he said in his deep sexy voice.

Oh God! Sexy voice? That's what I thought, sexy voice, jeez!

Her racing heart flew to her mouth, rendering her speechless. Not only was it running like a speeding train, it was beating quite heavily, as if it wanted freedom from her ribcage.

"Stop it," she whispered, placing a hand on her chest, willing her heart to calm.

"I'll get the lights," he suggested, moving away from the rail.

"No, it's fine," she said, her voice hoarse.

The light was too dim to provide much illumination anyway. Moreover, the moon gave

off enough so that the surface of the water glistened in its feint light. This was better, and she supposed he liked it that way.

Maggie tried to figure a name to give her friend. She couldn't very well keep referring to him as her mystery man. Her eyes cruised his silhouette and settled on the name Bryce. It was an unusual name, one she liked.

"How was your day?" she heard him ask.

He'd turned back to watching the water. "It was okay," she replied, her voice soft.

"Do you like what you do, I mean being a waitress?"

This was unusual. She'd assumed they wouldn't get personal, but here he was asking her questions about her job. Suddenly she felt closer to him, like he really was interested in knowing her.

"I don't mind it," she answered him. "It's a means for me to save for something greater."

He turned his head and she could tell he was looking at her. Silently she wished she could see his eyes and wondered what color they were. *Hazel eyes, or brown eyes*, she mused.

"Your own business?"

Maggie smiled. "No, college. My acceptance letters are sitting in a drawer at home."

"You need a sponsor," he suggested.

A frown creased her forehead and a sour taste developed in her mouth. She shuffled as a small wave of discomfort blanketed her mood. Her parents, before they passed, taught her to be self-sufficient, never to rely on others. She could never depend on someone else's hard earned money to take her through life.

"That's not something I would do." Her voice came out with a tinge of acidity.

He turned, facing her. "Why not?"

"What would I have gained on someone else's charity?" She asked. "I am able bodied, young and strong. I think I would feel more accomplished earning my own way."

"You can't do everything on your own, Maggie," he said.

His sultry tone eased her mood, relaxing her. *It's just a conversation Maggie*, she reminded herself. It wasn't as if he was going to fork over the money for her college tuition.

She laughed. "I'm not trying to do everything. I'm just trying to go to college."

"I admire that. I wish more women were like you."

Did she detect a hint of bitterness? Had a woman hurt him? She was now curious about her charming stranger, 'Bryce'. *Charming?* The thought gave her pause. Yes, she agreed, he was charming. She hadn't yet seen his face completely, but that didn't matter. What she was feeling was warmth and care from this man. He also did not impose himself on her, though he had the opportunity to do so last evening and more so now.

"Tell me about your dreams, Maggie."

A soft breeze lifted off the waters and rustled her hair. Goosebumps rose on her skin, a shudder running through her. The day had been almost scorching, therefore she'd worn a pair of shorts and this t-shirt, thinking the night would be warm.

"My dreams are simple. I want to be an educated woman who would then become a professional one. Eventually I want a family with a small house, a garden and a picket fence." She laughed on the last word.

"I like your dream as well. I just wish things were simpler."

She looked at her friend who was standing just about three feet away. "Life is as simple as you make it, isn't it?" she asked. It was more of her own statement about life.

"You have a point, but sometimes it's the complicated life you were born into that determines where you go," he said, his voice had become hard.

"I suppose you can't help the life you were born with, but I still think we all create our own destiny."

"Destiny," he said, repeating it a few more times. "Destiny." The last time it was almost a whisper. "I suppose its destiny that we meet here. I wanted you to be here so I came, hoping to see you and here you are."

Heat crept up her neck and face hearing him say he wanted to meet her. She had waited all day to see him and was upset that he hadn't showed. Her intention was to take a stroll. Instead, she found herself in the spot they met before. Was that destiny?

"Were you hoping to see me as well, Maggie?" his voice had grown thick, and her throat constricted tightly.

He was waiting for an answer and her heart was drumming loudly, she knew he was able to hear it. He turned to her and a magnetic field opened up between them. There was no denying that she was drawn to the stranger whose face she was yet to see. But the current sizzling between them was swift and strong.

“Yes,” she finally whispered her answer.

He made two short steps toward her, then stopped about a foot away. “Then promise you’ll come back tomorrow, same time,” he said.

What was happening? Her breathing changed and she found herself almost hyperventilating. He hadn’t touched her and yet she felt like hot fingers were crawling over her skin while shocking current was running up and down her spine.

She managed to reply after a hard swallow, “Yes.”

“I have to go,” he said in a low drawl. “I’ll see you, same time same place.”

He moved, but paused as he was passing by her. His hand reached up, the back of it brushing her cheek. Her skin sizzled from his touch and her breath caught. Before she could respond to it, he was gone. She stood rooted to the spot for what she assumed to be minutes.

When she finally turned to bid him goodnight, she was alone. She touched the area where his hand met her skin, still feeling the scorching sensation on her cheek.

After she left the deck, Maggie was all nerves. It seemed her heart had become an athlete. One minute it was doing backflips like Simone Boyles and the next it transformed into the fastest sprinter alive.

Sleep that night was nonexistent. His voice kept playing in her head while her mind tried to figure out what he looked like. All she knew from what little she’d seen was he was white, with strong muscular forearm, powerful thighs and broad shoulders.

She could tell all this from his build and she had made out his arms in the dining room. From the dimness of the deck light, she saw the way his thighs bulged in his jeans.

“Oh God, what’s happening to me?” she whispered in the dark.

For the next few hours, it was more of the same and then it was back to work. For the entire shift, her mind was on her mystery man and when it was time to leave, her nerves got the better of her. She was so nervous that she was tempted not to meet him as promised.

That wasn't to be, because by the time she showered, she found herself anxious to see him that she was hurrying to leave her cabin.

She got there early and he was not yet there. Something was different. Not only was the deck light on, there was a small portable table with two chairs. On the table were two glasses and a bottle of wine.

“What's this?” she traced her hand along the edge of the table.

It occurred to her that perhaps someone else had prepared for a romantic evening. A sinking feeling came over her and she retraced her steps. As she reached the end of the floor, she heard the hatch open. She paused, her back to the sound.

Uncertain whether it was him, she was afraid to turn around. Her heart skipped a beat as she kept her gaze forward.

“Are you leaving already?” he asked.

Closing her eyes, she took in a quavering breath. “No,” she replied, turning. “I wasn't sure if someone else was going to be here.”

“I don't think so. As far as I know, this part of the yacht is closed to commercial use.”

That was strange. Then why was he there? Perhaps he knew the owner, or George? Or maybe he was one of those people who liked breaking the rules. Shaking her head, she refocused her thoughts on what he was doing, and that was pouring the wine.

She hadn't moved since he arrived. Her legs seemed bolted in place. When he stretched his hand out to her with a glass, she hesitated.

“It's only five percent alcohol,” he said.

With wooden legs, she closed the space between them, taking the glass and immediately bringing it to her lips. It was light and sweet.

She strained to see his face, even a glimpse of it. She wished he would take the darn cap off. But if he was in hiding then he wouldn't, would he? Then what was this?

“I know what you're thinking.” His voice was low.

“Huh?”

“You're wondering what is this strange man doing, right?”

She chortled. “Something like that.”

“I want to get to know you, Maggie.”

Those darn butterflies in her stomach were fluttering again. The urge to tell him it was mutual was strong. However, what would happen after the yacht returned to the harbor?

“Dance with me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Dance with me,” he said, placing his glass on the table and taking hers.

He held his hand out to her. “But, there’s no music,” she said, placing her hand in his.

The moment their hands met, a bolt of current coursed through her. He gently pulled her close, but her body resisted. She stepped back, unsure of what was happening.

“I promise, I won’t bite you,” he said. “You see that man up there?” he pointed to the deck just below the captain’s bridge and above theirs.

The silhouette of a man was standing there, with the deck light behind him. She nodded.

“He’ll rush down here to rescue you if you scream,” he added. “Hey!” he called out to the person.

“Yes, Sir?” the man replied.

“If the lady screams, you come down here at once, hear?”

“Yes Sir.”

Pulling on her courage, she made a step. His free hand circled her waist while the other still held her hand. He made a step and she followed. It was as if there was music playing. His body kept moving while she fell into step with the rhythm.

Things were happening that she could not explain. Swirling around her were invisible chords binding her to him. She felt the heat of his body against her, seeping into her core. When she rested her head on his shoulder she could hear the thundering of his heart.

For a moment, she allowed the beat of it to relax her. Then she realized what she was doing. She stepped back, shaking her head.

“No, this isn’t real.”

“It is real Maggie,” he replied, reaching for her again.

“No, we have only a few days left on the boat. What happens when we go ashore? I don’t even know your name, what you look like. No, this can’t happen.”

“But it is happening Maggie. You feel it just as I do. Will you deny it?”

In a quiet voice she answered, “No, I won’t deny it. But…”

“Shhhh,” he closed the step between them, placing a finger on her lips. “I promise you this, the next time you see me, I won’t be wearing this.”

He touched the brim of the cap hiding half his face. All she could see was a short beard, perhaps from not shaving a few days. She had the urge to run her fingers through his face hair. Forcefully, she pushed the thought from her mind.

“You promise?” she asked, feeling her entire body flush.

“Yes, and one more thing, you don’t have a boyfriend by chance?”

She laughed. “No.”

“Let’s promise each other that once we leave this yacht, we’ll continue where we left off,” he said, sounding serious.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Disons promesse,” he said and was about to translate when Maggie cut in.

“What should we promise?” she asked.

“That we will see each other when we leave here. Promise me.”

“Okay, je promets,” she said.

“Je promets,” he repeated.

CHAPTER 4

Maggie's soft brown eyes narrowed, her brows knitted in confusion. "Why?" She asked the manager.

"He wants you to join him for a drink," George replied, with his sharp silvery eyes and freckled nose.

George Fontane was her manager. Now she understood that Chase McMillan, the owner of the cruiser, one of the wealthiest men in Florida wanted to have drinks with her. Maggie Carter looked with confusion at the man whose red hair was puffy and fizzy from the sea moisture.

What was she to do now? This request wasn't sitting well with her. Why would the owner of the yacht want to have drinks with her? She was just a lowly server. Did he know about her friend? Was she getting fired?

It was the fourth day on the yacht. They were in the largest of the three dining rooms and bar where she was about to serve a table.

For the last few days, she found herself in a situation she never expected. Was it possible that the boss knew she'd been fraternizing with the guest? It was an unspoken rule of sorts, especially for Maggie, never to mingle. However, she'd seen the other girls get cozy. It wasn't something she'd normally do, but she'd been extremely drawn to the stranger whom she liked to call Bryce. Her mind flicked back to what was happening in the here and now.

George raked his eyes over her body, which made her skin crawl. Not that he was unattractive; it's just that his steely eyes always seem to penetrate her. He was behind the bar counter mixing special drinks for people in one of the secluded areas, forbidden from regular crew. He was looking at her with his piercing gaze, which made her shuffle uncomfortably.

The Yacht was far off the coast of Tampa Bay, a distance that made the land no longer discernable. All the guests onboard were high society, heirs and business tycoons, along with their 'special' friends.

This was Chase's toy. When there were no paying guests onboard, it turned into his own personal playground. According to the rumors, he was a playboy who liked to party with a lot of women, and being away from the city gave him the privacy he needed.

Maggie was sure he had no shortage of female companions on the yacht, so why did he request her to join him? They'd been onboard for four days and rumor was that the following day was Chase's birthday. His idea of celebrating was getting away from business for an entire week.

Maggie could not understand how he could be calling for her with so many high society women there, unless he was going to fire her. *Oh God he knows*, she fretted, *he knows about the mystery man*. No, she argued in her mind. If anyone was going to let her go, it would be George.

Worry lines creased her forehead. As far as she was concerned, she was just an obscure black girl who no one knew, especially Chase, unless her friend mentioned something. But why would he, when he was trying to hide as well? She was confused.

Sighing, she looked at the tables that needed serving with all the tips she could be earning. This room was the most popular dining and bar area on the yacht. The other two were reserved for Chase and his close friends. Directly to the left of the counter was the employee exit. On the other end was a door leading to George's tiny office. The dining area opened up to the balcony. To the left of that was a swimming pool and a tennis court. The tennis area was closed, but there were people using the pool where a self-serve bar existed.

There was music being played by a live DJ, but the most noise came from the chatter of the people eating and drinking. There was one thing noticeable about the people on the yacht, there were couples or men with multiple partners.

That's why she could not understand how her friend was always alone, seeking out her company. A quivering feeling developed in her chest at the memory of their clandestine meetings. Never had she done something so adventurous and mysterious with a man. It was utterly thrilling. Her pulse raced just anticipating seeing him later that evening.

After meeting three days in a row, she concluded he was definitely hiding. That was the reason she doubted he'd said anything to anyone, especially Chase. It was strange, but she trusted him. Moreover, they hadn't done anything wrong. All they did was talk... and dance.

Her mind went back to Chase and his request. It was common knowledge that he had plenty of female companions with which to have drinks. The yacht was a place for such connections. Since her time working on the Chasmac, she noticed the couples boarded the cruiser were straight hook ups. They were always kissing and touching, as if that's all that

were on their minds. She knew many of the men did not come with their wives and vice versa.

Her gaze rested upon a booth with three people, two blond girls and an older man. He was probably in his mid-sixties while his companions were no older than twenty-five.

She looked away as the man raised his head, looking her way. "Why?" She voiced her thoughts.

George looked sharply at her. "I can't answer that, but he's the boss, what he says goes," he replied with a note of impatience. He leaned his elbows on the counter, beckoning her closer. She hesitantly leaned in. He lowered his voice, but spoke firmly. "If you want to keep working here, I suggest you go have drinks with the boss, STAT!"

Maggie jumped as the last word from her superior was almost shouted in her ear. She glared at him, biting down a heated reply. Of course he knew she needed the money, and this job paid triple what any waitress in the city was paid. In addition to her paycheck, the tips were sweet. She thought of the money she was saving for college, gritted her teeth and pouted her pretty pink lips.

"And change out of your uniform. Look pretty!" Was George's last command before he picked up the drinks he'd been mixing and walked away.

She looked down at her short black skirt and baby pink button down blouse, wondering what was wrong with her attire. She was about to ask but noticed Troy shaking his head, staring at her.

Gazing at her sympathetically, he said in his lazy tone, "I'd do as he says. The boss is very demanding."

She sighed, leaned towards him, whispering, "What's he like?"

He chuckled and she looked curiously at him. As he smiled, his hazel eyes twinkled while the corners creased. His eyes traveled slowly along her five feet seven inch frame, coming back to rest on her small round breasts. Absently, Maggie reached a hand to cover her chest.

She'd heard that Mr. McMillan was young, however, she'd never seen him before. She thought that if he was as good looking as Troy then it might not be so bad. She looked at him as he stared at her breasts. He was about five feet nine or six feet, she couldn't tell. What stood out about him the most was his physique. He always wore tight fitting t-shirts that stretched across his muscles. Then again, looks weren't everything. He could be the most handsome

man on the planet and yet the most dangerous. Troy certainly looked dangerous.

“He’s a man,” Troy replied, raking his eyes over her again with a grin.

Maggie inwardly cringed. *What’s with him?* She asked herself.

She couldn’t help wondering about Mr. McMillan. There were about a dozen waitresses on the yacht and she was one of the only two African American girls there. Why on earth would the boss want to have drinks with her? She decided she would ask him when she saw him. The only reason she was going was because they were in the middle of the ocean and she didn’t want to become headline news: *“Girl Goes Missing In Atlantic After Refusing Drinks With Billionaire Boss”*

She inwardly flinched, contemplating her situation. Troy was making signs at her and she turned to see George returning. She quickly exited to the back entrance, descending to her cabin.

“This isn’t right,” she mumbled, as she pushed the small hatch. “If I didn’t need the money for college, I’d just give George a piece of my mind.”

She thought that her roommate, Jan, was a better candidate than her. The girl was a blond beauty with large breasts and small waist. Jan once told her that she was to work at Hooters, but decided to take this job instead because it paid better. Then there was Emily, one of the others. She hardly knew her, but she was a pretty girl.

She was about to plop down on her cot when she noticed a dress lying on it. It was soft baby blue color, pencil cut, strapless dress about her size. Beside it was a box with a pair of silver three-inch sandals. There was no doubt it was the handiwork of George via the onboard store. For a full three minutes, she just stood there, staring at the items in disbelief.

Slowly, she walked to the little bathroom off to the side and splashed water on her face. Once done, she brushed her teeth, then dried her face with paper towels. Afterwards, she passed a brush through dark brown hair that fell in waves a few inches below her shoulders. She picked up her makeup bag, which was lying on the small counter beside the sink. All she took out was her tinted lip-gloss, which she smeared on her lush lips.

Maggie hated makeup. She didn’t feel that it was necessary for her smooth honey complexion. Her mixed heritage afforded her the long thick black lashes that brushed her cheeks, the small, pert nose just above her slightly up curved mouth. She didn’t know what to

add to her arched eyebrows and light brown eyes to make her look pretty. After a long sigh, she dusted translucent powder on her oval face and added a touch of color to her cheeks. She couldn't think of what else to do.

The heels were a little higher than she normally wore, but she found that she was able to walk without tripping. The dress was much too short and tight for her taste, though it was her exact size. Usually she wore a half size up to give her clothes some room. It was a surprise to her that the person who left the dress, and she suspected it was George, knew she was a size four.

Following George's direction, she found herself on the captain's deck, then coming back down to where she was last evening. A flash of memory made her smile as she recalled her time with 'Bryce'. She passed the area and walked a few more meters coming back around to where the private gym was. There, she found the cabin George told her about.

She knocked softly, hearing no answer. She was about to knock a second time when the door opened and a man with raven hair and the prettiest cobalt eyes she'd ever seen, stood there. Her heart leaped and she suddenly felt like fleeing, but he was holding her gaze, preventing her from looking away.

"Come in," he said in a rich deep drawl that took her breath away.

It couldn't be, could it? Her mind was playing tricks on her. There was no way this was the same man, though the voice sounded familiar. She had to make sure before making a fool of herself.

With jelly for knees, she wobbled into the exquisite room. None of the other cabins she'd been in were this huge. Her eyes darted around the space, taking in the soft inviting cream sofa. To the left was a small bar and attached to the immediate wall facing her was the king bed, neatly made with navy satin sheets.

She stood just inside the door while the man, whom she assumed was her boss, his eyes traveled over her. His scrutiny unnerved her.

"Come, sit," he indicated the sofa. "Drink?" He asked, walking to the bar. "Don't be nervous, I won't bite you."

That's what her friend said last night. The voice was mighty familiar, but she had to make certain.

Walking stiffly, she managed a nervous smile, perching her small derriere on the edge of the sofa. It was soft as she'd imagined and she wanted to sink herself into it to hide. There was an intense need to get away from the six feet plus man whose face she wanted to look at but was too scared to. All she knew so far was his height, probably six three and his eyes, which were cobalt blue. That's all she could tell the cops if needs be.

Having a description would be of no use if I was dead now, would it? Maggie, what are you thinking? Your boss isn't going to throw you overboard. Oh Jeez, overboard? I can't swim! Panicked thoughts assailed her.

He cleared his throat and she jumped, pushing her silly thoughts to the back of her head. Her eyes flew to his and she quickly looked away. *His eyes were blue, pretty blue cobalt, yes. But what color was 'Bryce's' eyes? Crap, I didn't see his eyes.*

Her nerves were confusing her that she wasn't even sure her stranger existed. Did she dream the whole thing? Those feelings she had, were they just a fantasy?

“I like to get to know my employees.”

His voice startled her, interrupting her thoughts once more. He poured the drink and came over, sitting beside her on the sofa. Absently she inched away. He held his hand out to her with the drink and she was almost scared to take it, but she needed it to clear her head. A tremor passed through her hand as she took the glass.

“Nice to meet you Maggie.” The warmth of his baritone washed over her and she was almost certain this was the same man, especially the way he said her name.

“Th-th-thank you,” she stuttered.

The glass in her hand felt like it was slipping and she gripped it tightly. She had never been this nervous about meeting anyone. Bringing the glass to her lips, she took a gulp. She hoped the wine would soothe her, give her some courage, except, it was white grape juice. In surprise, her eyes flicked to her host, who had taken a seat at the other end of the sofa, watching her with hooded eyes.

The fluorescent light of the cabin glinted off his hair and she noticed it curled slightly at his forehead. Her eyes traveled down slowly, resting on his strong nose and back to his eyebrows. They were thick, but neat. Clean-shaven, she noted the strong angled jaw with full luscious lips. Quickly she looked away as she saw him shift in his seat.

For the life of her, Maggie could not tell if this was her friend from last evening and she was too chicken to ask. What would she ask anyway? *Hey boss, did we have a great time on the deck for the last few nights?* She refocused her mind trying to forget Mr. Mystery man.

“Well, Maggie, are you seeing anyone?” Her head jerked up, their eyes making four. He was grinning from ear to ear. “I figured that would get your attention”

Was he toying with her? Her friend had asked a similar question. He was looking at her as though he was expecting an answer. She hesitated, not sure if she should lie.

“No,” she replied softly, looking away. “We broke up.”

She took another sip of the grape juice and wondered why he hadn’t given her wine. She would have preferred something stronger to relax her. He must have read her thoughts.

“Relax. I didn’t want you getting the wrong idea, so I thought some juice would be nice,” he’d softened his voice.

It was then she remembered his birthday was the following day. Needing something to say, she blurted out, “Happy Birthday!” She tried to sound cheerful, but her voice came out stilted. Her heart was going at a million beats per second.

Chase rose, walking to a window overlooking the ocean. “Do you know why I hate celebrating my birthday?”

She replied, “No.” *A conversation... that’s good*, she thought.

She took a chance to look at him while his back was turned to her. His shoulders were wide and she noticed how he stood with his legs slightly apart and his back rigid. Was that a sign of power, she wondered, or was he just plain cocky?

He pushed one hand into his pants pocket while the other lifted his drink. This looked so familiar that she tried to compare her friend to this man before her. She still wasn’t certain. Why would the boss come into the dining room disguised and then on the deck alone when he was supposedly occupied with his women friends? It didn’t make sense.

She noticed how tight his ass was in his pants as the fabric stretched across his bun. Her palms felt moist as she perused him and wondered what she was doing there.

“No one ever really thought about what I want on my special day. Do you know how many golf clubs or neckties I have? Not to mention the many fountain pens and bottles of

cognac,” he snickered. “The conversations are all the same, just like any other day. My friends, they come for the drinks and food... but, it’s the same as always. Never anything special.”

He turned and looked at her. Something about him struck her. She’d been in the room for less than fifteen minutes, and during that time all she did was panic. But looking at her boss, she realized he was lonely.

Taking a deep breath, drawing a little courage she asked, “What *do* you want?”

Chase turned, looking at her with narrowed eyes. Something flickered in his blue pools, but Maggie was never good at reading eyes, so she had no idea what it meant. She wondered if he was amused, or were they mocking her? The corners of his mouth twitched a little such as when someone was suppressing a smile.

“I want to spend my birthday with someone who doesn’t care about all that stuff. Someone like you.”

She was taken aback, but her heart gave a violent jolt. “Why me? There are prettier girls on the yacht,” she gained some courage to ask him.

“Ha-ha,” he laughed, a deep boisterous sound that bounced off the wall. “Now that’s the question. Do you know how many of those women have thrown themselves at me at some point or another?”

Maggie looked away, embarrassed. She could feel heat rise up her neck. She wanted to tell him that she could see why, but that would seem too forward.

He was a strikingly handsome man. Underneath his suit, she could tell there were muscles. She saw the way they bulged when he moved his arms. When he walked, she saw his thigh muscles move inside his dark slacks. She understood completely why those women threw themselves at him... but she was not one of those women. In addition, she’d started liking someone else. Someone she had no clue about.

“Do you know that you are the only female employee on this yacht who has never asked who I was, or what I looked like? You are the only one who has no interest in knowing me.”

“How did you know that?” She was surprised he knew, but quite embarrassed as well. “I’m sorry, I just didn’t think it necessary as long as I did my job well.”

He moved from the window, coming to stand about a foot away, “Would you like

something stronger?”

“Yes, thank you,” she answered, handing him her glass. As he stood near her, she could smell his cologne or aftershave, a light refreshing scent like the ocean breeze. Mingled with the cologne was his musky male scent.

The odor titillated her senses, giving her a heady sensation, taking her by surprise. He poured a glass of red wine and handed it to her, also taking one for himself.

“Cheers,” he clinked their glasses together, all the while keeping his eyes on her. “Have dinner with me tomorrow, my birthday,” he said, keeping his gaze on her.

She wasn’t sure about that, but the request was simple enough. “Okay,” she said quietly, trying to avoid his eyes.

What about Bryce? I want to have wine and dance with him in the dark. She was missing him, as a dull ache developed in her chest. She liked the flow of electricity between them, that’s what she wanted. She didn’t want to have dinner with this man.

She took another sip of the wine; it soothed her as it slid smoothly down her throat. Bravely, she raised her eyes from her glass and looked at him. He was staring out the window as if in deep thought. As she looked at his profile, she felt her insides melt.

Here was a man who had everything. He was known as one of the wealthiest heirs and businessmen in the country. He made his money from real estate, investments and whatever else... she had no idea. What she saw was a lonely man, by the way he was staring into space.

Maggie moved to the bar, placed her half-empty glass on it and poured herself some water. She sure as hell didn’t want to get drunk and embarrass herself. She was now regretting asking for the wine, because its effects she was already feeling. Chase came up beside her, pouring himself another drink. She could feel his nearness. The warmth of him quickened her pulse and she moved away.

It was a familiar sensation, the same as she’d felt last evening. Still she needed to be certain that her mystery man and her boss was one in the same and she was not reacting to the wine.

“So tell me, why did you dump him?” He asked, taking her by surprise.

She turned, looking at him confused, “Huh?”

“Your boyfriend,” he replied. “I assumed you were the one to break it off?”

“He... he cheated on me,” she replied haltingly.

“He’s a damn fool!” the venom in his tone was unmistakable, it surprised her.

Maggie wanted to ask him whether or not he had a girlfriend but she didn’t. She thought it might give him the wrong idea about her, when in fact she was only curious because his actions reflected that of a lonesome person. Yet, she’d heard many rumors about his womanizing ways.

He finished his drink and went back to the window. She wasn’t sure what to do next or even why she was there.

“I know this is uncomfortable for you so you are free to leave,” he turned his head, glancing her way. “You can take the rest of the afternoon off.”

“That’s it?” The question flew from her lips before she even registered the thought. This was weird, she thought. *First, he takes me away from my work and next he dismisses me. Did I fail some sort of test?*

“What do you mean?” He turned fully to face her, his eyes narrowing, brows knitted.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, why?”

Shuffling her feet, she stared at a spot on the floor. “I’m just confused as to why you called me here.”

Her voice betrayed her agitation. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Can I ask you something else?”

“I suppose,” she sighed.

“Since you’re not seeing anyone...,” he started.

“I am seeing someone,” she said, cutting him off.

His eyes narrowed. “I thought you said you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

“Well it’s not official, but...”

“You like someone?” he cut in.

“Yes,” she replied. “If you don’t mind I’ll leave now.”

As she was walking away, she felt him grip her arm, gently. “Just one more thing,” he asked.

His grip was doing things to her that she was even more confused. How was it possible that a man she’d never met was making her heart beat this rapidly? His palm on her wrist was hot, sending electrical charges up her arm.

She turned, her brows knitted. Their eyes met and locked. The feeling she’d had as if he was pulling her in was the same now.

“What?” she could hardly breathe.

“Je promets.”

Maggie gasp, pulling away her arm. The area where he’d gripped sizzled from his touch. Their eyes locked and she could not look away, until he broke the spell.

“I didn’t mean to deceive you. I just needed to have a real conversation with someone who didn’t know me.”

Maggie wasn’t sure how she should take that. If she’d known he was the boss, she would have never indulged him. And even if she’d did out of obligation, she would perhaps be unable to relax around him. Somehow, she understood him.

He moved up behind her and she could feel his heat on her back. She wanted to say something but her mind was in shock. The man she’d shared so many intimate moments with, the man she’d promised to date, was her boss. This wasn’t happening. She knew it was too good to be true.

“You have to keep your promise, Maggie.”

“How can I?” she asked, stepping away. “You are my boss.”

“I was your boss last night as well, but we made promises,” he said, his voice took on a sultry tone.

“Yes, but I didn’t know.”

She wanted to run. Something inside her was telling her that she should leave. Nevertheless, a part of her felt drawn to the blue-eyed godlike creature whose magnetic presence was pulling her to him.

“A promise is a promise Maggie.” He came closer. “You can’t deny what we feel for each

other.”

“Oh God,” she whispered, her chest heaving with each breath she took.

He embraced her from behind, and somehow she felt herself lean into him. Closing her eyes, she savored the sensations happening to her. His hard body was like a rock to her back, she liked the feel of it, but her mind was conflicted.

Then his lips brush tantalizingly against the skin of her neck, causing her to jump, electricity shooting through her. Maggie twisted around, ready to protest, but his lips descended on hers.

Shock, if nothing else rendered her rigid. Chase’s lips caressed hers, sending waves of current coursing through her. Never had she imagined a kiss so electrifying and utterly explosive. A small part of her brain tried to resist, as a whimper escaped her lips. As her mouth opened to protest, he took charge of her tongue.

A shudder ran through her, making her knees weak. She could only sag against him as her legs threatened to buckle beneath her body.

CHAPTER 5

Maggie touched her lips where Chase kissed her. “No,” she mumbled, while cleaning the tables on the balcony the following morning. “How could I let him?”

The evening came back to her. Her fascination with the self-assured, almost arrogant man was strange. Before she even realized he was her mystery friend, she’d been drawn to him. His eyes kept looming before her, like a hypnotic whirlpool, pulling her in. When she thought about it, the allure was long before last evening, it’s been four days in the making.

A part of her was annoyed that he kept his identity hidden from her when they met on the deck. Then again, he said he needed the freedom of having a conversation without anyone knowing who he was. That was understandable, given who he actually was.

She’d never been attracted to anyone as quickly, let alone allowing them to get this close to her. Her boyfriend, who she broke up with recently, it took three weeks before she allowed him to kiss her. It was four months before they made love.

This kiss left her weak in the knees. It was baffling. She met him only four days ago and they kissed already. Never in a million years would she have thought a man like that would want to get close to her.

“No,” she mumbled again. “He’s just playing with me, and I am playing with fire.”

Their ‘date’ was making her nervous. She was beginning to regret agreeing to have dinner with him today. She felt like jumping off the yacht and swimming to shore. Only, she couldn’t swim and she was more afraid of what was in the depths of the ocean. For the rest of the afternoon she was jittery. In the process of making up her mind to call Chase to cancel, Emily accosted her.

“I hear you’re having drinks with the boss again,” Emily spat. Though her lips were smiling, her misty gray eyes sent daggers at Maggie.

The ocean breeze whipped Maggie’s hair onto her face. She brushed it away, keeping her eye on the table she was cleaning. “Yes,” she replied. *Dinner, I’m having dinner with Chase*, was what she wanted to say.

Emily tucked her auburn hair behind her ears. “He must feel sorry for you,” the girl

hissed.

Maggie's eyes flicked to Emily, her brows knitting in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Emily shrugged, replying in a condescending manner, "Why else would he have drinks with you twice?"

"It was *his* idea," she informed the girl in her cool tone.

"Then you must have done something to make him request it," Emily argued. "Now, you must think you're special because Chase requested you."

"Look Emily." She dropped the cloth she'd been cleaning with, stepping closer to the girl. "If you want to have drinks with the boss why don't you? What... he never requested you?" Her voice was calm, but the girl might have detected the deadliness of it.

"I was the one who refused," the girl lied, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"Then what's the problem?" Maggie's voice became hard.

A flicker crossed Emily's face, her cheeks red and eyes wide. She backed away, holding her hands up. "No problem."

As she walked away, Maggie saw the hatred in her eyes. Picking up her cleaning cloth, she stomped towards the main dining room heading to George's office. Her intention was to have him cancel her 'date' with Chase.

She didn't want to have to deal with eyes on her at work. Jobs were hard to find. Having her colleagues hate her because the boss favored her was not something she was prepared to deal with. Although she could defend herself against people like Emily.

The door was slightly ajar and she knocked and pushed. "What can I do for you?" he asked, his eyes on a document he was reading.

"I can't do this," she blurted out.

The man raised his head, looking at her with one brow raised. "What can't you do?" he asked.

"The boss. I did as you asked and had drinks with him, but I can't do it again," she bemoaned.

"What happened? Did he do something wrong?" George asked, his brows now knitting

furiously.

“No... absolutely not. He was a gentleman,” she answered, remembering their evening.

“Then what’s the problem?” her manager asked, eyeing her curiously, his face relaxing.

She smiled, trying to avoid his eyes. “Nothing, just that I missed all the tips I could have made last evening,” she lied.

In fact, she was afraid of what might happen if she went back. Chase had kissed her. She wasn’t the only one shocked by the kiss, having seen the surprise in his eyes. Her experience with romance and attraction to the opposite sex was limited. Having only been with her ex a few times, she believed that’s the reason he cheated.

It was an electrifying kiss, one that left her wanting more. His searing lips sent current coursing through her, igniting a fire inside. This experience was new to her and the intensity of it scared her. What if she wasn’t able to resist his charms? What would she do?

“It must have been the wine,” she muttered under her breath.

“What?” George asked.

“Nothing,” she replied. “I’ll get back to work.”

“Have one more drink, and if you’re still uncomfortable, I’ll have a talk with Chase,” George promised.

“Okay,” she said, getting back to her duties.

It must really be the wine, she pondered, though she’d only had half a glass. There was no other explanation as to why she gave in to his kiss. Although they’d shared some moments and she felt this intense attraction, this was wrong.

Confusion curled its way around her brain. On the one hand, she was attracted to the stranger, but on the other hand, she found her behavior reprehensible. How could she allow her boss to kiss her? How could she kiss him back?

“No,” she mumbled to herself once more. “This can’t be.”

Getting involved with a man like Chase wasn’t something she should allow to happen. There was no such thing in her world. Maggie’s doubts made her jittery. Why was Chase messing around with her? Why had he disguised himself to be with her? Was this a game?

The more she thought about the situation, the beginning of anger wormed its way in,

replacing her anxiety. The notion that she was attracted to Chase was altogether silly. It was just a momentary lapse in judgement. The tranquility of the sea, the stars in the sky and the smooth glistening surface of the water all added to the mood. They'd met in darkness under a half moon, any one would have been swept away by the romance of it all.

Yes, she argued in her mind, he was a gorgeous man. His blue oceanic pools pulled her in when she gazed into them. Her heart skipped a beat thinking about him.

“No!” she scolded herself for her reaction. “You can't allow yourself this luxury, Maggie. Forget about him.”

Her heart refused to listen. With a frustrated groan, she finished her task and went back to the dining room. Thinking about Chase made her agitated and excited all together. The feel of his lips lingered on hers. The sensations they evoked rippled through her even now at the memory. However, he stepped over the line and she wasn't about to let it slide.

Chase's Birthday...

Like a caged animal, Chase paced his cabin. Occasionally he stopped to look out at sea, running his hand across his chin. For a second he stopped walking, then sat on the sofa. He got up and poured himself some sparkling water, downing it in one go. It was a little past eight in the morning and he'd hardly slept the night before.

“What the hell?” He almost shouted.

He was thinking on Maggie and what he'd done. He didn't mean to kiss her. Not then anyway, though he had thought about it. Since the time he laid eyes on her, he hadn't been able to think of anything or anyone else. Since their late evening rendezvous, all he could imagine was the taste of her lips.

Getting George to agree to send her there was a difficult task. He had to promise the man he would treat her with respect before he would agree. He knew George wasn't too keen about it, but the manager agreed and there she was. There must have been something special about her for George to be this protective of her.

He stood once more and walked to the window, shoving his hand into his shorts pocket. Should he go see her? He wondered. No, he thought, she would only be uncomfortable. He recalled the evening, how everything was going smoothly. Then like an idiot, he dismissed her, as her discomfort was obvious.

The urge to touch her, be near her was almost uncontrollable, hence his fear. His only intention was to save himself from trouble, but he ended up crushing her lips with his. Closing his eyes, he recalled feeling the tremor passing through her body as he took her tongue. She must have been scared out of her mind. When he released her, she gave him a terrified stare, before making a mad dash out of the cabin.

He felt he had to make things right with her, yet he had no inkling how. Should he ask George? *God no!* He thought. George would only have his head if he knew what he'd done. Maggie was supposed to come back to have dinner as she'd promised.

“She’ll come,” he told himself, though riddled with doubt.

She would come for the very reason that he was her employer, he moaned. This he hated. He wanted her there only of her own free will. The nights they spent on the deck were what he wanted, not her being there because she felt compelled. He made a note of clearing the air when she arrived.

* * *

When Maggie completed her shift, an indignant expression was a permanent part of her features. Determined that this was her last day on the Chasmac, she showered and dressed. Wearing a pair of jeans, a spaghetti strap top, she carefully did her makeup, telling herself it was because she was meeting the boss and nothing else. She wanted to be presentable when she quit her job.

As she readied, uncertainty started setting in. What would happen when she quit? Could she stay aboard after turning down the boss' invitation and telling him that she no longer wished to work for him? Would George send her ashore on one of the dinghies? She doubted it.

“Perhaps it’s not such a good idea,” she said aloud to the bathroom mirror. Maybe she

should wait a few days before quitting. What she could do was cancel the dinner date.

Ready, with her heart in her mouth she was off to see Chase. It took her longer than necessary to reach his cabin due to the quivering sensations galloping all over her. Never had she been this nervous about seeing anyone.

She stood for about five minutes outside the door before dredging up enough courage. He opened the door after the first knock, which threw her off guard. The first thing that hit her was his darn cologne. What was it, ocean breeze? Every other man she knew wore something stronger, that made her want to puke. But Chase, no, he had to wear a cologne that was refreshing and appealing.

Maggie tried a smile, but it came out crooked. “Hello,” she greeted.

“Hi,” he replied, softly. “Please, come.”

On wooden legs, she tottered in. Stiffly, she perched onto the edge of the sofa, trying to remember the lines she practiced. The words failed her as her heart drummed out of beat and her throat constricted painfully.

“I’m sorry about the other evening,” his voice brought up her attention and she looked up, making eye contact. “I know this is uncomfortable for you, so I’ll understand you wish to leave.”

She stared at him in surprise. That’s what she wanted wasn’t it? But the look on his face was making her stomach flip, replacing the nervousness. She took the minute of silence between them to contemplate her situation. A breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding escaped her lips and she relaxed her shoulders. *One dinner, that wont hurt. Just one dinner and that’s it.*

“It’s your birthday, I’ll stay,” she replied.

His face broke into a wide grin, giving her heart a jolt seeing his elated expression.

“I ordered dinner,” he announced, waving at a trolley in the center of the room. “I wasn’t sure what you liked so I got steak, chicken and seafood. I wasn’t even sure you would make it.”

He invited her to see the spread, pulling the covers off the silver platters. A wonderful aroma wafted up to her nostrils, causing her mouth to water. The food looked delicious and it was hard choosing between the chicken and seafood. She didn’t like beef, though what was on

the plate looked like a prime cut.

“New York strip,” he said, watching her eyes.

“Seafood for me, please. I don’t like steak,” she replied with a smile.

With raised brows he stared at her for a few seconds. He then pulled up two chairs to the trolley, which served as the table. He was very attentive, seating her first before taking his own seat. After pouring some Zinfandel, he handed her a glass.

“Thank you,” she said.

The tips of their fingers brushed as she took the glass. The touch was light but the effect electrifying. The thrill of his touch left a tremor in her hand as she brought the glass to her lips. It was the same wine as they’d had on the deck a couple of nights ago.

As he pulled his chair closer to the trolley, his knees rubbed hers provocatively. The shock of it almost caused the glass to slip from her fingers. She gripped it tightly, trying to still the sudden erratic beating of her heart.

Taking a sip of her drink, she noted her hand still trembled. Pulling on her inner strength, she willed it to keep steady. She did not want Chase to know how he affected her. It was inappropriate if not bizarre. No matter how she tried, she could not help the effect he was having on her. Since meeting him as a stranger until this moment, her reaction to him had been unwitting.

For the first few minutes of the meal, there was an awkward silence, in which time she kept her eyes on her plate. The food was great, but her appetite absent. She took a taste of the shrimp scampi and a few strands of the pasta. When Chase broke the silence, his voice startled her.

“So, do you know why oysters never give to charity?”

Maggie’s eyes flew to his, narrowing. *Was that a trick question?*

“No,” she replied softly, her pulse racing from being startled, or was she responding to his voice?

“Because they are shellfish!” Chase announced, awaiting her reaction with expectancy.

“Ha-ha-ha,” she laughed, almost choking on her drink.

He grinned, apparently pleased she liked his joke. “Here’s a question for you,” he said,

amusement evident in his voice. “What is a sea food diet?”

Maggie wasn't sure what the answer was. “I don't know, you tell me.”

“You see food and you eat it!”

“See food, ha-ha-ha, very funny. I suppose now I'm on a '*see food*' diet then.” His jokes relaxed her, allowing her appetite to return.

There were three more jokes to follow and then the conversation switched to sailing. They talked casually throughout the meal. Afterwards they shifted to the sofa and continued to talk about environmental issues, the sea, sports and travelling.

She was enjoying the company so much that the time lapsed without her knowing. Not for a moment did Chase make her feel like he was her boss. In fact, their rapport returned to the way it was before she discovered his identity.

As the evening slipped away, they drew close to each other on the sofa. Then as the conversation died, she found her head resting on his shoulder. He had one arm around her, making her feel secure.

“Remember our promise, Maggie,” he said in low sultry tone. “You can't break it.”

“What promise?” she murmured, raising her head to look at him.

“That we'll see each other when we get to shore.”

Their eyes locked and the world around them disappeared. His lips descended, capturing hers in an earth shattering kiss. He probed her mouth while one hand snaked its way to her breast. A groan escaped her as she arched into him.

He broke the kiss a moment to tell her this, “You drive me crazy, Maggie Carter.”

Then his lips crushed hers once more and she could only think, *I'm falling in love with you, Chase.*

CHAPTER 6

The morning sun touched the golden honeyed skin of the woman lying on the king bed. Chase watched her sleep. Her long lashes brushed her soft cheek and he felt the urge to touch them with the tip of his fingers. Her lips were perfectly swollen and pink from their night of passion. The memory of their night brought a burning heat in his groin.

He wasn't sure what happened. He hadn't meant to kiss her again, but when his lips touched hers, he was like wax in the summer sun. Never in his wildest dreams had he experienced such sweetness with a woman. When he first saw her serving on the balcony a few days before, his heart did a double take.

Now here she lay in his bed and he didn't want her to go. But he knew it wasn't that easy. His father would never allow him to date one of his employees. As he watched her sleep, he felt his pulse quicken. Could someone fall in love at first sight? He wondered.

His attention was drawn to voices on the upper deck and he eased himself from the bed, not wanting to awaken her. He quietly pulled on a pair of jeans and left the cabin. George was red faced and coming with full speed along the deck leading to his hatch.

“Chase, there's trouble!” The manager shouted. “Coast guards and the feds.”

“Have you locked the safe?” Chase asked, quickly blocking the cabin door.

“Yes,” George replied. “We need to get you off the yacht.”

“No, if I try to escape, they'll think I'm running and will come after me. Get the crew together and make sure they're okay.”

When he looked over his shoulder inside the cabin, Maggie was awake. He stood in the doorway to prevent George from peeking in. “Go see to the guests and the employees, I'll be there in a minute,” he commanded. George nodded and returned to the path along the deck leading back to where he came.

“What's the matter?” Maggie murmured sleepily.

“Get dressed quickly, the feds are on the yacht,” he told her, while pulling on a shirt.

Chase watched her from the corner of his eye while she quickly got dressed. She picked up her shoes and was heading past him when he stopped her.

“Thank you, for a wonderful birthday,” he said, kissing her lightly on the lips. “Go to George, he will take care of you. I’ll see you back in Tampa. Remember our promise.”

“Okay,” she answered quietly, heading to the door.

Chase felt a heaviness settle in his chest. Maggie’s face had fallen when he told her thanks. Her eyes lost the light he’d seen a few seconds ago. That adoring gaze she gave him when he came back inside flitted away the moment he said ‘thanks’.

He could kick himself. She must have thought that he considered what they did together some sort of birthday present. He knew his reputation was no good and admittedly, some were true. Therefore, she must have thought she was just another conquest. He made a mental note to make her understand she was more than that. For now, he had the FBI to deal with.

* * *

Maggie ambled from Chase’s cabin with her heart in the bottom of her stomach. Never had she felt regret as much as that moment. When they’d ended up kissing, it had felt right. His hands as they caressed her had felt right, as she’d given in to his charms last night had felt right. Now, not so much.

Thank you for a wonderful birthday, was what he said. She didn’t know what she had expected, but it certainly wasn’t gratitude for spending the night. In that moment that Chase said the words, she felt cheap, like those women who gave their bodies to anyone for no good reason, or for money.

Stopping just a few feet away from his cabin door, she closed her eyes as the memory of the night rushed through her mind. Her body had taken on a mind of its own, as she’d never experienced such ecstasy in all her life.

Of course, she had only one boyfriend before, but he never made her feel so... so... wanton, was the word that popped into her head. Gritting her teeth against the disappointment of hearing Chase tell her thanks, she pushed herself forward, heading towards the cackle of voices reaching her ears.

By the time she reached the dining room, all the employees were being carted to one of the coast guard’s vessels. When George saw her, he beckoned her over and told her to keep

quiet and do what the feds asked.

“Just pretend you know nothing,” George whispered.

“But, I don’t *know* anything,” she whispered back.

“Good!” He smiled at her then turned to talk to one of the men in black.

Maggie wasn’t sure what was happening. Were there drugs on the yacht? She wanted to ask George but the man looked like he was going to burst a vein soon. His face had gone completely red, so much so that his freckles had blended with the new skin tone. One of the feds walked over to her and asked her name.

“Maggie Carter,” she replied with a lump to her throat.

He looked at a list and frowned. She was not wearing her uniform, so she must have looked like a guest.

“I’m not on the guest list,” she told him. He lifted his eyes from the paper, looking at her intently. “I’m a waitress.”

“Oh, I’d have never guessed,” he smiled. “You must have been off duty.”

“Yes,” she replied in a soft voice, hoping he didn’t know what she’d done.

The man told her that they were sending the employees back to the city and that she should also get on the yacht that was waiting. Hesitantly, she complied, but her mind was on Chase. She tried to see if he had come up on the deck, but no such luck.

A few of the agents moved away from the area and descended to the lower part of the yacht. She assumed they were looking for the owner. She was ushered onto the coast guard vessel with the other crewmembers. When the feds were satisfied that everyone who worked the cruiser was aboard, the vessel started moving away.

A few minutes later, while the federal yacht treaded the blue waters, she saw Chase being escorted on deck. His hands were cuffed behind him and another yacht the feds had reserved sidled up to his cruiser. Maggie could not watch. The night before was like a dream, but this was her nightmare.

“Listen up everyone,” an agent’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “When we get ashore, you will be taken to the Tampa Police department and asked a few questions.” He looked at each passenger and continued, “There’s nothing to worry about. You haven’t done anything.

Just answer the questions honestly and you will be sent home.”

Maggie recalled what George had told her, that she didn't know anything. That was the truth. Other than the rumors that there was a casino on board, she knew nothing. She'd never been to the game room so she could not give evidence about it. She also had never seen anyone using drugs on board. In fact, she could not recall any illegal activity happening on the yacht. As far as she was concerned everything was just like a regular hotel, bar and restaurant.

When the yacht docked, the group was taken to the precinct. A few of the male employees looked a little nervous, and she wondered if perhaps they knew something she didn't. When it was her turn, she was taken into one of the interview rooms with the one sided mirrors. She'd only seen the interrogation room on TV, but had never been inside one before. She half expected the good cop, bad cop routine like in the movies, but that didn't happen.

“State your name,” her interviewer said. She assumed him a detective having seen him remove his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He was not dressed like the agents on the yacht.

“Maggie Carter,” she replied softly.

“Please, speak a little louder, okay?” He urged. His voice was gentle.

“Are you a waitress on the Chasmac?” he asked.

Hearing the name of the yacht gave her tingle in her spine. Chase must have named it after himself. Fleetingly, she wondered what he was doing, or if he was thinking of her the way she was now thinking of him. Giving herself an inward jab, she pushed him from her mind.

She nodded with her reply, “Yes.”

The detective looked at her keenly, “You're not wearing uniform, why?”

“It was my night off,” she replied, looking down at her hands in her lap. *Oh God, I hope he doesn't know about the boss and me,* she silently prayed.

“How long have you been working on the yacht?”

“About twelve weeks,” she answered.

“Have you ever been in the casino room?”

She raised her head, brows furrowed. “In Vegas?”

The officer chuckled, “No, on the yacht.”

“I didn’t know there was such a room there. I work the main dining room, sometimes the balcony and small dining area... that’s it,” she stated, steadying her voice. All this time her mind was on Chase, wondering how he was doing. “Sir, when can we go back to work?”

He looked at her. “Listen young lady,” he replied, looking at his file. “Maggie, is it? You can’t go back to work. I suggest you find another job. This vessel has been confiscated. Your boss broke a federal law, that’s serious.” He stood, “You may go now.”

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice.

What was she to do now? She needed the job. And, what did Chase do? The policeman said he broke the federal law. They asked about a casino. Was it illegal? It must be. Why didn’t Chase do things the right way? She had all these questions and no one to answer them.

She left the precinct confused and disappointed. Not only was she confused about Chase’s actions, she was also sure that her promise of seeing him meant nothing.

It was strange. When she’d broken up with her boyfriend, she was hurt and angry. However, the dagger now wedged in her chest was new. She wasn’t angry with Chase. However, the pain was real thinking of him and the fact that she thought she was more than a conquest. She was wrong.

After going home, she thought about her plans for college and how hard it was to find jobs. Y’bor City was the ghetto of Tampa, and probably the most crime-ridden area in the city. It was hard enough landing the job she had, let alone trying to find another. Losing a job was a direct setback to her dreams. She had her acceptance letters from NYU and Florida State University, but she had no money. She had hoped to save enough for the following year’s registration. Now, that may never happen.

CHAPTER 7

Chase rested his back against the chair in the interview room. It was midafternoon and he'd been in the building for a few hours. The FBI agent stood across the long metal table, his eyes shooting daggers his way. The corner of Chase's mouth lifted ever so slightly in what the agent must construe as a smirk.

"Remove those," Agent Charles ordered in a gruff voice, indicating Chase remove his glasses.

He complied, slowly pulling it from his face, folding and placing it in his breast pocket. "Happy now?"

"You think you own the city don't you? Well, Mr. McMillan, you're not above the law."

"Thanks for letting me know." He grinned, his sarcasm wasn't lost on the agent.

"We can deal with this the hard way or the easy way, what do you prefer?"

Chase fingered his chin as if in contemplation. His mind was elsewhere and he needed to get out of there quickly. Maggie was on his mind, the look on her face that morning. He needed to set her straight and tell her how much he enjoyed her company. He had hoped to meet her at the precinct, but they took him to the FBI field office instead.

The interrogation room was similar to that of the police department, with the same metal table, one-way mirror and the eerie quietness. The only sounds in the room were that of the two men.

His eyes darted around the room, taking in the three cameras strategically placed at several angles. A water cooler was in one corner and a small file cabinet in another.

"Let's get this over with. I have business to attend," he replied, his voice deep and commanding.

Charles pulled up a chair and sat facing him. He pulled a single sheet of paper from a file folder that was on the desk, pushing it towards him. Chase eyed him before scanning the paper. It was a casino license application.

"That's it?" He cocked a brow.

He'd expected a fine of a couple million dollars, or at the very least a lot of bureaucracy.

"You have some really powerful friends. If it were up to me, you'd spend some time in jail along with paying the state for tax evasion."

A deep guttural laugh rumbled from his chest, filling the room. The quietness broke at the sound, as it bounded off the walls. It was the most amusing thing he'd heard in many days. Agent Charles was glowering at him, apparently not amused.

"Tax evasion?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Running an illegal casino is defrauding the government of the taxes you should be paying," Charles retorted.

"Haven't you seen the accounts? I don't make a profit from that casino, I don't need to, Agent Charles. It's all fun and games."

Charles snickered. "Yeah... yeah. I saw the so-called accounts. That means nothing, and you know it."

"It appears you have no idea how much in taxes I return to the state each year," he replied, laughing once more.

Charles shuffled uncomfortably before replying, "I'm giving you twenty-eight days to get a license or we keep the yacht... permanently."

"Okay," Chase relented. "I'll get the license. Now tell me, where are my employees?"

"Precinct 27. Detective Blaze let them go."

The so-called interview ended. Police commissioner Weir was his father's golf buddy. Chase learned that the commissioner, when he heard that he was in custody, made a call to the FBI chief who was a schoolmate.

It was his first offense and he was an important citizen of the state, providing hundreds of jobs and paying millions of dollars in taxes. He made a mental note to personally thank Commissioner Weir for making the call.

As soon as he stepped out in the bright Florida sunshine, his cellphone rang. He paused, pulling it from his pocket, staring at it. His father would be irate, best to let it ring out.

The next call he took was one of the shareholders in the pharmaceutical division of McMillan Corporation.

“Hello Harvey,” he greeted cheerfully.

“Chase, what’s this I hear you’ve been arrested?”

“I’ve not been arrested. They took my yacht, but all is well.”

The man’s voice was stern. “Chase, when I sided with you against Herman, I was of the impression you are a mature and stable young man. Now I learn that you’re running an underground casino? How can we trust you not to...?”

“Listen Mr. Sorenson,” Chase cut him off midsentence. “My yacht isn’t even registered as a McMillan asset. It’s my personal property and has no affiliation with the company.”

“I still don’t feel good about this Chase, what will the other shareholders think?”

He continued towards his metallic gray Ferrari, which he’d arranged to have dropped off. He moved with long purposeful strides, pausing briefly to pull the keys from his pocket. After unlocking it, he slid into the driver seat, continuing the conversation.

“Do you trust me, Mr. Sorenson?” he asked succinctly.

The man’s reply was swift, “Yes, I trust you. The company profits have multiplied three hundred percent since you became CEO.”

“Three hundred and seventy five percent,” he corrected.

Mr. Sorenson cleared his throat. “Yes, yes, that is so.”

“Then trust me when I say this won’t affect the company in the least,” he paused. “Haven’t I made good on all my promises?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Then we’re set. Don’t worry, people expect me to be a little bit bad you know. What kind of bachelor would I be without a little rep?”

Harvey Sorenson chuckled, mentioning that he too was a force to reckon with in his day. The conversation ended on a light note before he hung up, just before his father called again. He ignored it. Starting the engine, he pulled out of the FBI parking lot.

Herman McMillan was camped out in his office. Of that, Chase was certain. If he went back to work, he’d have to face whatever hell his father would break loose on him. Not that he was afraid, rather, he had other plans. Finding Maggie was on the top of his to-do list.

His heart began at an irregular pace at the thought of her. The taste of her lips and the feel of her skin were fresh in his mind. A small ball of heat curled in his belly, remembering their night together. The sudden jolt of his member caused his foot to press the gas harder.

“You can’t break your promise Maggie,” he chuckled.

The cellphone rang once more. He checked the number to see who it was before initializing the hands free device. It was Andrea, his personal assistant. He strongly hoped she wasn’t calling to tell him that his father was waiting, because he had no intention of going to office.

“Yes, Andrea,” he said.

“Sir, Colby & Sons are requesting an emergency meeting.”

He clenched his jaw as he realized how much damage control he had to do now. Colby & Sons was in the acquisition phase and they were perhaps panicking.

“When?”

“An hour from now at the Blue Rose Restaurant,” she replied.

“Alright,” he said. “Have the messenger drop the files at the penthouse. I won’t be coming in today.”

“Already done, Sir.”

He was pleased. Andrea was the best assistant he’d had since taking over the general operations of the company. She was efficient and didn’t care about his stringency at work. Chase strongly believed that when in office it was all business. He was an astute executive with strong personality that many people found daunting. Andrea didn’t, and he liked that.

His mind flicked back to Maggie and the fact that she was the first girl he’d met who remained an enigma. She was a riddle, and Chase had never left a puzzle unsolved. She was the first girl with which he didn’t want a one night stand. Something about her made him want more.

Whether in business or personal life, he’d always been in control. This was the first time he was unable to bring his feelings for the opposite sex under subjection. If a girl didn’t want to see him, he’d forget about her and move on. With Maggie, it wasn’t happening.

He was at his penthouse apartment before he realized. Before getting out of the car in the

underground garage, he made a call to George.

Both men had been friends for almost twenty years. They met while in high school on the football team and later went to college together.

George answered after two rings. "Where did they take you?" he sounded stressed.

"Calm down George. They took me to the FBI field office," he calmly replied. "Everything is fine. Now tell me, how are things at your end?"

"Well, they just let me go after hassling me about knowing about the casino. I thought they were going to lock me up."

"Where are you now?"

George was obviously calmer. "At your office. When are you getting here? The press has been hounding your father and me. You know him, he doesn't like being hassled."

"George, I need you to hold the fort for me as usual. Just tell the press you have no comment and you will update them as more information becomes available."

"I already did that, but what should I do about your father?"

"Forget about Father. You need to take care of the crew. Give them a month's salary... no, two months and tell them to take time off for a month," he instructed. "We'll be up and running in a few weeks, so take care of them."

What Chase wanted was to tell George to take care of Maggie, but George would only question his motives. He'd just have to wait until an opportune time to inquire about her. For now, he had a meeting to prepare for and he needed to be at his best.

"Just take care of things at the office," he added.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow I suppose."

"Yeah, I'll be there tomorrow."

Within the hour, he'd showered, changed and was back on the road to his meeting. However, his thoughts were on the Chasmac and Maggie. Somehow, he got the feeling that he would never see her again.

Chase resolved within himself that he had to put aside his ego and ask George to contact her before it was too late. He placed the call as he was entering the restaurant where his meeting was supposed to be.

George grunted into the receiver. "Yes Chase."

He ignored the sour tone of his friend, knowing he perhaps had to face Herman McMillan's wrath. "I need you to contact Maggie for me."

"What?"

"I said, I need you to get to Maggie. I need to see her."

There were a few seconds silence before George asked. "Why?"

"Just do it," he ordered, hanging up the instrument. He was partly agitated with himself for not taking her address and phone number himself. He'd been so caught up with his feelings for her that he could not think straight. It was time he did things the right way.

CHAPTER 8

George's eyes narrowed as they glared at him. Chase turned from his manager's gaze to look out his seventeenth floor office window. The entire building was McMillan Corporation (MacCorp) building. He controlled the middle floors while his father controlled the top ten floors.

Since he was dragged off his own cruiser in the middle of the Atlantic, he'd been avoiding his father. Tiffany, his spy on the twenty-fifth floor had been vigilant enough to let him know his father's schedule and whereabouts for a few weeks.

His mind came back to his present dilemma. Since that incident, he had not seen or heard from Maggie. He missed her, and a small part of him had hoped that she would contact him, as per their promise. But he wasn't surprised that she hadn't. She wasn't the type of girl to do the chasing, especially after the incident with the feds and his stupid comment to her.

"Haven't you found her yet?" Chase was beginning to feel impatient with George. He'd asked him to contact Maggie as soon as they returned to Tampa, but he hadn't even tried.

"Why do you want to find her?" George's voice made him turn.

"Can't you just do as I ask without questioning it?" he asked, trying to avoid telling George the truth. "It's been more than a month."

"Two months," George corrected.

Chase glared at him. "I asked you to find her the minute we got off the yacht and still you haven't. What's your problem?"

George returned a hot stare. "In case you've forgotten, I've been sorting out the paperwork for the Chasmac, dealing with the press and acting as referee between you and your dad."

Chase released a breath. "Yeah, I know," his voice was calmer. "But now that the issue has been resolved, now you can do as I ask."

George watched his face keenly, seemingly trying to read him. "You've never done this before. Why Maggie?"

"I'm just concerned about her. She's saving for college you said. What if she hasn't found

a job?”

George’s face relaxed, just a little. “Okay, I’ll do it, but I can’t promise I’ll succeed, Florida is a large state. She could be anywhere.”

“Didn’t you take her address when you hired her?”

“Of course, but the address she gave was her old address in the city. I think she thought she wouldn’t get the job if she gave her real address.”

“Let me know when you find her.”

The manager nodded. “Okay.”

The door opening brought a frown to his face. His eyes widened as a man with icy blue eyes, greying hair and sideburns walked in with a grim look. The man’s six-foot presence was daunting that he could see George wince.

“Oh no,” he muttered under his breath.

“You can’t avoid me forever, Chase!”

George bade a hasty retreat, looking sympathetically at Chase as he closed the door. Chase concluded that his father must have intimidated Tiffany why she hadn’t alerted him of his arrival.

“Father, what can I do for you?” Chase returned to his desk while Herman took the the armchair opposite him.

“Sell that damn yacht of yours before you get into more trouble. I know you are planning to reopen the casino,” his father’s voice was sharp. “If you insist on that gambling den, then get a permit.”

“Father, I already did.”

“So you are insisting on running a casino!” His father bellowed.

He wasn’t in the mood for this. “Father, it’s not what you think.”

“Why do you need a casino? Haven’t I given you a legitimate business to run? You make millions of dollars every minute of the day with the stocks you own. Why on earth would you want to sully the family name with an illegal gambling business?”

“Father, it’s not a business, and I got the license,” he replied. “Anyway, I don’t make

money from it.”

“What? Then why on earth would you risk your reputation?” Herman’s face grew red from his rising anger.

Chase sighed, “It relaxes me and it was kind of fun hiding from those freaking feds. Now that everything’s legit, it’s no fun.”

“Well you did inherit your mother’s spirit of adventure,” Herman’s voice lowered. “But that’s beside the point. If I hear that you’re doing anything illegal on that yacht again, I’ll personally get rid of that damn toy of yours.”

“Okay, father.” He chuckled.

“Now on to more serious matters,” Herman said, his eyes never leaving Chase. “What are you doing about Brittany?”

“What?” the question threw him off guard.

“Brittany, the girl you’re supposed to marry?”

Chase’s forehead creased severely, his expression darkening. “Who says I’m marrying her?”

“Now look here Chase, I don’t care what you do in your personal life, but this is business,” Herman said, his voice stern. “Get your priorities in order.”

“I’m not marrying Brittany,” he insisted, rising to his feet and walking to the window.

Herman also rose, following him. “Why on earth not?”

“I just can’t do it Father,” he replied with some acerbity.

Herman snickered. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Chase turned his head, glancing in his father’s direction. The man had his hands in his pockets, looking down at the street below. He thought of Maggie and wondered if his father would agree for them to marry. She would be the only woman he would willingly marry, if he could find her.

“No father, there’s nothing you need to know.”

“Then make a decision. I’m giving you one month to make up your mind, or I will make it up for you.”

Before he could protest further, Herman turned and headed to the door. When he pulled it open, he paused. “One month, Chase.”

He was through the door before Chase had a chance to argue. This was not going well. Finding Maggie was now priority or he'd have to marry Brittany. At least, if Maggie would see him, he could convince her to give their relationship a chance and then convince his father.

CHAPTER 9

After the FBI incident on the Chasmac, it took Maggie a week and a half to find a new server job at a club in the Palmeto Beach area. Luckily, her short experience on Chase's yacht apparently helped her boss, Mickey J, make the decision to hire her. The place was always busy, giving her a chance to work overtime to make up what she'd lost. After two months, everything was going great.

The club was neatly placed in the center of the action zone close to the beach. Most of the bamboo tables and chairs were under umbrellas, with a cabana bar nearby. There was a section indoor with tables for those needing some privacy.

It was a busy afternoon with the summer sun blazing down in its full force. Because of the scorching July heat, most of the patrons gathered at the bar counter, those who could find no seats in the sheltered area. She'd just served a table and was about to take a well needed five minute break when another patron called her.

"Hey, pretty lady, can I have a beer and some nuts over here?"

She turned to see a man with a straw hat and red face smiling at her. "George!" she screamed running towards him. He grinned gripping her hands, looking fondly at her.

"Thank God I found you!" he said. She was about to respond when she felt a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Are you okay?" he asked as she grimaced.

"Yes, I'm tired and I think I'm coming down with something." She managed a smile as nausea rose to her throat. "What brings you here?" she asked.

"Chase wants to see you," he told her, searching her face.

"Why?" Her heart jolted at Chase's name.

George stared blankly at her. "You can ask him when you see him," he replied. "The cruiser is back on the waters and the others are at work."

"That's great, but I already got a job and I like it here," she replied with a smile.

"What about Chase... aren't you going to see him?" he asked.

"I'm not going to see him," she told him, watching his eyes narrow.

“At least consider it. Are you afraid what happened with the feds might happen again?”

“It’s not that. I just need a change.”

“Since it was a first offence, they issued him a warning and told him to get a license if he wants to keep the casino on board,” George told her. “The license has been issued and everything has been sorted.”

“How come I didn’t know about it?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “It’s kind of a secret room and we try to keep it that way.” He looked at her keenly, and then remarked, “You don’t look so good. Maybe you should see a doctor, you look pallid.”

“I’m fine. I’ve been working double shifts. I’m just tired.”

George nodded, but didn’t seem convinced. “Are you sure you don’t want to see him. He asked me to find you, but it took me a while. He wants to see you... really,” George told her once more.

“Tell your boss I’m fine with my new job, please.”

“Maggie, what’s going on? Did something happen between you two?” He was looking at her with a quizzical expression.

She rushed to allay his curiosity. “No, nothing happened,” she replied, hoping she wouldn’t burn in hell for telling a lie.

George’s eyes told her he was not convinced as he continued to peruse her sharply. Still, he didn’t need to know about a one night stand. That was hers and Chase’s business alone. And if Chase didn’t see fit to tell him, she didn’t see the need to.

After a few minutes, his face relaxed and she released a relieved sigh. “Just think about it, okay?” he said. “And think about coming back. I’ll increase your pay, say double?” He added, leaving her a fifty-dollar tip before walking away.

What could Chase want from her? She wondered as she watched George leave. She was embarrassed as it was, for her behavior the night of his birthday. Never in her twenty-five years had she ever had a one-night stand, let alone slept with a man after just a few days.

Moreover, he had been her boss and that was even worse. What he must think of her! There was no way she could face him again. Even if she was desperate enough to return, she

was afraid of repeating this mistake. Because that's all it would amount to, she becoming a kept woman, a booty call.

Yes, that's all she would be to a man like Chase, as there was no way on this earth he would date her. In her mind, either he wanted a repeat performance or he felt guilty. She doubted the latter. Either way, it wasn't necessary to see him.

A dizzy feeling overcame her, causing her to grab a chair. A wave of darkness almost swallowed her, but she fought to remain conscious. As she moved away, she found she was staggering. Someone rushed to grip her shoulders, then led her to the indoor section where the employee locker room was located. She barely got to see that it was her boss Mickey.

"Take the rest of the afternoon off and get some rest, or get checked at the hospital," he said, his voice penetrating her haze.

She opened her eyes to look at the man with a pot belly, wearing a Mexican hat and Cuban shirt. His mustache curled at the ends and his soft brown eyes were always moist. He was looking at her with his brows creased.

"Yes," she whispered in agreement. She was feeling sick to her stomach and there was no way she could continue her shift. "I'll make up my shift tomorrow, I promise."

"You're a good worker, so take care of yourself and call me if you need more time," he said.

"Yes boss," she quietly replied.

When Maggie left work that Wednesday afternoon, her intention was to go straight home, but a wave of nausea and dizziness made her change her mind. The bus ride didn't help. She never had motion sickness before and the ride proved to be the worst part of her day.

There was a clinic in her neighborhood where she headed after getting off the bus. As she made a few steps away from her stop, vomit rose to her mouth. Having to stop and wretch, now she was certain she had caught a virus.

By the time she registered at the front desk, the queasiness was gone and she was feeling much better. The wait was long and the bad feeling had not returned. She'd just made up her mind to leave when the nurse called her name.

“Maggie Carter?”

“Yes,” she answered.

The nurse with chocolate complexion motioned towards a room to the right of her desk. “This way please.”

The doctor was old enough to be her grandfather, with a deep tan and greying brown hair. He looked at her with gentle brown eyes.

“Come sit,” he said. “How are you feeling today?”

“Well, earlier I was a bit dizzy, but I feel much better now,” she replied. “I think it’s something I ate because I vomited a while ago and the feeling’s gone,” she told him.

He placed his thumb under the bottom of each eyelid and gently nudged them down. After listening to her chest, looking in the back of her throat and asking some basic questions about her diet, he scribbled in her file. She was asked to urinate in a cup and then the nurse took some blood.

“We’ll call you with the results in a couple of days,” the doctor said. “Take these,” he handed her a small packet with tiny yellow pills. “They should help with the nausea and if you feel dizzy, sit or lie down and you’ll be fine.”

For the following few days Maggie felt okay. She took the yellow pill whenever she felt the queasiness in her stomach, but the dizzy feeling never resurfaced.

On Saturday, her day off, she decided to do a thorough cleaning of her tiny studio apartment. Her energy was high and she was in good spirits. She was dusting the furniture when her cellphone rang.

“Hello,” she answered in a cheerful tone.

“Miss Carter, I’m calling from the clinic,” the nurse’s voice was pleasant.

Maggie’s heart did a little backflip as she wondered what they might have found in her blood. Did she get a virus? Was it HIV? *Oh God, what if...?*

“Miss Carter, are you there?”

The voice startled her from her thoughts.

“Yes,” she answered abruptly. “Please tell me.”

“You need to come to see the doctor and he will give you the results of your examination.”

Her heart thundered loudly, drowning out the nurse’s voice, so much she could barely hear it. “Can’t you tell me now?” she asked.

“I’m sorry Miss Carter, we can’t give you the results by telephone... will you come in today?”

“Am I sick?” she asked, wondering why the nurse was so mysterious. “It’s not cancer is it?”

The nurse sounded apologetic, “I’m really sorry, but the doctor needs to talk with you.”

As she hung up the phone, a shudder ran through her from the fear of what they might have found. For the next hour or so, while she got ready, Maggie felt her heart beating unevenly. Dread made her lose focus a few times, wondering what was wrong with her.

After taking too long on getting ready, she called a cab. Though it was only a couple of miles down the road, she was too nervous to walk. She wasn’t in the mood to take the bus either. When she got to the clinic, she had to wait another forty-five minutes before the nurse sent her through.

The Doctor greeted her with a smile. “Miss Carter,” his easy tone addressed her. “How are you feeling today?”

“I’m fine doctor. Am I sick? Why did you call for me?”

“We got the results of your blood workup. We had found something in the urine sample but needed to make sure before telling you this,” he said looking at her intently.

She folded her hands together, trying to keep her composure while her heart jumped around her chest.

“You’re pregnant,” he announced.

“What?” she wasn’t sure she’d heard right.

The doctor repeated, “You’re going to have a baby.”

This wasn’t happening. Maggie felt the blood drain from her face and she began to feel numb. She stared at him blankly, then he asked her if she was okay, but his voice sounded far away.

All sounds around her faded. She was seeing his mouth move but heard nothing. Maggie got up from the chair, in a daze walked from the small room and into the waiting area. She passed the nurse, stepping into the hot afternoon sun.

As she walked briskly away from the building, she heard voices, not comprehending what they were saying. At one point, she thought she heard her name, but was not certain of this. She continued walking, ignoring the sweltering heat of the sun.

She was sweating profusely by the time she got home. Still numb from her visit at the clinic, her mind refused to accept what the doctor told her. She told her self she was in some kind of dream from which she would soon awaken. After splashing cool water on her face, she dumped herself into the bed, exhausted from her long hot walk. She closed her eyes, thinking this was all just a bad dream.

When she finally awoke, it was past midnight. The memory of the clinic visit came crashing back causing her much depression. When she awoke the following morning, there was a queasy feeling in the stomach.

What was she to do? She started getting ready for work when dread took over. She realized that Chase could easily find her now that George knew where she worked. For an hour, she paced her apartment uncertain if she should call in sick, face whatever was to come or quit altogether.

Eventually everyone would come to know she was pregnant and would question the child's paternity. What if Chase was serious about finding her? What if he knew the child was his and took her baby away? That's what rich people did, claimed things, she argued to herself.

No, he'd never think this baby is his, would he? How could he, it was only one night. He had better things to do than to think about her and her child.

Still, she didn't want to take the chance of creating drama with Chase. She had a feeling that he would want to know. Then there would be some paternity test, unless she told him that the baby wasn't his. No, she hated lying about such things. Quit, yes, that was her decision.

* * *

“I’m sorry Mickey, I really can’t tell you why.”

It was one of the hardest things to do. Seeing Mickey’s sadness also made her feel down. She liked her job and she wasn’t quitting just because of Chase. She knew that she’d continue to be sick for a while given her condition. This was not the ideal place to work when pregnant.

“I don’t like this at all. Does it have anything to do with that man who visited you the other day?” he asked.

“No, Mickey,” she replied. “I just got some news that will change my life. I have to do this,” she stated firmly.

“If you ever need your job back, it’s here,” he said, his eyes showing concern. “I hope you aren’t in any kind of trouble.”

“More than you’ll ever know,” she muttered under her breath.

She watched as he pulled his checkbook from the drawer in his desk. Looking around Mickey’s tiny office made her sorrowful. Other than the Chasmac, this was the nicest job she’d had. The pay was good and Mickey was very protective, like George. The thought of her old manager made her wince.

“What’s the matter, are you sick?” Mickey asked, cocking a brow.

“No, gas.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. She hadn’t eaten much since getting the news of her pregnancy and her stomach was protesting rather furiously.

He finished writing the check and pushed it across the table. Although she’d only been there two months, he generously gave her a bonus of thirty percent on her current pay.

“This....” Her eyes widened as she stared at the check.

“Just take care of yourself,” he said, and call me if you need anything.

Grateful, tears welled in her eyes as she thanked him. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

The dilemma she now had was finding another job close to home... something she could handle in her condition.

CHAPTER 10

Chase McMillan leaned back in his high leather back office chair and spun to face the window. From his office, he could see the street below. However, he wasn't looking at the street, but rather several months into the past. Now he flicked back to the present and the task he gave to George.

"Have you found her?" he asked with obvious anxiety.

George looked at him with narrowed eyes. "What's going on Chase? What's this obsession with Maggie?"

He closed his eyes, wondering if he should tell his friend. He knew George could be trusted, but this was personal. He took a long deep breath, exhaling it before opening his eyes.

"If I don't find her, I'd have to marry Brittany."

George narrowed his gaze. "What's Maggie got to do with Brittany?"

"I'm in love with her George."

George's face took on a look of incredulity, then his eyes widened. "You are crazy, you know that? You have been obsessed with her ever since you laid eyes on her."

"It's more than that. We shared something special," he told his friend, his heart galloping with the memory of the times they spent together.

George leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "So something did happen."

"The most beautiful thing." He smiled.

"Then I hate to break it to you, she doesn't want to see you."

He sat up straight. "You found her?"

"I had to call in a few favors."

"You found her!"

"Yeah," George continued, ignoring Chase's apparent elation. "Did you hear me? She says she doesn't want to see you."

"I'll just have to convince her. Come on give me the address."

Reluctantly, George handed him a piece of paper with the address of the place where Maggie worked. He looked at the name Mickey's. The address was on the beach.

As George was leaving, his father was entering the office. He'd come to expect him to show at odd moments. He pocketed the paper in his jacket before Herman could get nosy and demand to know what that was about.

"So you were serious about reopening the casino?" his father asked, giving him a stony look.

He knew Herman was not too keen on him operating a game room, one that earned no profit. It wasn't his money that was being spent, therefore he had no say in the matter.

"Father, let's not go there."

"Have you made your decision about Brittany?" His father always knew how to sock it to him.

"You gave me a month, remember?"

Herman looked at him sharply, changing the subject. "Now, about that building in Temple city, I need to know what your plans are."

"What do you mean? I am renovating it so the tenants can have a better building."

"You are planning to raise the rent as well, right?" Herman asked with one brow raised.

"Those people can't afford it, Father. I can't raise the rent on them now."

Herman glowered at him. "Are you out of your mind? How much are you spending on these renovations, fifteen, twenty million? How do you plan to earn that back?"

"Father, do you know why our profits have jumped three hundred and seventy five percent in the last four years?"

Herman shrugged. "I'm sure you're going to enlighten me."

Yes he was. Since he took command as CEO of MacCorp six years ago, the profits have soared through the roof, breaking every record the company had previously set. They moved from a multi-million dollar company to a mega-billion dollar corporation.

"It's not always about the bottom dollar. Did you know that half that building is empty? If we raise the rent, chances are those people who have lived there for twenty years will move out."

“So what’s your plan?” Herman was calmer, his tone low.

“We develop the area so people will want to live there. Increase the number of tenants and make the surroundings safer so that people won’t want to leave.”

“You mean spend more money.” The older man grunted unhappily.

Chase looked at his father and smiled. “You have to spend money to make money, Father.”

“Come home for dinner later, your mother told Helen to prepare something special.” Herman rose. “We eat at seven, don’t be late.”

“Okay, see you later,” Chase replied as Herman walked out.

As soon as his father was out the door he dialed George’s number. The man answered after two rings. “Yes?”

“Come back to my office, now.”

“Yes, Boss,” his friend replied in a sarcastic tone, which he ignored.

George was pushing his door within five minutes. He’d spun his chair around, facing the shelf behind him, his back to the door. Before the freckle face man could reach the desk, he fired a question at him.

“Why doesn’t she want to see me?” he asked.

“I can’t answer that,” George said, having a seat in the armchair. “Go see her and hear it from her yourself.”

He spun back his chair to face his large mahogany desk, which held his laptop, a few files, a calendar, an hourglass and a Rubik’s cube. With a frown, he fingered the cube. Rising from the chair, he picked up his attaché.

“Where are you off to?” George asked, his face quizzical.

Chase paused to give George a severe stare. “You just said I should ask her myself. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Have you thought about this, Chase?” George’s agitation betrayed him. “Why’d you call me if you’re just going to leave?”

Ignoring the man, he reached the door in a few strides. Hurrying through the outer offices,

he avoided the elevator, bounded down the stairs and was in his Ferrari within three minutes.

The beach club where Maggie worked was twenty minutes away. Chase was there within twelve. He checked his reflection in the mirror, something he didn't do often. The place was busy with beach goers, surfers and people enjoying the summer breeze from off the coast. There were a bunch of teens setting up a stage further down the beach and a few surfers brushed passed him as he made the short walk to the bar.

“What can I get you?” a man with a mustache and straw hat was behind the counter.

“I'm looking for Maggie, I understand she works here,” Chase said.

“What will it be?” asked the man, raising a brow.

Chase glowered at him then ordered a sparkling water. “You must be Mickey?” he asked and received a nod. “Now, can I see Maggie?”

“And who's asking?” Mickey asked.

He saw that the man was being difficult but he wanted to see Maggie. “Chase, her... friend.”

“Your *friend* doesn't work here anymore. She quit a few days ago,” he replied in a matter-of-fact manner.

“Why didn't you say so in the first place?” Chase's irritation was evident in the pitch of his voice. “Why'd she quit?”

“How should I know? She's been getting sick every day and told me she got to quit. That's it buddy,” Mickey told him.

“Thanks for nothing!” Chase paid his tab and pushed away from the bar counter, hurrying back to his car.

Once there, he called George. The phone rang out, but he kept trying, having to redial three times before his freckled faced assistant picked up.

“Yes?” George answered, panting.

“Did I interrupt something?” Chase asked, curious as to why George was out of breath.

“No, just got back from an errand. What can I do for you?”

Though the yacht was back at sea, it only operated on weekends. During the off days,

George worked in his office. His position was not official, but as a long time friend, he liked having him around. He was his closest ally and confidant.

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Huh?”

“Maggie, do you know where she lives?” Chase repeated with impatience.

“Ahhh, yes, somewhere in Y’bor City.”

“I know that, but where exactly?” Chase sounded impatient. There was no answer from George’s end. “Why aren’t you answering?” Chase insisted.

“I don’t know the exact address, Chase, but I’ll find it for you.”

Chase grunted, “Do that.”

He was getting anxious about not seeing Maggie. For the past few weeks, since their night together, he hadn’t been able to get her off his mind. He’d never been this obsessed with a woman before. There was a feeling that if he never saw her again he would go completely crazy. And, what was with her refusing to see him? Did he do something to upset her? Yes, he did, he concluded.

He went back to his office in a sour mood. There were several appointments for the rest of the day, but he cancelled them all. His secretary informed him that his father called several times while he was out and requested to see him, but even the thought of Herman McMillan did nothing to ease his mood.

CHAPTER 11

Trying to evade his father was a skill Chase developed early in life. He recalled the time he was sixteen when he wrecked the car, when he got himself in a brawl at age eighteen, and the time when he ditched classes for three months in college. Fortunately, with an above average IQ and 4.5 GPA, he made up for those classes within a couple of weeks.

After promising Herman an answer within the month, he'd managed to avoid confronting him for two whole months. He knew that eventually Herman would convince his mother to soften him up. His father knew that he could not say no to his mother.

His feelings for Maggie hadn't waned. In fact, the old adage that *absence made the heart grows fonder*, finally made sense to him.

George was busy managing the yacht on weekends and taking the bulk of his meetings with the board during the week. Eventually, he'd have to show up for the board meetings or risk the wrath of his unpredictable father. Herman had been known to punish those who failed to comply by his rules. Chase was no exception.

Running out of patience waiting for George to produce Maggie's address, he had an old PI friend did some digging around. This was his final effort. He told himself that if he didn't find her now, he might as well give up.

He was leaving on business for New York in a few days and when he got back, he would have to face his father. There was no avoiding it. There was a company takeover at stake and he was the one in charge. George could not cover for him on this one.

There was no delaying the inevitable with his father, or marrying Brittany. Unless, he could produce a reasonable cause for not following through.

It was late Thursday night. He was just getting out of the shower when the cellphone rang. He'd been dodging his father for so long that he was certain it was him calling. On the other hand, if Herman were completely serious, he would have visited the penthouse by this.

Upon seeing the number he smiled, his heart racing as he answered.

"Mike, any luck?" he asked.

"She wasn't easy to find. People in Y'bor city don't like talking much," Mike replied in a

low easy tone.

“So you did find her?”

“Yeah, you ready for the address, man?”

Chase had to leave the bedroom, bounding down the stairs with his towel wrapped around his waist. The notebook and pen was on his desk where he kept it.

“Tell me,” he said after about twenty seconds.

He took the address Mike gave him after which they talked a few minutes more, promising to have drinks soon. After hanging up, he was tempted to go to Y’bor city. However, given that it was close to eleven, he decided to wait until the following day.

He would have gone first thing in the morning if he didn’t have an early meeting to attend with a day as packed as a can of sardines. He made a note to clear his evening for at least an hour so he could get there. He didn’t want another missed opportunity to see her.

CHAPTER 12

Maggie was gaining weight around the waist. At four months pregnant, that was expected. Working tables in a club was not befitting a pregnant woman so she discarded that idea, opting to work in a restaurant instead. She liked her job chopping vegetables. It was better than doing nothing. The pay was okay and she was able to sit while she worked.

There were no tips but she got three meals a day from her job, plus extra to take home, reducing her grocery bill. Her Jamaican boss, Mr. Myles, was surprisingly kind and agreed that she could continue working until her time of delivery. To earn extra money, she also did the cleaning of the establishment before opening hours.

It was Friday night, she'd just finished her shift and got home. Climbing the three flight of stairs that led to her apartment was becoming tedious, especially after a long day.

She was about to unlock her door when someone stepped from the shadows across the hall. The blood drained from her head and she felt like she was about to pass out. She swore her heart stopped beating for a few seconds, before it took off like a cheetah in the wild.

This was a dangerous neighborhood and everyone carried some kind of weapon. With trembling hand, she groped around her bag for her pepper spray. As soon as she gripped it, someone said her name. Her hand tightened around the small canister.

“Maggie.” The voice was deep and smooth.

Chase. Her already frightened heart continued to jump around her chest like a grasshopper. What was he doing there? How did he find her?

“Chase, you scared me half to death!” She whirled to face him.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” he apologized, stepping closer.

Moving back, she brought her handbag to cover her rising stomach. Too late, Chase was quick on the take. The light from the passage shone on his face and she saw him narrow his eyes. He came closer, slowly raised his hand, pulling the bag away.

“What are you doing?” she grabbed the strap, yanking it away from him.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why are you avoiding me?”

“What was I to say to you?” she asked, her voice squeaked.

“That you’re carrying my child,” he grated.

Maggie looked away. Her heart hadn’t slowed its pace. “How can you be sure it’s yours?”

“I can see it in your eyes,” he replied, lowering his tone. “But you haven’t answered my question. Why are you avoiding me?”

“Look Chase,” she inhaled a quavering breath, trying to steady her pounding heart. “What happened between us... I’ve never done that before and I don’t want to be somebody’s mistress or booty call. I’m sorry,” she replied in a cool tone.

Fumbling with the key in the lock, she unlocked the door. As soon as it opened, she slipped through, locking it behind her. Her feet hurt, matching a dull pain now present in her chest. Exhausted, she plopped herself down on her tiny worn sofa. The shock of seeing Chase at her door also making her weak.

“Maggie, let’s talk,” he said through the closed door. “We need to talk about that.”

“Hey buddy, keep it quiet!” a neighbor shouted.

“Maggie,” Chase called out, ignoring the neighbor. “Please let me in, I need to talk to you.”

“No, I don’t want to talk to you, go away,” she replied wearily. “Please. I’m tired. Please go away.”

There were a few moments of silence. “Okay, I’ll leave for now, but I’ll be back.” She listened as his steps faded in the passage. She dragged herself up and hurried to her tiny window overlooking the street. There, she made out his figure as it got into his Ferrari. The car pulled away, the tires screeching on the pavement.

* * *

Maggie wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. The temperature was the same inside as it was outdoors. Cleaning the apartment was becoming more difficult as she was feeling ill quiet often. Sometimes, she was just too weary to do anything.

The sweltering heat dehydrated her. She went to the tiny kitchen to fetch some water to cool her parched tongue. As she turned the faucet, water sprayed in her face. She tried to turn it off, but it got worse, soaking her dress. The fight with the tap lasted a few minutes in which time her frustration rose. She fumbled with the tap only to have it come off in her hand.

“Dang it!” she yelled. “Argh! I’ve had it with this place.”

Thinking quickly she opened the cupboard under the sink and turned the valve off. But the damage was already done as the kitchen floor was covered in water.

This wasn’t the first incident. When it was not the water, it was the electricity or some other problem. She leaned against the small counter and closed her eyes, allowing herself to calm down. When she opened her eyes, they rested on the old stove that only had one usable burner.

As she looked around at the peeling paint, the scruffy floors and the state of the entire building, she realized she did not want to bring her child into such a place. The neighborhood was not one she liked, with drug dealers on the street, constant gang wars and the lone thug who believed he was above the law.

“I have got to move before the baby comes,” she said aloud, mentally making a note to start looking for a new place. “This is no place for a child.”

After completing the cleaning, she went to window shop at the mall, checking out the toddler stores. She saw many things she would love to get but could not afford. Though the shopping was important, moving from Y’bor was on the top of her list. Her college money was all she had, but college had to wait as the baby now came first.

Using the money to get a decent apartment and baby items was priority. There was no way she could afford to attend school in her state. As she went back home, she made a mental note of all the things she needed to get done before the end of her term.

When she returned to her apartment there was a carton box at her door. In it was juice, fruits and a note that read: “*We need to talk, in the meantime, take care of yourself. I’ll be out of town for a few days, call George if you need anything.*” At the bottom of the note was a number that she knew to be George’s.

“Ugh!” she made a frustrated sound. “If he really needed to talk to me he could have left his own number.” She crunched the note, throwing it in the garbage.

Sunday wasn't a very good day for Maggie. She paced her apartment the entire day, constantly looking through the window. She was so much on edge that she'd completely forgotten that he said he'd be out of town.

"Out of town, yes, that's what the note said," she murmured after three hours of peeking through the lace curtains.

Chase did not show up or call for the entire week, so she began to relax, hoping he had decided to stay away. However, she executed her plans for finding a new apartment.

Temple City was on the outskirts of Tampa and a better environment for raising a child. The crime rate was lower than Y'bor City and the apartment building she found was undergoing some serious upgrade. On Tuesday, she signed the lease and started packing her few belongings.

Saturday, one week after Chase's visit, a small pickup helped her move to her new place. The one bedroom apartment had a small kitchen, which opened up to an area that doubled as living and dining. She acquired a flat on the ground floor, close to the entrance. This was convenient for her given her situation.

Living alone with no relatives close by, the ground floor was ideal in the event of an emergency. This was the perfect apartment for a single mother.

The walls were clean, with fresh paint. As she looked around, she noticed there was even a garbage chute. A few minutes after she moved in, the apartment manager checked in on her to make sure everything was fine. He told her that the new owner was also putting in a garden and was building a park down the street. The area was going to be very nice when the development was complete.

The bedroom was big enough for a crib and that's what her plan was. There were second hand items in good condition she could acquire at the flea market. She could get one at a yard sale as well. Her plan was to get as many things ready before the baby was due.

With no one to help her, she needed to move quickly to get things done. She had a maternal uncle living in New York. He had no idea she was pregnant and she wanted to keep it that way. Both her parents were dead and her only brother was in prison for a crime he said he didn't commit. She was alone, however, she was determined to make the most of it.

CHAPTER 13

“Damn it!”

Chase slapped his palm against the steering wheel, resulting in the violent jolt of his car. Sitting in front of Maggie’s apartment, he growled, frustrated at finding her gone. He’d accosted the apartment manager, demanding to know where she’d moved.

“Where did she go?”

The man looked terrified at his dark features and glaring eyes. “I don’t know sir. She moved a few days ago, saying the apartment wasn’t safe for the baby.”

Chase gritted his teeth. He should have been the one to get her an apartment. That’s what he’d come back to do, but she kept running from him.

“You can run Maggie, but you can’t hide,” he murmured unhappily. “I’ll find you even if I have to turn the entire state upside down.”

Irritated, he started the engine, jamming the gas pedal harder than necessary. As the vehicle sped off, its tires screeched, leaving burn marks on the pavement. Chase’s mind was working, trying to figure out where she could have gone that quickly.

The manager said she left in a small moving van, but there was no logo on it. That meant she didn’t use a company truck. Of course, she probably could not afford it.

As he sped towards the Bay area, back to his office, he worried whether or not she could afford a decent place. He fretted about what she was eating, and the things she needed to get before the baby arrived.

“Is she even seeing a doctor?” he mumbled, worry lines creasing his forehead.

Within half hour, he was back in his office in a sore mood. He needed to find Maggie, not only so he could present her to his father as the mother of his child, but because he needed to care for her. She needed him, whether she knew it or not. And he needed her. There was no doubt of that in his mind.

For the first time in his life, Chase wanted to care about someone. He wanted to protect

Maggie, if only she would let him. He knew the circumstances under which she got pregnant was not ideal, but he was sure she felt something for him. Why she was fighting it, he wasn't certain.

The office intercom buzzed, indicating the reception on the ground floor. He had no appointment that he could recall; therefore, he hesitated to answer it.

"Yes, Lana," he said, pressing the button.

"Mr. McMillan, Miss D'Morne is here to see you."

Chase curled his fingers, forming a tight fist while grounding his teeth together. What was she doing there? Why didn't she call first?

"Mr. McMillan?" the receptionist asked. "Are you there?"

"Yes, please send her up," he reluctantly replied.

"Miss...", Lana's voice came through, trailing off at the end. "She, she's already on her way up."

As he lifted his finger from the machine, his office door burst open and in walked Brittany. Her eyes could freeze the Antarctic and her face set in a hard line.

"Chase, what are you doing?" she asked, coming to set her Louis Vuitton bag on his desk.

Leaning back in his chair, he studied her demeanor and determined that something was definitely off. This was not the girl he'd known for four years. The few months he hadn't seen her, something had shifted. She perched herself in the armchair facing him, keeping her hard titanium eyes trained on him.

"Whatever do you mean?" he replied, his tone calm.

"You haven't contacted me in months and your father is expecting an answer today."

He feigned ignorance. "Answer to what?"

Her cellphone beeped and she plucked it from the bag. After putting in her lock code, she stared at the message in silence, pursing her lips tightly.

As she raised her eyes, Chase repeated. "Answer to what?"

With a roll of her eyes, she spat, "To us getting married."

"Oh that. We aren't getting married. Didn't you set him straight?"

Brittany glared at him, clenching her jaw tightly. Chase could see she wasn't happy about his response. She closed her eyes, inhaling and exhaling a quick breath.

Her cell beeped once more. With obvious agitation, she glared at the screen as she opened the message. Before she could put the device away, it began to ring. She stared at it ringing in her hands, then she glanced at Chase.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" he asked mildly.

She shook her head a little too vigorously. "No, it's nothing."

Chase could see that she was affected by whoever had been messaging or calling her, because she kept glancing at the phone as it rang out. As if sensing his curiosity, she switched it off and dropped it inside the bag.

She raised her eyes. "Why not?" she asked, her tone clear and cold.

Chase cocked one brow. "What?"

"Why don't you want us to get married?"

He returned her stare, looking directly into her icy eyes. "We don't love each other and you know it," he said in a casual sort of way. "Where is this coming from Brit? You never mentioned marriage before."

"It's always been expected Chase, you know that!"

"I'm not marrying you."

Brittany stood, her shoulder length platinum blonde waves shimmering as she moved. Slowly she picked up her bag, pulling the straps up over her shoulder.

"Tell that to your father. He's calling a press conference as we speak."

With a jolt, Chase sat upright, brows knitting in confusion. "What?"

"Your dad is telling the press the good news of our engagement and family merger. Try getting out of that one, Chase." Brittany gave a sly evil smile that made him cringe.

With a flip of her hair and stiffened back, she exited the office, slamming the door behind her. Chase sat in stunned silence, contemplating his next move. He must know where the press conference was being held. However, if he showed up and refuted his father's claims that he was getting married, Herman would face embarrassment. Having to explain the announcement was not something he was prepared to do.

“This is not good, what if...,” he muttered, his voice trailing off as the door opened.

He half expected it to be Brittany returning but it was George. His face was grim as his eyes shot arrows at him.

George marched to the desk. “What game are you playing Chase? One moment you said you were in love with Maggie. She’s pregnant with your baby and now you’re marrying someone else?”

“I’m not marrying anyone, George. This is all a ploy by my father to force me to marry Brittany.”

“What are you talking about? It’s all over the building already. The two of you got engaged today.”

Shaking his head, he insisted, “No George, we didn’t.”

“This is confusing,” George sank to the seat, deflated. “What’s going on?”

“You know that they’ve always expected me to marry her, but George, I can’t. I have to find Maggie and convince her. Help me please.”

“What do you mean, find her? You told me you found her before you left for New York.”

“She moved. Landlord said she didn’t like that the place wasn’t safe enough for the baby.”

“Then that means she is looking out for the best interest of the child,” George replied in a milder tone. “But, Chase, I don’t think you should pursue this with Maggie.”

Chase gave him a cutting look. “She’s carrying my child, George, in case you forgot.”

“I know,” replied his friend. “But this thing with Brittany and your father, you need to sort that.”

“Does that mean you won’t help me?”

Before George could reply, Chase’s private line rang. “Yes, Andrea,” he answered after picking up the phone.

His personal secretary cleared her throat. “Sir, I have the Temple Hall report from the Real Estate office.”

“Okay, bring it in,” he instructed, hanging up the phone.

A few seconds later, Andrea walked in, smiled at George and placed the file on Chase's desk. She left, glancing back at George, giving him a wink.

Chase chuckled. "You've got yourself an admirer."

"Yes, she keeps seducing me with her eyes." George grinned. "Is that the apartment in Temple Hall?"

"Yes, the renovations are almost complete but Father is hounding me not to spend any more money until I am sure that tenants are filling up the place. I asked for a report on rental progress so I'll have something positive to show him."

He pushed the report under a stack of files that needed his immediate attention. The report would have to wait for a more opportune time. At the moment, he was more concerned about finding Maggie and fixing the mess his father created with the press.

George rose. "Let's get outta here. We haven't played racquetball in a while."

"How can I concentrate on racquetball in a time like this?" he asked, then his face broke into a grin. "Anyway, with that beer belly of yours, I'd hate to beat you."

George patted his belly. "You don't worry about this, worry about your own damn self."

"Maybe you're right. A game of racquetball would help clear my head. Let's go before father returns from wherever he is."

CHAPTER 14

The day did not start well for Chase. As soon as he stepped from his Ferrari, a throng of reporters accosted him. He stopped, almost in shock as a few microphones pushed close to his nose. There were questions flung at him that he had no desire to answer.

“Tell us about your engagement, Chase,” one voice shouted.

“Chase, why did you decide to get married? Is it because of the alleged merger?”

He scanned the small crowd through his aviator sunglasses, seeing their animated, almost possessed expressions. They pushed forward, not caring about his personal space. He leaned his back against the car, folding his arms across his chest, his demeanor cool and relaxed.

“Chase, when is the wedding?”

He said nothing while he waited for them to tire themselves out. Eventually, the questions thinned as they realized he was not responding. Gradually, they began to step away, lowering their microphones.

He eased from the vehicle and began moving forward. The crowd parted to let him through. A few questions were thrown at his back, all of which he ignored as he made his way to the entrance of the MacCorp building. When he reached the glass doors, he turned, gave them a little salute before entering the lobby.

“Good morning Sir,” the chief of security greeted.

The man was at his post near the front door. “Good morning Dave. Get rid of the nuisance in the parking lot, will you?”

“Yes Sir,” the man replied with a grin, beckoning to one of his colleagues stationed near the elevator.

“Hi Lana,” Chase greeted. “Is my father in yet?”

The brunette behind the reception desk smiled, her baby blue eyes twinkling. “Senior McMillan won’t be in today. He called earlier.”

“It’s barely eight. He called in already? Did he say where he was going today?”

“No Sir, he didn’t say,” she replied, still smiling. He nodded and started walking away when she added, “Congratulations on your engagement.”

Chase halted, feeling his chest tighten. With a slight turn of his head, he gave her a fiery stare. Her smile faded and she looked away, making herself busy with something on her desk. He strode away, hastening his pace towards the elevator.

As he made his way to his office, he thought of Maggie and what she might be doing. Was she okay? He sincerely hoped she didn’t get the news of his engagement or it would be difficult for him to convince her to let them be together.

The moment he entered his office, his private line rang. Annoyed, he yanked it from the cradle, answering, “Yes?”

“Lunch at noon... the Hotel Flamingo. Don’t be late,” Brittany’s cold tone came through the line.

His words came through gritted teeth, “Yes, we need to talk.”

“See you then,” she replied.

Chase dropped the receiver in its cradle, glowering at the instrument. Having lunch was a good idea. He could set her straight and end this farce of an engagement. He was not marrying her and that was final.

The next few hours he spent on business calls, dealing with the acquisition for the New York City based company. A stickler for punctuality, he left the office at eleven thirty. He knew Brittany would be late, so he ordered a scotch neat. It was rather early, but he badly needed the smooth taste of the golden liquid on his tongue.

It was near twelve thirty when she walked in, chatting animatedly on her cellphone. When she neared the table she hung up, pulling up a chair and placing the cellphone on the table.

“Waiter!” she motioned to a passing server, without greeting Chase.

A man in white shirt and black trousers came up, a smile planted on his face. “Yes ma’am, what can I get you?”

“Merlot... make it a bottle of your best.”

The waiter gave a slight bow. “Yes ma’am,” he said then moved off.

Brittany’s cell rang as Chase sipped his scotch, watching her eye the device without

answering it. It rang out, during with time she kept her eye on the screen, visibly relaxing when the ringing stopped.

“Aren’t you going to order?” she asked crisply, her frosty eyes raking over him.

“I’m not hungry, thanks for asking,” he replied, emptying the glass.

The wine arrived and she ordered a Caesar’s salad for herself and ham on rye for Chase. He cocked a questioning brow at her.

“At least pretend to enjoy having lunch, the press will be watching,” she squeezed through tightly pursed lips.

The waiter poured a glass of the deep red liquid of which she immediately took a sip. By the time her salad and the sandwich arrived, she’d finished one glass and was halfway through another.

“Frankly, I don’t give a damn about the press. You call off this engagement you cooked up with my father.” His tone was low, but she must have detected the seriousness in it as her eyes flicked to his, widening.

“Not a chance.” She gave a slight shake of the head. “You know this deal has been in the making a while. What’s got into you?”

The cell phone rang once more. She glanced at it, her eyes lingering a few seconds before she clenched her jaw. She must have realized Chase was watching because in that moment when she lifted her eyes, she feigned a smile.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” he asked, jutting his chin towards the device.

“Don’t change the subject,” she flung at him, obviously trying to veer his attention from the phone.

The thing stopped ringing, then there was a moment’s silence before it beeped. Grabbing it from the table, she swiped the screen. A cloud crossed her face as she read the message.

“Is everything alright?” Chase asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

Brittany raised her eyes, smiling brightly. “Yes, fine.”

It was obvious to him that she was not okay by the tremor in her hand as she placed the cellphone on the table. What was she hiding? He was pondering this when the phone rang and she jumped.

Now his concern was real. “Something is wrong, isn’t it?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” she almost shouted, grabbing the cellphone. “Excuse me, I have to take this.”

Getting up from the table, she placed it to her ear. “Hello?” her voice lowered.

Chase watched as she walked to the front of the restaurant towards the reception area. From his vantage point, in the center of the room, his eyes followed her. Unable to hear her, he trained his eyes on her body language, facial expression and way she gesticulated while talking.

From what he gathered, she was upset. While he waited, he took the chance to have the sandwich she ordered. It was delicious and he almost ordered another.

She returned with a sour look on her face, downing a full glass of her merlot in one go. He ordered another scotch, nursing it while observing Brittany’s usually cool demeanor now shattered, revealing a side to her he’d never seen.

In silence, she devoured her salad, drinking the wine as though it was water. This wasn’t where he needed to be. He needed to see Maggie, to make sure she and the baby were all right.

“Look Brittany, I don’t know why you ask me here, but you need to take care of this. I’m not marrying you and that’s final.”

He stood, pulling out his wallet, dropping a few hundred dollar bills on the table. After moving a few paces, he paused and turned, his eyes glinting dangerously. “We are not getting married, you got that?” his voice rose a notch, extending a few meters.

A few heads turned, looking their way. Brittany fidgeted in her seat as her eyes darted around the room. Her discomfort was obvious as Chase sauntered out.

Once in his vehicle he pulled his cell phone, attaching the hands free device, then dialed a number. Three rings came through before the party picked up.

“It’s Mike,” a low tone answered.

“Chase here, I need you to look into someone for me.”

“How urgent is it? It’s not the same chick is it, because she’s clean.”

Chase chuckled, “No, it’s not her. I need you to look into the business and personal dealings of Brittany D’Morne.”

CHAPTER 15

By November, Maggie had done everything she needed to do in preparation for the baby. At six months, her body had drastically changed along with her mood swings and appetite. She could barely walk a few feet without taking a seat, with constant aches in her back and legs.

It's been two months since she moved into her new apartment. With her shopping done and her monthly visits to the doctor taken care of, she felt everything was going fine.

Chase was on her mind a lot. Seeing him at her old apartment brought back memories of their time on the Chasmac. Their connection as strangers on the deck stuck with her even through the months after she left.

His deep smooth voice kept echoing in her head. Their conversations would come crashing back each time she saw the ocean or passed an aquarium. She was particularly drawn to the SeaWorld Adventures park, where she spent most of her free time. Whenever she could, she'd go to the beach, taking long walks, pretending that Chase was there with her.

It wasn't a conscious act on her part. She tried to put him out of her mind, but he would pop up at the oddest moments and she found it difficult to rid her mind of him.

There were times she was tempted to call, but she refrained from doing so, determined to live her life without him.

On Thanksgiving, the restaurant closed its doors to customers. Instead, Mr. Myles treated all the employees to Thanksgiving dinner. Maggie wasn't too keen on going in since she wasn't going to work, but the idea of the juicy turkey and cranberry sauce was too delicious to refuse. She had to admit that her baby had a healthy appetite, as the idea of missing the turkey was not a possibility in her mind.

The meal was delicious but by the time she was done, her stomach started to churn. Perhaps it was the stuffing, she couldn't be sure, but something didn't seem to go down well with her. As nausea assailed her, she grimaced.

“Are you okay, Maggie?” Mr. Myles asked.

With a shake of her head she replied, “I don't think so. I don't feel so good, I'll head

home now.”

The meal was over and she was ready to leave. Some of the staff was clearing the table while others were cleaning the floor. She wasn't expected to help, as Mr. Myles had told her that she should not do anything but come and enjoy the meal. Still she felt bad for not assisting.

The feeling in her stomach was getting worse that she was sure she'd bring up her food at any moment. Home was where she needed to be. Picking up her bag, she started towards the exit at the back of the restaurant. It was the door commonly used by the employees as well as for delivery.

“You can't take the bus in your condition,” her boss said, stopping her. “Let Byron drop you. He has a car.”

“Thank you,” she beamed. “But I don't want to trouble anyone.”

Mr. Myles ignored her and called for the male waiter, “Byron, can you drop Maggie home? She's not well.”

“Yes boss,” Byron replied from the table he was clearing.

“I can manage, I don't want to put you out,” she told her colleague.

“Is no trouble, we cool,” Byron said cheerfully, coming to assist her to the door.

With a smile, he ushered her to his car, seating her in the front passenger side. This was not someone with whom she interacted on a regular basis. The most they'd spoken were greetings, and on occasion he'd ask for something when he entered the kitchen.

Not being one to talk much, she kept quiet as he drove at a moderate speed. Occasionally she glanced over at his tall thin frame. His bony hands gripped the wheel as he steered the vehicle towards Temple Hall.

He hummed out of tune in a happy go lucky manner, glancing her way a few times. He wasn't a bad looking fellow. She liked his deep chocolate complexion and his dark eyes. What was most interesting about Byron was his Jamaican dialect.

“You alright?” he suddenly broke the silence.

Maggie jumped, as his crisp voice crackled through the stillness. “Yes, thank you,” she replied with a shy smile.

“My girlfrien’ pregnant too,” Byron said. “Har belly roun’ like pumpkin!” he chuckled.

The sound of the broken English made her smile. He continued his banter about his girlfriend right up to the moment he pulled the car to a stop before her apartment building. By this, she had relaxed and was smiling as she got from the vehicle with his help.

“Thanks for the ride, see you on Monday,” she said.

“Mek me walk yuh to di door,” he suggested.

“No I’m fine, I’m much better. You’d better head on home. Thank you.”

“Alright den. See yuh Monday. Tek care,” Byron said, slipping back behind the wheel.

Maggie turned, feeling the queasiness return to her stomach. As she moved to the building, she came to a halt seeing Chase casually leaning against his metallic gray Ferrari parked in front. He was glaring at them both.

Byron didn’t seem to notice as he said goodbye once more, waving while he pulled the car from the curb. She started walking towards Chase when he turned, yanked his door open and slid in the driver seat. With his jaw set, he started the engine. She paused, her mouth opened in surprise at his behavior. Without a glance, he gunned the engine, leaving a puff of smoke as he drove away.

With a sigh, she continued to her apartment door. The nausea was returning and she badly needed to get to the bathroom. Quickly, she turned the key, was about to push the door when she heard him reversing. A moment later, it stopped and she heard the car door slam. She kept her eyes forward, listening to his footsteps on the pavement as he approached.

“Who is he, new boyfriend?” he asked, stepping up behind her.

She ignored his question, throwing at him one of her own. “How did you find me?” She turned her head, giving him a sideways look.

He looked up at the building with an arrogant reply, “I own the building so it wasn’t hard finding you.”

“You were looking for me?” she asked, her heart flipping over.

She was surprised that he owned the twenty-story apartment building she now lived in. Fear gripped her at the thought of him coming around often. He owned the place, so she couldn’t very well keep him away.

“I told you, we need to talk, but who was that guy?” He insisted.

“He’s my co-worker,” she sighed heavily. “Okay, let’s talk, that’s what you said right, that you wanted to talk?”

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” he raised his brow.

Silently, she pushed the door as another wave of nausea assailed her. Swallowing hard, trying to hide her discomfort, she stood aside to let him in. She watched him look around her scant living and dining room, then walked to the window overlooking the newly planted garden.

She placed her bag on the small coffee table in the center of the room. Taking out her cellphone, she plugged it into the charger, then plugged the charger into the outlet on the wall.

“You need a bigger place,” he remarked.

“I can’t afford a bigger place,” she retorted

Chase turned to face her. “You don’t need to.”

Maggie took a deep breath. “You don’t have to feel obligated to do anything for me. I can take care of myself.”

“What are you saying?” he stepped towards her with a frown.

“I’m saying this is my responsibility. You don’t have to feel burdened to do anything.”

“I don’t feel burdened. I want to,” he replied casually.

“Why? Why would you want to do anything for a child who would only bring shame to you?”

A line formed between his eyes. “What?” his voice incredulous. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, we both know that your world is different from mine and we both know that this,” she touched her mound. “This was a mistake.”

Chase stepped closer to her. His voice lowered, becoming husky as he asked, “Was that night a mistake for you?”

She looked away, her pulse running away like a wild animal. “I said getting pregnant was,” her voice was soft. “We both know it wasn’t meant to turn out this way.”

He closed in on her, too close. She wanted to move away but felt rooted to the spot. He was standing close enough that his body brushed hers. A volt of electric current ran through her belly, down her legs and back through her entire body.

“I repeat,” he said, his tone sultry. “Was that night a mistake for you?”

Maggie swallowed hard, trying to calm her racing pulse. She could not believe that after so many months apart, she could react to him in such a way. She felt his heat penetrate her as he stood near and there was a slight flutter in her belly.

She wanted to answer, but the words stuck in her throat because when she thought about it, she did not regret their moments together. She closed her eyes, inhaling shallow breaths as his nearness enveloped her.

When she failed to reply, he grinned. “That’s what I thought.” Her eyes fluttered open when she felt him brush his hand against her cheek. “We both know that night was not a mistake,” he added.

“Even so, this child would only make things hard on you, your parents, your business... your reputation,” she continued.

She knew that the media would have a field day. They would mark her as a gold digger who got pregnant on purpose. She could not subject her child to that kind of life. She would rather raise her child alone than have him face that. People would start to question his paternity as well. No, she could not go through that, or have her child be subject to that kind of scrutiny.

“You let me worry about that,” Chase said, cupping her face.

Gripping his hands, she tried to pry them away, but as she touched him, her palms caught fire. *How can this be?* She argued in her mind. *How can this attraction be so strong after all this time?* Giving herself a mental shake, she tried to focus on what he was saying.

“Now, I want my child to have the best things in life and his mother must have the best as well.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered, raising her eyes to meet his.

He grinned as if he’d been waiting for her to ask. “Let’s be a family.”

She could not allow this to happen. Chase would be the laughing stock of his friends. Her

child would be caught in the middle.

“No! Just let us be Chase. Do you know what’s going to happen once the media gets wind of this? Do you remember what happened with the yacht incident, how the reporters had a field day?”

“Maggie, I want you and my child in my life. You let me take care of everything else, okay?”

“You don’t get it, Chase. You don’t understand what the baby will encounter once they find out that a poor black girl is carrying your child. You don’t know what we’ll go through.”

He was trying to convince her and his pleading eyes almost got her. She so wanted to rest her weary head on his shoulder and listen to his heartbeat.

The memory of their time together came back with a force. She’d laid in the bed, the moonlight filtering in. Her head had rested on his chest while he caressed her hair. The thudding of his heartbeat had put her to sleep.

“Listen Maggie, everything will be fine, just you wait and see,” he insisted.

Still cupping her face, he lowered his head, bringing his lips to hers. Her eyes widened as he closed the gap. Why couldn’t she move? She needed to pull away. *Pull away Maggie, pull away.* His lips touched hers and her knees wobbled. Fire coursed through her as his lips pressed on hers in a gentle kiss.

She closed her eyes, anticipating a deeper caress, but as she parted her lips, he withdrew. She forced her leaden eyes to open, seeing Chase smiling at her.

He moved away, and while still reeling from the sensations he evoked in her, he picked up her phone.

“What are you doing?” she breathed, closing the gap and reaching for the device.

“I’m adding my number,” he said, moving his hand away. In that instant, his own cell phone started ringing. “Good, now there’s no excuse not to keep in touch. If you need me, call.”

“Chase, please, don’t pursue this.”

He replaced the cell and sealed the space between them. “Stop fighting it Maggie,” he replied, pecking her lips again. “Think about what I said,” he added, jaunting to the door.

As she stood entrenched to the spot, she watched as he opened it, slipped through and closed it gently behind him.

Her lips tingled where his touched hers and her heart was galloping like a spooked horse. This wasn't good. First she got pregnant only after one night with the guy, now he wants to do the right thing. But the right thing could cause problems for everyone.

Chase wasn't just some guy, he was Mr. Tampa. He was the wealthy bad boy of Florida, known in all the elite circles and the business community. There was no way this could go unnoticed for long, especially if he planned to come around often.

CHAPTER 16

The McMillan mansion occupied ten acres in the middle of the affluent area of Parkland Estates. At the point of entry was a security post, which handled all entrances and exits. The quarter mile driveway was flanked by two large fountains, neatly cut lawn and led to a turn-about directly in front of the home.

Chase's Ferrari slowed, the huge iron gate gaping, allowing him entry. He sped forward, coming to a stop in front of the family home. The butler met him at the door and he greeted the man with a grin. Jives bowed slightly as Chase hurried to his father's study.

Herman looked up from his desk as Chase walked in. This was his domain, a place he referred to as his personal man cave, and no women were allowed.

In there were two bookshelves, his desk, a leather chair and a shelf with business awards. On the desk, Chase made out a half used cigar and an empty cognac glass. He made his way in, keeping his eyes on his father.

It was time to face the music and he was ready to do battle. He knew what his father was like and this was going to be tough. However, if he wanted to get him on his side, he would have to win the battle first.

"So the prodigal son finally shows up!" Herman tone dripped with sarcasm.

"Hello Father," he greeted, entering the small home office, closing the door behind him.

Herman leaned his elbow on the mahogany desk, giving Chase a hard stare. He knew his father was not pleased with his actions. He'd evaded him for months. On the other hand, if he seriously needed to see him, he'd have visited the penthouse. Instead, Herman made a deadly move by announcing his engagement to the world. He knew Chase would not refuse it to the press, that's why he did it. Herman also knew that eventually, Chase would have to come see him.

That time was now.

"We need to talk, Father," he said, pulling up a chair in front of the desk.

"I'm listening," the man replied.

Chase went straight to the point. "I can't marry Brittany."

"That's not an option Chase, unless you have better prospects."

He knew he had to tread carefully since his father was set on this marriage deal. "Have you checked into their business dealings lately?"

Herman's face hardened. "Don't give me any of that nonsense."

His voice hadn't lifted, but his tone was stern enough that Chase knew he must handle this with care. The D'Mornes were not as clean as they made out to be but apparently, his father was not ready to listen. He took another approach.

"I can't marry her because I'm in love with someone else," he said, watching the man's reaction.

Herman's features didn't change. "Love? You want to ruin this deal because you can't keep it in your pants?"

"She's going to have a baby... you're going to be a grandfather. Father...," Chase emphasized. "*A grandfather.*"

Herman stared at Chase bug eyed. "What?"

"You heard me. Soon you'll have a little Herman or Irene McMillan running around the house. Your wish for the continuation of the family name has finally come true."

Herman's face brightened. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" His voice also lightened. "When do we meet her family? Invite them over ASAP, we'll have dinner and plan the future."

"Well that's why I'm here, Father." Chase pulled up closer to the desk, now that he had his father's attention. "I need your help convincing her."

"I don't understand. Is her family against this marriage? How dare they refuse you! Do they know who you are?" Herman picked up his cigar and lit the end, taking a puff. "Which family is she from, the Abrams... no," his hand moved back and forth while he talked. "They must be the Vlasicks, they are always talking about their wealth and family history. Those bigots, perhaps wanting her to marry a Russian heir."

Chase held his hand up. "Slow down, Father. It has nothing to do with her family. She has no family."

Herman's brows knitted, his cigar stopping in mid-air. "No family? Is she a sole heir? I haven't heard of an orphan heiress."

"She's not from our circles," he said slowly, observing his father's frown getting deeper.

"Go on, I'm listening."

"She's from the other side of the tracks, so to speak. She's a working girl."

Herman's shoulders deflated and he put out the cigar. He reached down and opened a drawer, pulling out a bottle of Hine-250, the seventh most expensive cognac in the world. He splashed some into the glass he'd been drinking from and replaced the bottle. After taking a sip, he settled the glass on the surface of the desk. It made a clinking sound.

"You mess up this deal with D'Morne for a working girl?" he nodded slowly, his voice incredulous. After a few seconds, he took another sip of his drink. "Okay, I can live with that. What is she, an actress, model?" he asked, then his face relaxed. "Oh, she's an executive, a CEO perhaps?"

"No, Father. She's neither of those."

Herman closed his eyes, letting out a heavy breath. After a moment, he opened them, replying, "Okay, whatever. She's not from money, I understand. But what's the problem?"

"She's reluctant to commit."

"What are you talking about? That's preposterous!" his voice lifted a few decibels before leveling. "What does she want, money? Give her what she wants and make her commit. Take control."

"You're on the wrong track again. She doesn't want to commit because," he paused. "She thinks this union will cause problems, plus..." he trailed off.

Herman's eyes narrowed. "Spill it Chase."

"She thinks the child will be caught in the middle of a media storm, you know how it can be when two people from opposite worlds have children."

Herman chuckled. "Of course the media will cover it, as well as covering how you two get married and live happily ever after," he said, amused. "So what's the problem?"

"It's more than that father. She's afraid the child will be caught in the middle of a messy situation."

Herman laughed, his booming voice filled the small room. “What is she talking about? It’s not like you went and got a nigger pregnant!” his laugh continued, fading only when he noticed Chase’s scowl.

“Father!”

“What? I’m sure you didn’t breed one of them,” he added, his face turning pink. “Did you?”

Chase’s eyes blazed as he bared his teeth. He found it difficult to stand and listen to his father. Never had he the urge to hit a parent until now. Barely holding in his emotions, he doubled his fist and tried to let his voice remain calm.

“She is, *Father*. Maggie is a woman of color.”

Herman paled before he turned red. “Don’t tell me you got one of them pregnant, tell me it isn’t true,” Herman’s voice was barely a whisper, his eyes wide.

“How could you talk about other people like that, Father? It’s disrespectful referring to them by the *N* word.”

“No this isn’t happening,” his father muttered, giving his head a vigorous shake. He drained his glass, settling it down noisily. There was a moment of deathly silence while both men glared at each other. Herman was the first to break it.

“How could you get a girl like that pregnant? Have her get rid of it!” Herman bellowed.

Chase clenched his jaw, his blood hot in his veins. Regret now coursing through him. The idea that telling his father would be the beginning of setting things right was now painful remorse. Never had he been this furious with anyone, let alone the man who sired him. Not only was he angry, he was also ashamed to call him father. Chase could tolerate no more.

“Enough, Father!” he shouted. Herman’s eyes bulged at his tone. Chase ignored it. “Moreover, it’s too late for that now. She’s more than six months along and we’re keeping the baby,” his voice grated at his father.

“We? Are you out of your blasted mind?” Herman thundered. Chase heard his heavy breathing, noticing the vein in his forehead ready to pop. “What do you mean, *we*? You are not marrying that... that...” his voice was strangulated.

“I see, Father. It’s because Maggie is different isn’t it? She doesn’t have your skin color,”

he retorted.

Raising his head abruptly, Herman's sharp eyes bore into his. "Are you accusing me of being racist? I too had a nig... colored girl once, but I never got her pregnant nor did what... what... what you're suggesting," his tone lifted, stuttering on the last few words.

"What's wrong with me having a child with an African American girl?" Chase glared at his father, who had turned purple with both anger and obvious embarrassment.

"It's just not done in our society. The media will have a field day with this!"

Chase was at his wit's end. He replied in a deflated tone, "That's what she said."

Herman looked surprised. "She's a smart girl. Listen to her. I assume she is also against this *thing* you're suggesting?"

"If you mean marriage, yes. She wants to raise the child on her own, but I can't let her do that."

"Why the hell not? They... I mean, women do it all the time."

Chase turned his back to his father and walked to the book shelf to his left. Absently, he fiddled with one of his father's Business Person Of The Year award plaques. The urge to throw the item at the man was enough that his hand gripped it, lifting it from the shelf.

"What are you thinking?" His father's grim tone brought him out of his momentary lapse. He set the plaque back in its cradle.

"I'm taking her away from here." he turned, his face grave.

"You're going to be the death of me." Herman sagged back into his chair, the color drained from his face. "Are you crazy? Have you gone mad?" Herman asked in a tight voice. "Is this her idea? Is this her plan, pretending not to want to marry you so you'll leave all you know behind and take her away?"

His father's words cut into his nerve.

"She doesn't know it yet," he replied.

"Has she cast some spell on you? What is it about this young woman... has she messed with your brain?" The man had nothing good to say.

"I'm in love with her, Father."

“I didn’t hear you correctly. Care to repeat that?”

He knew his father was being sarcastic but he could not resist. “I love her and there’s nothing...”

Herman cut off his last words pounding the desk with his fist. “GET OUT, you hear me? GET THE HELL OUT! And don’t come back until you’ve screwed your head on right!”

Chase stormed out of the den, slamming the door behind him. First, Maggie wouldn’t listen and now his father. What must he do to get through to them? If he told her he loved her, she would never believe him. Getting his family’s approval was the best solution. Then, whatever the media said would be irrelevant.

He paused in the passage, calming himself before moving along. Secretly he hoped that none of the servants heard the argument. He was ashamed of his father as it was. It would be more embarrassing if any of the African American staff heard the words coming from his father.

When he reached near the drawing room, he paused. As he made to pass, a silky voice halted him.

“Chase?”

He turned, catching his mother’s adoring gaze. His anger evaporated seeing her neatly coiffured blonde hair and soft hazel eyes.

“Chase, my son.” Irene rose from the plush beige sofa. “You do what you think is right.”

They looked at each other through the expanse of the room. A room large enough to hold fifty or more. His eyes darted to the right wall where his parents’ portraits sat side by side over a mantle.

He watched as his mother leisurely moved towards him. When she was within inches, she raised her hand and lovingly caressed his cheek. “It doesn’t matter whether she is black, white or Chinese. Do not allow your father to dictate your future. Only you can do that.”

“Mother,” he whispered, voice cracking.

“Is she a nice girl?” Irene asked, her smile never fading.

“Yes, Mother.” He felt deflated. “I want to be with her and my child.”

“And you should. I’d like to meet her,” Irene told him.

“Okay, I’ll try convincing her, but she’s as stubborn as Father.”

“Don’t worry my son, we’ll make him understand.”

His mother pulled him into a loving embrace. His arms closed around her slender five feet five inch frame while she whispered soothing words.

“Everything will be fine.”

CHAPTER 17

Chase doubted that he could convince his father to accept Maggie and the baby. On the one hand, his mother was with him, but without his father's approval, his child would have to face life knowing his grandfather disapproved of his existence. That was not something he wished his child to encounter in life, especially from his own blood.

There was only one solution and that was to leave with Maggie. He began arranging to do that. With George's help, he acquired a condominium in New York. Maggie was going to need her family and she had an uncle there. That he found out when he tried to find her. But before he could make any other moves he came head to head with his father once more.

The man had come into his office unannounced, red faced and puffing like a chu-chu train. He was breathing so hard that Chase was afraid he'd have a stroke.

"What's the matter Father, you look piqued."

Herman slapped his palm down on the surface of Chase's desk, upsetting the contents. "What's this I hear about you buying a condo in New York? Are you serious about leaving with that girl?"

He rose from his chair, facing his father squarely. "Yes, I'm moving to New York with Maggie."

"You are out of your flipping mind!" Herman hollered.

"No father, I am thinking clearly. She needs me and I need her."

Chase observed the scowl on his father face and he too was beginning to become agitated. The man was clearly against his relationship with Maggie and she wanted to raise the child on her own. He felt as though he was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Okay fine." Herman replied, his voice hard. "If you move to New York with that girl, I will disown you. I will cut you from my will."

Chase absorbed his father's words, unmoved.

Herman continued, "I will take everything you own, and you will be left with nothing. If

you decide to do this, you will be a pauper. Are you willing to throw everything away for that girl?"

He was silent as he slowly settled himself in his chair, contemplating Herman's words. Would his father really disinherit him? Would he take away what he now had?

As an only child, Chase had never wanted for anything. The family wealth was many generations in the making. He was supposed to inherit whatever his parents left behind and carry on that tradition, passing it down to his children.

"You would do that to your own child, to your grandchild?"

"Don't you utter another word about that!" Herman's voice echoed in the room. "That bastard could be anybody's baby. Those people, they sleep with any..." Herman was saying.

Chase would have none of that. "Enough is enough now, Father!" he snapped. "I swear, I will not have you talk about Maggie in that manner."

Herman's jaw dropped, staring unblinking at him for almost a full minute. "Is that a threat?" he asked in an undertone. "Look what she's done to you. You never spoke to me that way before meeting her. Now you insult me and speak with disrespect."

Moving his head from side to side, his eyes wide and face blank, he ambled out of the office. Chase watched crestfallen as his father left. He knew he should not have spoken with Herman in that manner, but he asked for it. No one deserved the contempt his father was giving to Maggie. Even though they were not yet together, he would not allow this disrespect. How could his own father be so hateful to another human?

Never having to deal with this kind of intolerance was making him edgy. He had many friends in college, including people of all races and religion. He'd never assumed this kind of bigotry would be close to home.

CHAPTER 18

Maggie stepped out of the restaurant into the late afternoon sunshine. The golden sun was sinking low in the sky and would soon disappear. Shadows appeared as the evening descended mingled with the soft glow of the remaining sunlight.

Mondays were tiring and she hated every hour of the day. She was glad it was over and she would be heading home soon. Tired and weary, she badly needed a shower and a nice cup of steaming tea. Chamomile relaxed her, putting her to bed and giving her a nice long sleep.

With her handbag straps over her shoulder and doggie bag in one hand, she made her way past the dumpster, heading towards the main street. Her steps halted as a figure raised himself from a Ferrari, standing with his hands jammed in his pockets.

Her disloyal heart gave a jolt at seeing Chase, his face ecstatic. *Oh no*, she groaned. Tempted to turn around, she stopped.

When he opened the car door she felt relief that perhaps he was leaving, but not so. He picked up a small bag and sauntered towards her.

“Hi,” he greeted, his voice warm.

She cleared her throat. “Hi.”

“I wanted to drive you home, but I have a meeting in a few minutes.”

He held out the bag to her, which she was reluctant to take. Taking her hand, he placed the straps of the gift bag in it. His hand lingered on hers longer than necessary and she pulled it away, feeling the heat of his touch.

“There’s a cab waiting for you,” he said, placing his hand on the small of her back. “Come.”

Maggie sidestepped him. “What are you doing Chase?” her eyes darted back and forth, hoping her colleagues would not see her. The backstreet was empty.

“I’m taking care of you and the baby like I promised,” he replied. “Now, don’t argue with me. Please, let me do this.”

His pleading eyes locked on to hers, holding her mesmerized. When he stepped closer to her, she felt trapped by his gaze. Then, before she knew it, he was pulling her into an embrace.

“I need you Maggie,” he whispered against her hair. “And you need me.”

His arms wrapped around her, her belly gently pressing against his lean body. A flutter in her stomach made her gasp. Chase’s arms loosened. He leaned back, gripping her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” he asked with concern in his voice, worry lines creasing his brow.

“The baby just kicked,” she breathed. “When you hugged me, he kicked.”

Chase’s eyes widened, before he broke into a grin. His hand came down, hovering over her tummy. “May I?” he asked, his voice quavering.

“Yes.”

As his hand touched her, the baby gave her another jab. “Ouch!” That one was more intense than the first.

“He’s going to be a baller, I can tell.” He was elated.

“What if it’s a she?” she asked, teasing him.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is a healthy baby loved by both parents.”

That’s what she wanted more than anything, but something told Maggie, that Chase’s dream of a happy family won’t be so easy. Him being near her now, made her feel secure. He was doing the right thing and she adored him for even wanting to stand by her, but a sense of foreboding hovered over her.

“Okay,” she murmured, fighting the feeling.

Chase gave her a puzzled look. “What?”

“Let’s do this, for the baby.”

His face shone like a three hundred watt light bulb. Happily, he pulled her into a tight embrace, that she felt she could hardly breathe.

“Chase,” she managed to squeeze out. “You’re suffocating me.”

“Oh, sorry,” he loosened his grip, just a bit. “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world.”

“Stop exaggerating,” she giggled.

He stepped back, breaking the embrace, but his hands remained on her arms. “You’ve got to promise me something, and this time you’ve got to keep it,” his voice and face got serious. “No matter what happens, don’t give up on us.”

Her heart started going at an unsteady pace. “What are you saying?”

“I’m just saying that, only you and I matter now, just trust me. Okay?”

Something didn’t feel right. “What are you not telling me?”

“Look into my eyes,” he pleaded. “Do you trust me?”

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, I trust you.”

“Then trust when I say I’ll take care of you and the baby.”

After he made her promise to trust him, he walked her to the waiting cab, payed the fare and seeing that she was safely inside.

Before the vehicle moved off he leaned in. “Remember, you promised,” he whispered, planting a kiss on her lips.

The cab moved off and she was left with the lingering sensation of his lips and her own thoughts. There was something Chase wasn’t telling her, Maggie felt it in her core. While she contemplated the mystery, her cab came to a halt in front of the apartment.

The fading light cast deep shadows on the pavement and the outdoor light started flicking on one by one. A light breeze rustled the newly planted palm trees in front of her building as she stepped from the taxi.

The sight of a black Lincoln in front of the apartment, with white glove, dark suited chauffeur brought an amused smile to her face. She figured someone was having a date night splurge or getting married. In any case, the stiff backed chauffeur standing next to the car with his serious army like expression was out of place in this neighborhood.

As she made to pass by, the man stepped in her path.

“Excuse me ma’am, Mr. McMillan would like a word with you,” he said, his voice as crisp as his stiffly ironed suit.

She smiled sweetly, sidestepping him while thinking that Chase was too much. They’d only just met at the restaurant. Was he trying to be romantic? She smiled at the idea, but she would not give in so easily. If he thought that showing off his money was romantic, he had

another thing coming.

The man rushed passed her, stepping into her way once more. “Please ma’am, he’s waiting in the car,” the chauffeur pleaded.

Maggie sighed. “Tell Chase that if he wants to talk to me, he knows my apartment. And please, don’t block a pregnant woman. I need to go, if you’ll excuse me,” she replied politely.

Looking sheepish, he stepped away. When she reached her door and pulled out her keys, someone walked up behind her. She turned with a smile, expecting to see Chase. Instead, she was staring into the icy blue eyes of a man a few inches shorter than Chase, with graying brown hair.

“You must be Maggie,” the man said. His voice was as cold as his eyes.

“Yes, and you are?” she smiled.

“I’m Herman McMillan, you’ve heard of me.” His orotund voice made her cringe, her smile fading.

With quivering hand, she completed the task of opening the door as the man’s eyes penetrated her.

“Won’t you come in?” she pushed the door, stepping aside to allow him entry.

His eyes darted around the room, coming back to rest on her. They bore into her, driving home the intimidation she knew he wanted to communicate.

In the same menacing tone, he asked, “How much?”

“Pardon?” she locked eyes with his, her forehead creasing and eyes narrowing.

“How much would it take for you to leave the state?”

So this was it? This was what Chase had been trying to convey, that his father was against them being together. She knew it wasn’t as easy as he was trying to make out. There was no way she was going to face this opposition. No matter what Chase said, he was still his father’s son. In no way would this man give in.

With a sigh, she eased herself onto the sofa. Having had a long day, she was tired and certainly not in the mood for this. The weariness seeped into her bones as she tried not to let him get to her.

All she could come out with was, “I don’t need your money. Please leave.”

“Take the money and live comfortably somewhere,” he said. He’d lowered his voice, but the words grated her nerves. “Do you know what will happen if word gets out about this?”

“With all due respect, I don’t *need* your money,” she replied evenly.

“Ha-ha-ha,” he chuckled. “That’s funny given the condition you’re in. I know girls like you prey on men like Chase. You worm your way into their beds and trap them.”

That did it. She rose to her feet, perhaps upsetting the baby as she felt a slight cramp in her lower abdomen. The feeling was fleeting and she ignored it, counting it down to gas.

“Girls like me?” she straightened, looking up into frosty eyes, her own sending him fiery bullets. “Look here, sir. I don’t care who you are, but don’t you dare pretend to know anything about me!”

“Now, now, let’s be reasonable...,” he was saying, but she cut him off.

“I think you should leave, sir,” she said quietly, the cramping sensation running through her once more.

Not wanting to show weakness, she gritted her teeth to prevent herself from grimacing. She began walking to the door.

“Chase won’t get a penny from me. I will take away everything he owns until he comes to his senses. If the child turns out to be his, we will quietly pay you child support each month, but not a penny more, is that clear?”

Yanking the door open, she stood silently, her eyes blazing. Slowly, he walked out. When he was outside the door, he repeated. “He will be ruined. Are you willing to live with that on your conscience?”

“Goodbye, Mr. McMillan, I’m closing the door now,” she remained polite, as she gently closed the door.

Maggie wanted to do nothing but slam the door in his face. It took every ounce of will to remain calm. This was Chase’s father and no matter how rude and hateful he’d been, he was still the grandfather of her baby.

By the time she ambled back to the sofa, the beginnings of a headache throbbed her temples. She sank herself into the cushions, closing her eyes as Herman’s words replayed in her mind.

“He’ll be ruined. Are you willing to live with that on your conscience?” Again, the words echoed, *“He’ll be ruined. Are you willing to live with that on your conscience?”*

CHAPTER 19

Tuesday Maggie awoke to a throbbing pain behind her eyelids. Opening her eyes, she groaned as pain shot through them. She had to blink several times before she was able to focus. The golden morning sun peeped through the window, lighting the room in its resplendent beauty, a beauty she did not enjoy.

Her eyes hurt from the glare, a sharp pain shooting through her head. She pulled the covers off, dragging her feet to the edge of the bed. Slowly she lowered them until they touched the carpet. As she tried to stand, a sharp pain in her lower abdomen rendered her immobile.

“Ouch!” she cried. Another wave of pain assailed her. “Aaaah!”

Laying back, she reached on the little nightstand beside the bed, feeling for her cell phone. Picking it up, she brought it around to her face, pressing the green button. The screen was black. She pressed the power button, but nothing happened. The phone was dead. What now?

By this time, the cramp was shifting back and forth across her lower abdomen, coming in waves. She closed her eyes, willing the pain away.

Now, she wished she had taken the house phone the manager had suggested. Unable to afford another expense on her budget, she'd turned the offer down. She'd been trying to save every dollar she earned for when the baby came and she could not work.

“Relax, Maggie,” she whispered. “Relax.”

Remembering what she read about breathing during labor, she began inhaling deeply. This was not labor pains, she hoped, but the breathing technique would certainly ease some of the discomfort. It worked. After a few minutes, the pain left. She waited some time, lying on her back to see if it would return. After about twenty minutes, she felt okay.

The cramps stayed away through her shower, breakfast and even when she stepped through the door to head to work. As soon as she made a few steps on the pavement in front of her building, the waves of pain returned.

“Ouch,” she cried aloud, having to stop and grip her belly.

“Maggie, are you okay?”

It was the voice of Henry, the apartment manager. She listened as his footsteps came close and he was beside her in a minute.

“Call the ambulance, please!” she begged.

“Yes,” he answered.

The piercing pain gripped her while the baby stiffened inside her belly as if he too was feeling it. It wasn't time for him to come. She was only six months in and the end of her second trimester. Giving birth now was impossible.

She stood in the same spot refusing to move while Henry dialed 911. She listened as he told the operator about her condition.

“Are you in pain Maggie?” he asked. All she could do was nod as her voice refused to work. “Yes, she's in pain, please send the ambulance quickly,” he told the operator.

At least her water hadn't broken, she told herself. Along with the extreme pain were bouts of dizziness. Fighting to stay conscious, she started humming a song she liked. Her legs had started to tremble as the pain was coming more intensely than before. She wasn't sure how long she could stand without falling.

Not sure how long she stood there, but she knew she wouldn't hold out much longer. Strong arms gripped her shoulders as the sound of the sirens neared. When the ambulance pulled up her legs started to buckle, but Henry held her tightly while she closed her eyes, trying to fight another surge of dizziness.

Something touched her backside and she was gently laid on a stretcher. She felt, rather than saw, herself being pushed into the ambulance, hearing the door slam before someone gripped her wrist. Slowly a dark shadow descended, pulling her into a black hole.

* * *

Maggie opened her eyes to see a face staring down at her. Graying mustache graced thin lips with thick black rimmed glasses perched on strong nose. His baby blue eyes made contact with hers as a smile creased the corners of his mouth.

“How are you feeling?” he asked as she stared at him. “I’m Doctor Lowe.”

She skimmed the room with her eyes. It was as she suspected, she was in the hospital. Her vision was fine, compared to the blurriness before and the pain in her abdomen was gone.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“Do you have someone we could call? The hospital administration needs an emergency contact.”

Chase popped into her head. She opened her mouth to say his name when Herman’s voice pierced through the stillness. *“He will be ruined. Are you willing to live with that on your conscience?”*

Shaking her head, she replied, “No, I don’t have anyone.”

Dr. Lowe looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. “What about the baby’s father?”

“No,” she lifted her hand, resting it on her tummy. “He doesn’t have a father.”

“You must have a friend, or someone who can stay with you. You mustn’t be alone now that you are getting closer to that time.”

“What was wrong with me?” She asked, thinking that she needed to call her uncle Tony.

“Your blood pressure was too high. Were you stressed for any reason?”

“Well---yes.”

“The vessels that carry oxygen to the baby get constricted when the blood pressure is too high. This is known as preeclampsia. Fortunately, it is mild and has not caused any damage to the uterine wall. You need to stay away from stressful situations, eat well and take plenty of rest.”

The doctor spoke to her slowly and deliberately as if he was speaking a parable to a child. But Maggie knew exactly what he was talking about. She knew that preeclampsia could lead to placental abruption and eventually a miscarriage or premature birth.

Not only had she read everything she could gather, she would have majored in the sciences had she been able to make it to University.

“Thank you Doctor,” she smiled. “Can I leave now?”

“We want to keep you for a few more hours, to make sure the blood pressure is under

control.”

Before he left the room, he checked her pulse, promising to send the nurse to do another check of her blood pressure in a few minutes. She knew they’d be checking every hour until they were pleased with the results.

Trying not to worry, she closed her eyes and took deep breaths. This was her first time being absent from work, and she hoped Mr. Myles would understand. Most of all, she hoped Chase would understand the promise she could not keep.

CHAPTER 20

Spending twenty-four hours under hospital supervision was not Maggie's idea of resting. It took every ounce of will not to get up and leave. Had it not been for the safety of the baby she would certainly have returned home.

It was with relief that she signed the release papers before calling a cab to come get her. As soon as she stepped from the taxi in front of her apartment, Henry greeted her. He helped her to her apartment and offered to get her anything she needed.

"Did you say anything to Mr. McMillan about this?" she asked as he opened the apartment door for her.

"No, Miss Maggie. I haven't said anything."

"Then please keep this between us. I know he told you to take care of me. Promise you won't say anything to him," she said, turning to face him.

"I won't say anything."

"Thank you."

With that out of the way, she closed the door and headed straight to the sofa. Once she was settled, she dialed her uncle's number in New York. The phone rang out without answer.

She hadn't spoken with him in several months, therefore she worried if perhaps his number had changed. She dialed again and this time he picked up after just two rings.

"Hello?" he sounded out of breath.

"Uncle Tony, it's me, Maggie."

"Oh God, I was worried about you. Are you okay?"

It was a strange thing. With all that happened, Maggie never once felt like crying until now. The stinging of her eyes and the sudden moisture welling in them felt weird. She sniffled, stifling the emotions causing her to want to bawl her eyes out.

“Baby girl are you alright?” her uncle asked, his concern palpable.

“Ah,” she cleared her throat. “Well---I---I want to come stay with you.”

“Of course! You know I asked you to come live with me in New York, but you were set on taking care of yourself.”

The uneven drumming of her heart was distracting as she tried to find words to tell her uncle her condition. No, she wouldn't mention Chase, though he would perhaps demand to know who the father of the baby was.

“Maggie, are you in some kind of trouble?” He asked. His question brought a lump to her throat while tears brimmed her eyes. “Maggie, what's the matter?”

“I'm pregnant,” she cried, the sobs escaping her, tears flooding her cheeks. “I'm pregnant!”

“What? I thought you were in college by now. Oh baby girl,” Tony sighed. “Don't you worry. You get on the next plane... wait, you can fly can't you?”

Maggie nodded before she realized that her uncle could not see. “Y-yes,” she answered through a sob.

“Then you get on the next plane. Wait, I'll send you the ticket. I'm going to buy it as soon as we're done talking.”

“Uncle Tony, I have to give notice at work and my things...,” she was saying but he cut her off.

“You don't worry about your things. You just get here. How far along are you?”

“Six months.”

“That's it, you don't need to be working,” Tony stressed. “I promised your mom, God rest her soul, I promised to take care of you and I intend to keep that promise.”

Going to New York was what she'd decided, but it seemed to be moving faster than she anticipated. She wasn't ready. She wanted to see Chase before she left. On the other hand, she'd perhaps weaken about her decision if she saw him. He would no doubt know something was off and she could not be able to hide it for long. No, she couldn't risk seeing him.

Leaving at the earliest was best, given that he was likely to come around soon. In addition, another visit from Chase's father was what she feared the most. This was the best

option.

“Okay Uncle, I leave as soon as possible, but you don’t have to send me the ticket.” She wiped her eyes, trying to steady her voice.

“Nonsense. My business is doing well. You need to save your money for college like you planned. Now come, let me take care of my favorite niece.”

Her mood lifted and she gave a light laugh. “I am your only niece.”

It was strange that Tony never asked about the baby’s father. She braced herself to tell him everything when she reached NYC. Tony promised to call her when he’d made the necessary arrangements for her travel. On that note, the conversation ended, allowing Maggie to call in to work, giving her immediate notice.

Mr. Myles was disappointed, but after hearing about her hospitalization, he understood. He told her that he figured something might have happened for her to miss work without notice. She did not tell him where she was going, though he promised to drop her paycheck off.

The rest of the day, she spent lying on the sofa. The doctor had given her a prescription, which she asked Henry to fill for her. It was embarrassing having no one to help her but the apartment manager. Her only friend Shequana had moved state and they had lost contact with each other.

By Wednesday, she began packing the baby’s items for when Tony came to gather her belongings. This was the best decision. What if she’d taken ill in the middle of the night alone? Who would help her? Moving to New York was the right choice.

As she taped the box with the baby items in the bedroom, her cell phone rang. Dragging herself to the living room where it lay on the table was a task. By the time she got there, she was tired. Was this how all pregnant women felt? She wondered. She didn’t think this was normal.

“Hello?” she picked up the cell, answering it.

“Maggie?” it was Mr. Myles. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. What can I do for you?”

“A man came here a few minutes ago, looking for you,” he told her.

Without him having to say it, she knew who it was. “Did you tell him I was sick or that I quit?” she asked, hoping he’d say he didn’t. She held her breath while waiting for his answer.

“No, of course not. I don’t know him. I just thought I’d let you know,” he replied as she exhaled.

“Thanks Mr. Myles, I appreciate you telling me.”

There was a pause before he asked, “You aren’t in trouble are you?”

“No, no, I’m fine. I know who the man was. I’ll take care of it.”

“Okay,” he said. “Take care of yourself.”

She’d just hung up the phone and laid it on the table when the knock at the door had her heart galloping. Momentarily, she thought of not answering but Mr. Henry knew she was home and he’d certainly tell Chase she was inside. She tottered to the door, the weariness slowing her down.

He was standing there with carnations and a grocery bag. “Hi,” he greeted in his usual cheerful tone.

“Hi Chase,” she returned, staring into his electric eyes.

“Move aside, let me set these down. Oh, here,” he handed her the flowers, brushing passed her into the living room.

“Chase, what are you doing here?”

He sauntered into the kitchen and started plucking items from the grocery bag, opening and closing cupboards.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“What are you doing? Groceries, flowers... I don’t understand.”

He came back into the room, dropping himself into the sofa and propping his feet on the coffee table. “Taking care of you and the baby like I promised.”

What was she to do? She glowered at him, but he’d closed his eyes. Should she just tell him to leave? How was she to handle him lounging in her sofa like that? But as she stared at him her frustration evaporated.

She was leaving in a few days and might never see him again. Her eyes stung at the

thought and she had to fight to keep the tears from coming. A dull ache presented in her chest as she realized this might be the last time she saw him.

Make the most of it Maggie, a voice in her head said. Obeying it, she eased herself onto the sofa and sidled up next to him. He murmured as his arm snaked around her shoulder. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heart drumming loudly against his rib.

With a contented sigh she relaxed, knowing this was the last chance she would have to be close to him. She wished it wasn't so, that she could stay this way forever. However, reality was a different matter.

* * *

It was Friday morning when Maggie boarded the plane for New York City. As she climbed the steps of the plane, she paused, turning to take one last look at the city in which she grew up. She didn't know if she'd ever return. She was leaving, not only for herself, but also for her child.

Tony promised to return to take care of her things before her lease ended. He'd put them in storage, those things which she did not immediately need.

With a crack in her voice and ache in her heart she whispered, "Goodbye Chase."

With a last look, a sob and heavy heart, Maggie left Florida behind. She could only hope things were different. As they were, she was learning to live with her new life. She was to be a mother and that took precedence above all, above her feelings as a woman.

The plane lifted at around eight fifteen and was at MacArthur airport by two in the afternoon. As she disembarked, the change in temperature drove home the fact that she was no longer in Sunny Florida. From the chill of early December, she pulled her warm winter coat about her. She had anticipated this and brought along a scarf, which she wrapped around her neck.

The difference was in not only temperature, but sounds and smells. It didn't take long for her to miss home. Seeing her uncle waving at her from inside the lounge made some of her anxiety disappear. He was her only family, except for her brother. She was grateful he'd agreed to have her stay with him.

“My little baby girl!” Tony greeted, pulling her into a warm embrace.

“Hi Uncle Tony. I’m so glad to see you.”

The five feet nine inch frame was lean and muscular. The last time she saw him he had a potbelly, now that was gone. She liked the new look he had. His neatly cropped curly charcoal hair and warm olive skin, made him look younger than his forty-two years.

“Are you lifting weights?” she asked with a giggle.

“Yeah, I had a health scare a while back and started exercising,” he replied, his tone sober. “I haven’t been able to stop.”

“That’s great,” she said, her smile fading as she recalled Chase’s defined pecs. She’d ran her hands on his plains, feeling his muscles ripple beneath her fingers. Her heart leaped at the memory as heat traveled up her neck, burning her cheeks.

“Let’s go,” Tony said, grabbing her bags. “I have a lady friend who lives with me, but don’t worry, she won’t bother you.”

“New girlfriend?”

“Yeah, it seems that way.” He suddenly became serious. “We’ll see.”

That didn’t sound like he was happy about it, but she said nothing. Perhaps there was trouble in paradise. In any case, she didn’t want to get in the way.

“Business is doing well. I opened a hardware store, so don’t you worry about anything,” he continued.

A cab was waiting at the entrance. He saw her seated before skipping around to the other side, slipping into the passenger seat beside her.

“Have you closed the mechanic shop?” she was curious about the business he’d operated since she was a little girl.

“No, it’s going great too. Did I tell you I moved to Brentwood?”

“No, aren’t we going to Brooklyn? How come you have the same number?”

“I used the same service, so they transferred the number.”

“Did you move the mechanic shop to Brentwood? Where is the store?”

“Well, the mechanic shop is still in Brooklyn. I left someone in charge. The hardware is in

Brentwood.”

It was good catching up. Tony told her that Brentwood was quieter, with less crime, a nice place to raise a family. His apartment was not far from the airport and they were there in less than forty-five minutes.

The building was an old brownstone home, each floor transformed into single family units. Tony was in the middle on the third floor with three bedrooms and two baths. The space was large and comfortable, making her feel right at home.

* * *

The door stood ajar. Chase pushed it open to see Henry standing in Maggie’s tiny living room. A line formed between his brows as the apartment manager turned to look at him.

“What’s the matter? Where’s Maggie?” he inquired.

“She’s gone Mr. Chase sir, she’s gone.”

A flicker crossed his face, his eyes narrowing. “What do you mean, she’s gone?”

Henry stepped towards him, reaching out his hand. “She handed in her key and left a note that someone would come and take care of her stuff.”

Chase was never one to fear, until now. He feared losing Maggie, for good. The tightness of the chest, the feeling of dread that assailed him, combined with the uneven beating of his heart weakened him. A feeling as though he was punched in the stomach almost knocked him off his feet.

“She promised,” he muttered. “She promised!” his voice lifted.

“Sir, maybe she left because she was sick.” Henry’s words jolted him.

He raised his eyes to the man’s mocha ones. “When was that?”

“She was admitted on Tuesday and came home the following day,” the manager told him.

“But I came to see her Wednesday and she said nothing. When did she leave?” his voice was gruff.

Henry fidgeted, his eyes widened at Chase’s tone. “She left yesterday morning,” he

replied in a quiet voice. “But...,” he paused.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Chase stepped to Henry, who winced and made a step back.

“Your father may have something to do with it,” Henry replied, visibly flinching.

“What has my father to do with this?”

“He was here to see her.”

Chase scowled. “When?”

“On Monday.”

His jaw tightened as anger curled in his belly. He saw Maggie on Monday, but because of a meeting, he had to send her home in a cab. Herman must have been waiting for her when she got home.

Without another word, he strode from the room. He was in his Ferrari in less than a minute, driving away with a screech. This was getting too much. What did his father say to her? He must have threatened her. Where was she?

Speeding across town, Chase was back at the office in less than fifteen minutes. He passed through the lobby without a word, ignoring Lana.

“Sir, I have messages....” Her voice trailed off when he rushed passed her.

Once in the elevator he pressed the button to his father’s floor. Herman should be in office, perhaps pleased with himself that he managed to scare off Maggie.

When Tiffany saw him enter, her face brightened as she reached for the intercom to inform his father of his arrival.

“Leave it, I’ll just go in,” he instructed, trying to keep his voice tame.

Herman’s chair whipped around as Chase pushed the door. The man was leaning back in his Lay-Z Boy chair with an unlit cigar between his fingers.

On the wall behind him was a large portrait of himself. Under that was a sidebar flanked by wall to ceiling shelves. His larger than life mahogany desk swallowed most of the space in the large office. To the right was the glass wall overlooking the Tampa Bay.

“Padron Serie, the best in the world.” Herman held up his hand, showing off the tightly

wrapped tobacco. Then passing it under his nose, he gave a sniff.

Chase stormed to the desk, placed both palms down and leaned menacingly forward. Herman's eyes widened, staring at him bewildered.

“What did you say to her?” he grated through clenched teeth.

“Who?”

Chase raised one hand bringing it back down heavily on the desk. The desk shook. “Maggie, I know you saw her on Monday,” he snarled.

“Oh.”

“Answer me Father, what did you say to her?”

Herman rose from his chair, moving to the window. “I haven't said anything.”

Chase straightened, his tone gritty, “Don't lie to me!”

Herman spun, his expression blank. “What are you accusing me of now?”

“She's gone, and I know you had something to do with it.” He was losing his patience.

A flicker crossed the older man's face before he broke into a broad smile. “Smart girl. Now, maybe we can get back to business and your marriage to Brittany.”

Herman was getting on his last nerve and Chase wasn't sure how much more of his father's attitude he could take. They glared at each other for a minute before anyone spoke.

“I'm not marrying Brittany, you need to get that clear.”

Herman's eyes became as hard as nails. His jaw clenched and his fists folded at his sides. He strode forward, facing Chase squarely.

“She's just like any other girl. Your precious nigger took my money and ran.”

Chase was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I asked how much and she gave me a price. Didn't even bat an eye. She's smart, I give her that,” Herman added, turning away, going back to the window. “Now maybe you'll come to your senses and forget she exists.”

“I don't believe you, Father.”

“It's evident isn't it? She has disappeared. That was our agreement, that she would leave

the state and she has. I just never expected it so soon. In any case, it's all for the best."

The dreaded sensation from earlier resurfaced. The feeling that a spear was wedged in his chest presented itself. He could feel his heart bleeding from the wound. Not knowing what to think, he staggered from Herman's office as his father drove home what he feared.

"She left you," Herman laughed. "She took the money and left."

She left you, echoed through his mind as he rode the elevator back to his floor.

"Hey, you look pale. What happened?" George's voice pierced the smog.

Stepping from the elevator, he halted as everything around him swirled. Everything seemed hazy and almost foreign. Lurching through the outer office, he barely managed to push his own door, stumbling to his desk.

"Chase, are you alright?"

He took his chair, slumping into it, his shoulders sagging. "She's gone," he moaned.

"Who's gone?" George was puzzled.

The pain wedge in his chest was making it difficult to breathe. "Maggie, she's gone."

George pulled up the chair in front of the desk, puckering his forehead. "What do you mean, she's gone?"

Chase's haunting stare came back at George, his voice distant. "Father paid her off."

"Talk to me with sense. I'm unable to understand what you're babbling about," George scolded.

Chase rose, folding his fist and pounding the desk with it. "She's gone, what's in that not to understand?" his voice rose a few decibels as the contents of the desk rattled.

"I'm sure you must be mistaken."

"No," he shook his head. "She's gone. Father paid her off."

"Come on Chase, do you really think Maggie would take your father's money?"

He looked sharply at his freckle-faced friend. "I don't know what to believe. She's gone, handed in her apartment keys and then I find out my father saw her on Monday."

"Tell me everything." George sat, leaning his elbow on the edge of the desk. "Tell me from the beginning."

Raking a jerky hand through his hair, Chase paced the office. “I met her outside work on Monday, but you know I had that meeting,” he paused the pacing. “She was okay, promising to give our relationship a chance.”

“Then what?” George urged.

“I sent her home in a cab. I saw her Wednesday afternoon and she seemed fine. But Henry said she was hospitalized on Tuesday morning,” he said, his voice cracked.

“What, is she okay?”

He turned to George, “How should I know? She’s gone, man!” his pacing started again.

“Calm down Chase. You’ve dealt with more dire situations than this. You’ve negotiated mega-billion dollar deals, but I’ve never seen you lose your shit.”

“I’ve never felt this damn helpless!” He moved to the window and looked out over the city, wondering where she was and why she left him. Was it the money? She must have been desperate to take it, but why couldn’t she trust him. His heart ached thinking that she might not be the girl he thought she was.

George stood and walked up behind him, patting him on the shoulder. “Now tell me the rest, calmly.”

“I went there to see her as today is her day off. Henry was there with her keys. He told me she handed in her notice. Jeez, my father went to see her on Monday, after I sent her home.”

“Didn’t you say that she was admitted to hospital on Tuesday morning?” George asked.

The question made Chase’s head jerk around to stare into George’s titanium pools. A glimmer crossed his face before twisting painfully.

“Yes, do you think my father said something?” he asked.

George nodded. “You know your father and the way he’s been acting. I wouldn’t put it past him. Now tell me, how do you know Maggie took the money?”

“Father told me himself,” he replied, his voice thick. “He said he offered her money to leave and she took it.”

“I don’t believe she did. I’ve worked with Maggie longer than you’ve known her. She’s not the type of girl to do something like that,” George assured him.

“You think?”

“I know so,” George grabbed Chase’s shoulder and spun him around to face him. “Look, you’re the one who claims to love her. You should be the one to trust her.”

That statement punched him in the gut. Red stained his cheeks with embarrassment. George was right. He should trust Maggie. With all that Herman has been trying to do, it was no surprise that he may have lied to him.

“Listen,” George said. “Let me check on something and get back to you. Don’t move a muscle and *don’t* confront your father.”

“Where are you going?”

George squeezed his shoulder. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll be back in a bit.”

After George left, the events of the day ran through his mind, from the time he went to the apartment until this moment. If there was one thing he’d learned during all his years of doing business, it was never to take anything at face value.

He’d allowed a moment’s weakness to cloud his judgment so much that he was unable to think clearly. As he looked out over the city, his eyes riveted to the sun glistening off the neighboring buildings. He allowed everything around him to slow, letting in fresh thoughts.

“She wouldn’t do that.”

His mind began to work, thinking of all the places Maggie could be. She did not move into a new apartment. One possibility existed, that she relocated to New York to her uncle. He was contemplating making a few calls to track her down when George returned.

“Listen,” he said, coming through, closing the door with a snap. “You know Ben and I come from the same neighborhood, right? I recommended him as your father’s chauffeur.”

“Yeah, so?”

“She didn’t take the money. He offered her, but she gave him the boot. Ben said he was angry when he returned to the car, shouting expletives and calling her names,” George relayed before his face broke into a grin. “He said she shut the door in his face.”

A muscle twitched in Chase’s jaw as he gritted his teeth. Herman lied to him, that controlling bastard of a father! How could he do that? Did he hate Maggie that much?

He closed his eyes, calming himself. “I think I know where she is,” he said, tone quiet.

“New York,” George said.

“Yes,” his eyes flicked to his friend. “You know that she has an uncle there?”

“Hmm.”

“Then you’ve got to help me. I already bought a condo. I’m going to see her.”

“That’s the best thing to do. She needs you now more than ever.”

CHAPTER 21

“You follow him, you hear me. And don’t mess this up!” Herman shouted, then slammed the phone into its cradle. “Incompetent idiots,” he muttered.

So the gold-digger has ran away, good. He couldn’t help but admire the poor thing. She was pretty, only good for one thing, but never good enough for his son. He could see why Chase was smitten, but as long as he was alive, he would never have a one of those people in his family.

Nevertheless, his son could not be trusted. Having him followed was best, so that he could know what he was planning. The damn idiot didn’t seem convinced that the girl took the money and left.

The phone rang, annoying Herman. He grabbed it after the first toll. “Yes,” he barked into the receiver.

“Sir, he went into the travel office, Infinity Travels.”

“When he comes out, you go in there and find out where he’s going, and don’t mess up.”

“Y-y-yes Sir,” the man on the line stuttered.

Herman settled the instrument back in its place. “I should have hired a proper PI. These boys, they have no sense at all.”

He was beginning to question the decision to have one of Ben’s friends follow Chase. Money wasn’t the issue, but the boy said he needed work and he needed someone immediately.

Before the boy even called back, Herman knew exactly what Chase was doing. He’d done his homework already and knew that Maggie had an uncle in New York. Chase bought a condominium in New York. Putting all the pieces together yielded one result. Chase was headed to New York.

With that settle in his mind, he made a call he thought to be of utmost importance to his plans. He tapped his fingers on the surface of the desk as he waited with impatience for his party to pick up.

“Hello?” a crisp, curt voice answered.

“You took long enough to answer,” he grunted.

The person on the phone snickered. “I’m a busy girl you know.”

“Brittany, my dear, stop fooling around and get serious with Chase. Have you finalized your plans?”

“Herman,” her voice was weary. “Chase made it clear he has no intention of going through with this. What can I do?”

“I’m sending you to New York.”

“New York?”

“Yes, it’s important that you do exactly as I say. Clear your schedule for the next few days.”

Her voice perked up. “Okay, tell me more.”

* * *

Meanwhile across town...

Chase made his travel arrangements. He could have used the company jet, but that would alert his father. No, he needed to do this without the man knowing his movements.

He knew someone was following him. The poor fellow had no idea how to trail someone undetected. Herman must have been desperate to use an inexperienced youth to do his dirty work.

He peered through the glass panel of the travel agency. Across the street, the young man leaned against his motorcycle, looking anxiously at the door of the agent’s office.

“When that boy comes in here, tell him I booked a ticket to Texas,” he instructed the red head at the desk, pulling out two one-hundred dollar bills.

“Okay.” The girl smiled, snatching the money from his fingers. “I will tell him that. Here’s the receipt and itinerary for your chartered flight.”

She stretched her hand out with the sheet of paper. On it was his schedule for the following afternoon. Though he wanted to jump on the next plane, he had to wrap up business as usual. If he disappeared immediately, his father would thwart his plans. He must be careful if he wanted to outwit him.

“Good,” he grinned, taking the paper. “I know I can trust you not to reveal client information.”

“I would never do that Mr. Chase, you are one of our best clients, a handsome one at that.” The girl batted her eyes at him and he returned a seductive smile.

On second thoughts, he pulled out another three hundred dollars and handed them to her. “Buy yourself something nice, you deserve it.”

“Wow, thanks!” her cheeks turned pink as she grasped the money.

That was his insurance in case his father decided to come to the agency himself. He had no doubt that he would if necessary. The man was a control freak who relished making people squirm and didn't trust people below his status.

A shudder ran through him at the thought that the man he loved, the one who sired him, could be so hateful. He should have seen the signs long ago, there were many hints of it. The company, though employing many people of color, never promoted anyone to executive office until Chase came onboard.

He recalled the first time he promoted a person of color how his father found every excuse in the book to rescind it. He thought the man was only being careful. However, there were other instances, which hinted at his father's bigotry.

One such occasion was Herman's refusal to attend the wedding of a friend who married into another race. His father's remark was that his friend was no longer pure. He been young and hadn't made much of the remark then, but he now understood exactly what it meant.

Never once had he seen his father invite someone of another race into his home for a function, except the Japanese. Yes, they could work there, but that was about all they could do.

As he pulled his Ferrari away from the building, the young man raised himself from the motorcycle and trotted to the office. Chase chuckled to himself, steering the vehicle towards his penthouse apartment.

Once there, he packed a few things, made a call to George to make sure everything was

ready in NYC. After taking a shower, he was ready to go back to the office. He had one more meeting for the afternoon and then he would leave in the morning.

“Maggie, you’re not getting away from me this easily,” he declared as he picked up his briefcase. “I’ll protect you from my father. You wait and see.”

* * *

“Texas? Are you sure?” Herman’s tone registered his mistrust.

“Yes, that’s what the woman in the agency said. I had to give her the eighty bucks I had for her to tell me. She said she was breaking the rules, but I looked like a nice guy.”

“Okay, I’ll send my driver to pay you. Just wait in the parking lot.”

Rising from his chair, he walked to the portrait on the wall, gripping the right frame and pulling. There was a snap as the right side of the frame released from a catch, the left side held to the wall by hinges.

Behind it was a safe buried in the wall. Herman pressed his thumb on a small rectangular piece of glass on the front. There was a suction sound and then the door gave way.

Inside was a shelf wedged in the center and on it were piles of paper money. The floor of the safe held important business and personal documents, bonds and stocks. From the top, he plucked a sealed stack of hundred dollar bills, then from that he counted one thousand dollars, after which he closed the safe.

A knock at the door, then the chauffeur pushed his head through. Herman beckoned him inside. He pushed the money in an enveloped and handed it to Ben.

“Give it to your friend and tell him to stay close by, I may need him again.”

“Yes, Sir,” Ben replied with a slight bow.

Herman waved him away, then took his seat. Pulling out the top right hand draw of his desk, he picked up a bottle of cognac, withdrew a glass from the same drawer and poured himself a drink.

Taking a swig, he closed his eyes, savoring the smooth rich taste of the amber liquid. This was it, patiently waiting for his plans to fall into place. Once that girl broke off completely

with Chase he would be too distraught to do anything else but what was expected of him. He smiled as he waited for Brittany's call.

CHAPTER 22

The morning sun peeped through the slit between the curtains, casting a yellow glow in the small bedroom of the third floor apartment. The morning was different than it was in Florida. December in New York was cold. It hadn't started snowing yet, but the apartment had to be heated.

Maggie opened her eyes, stretching as she turned to get off the bed. She felt rested, better than she'd felt in a few weeks. The first thing that popped into her head was how Chase was taking her absence. He'd been on her mind since Friday when she arrived at her uncle's.

The sound of voices made her ears pricked up and she gently placed her feet on the rug before the bed. She stood, gripping her back. If nothing else, stiffness greeted her each day, of that she could always count on.

"Shut the hell up!" she heard her uncle's voice clearly through the bedroom wall.

"Don't tell me to shut up. What I'm saying is the truth. She's just here to sponge off of you," Latoya his girlfriend chimed in.

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"When will you start paying rent or contributing?" he asked, his voice rough.

"I'm your woman, you said it didn't matter if I worked or not," her voice lowered.

"And now I'm telling you, my niece doesn't need to do anything. She's like my own daughter. You got that?"

There was a moment of silence before Latoya answered. "Yes, I got it."

Maggie felt out of place, a feeling of discomfort wormed its way into her chest. Should she have left her home? It was not her intention of getting between Tony and his girlfriend. The urge to return to Florida was strong. On the other hand, she thought perhaps getting her own place was best, except she would need more money than what she had saved. No one was going to hire a six and a half months pregnant woman.

She stayed in her room until she was certain the tension passed. After half hour, she slipped out to the bathroom in the passage. The other bathroom belonged to the master bedroom.

On occasion, according to Tony, he would board out the extra rooms. Now that she was there, he was thinking of fixing up the third room for the baby. He seemed more excited about the coming of the baby than she was. This new argument was making her reconsider agreeing with his plans. If this was causing problems it was better she keep the baby in her room until she was able to live on her own.

She was done showering and dressed when someone knocked her door. She ambled to open it to a hot stare from Latoya.

“There’s a woman here to see you.”

“Thanks,” she replied, wondering who it was.

Maggie waddled to the living room, her back still a little stiff from before. Sitting on the edge of the sofa was a woman with platinum blond hair, steel gray eyes and thin lips. She was very pretty, like a well-polished doll. Maggie could tell right away that she was one of those who believed that money could buy anything. The woman reminded her of Chase’s father.

“Can I help you?” she asked, moving slowly into the room.

At her voice the woman stood, her eyes betraying her disdain. “Maggie?” she asked, her voice toneless.

“Yes, who are you?”

She made a step towards Maggie, outstretching one hand. “Brittany, Chase’s fiancé.”

Maggie’s heart stopped at the sound of Chase’s name. She raised her hand haltingly, taking Brittany’s. The coldness of the other woman’s touch sent chills through her.

Is Chase marrying this woman? Maggie studied her cold eyes, her thin smile, and felt the coldness in her touch. She was the opposite of Chase, who was warm and passionate.

“What can I do for you?” Maggie asked, wondering why Brittany was there.

“Can I talk to you woman to woman?” Brittany asked, gripping her hand, pulling her down to the sofa.

Maggie could tell that she was trying to soften her voice and to appear pleasant. She

nodded, urging Brittany to continue.

“Please leave Chase alone,” she said, her eyes moistened. Maggie opened her mouth to speak, but the woman held up her hand. “Please let me finish. He’s going to come after you, but you have to send him away, for your sake, our sake.” At that moment, she rested her hand on her belly, looking down at her abdomen adoringly. “You get my drift, right?”

Was this woman carrying Chase’s child? That’s what she implied, wasn’t it? These questions ran through Maggie’s mind. The conversation began to make sense. Brittany, or whatever her name was, she was pleading with her to leave Chase alone so they could marry and raise *their* child.

Her eyes dropped to Brittany’s hand resting on her tummy. On her finger was a bauble the size of a planet set on platinum. That must cost a fortune, she thought. Maggie stared at the diamond, knowing that she could never wear something so ghastly. Still, it wreaked of wealth. The kind of wealth that Chase was accustomed to. This was Chase’s ideal partner, a woman from his own world, she concluded.

Brittany’s pregnancy wasn’t showing, so she must be less than three or four months. All this time while Chase was running after her, convincing her to be a family, he was sleeping with someone else. She had actually believed him when he said he wanted to be with her and her baby.

The blood drained from Maggie’s face as she assimilated what was before her. Her chest constricted, preventing her from breathing properly. A wave of dizziness assailed her and she closed her eyes. She was sinking, she could feel herself go under, as a sharp pain shot through her abdomen. She was in a mist, a dark mist that swirled around her.

“What’s happening?” she heard Brittany’s voice. “Someone help!”

“Maggie!” her Uncle Tony’s disembodied voice was the last she heard before she succumbed to blackness.

Not certain how long she was out, she opened her eyes to stare into the chocolate pools of Tony’s. His face was twisted with worry as he stared down at her.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his voice brittle.

“Where is Brittany?”

“I sent her away,” he replied some heat coming into his voice. “These people are the

devil. I told her to stay away from you. Should I take you to the hospital?"

"No, I'm feeling better."

He didn't seem convinced. "Did you take your medicine?"

"No, I haven't yet eaten."

Tony reached his hand down to help her rise. She was lying on the sofa, the same one she'd been sitting on having a conversation with Brittany. It was strange, Chase never made it seem he was engaged, and how did this woman find her? Not even Chase knew where she was. Did he?

As she allowed her uncle to lead her to the kitchen, the uneasy feeling that something wasn't right beset her. She wasn't sure what it was, but Brittany's visit was fishy, unless Chase himself sent her. Then all the promises he made were lies. Would he really do that? How did this woman know where she was... who she was? Was she really pregnant?

Maggie was from the ghetto, she'd seen many things, heard many stories of women doing things to trap men. If this woman was really Chase's fiancé, why would she be here? Why was she so insecure that she'd left Florida to tell her she was carrying Chase's child? Like a fool, she'd believed her for a moment.

"Here," he said, seating her at the table, rushing to get pancakes and eggs. "Eat it all. I think I hear the door."

She did hear the knock and wondered if perhaps Brittany had returned. She braced herself, ready to face the woman, but instead heard male voices.

Famished, she got down into her pancakes, trying to ignore the voices in the living room. However, as she was half way through, one voice made her fork stuck mid-air.

"I'm not leaving without seeing Maggie," the voice said. She was certain it was Chase.

"Then maybe you should have kept your fiancé in check mister," Tony returned heatedly.

"What fiancé? I don't have a fiancé."

"That's beside the point; you need to control your women."

"Let me talk to her, please," Chase begged.

Maggie's heart ached. She wanted to run to him, but the memory of his father and Brittany stopped her. Those people were dangerous and each time she confronted either of

them, she fell ill. If it were only her, she could handle it. But she had the baby to think about.

She wanted to trust Chase, to believe he had nothing to do with Brittany's visit, but that only meant his father was behind it. If Herman was behind it then she could not trust what he wouldn't do to keep Chase away.

"Maggie isn't well," Tony said.

The voices lowered and she strained to hear what they were saying, giving up after a few minutes of not hearing a word. They talked for about half hour while she tried to complete her meal. Her appetite was lost anyway and she pushed the plate away.

When Tony returned to the kitchen, she'd had her medicine and was ready to lie down. The morning seemed to have put a strain on her and she was very tired.

"You don't look too good. I think you should go to the hospital," her uncle said, his concern showing.

"I'll just lie down a while," she said, moseying to the door, then she paused. "Be gentle with him, he didn't do it."

Tony looked at her with a frown. "You're talking about that guy?"

"Yeah. He didn't send that girl... he wouldn't."

"Yeah, I believe you. He told me about his father. But Maggie, that family is bad news."

"I know, but Chase is a good guy."

He chuckled. "You love him don't you?"

Was this love? She'd always believed that to love someone you had to know them a long time, live with them, know their bad habits and good traits. She didn't know Chase well enough. What she did know was that whatever bad habits he had wouldn't matter to her anyway. The only reason she was breaking her promise to him was that she didn't want to cause him ruin, as his father suggested.

"I suppose," she said quietly. "Maybe."

"What do you want to do?" he asked. When he noticed her puzzled look, he added, "We can fight his old man if you want. If you want to stay away from him that's fine too. It's up to you."

Confused, she left her uncle and return to her room. She hadn't given him an answer but

the temptation to be with Chase was beginning to outgrow the fear of his father. The way Tony had spoken to her just then, gave her some amount of courage. Nevertheless, Herman gave her the willies, and she believed he would ruin his own son to get what he wanted.

“No,” she whispered. “I can’t live with that on my conscience. I can’t.”

CHAPTER 23

When the chartered plane touched down at La Guardia airport, his first mission was to see Maggie. He'd arranged a hired a car and driver to take him to the address Mike gave him in Brentwood.

Maggie's uncle was irate that Britany had upset her and he forbade him to see her as well. It was with diplomacy that he'd gotten the man to calm down and listen to his side. By the time he left, he believed he'd got through to him.

When he returned to West Broadway NYC, it was late afternoon. The luxury sixth floor condominium overlooked the bustling city below. The cool thing about this building was the panoramic view it offered with floor to ceiling glass walls all around. Of course, he wasn't too keen that Maggie would like it.

He pulled the key card from his briefcase and swiped the lock. A red light appeared, indicating 'no open'. He repeated and a buzzing sound alerted him that something was wrong.

"That's strange," he muttered, taking out the cellphone to dial the agent's number.

"Summit Real Estate, Emma speaking," came the greeting as the line opened.

Clearing his throat he replied, "This is Chase McMillan. I'm trying to get into the condo I own and the key doesn't work."

"One moment, let me check on that for you," she said. "Chase McMillan you said?"

"Yes."

"One moment." she put him on hold for a few minutes. "Sir?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Your company made some adjustments to the contract, didn't they inform you?"

"What? This condo was not purchased by my company."

She was silent for a few seconds before returning an answer. "Aren't you Chase McMillan, son of Herman McMillan?"

“Yes, what has that got to do with it?”

“Well Sir, he renegotiated the terms of the purchase and now the company owns the entire building. I’m sorry, there’s nothing we can do. The original deposit was returned to your personal account. MacCorp paid in full for all the condominiums on that building. I’m so sorry.”

“So the locks were changed?”

“Yes, there was a request to change all the locks on the building sir.”

“Damn it!” He slapped his palm on the door, setting off an alarm.

“Sir you cannot do that. I’ll call security and let them know it was an accident, but you can’t hit the door.”

“Yeah,” he grunted into the cell before hanging up.

The security patrol passed him on the way out as he was making another call. The phone rang out, much to his chagrin. He called George in an attempt to make other plans, the man picked up on the first ring.

“How is she?” George sounded anxious.

Ignoring the question, he gave him strict instructions. “I need you to contact the Prince Ban Abbar Ali about the sale of the yacht. And George,” he paused as his friend acknowledge he was listening. “Whatever you do, keep it under wraps.”

“Did something happen?” George inquired.

“I’ll fill you in when I get back tonight. You contact the prince immediately and have him transfer the funds to an offshore account.”

“Done,” George replied.

After talking to George, he called the pilot for the chartered plane. He should be in a hotel somewhere, awaiting his call in the event of an emergency. He’d book the small plane for return, hoping to have spent a few days sorting things out with Maggie before returning to organize things back home.

“Mr. Chase, sorry I missed the call. I was in the shower,” the pilot answered.

“I’m returning to Tampa right away. I’ll be at the Airport in thirty five minutes.”

“Yes sir.”

There was one more call he needed to make, but Chase waited until he was on the plane to do that. He needed to make sure there was little interruption during the conversation. In the meantime, while on the way to the section of the airport that housed the private planes, he called his PI friend Mike. Mike should have had something for him by now.

When he failed to reach him, he left a message. Within ten minutes, his message was returned. Mike would meet him at the penthouse with the information he requested.

With all that settled, Chase impatiently waited to get on the plane. He arrived eight minutes before the pilot, in which time he took to send some emails and wrap up a few loose ends business deals.

He was waiting in the small private area near the hanger when the lanky pilot with messy brown hair appeared. The man gave him an apologetic look. “Sorry sir, the cab was very slow.”

“Let’s go,” he replied, his mood sour.

The man trotted ahead to the small aircraft. It was nothing like the company jet, but it did the job. The interior was comfortable with a small bar, a bed behind a screen and the lavatory in case he needed to do his ‘business’ while in the air.

When he was comfortably settled, he made the most important call off the day, a call that would change his life forever. With a jerk in his hand, he picked up the cell phone and swiped the smooth surface, watching as the light came on the screen. A moment’s hesitation was all it took for him to doubt, but the idea that he could do what he knew in his heart was right, erased the doubt, so he dialed.

George picked up immediately. “Chase, where are you?”

“I’m on the plane. Listen, I need you to organize a press briefing for first thing in the morning at The Royal Plane’s Hotel. I don’t care how you do it, just get it done.”

“Okay. So what should I tell them this meeting is for?”

“Tell them I have an important statement to make, but you have to reiterate how important it is that they keep this under wraps until the meeting ends.”

He gave George a few more instructions. With that settled, he leaned against the backrest

of the soft seat. His body was flying back to Florida, but his heart remained in New York. When next he returned to Brentwood, Maggie would be assured of his intentions. There would be no turning back. What he was about to do was irreversible, but he knew in his heart of hearts, that it was right.

CHAPTER 24

There was a hushed tone in the room as Chase stood on the podium in the hotel pressroom. His heart beat unevenly as he looked over the faces looking expectantly at him. No one asked any questions as he'd given specific instructions that he needed to make his statement before answering any questions fielded at him.

Clearing his throat, he started, "Good morning. First, I want to apologize for having you here this early." He chuckled, looking at his watch. It was barely minutes after six. In any case, he'd provided coffee and sandwiches.

"There are a few issues I want cleared. The first is that Brittany and I won't be getting married. Contrary to what my father told you, we were never engaged," his voice was loud and clear.

There were a few whispers and surprised expressions. He ignored it and continued, "As a matter of fact, the woman I love and will marry is with child, so am no longer available," on this note, he laughed. "So to all you lovely ladies, I'm sorry."

The atmosphere lightened as he placed his hand on his heart, giving them a look of mock remorse. The mood quickly sobered when he straightened and set his face in a hard line.

"But that task, being with the one I love has not been easy, since there are forces out to destroy her. You see, she's not wealthy nor is she white."

Someone gasped, while another asked, "Is she African American?"

"Yes, she is an African American, but I prefer the term *American*."

"Is your father against this relationship because she is not of the same race?" another reporter asked.

They asked the right question, but he was inclined to protecting the company from racial scrutiny. "No comment."

"Why are you telling us about this? Isn't this a family matter?" A male voice shouted.

"I recall it was just a short time ago that you were interested in my personal life, what you

now call a family matter,” he said, silencing the one who asked. “Now, if you’ll allow me to finish.”

“Chase, one more question before you continue,” a female stood, addressing him. “Are you accusing your father of being a bigot?”

The moment arrived that Chase must make a decision. If he answered this question truthfully, he would not only hurt his father, but the business as well.

“I’m not accusing my father of anything. Now, let’s move on. As of today, I will no longer be CEO of McMillan Corporation.”

A noise swept across the room as everyone started speaking at the same time. Chase held his hand up, asking them to settle down. It took about five minutes before the room was quiet again.

“Now, I’ll take questions, by the raising of the hand.”

The first question thrown at him was why he was leaving the company. His reply was that he was moving to New York and wished to pursue other avenues. Asked if his decision to move to New York had to do with his father’s disapproval of his relationship, he told them his decision was to make a family with the woman he loved. Then a question had his blood boiling over.

“Then Chase, how do you know this girl isn’t with you for your money?”

“That question does not dignify an answer,” was his cutting reply.

After answering most of the questions, he had George take over. He’d gone there with the file from Mike to expose what he’d found out about the D’Mornes, but at the last minute changed his mind. He also planned to get back at his father, but when the reporter asked him if his father was a bigot, he was ashamed to admit it.

This was not the press meeting he had intended, but he hoped the outcome would be in his favor, that his father would back off.

When the meeting ended, it was seven thirty. Chase returned to the penthouse while he waited for the call from his father he knew was forthcoming. Within the hour, he knew that either the man would be receiving calls from the press or he’d hear the news about the conference Chase held at the hotel.

While he waited, he made himself coffee, sipping it as he lounged on his sofa in the spacious living quarters. Going up against Herman McMillan was dangerous. But, it was a road he needed to take, or spend his entire life under his subjection.

At exactly seven minutes after the hour of eight, Chase's cell phone rang. He let it ring out. When it rang again, he allowed it to ring three times before answering.

In a cheerful tone he greeted, "Hello Father."

"What the hell are you doing?" Herman thundered.

"Calm down Father, and tell me what you're referring to," he said, leaning back in his sofa.

"Don't patronize me. I don't know what game you're playing but I tell you, don't mess with me Chase."

"Father," he said, his tone calm. "I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Okay, I understand that you don't want to marry Brittany, but what's this I hear about you quitting the company?"

"Oh that," Chase feigned ignorance. "That's what this is about?"

Herman was breathing heavily that Chase could almost feel his hot breath coming through the cellphone. He grinned, imagining his father's red face and blazing eyes.

"Stop with your nonsense and retract your statement from the media, you do it this instant!" Herman ordered.

"Sorry Father, that won't be happening, I'm moving to New York to be with Maggie and my child."

"Chase, are you out of your mind?"

"Maybe, but it feels right," he said, his tone sober. "I won't be coming back to the company Father."

"Is that your final decision?" Herman's tone registered his resignation. "Is it?"

"Yes Father, I won't change my mind."

There was a pause as Chase listened to his father sighing heavily before he replied. "If you insist on pursuing this girl, you are no longer my son."

“I’m sorry to hear that Father,” Chase replied, his voice thick. “Then I guess this is goodbye.”

* * *

Irene strolled into the room as Herman slammed the portable handset on the side table of the drawing room. His face had turned purple and his breathing labored. She’d been standing at the door listening to him while he conversed with their son.

“How could you Herman, how could you say that to your own son?” she asked, her voice smooth as silk.

Jerking his head up, he looked sharply at her, his features distorted. “Don’t start with me Irene. You coddle that boy too damn much.”

She made a few more steps to him, her back rigid and her chin high. “Don’t you raise your voice at me.”

“Then talk some sense into your son. Do you know what he’s doing? Do you even know that he’s ruining his life for a... a... a...” his voice was strangled.

“Her name is Maggie.”

“She’s trapped our son and you stand there calling her name like it was the most normal thing in the world,” his voice dripped with incredulity as he threw his hands up.

Irene clenched her jaw, amber flecks appearing in her hazel depths. “Trapped him, the way you trapped me?”

“What are you talking about?” he raised a brow.

A sardonic laugh emitted from her. “Didn’t you claim to love me, but we both know you only married me for my family’s wealth.”

Herman turned pink. “That’s nonsense!”

“Nonsense you say? We both know I was not your first choice. I was only your most profitable one,” she flung at him.

His eyes widened and his mouth gaped. “What are you saying?”

“I know why you married me, I’ve known all along.” He stared at her, his mouth shut. She continued, “Now listen to me, you will not subject our son to this kind of life!”

“What’s wrong with our marriage?” Herman was perplexed.

Irene chortled. “What’s wrong with our marriage? Do I need to spell it out?”

He held his hand out to her. “Enlighten me please. You seem to know something I don’t.”

“When you marry as a business deal, it leaves you empty. After thirty years, it’s empty!”

“What are you saying Irene, aren’t we happy?”

She chuckled. “Are you happy?” He didn’t answer. “I know what makes my husband happy and it certainly isn’t his wife. Is that the life you want for your son?”

“Stop talking in riddles.”

“I know about the affairs, Herman,” she held his gaze as a light flickered in his eyes. “All of them.”

He turned away, walking to the mantle. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Stop lying to me Herman, I’m no fool.”

“I did no such thing. Moreover, I didn’t ruin my life the way Chase is. Just know this Irene, if he follows that girl to New York, I will cut him off!”

“You will do no such thing,” she replied, her tone icy.

“There’s nothing you can do to stop it.”

“That company you so love, is not yours. You seem to be forgetting that.”

Herman turned to face his wife, his face twisting, “Your father handed me the company thirty five years ago, have you forgotten?”

She glided up to him, until she was inches away. In a quiet tone she replied, “I know about the clause, Herman.”

His eyes widened and glinted. “What clause?” he asked.

Irene knowing about the clause his father-in-law put in the contract thirty-five years ago, surprised him. The only way she could act on that clause was if she got her hands on the original documents. That he would make sure never to happen.

“I know you’re feigning ignorance, but know this. You hurt Chase and you have me to contend with,” she added.

“He’s done for Irene.”

“We’ll see, Herman.”

A sound at the drawing room door caused him to raise his head. Standing there was the butler and at his feet was a suitcase.

Irene turned, instructing the man, “Take it to the car, Jives.”

Herman’s brows furrowed. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll be back in a few days. When I get back we finish our discussion.”

CHAPTER 25

Tony was at the hardware store and Latoya was out with friends. It was a beautiful mid-morning in Brentwood. The sun was out, even though the air was crisp. Maggie went out for a stroll. It was a few days after Chase's visit. Deep in her heart, she hoped he would return, but he didn't. She buried the disappointment, as she knew eventually he'd forget about her and move on.

When she returned to the Brownstone, there was an elegantly dressed woman in a beige suite on the front steps. Her blond hair, neatly swept up on the head, gleamed in the morning sun. A whiff of expensive perfume wafted up to Maggie as she took the steps one at a time. She gripped the handrail, pulling up herself, stopping on each step.

She was climbing the fourth of twelve when the woman, moving quickly, skipped down to her and gripped her shoulders. Maggie's head snapped up in surprise as her eyes made four with hazel ones.

"Who are you?" she inquired of the woman.

"Irene," the woman said. "Chase's mother."

Maggie's back stiffened, her smile fading. Reaching up, she gently pushed Irene's hand away.

"I can manage, thank you."

"Come, we need to talk inside," said Irene in a gentle manner, replacing the hand.

Maggie winced. The idea of another lecture on how she would ruin Chase's life was not something she could handle.

"Look Ma'am, your husband already made it clear to me...."

"Forget what my husband said. I'm not here on his behalf. Come, let's go inside. My feet are killing me."

Irene gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, assisting her inside. Her belly was huge, larger than she'd expected at almost seven months. She was also heavy around the mid-drift with

swollen legs and ankles. This made it difficult to move quickly or to climb the stairs.

They went the rest way in silence while Maggie pondered on Irene's visit. Her pulse had quickened, perhaps out of fear, in anticipation of what the woman wanted. She'd just about had enough of people interfering in her life now. As she neared the apartment door, she bolstered her courage. This was the last straw. No more would she allow these people to manipulate her.

"Here we are," she breathed, opening the door and standing aside to let Irene through.

When they were both inside, she offered her a seat and a drink. Irene opted for coffee. In the time it took to make the coffee, Maggie ran through her mind the many things she could say to Irene, should the subject come up of Chase's 'ruined life'. With her thoughts settled to return to the living room with two steaming mugs.

"It's decaf, if you don't mind," Maggie smiled as she handed the older woman the mug. "My uncle got rid of everything that wasn't good for the baby."

"Is there anything you need?" Irene's question threw her off.

The mug in her hand stopped in mid-air as she looked in surprise at the woman. Irene was looking at her expectantly. What that a trick question?

"I'm sorry?"

"Is there anything you need for yourself or the baby?" she asked once more. "I'm glad we met before the baby arrives," she added. "I see you're surprised."

"Well, your husband, he...." Her heart started doing backflips.

Was this woman real, or just a figment of her imagination? She blinked, to see if this was real. Irene was looking curiously at her and speaking again. Maggie liked the silky tone of her voice.

"He upset you didn't he? What did he say?"

She hesitated, not sure if she should say anything, but the woman was waiting patiently for her to speak. "He made it clear that I was no good for Chase."

"Is that why you ran away?"

"I didn't run away. The doctor said I needed to be near family."

"Maggie," Irene continued. "Chase, *wants* to be your family. Why are you pushing him

away?”

“Mrs. Mc...”

“Irene... it’s Irene.”

“I... well... I don’t want to ruin his life. He’s not used to the streets like us.”

Irene looked bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“His father, he said I’d ruin his life if we were together. Mrs. ... er... Irene, I don’t want to cause him trouble.”

“That’s nonsense! Forget what my husband said. Isn’t the love of my son enough?”

“Well...,” she began, then it hit her what Irene just said.

The woman continued, “I know the circumstances under which this happened, but I think you will grow to love my son with time, just give him a chance... huh?”

This was like a weird dream. Chase was all she could think about. She’d promise him to let them be a family and she broke that promise because of what Herman said. She thought about him all the time and wondered what it would have been like if things were different. Now, this was surreal to her.

CHAPTER 26

Freedom. A strange and unusual thing. Chase descended the steps of the commercial plane, a first in his life. He was doing many things for the first time and it was exhilarating. Following the instructions George provided, he kept his ID in one hand with travel bag in the other.

One week ago...

Chase hung up the phone after speaking with his father. Herman was incensed. Telling the media he was leaving the company drove his father up the wall.

The following morning he dressed, was ready to sort his accounts at the bank. He had coffee and toast, the only thing he knew to make and headed down to the parking garage. The spot where he left his car was empty.

Chase twisted his head around, trying to figure if he'd parked in another spot. This was the usual place he parked, all the other tenants knew that. He walked around for a minute when he noticed a paper sticking to the back wall.

Curious, he stepped closer. That's when he noticed his name. *"Chase, if you need your car, return to work at once and retract your statement to the media."*

"Ha, that's the way you want to play it father?" he addressed the wall.

That was the beginning of Chase's new life. By that afternoon, all his credit cards were cancelled, and his personal bank accounts frozen. After calling George, the man came within a few minutes to his rescue. George became his chauffeur and caretaker.

"Can he really do that?" George asked, referring to Herman having Chase's personal accounts frozen.

They were sitting in George's BMW in the exact spot his car was supposed to be. Having just eaten, for the first time, fast food from a famous fried chicken franchise, he was stuffed.

"He can. My father has many contacts all over the place. He's done business with these

people long before I was born.”

“But still, isn’t it unethical?”

He snickered. “That’s how the big boys roll. They wheel and deal and manipulate.”

George turned his head, eyeing him with brows knitted. “What’s next?”

“I don’t know. I want to get to New York, but am broke.”

“I can buy your ticket and put you up in a hotel for a while until we sort something. I should be getting the call from the bank in the Bahamas soon. The Prince said he would wire the money some time this week.”

“Get me the ticket, but no hotel. I need some cash though.”

That was a week ago. As Chase stepped from the plane and followed the throng towards the arrival gate, he recalled the moment George got the news about the transfer.

The man’s face had gone white as though he’d painted himself in chalk.

“What’s the matter?” he’d asked.

As per the new routine since he became a pauper, they were in George’s car going out to get some food. Even his phone service had been disconnected since it was on the company account. His penthouse was owned by Irene, that’s the only reason his father hadn’t found a way to throw him out. She’d given him the apartment as gift when he started with the company.

His mind came back to what George was saying.

“Your father,” the man’s voice squeaked. “He’s an evil bastard!”

“What has he done now?”

“The money!” George said. Chase looked with trepidation as his pale faced friend continued, “He intercepted it. He’s been keeping tabs on you the entire time.”

Chase crunched his teeth together, trying to still the rage building inside him.

“That’s two hundred and fifty million dollars! I don’t know how he did it but the money wired to your account has been transferred to Herman,” George bemoaned, his face getting whiter.

Chase’s tone was a low growl. “That yacht was purchased with my inheritance from my

grandfather. He has crossed the line.”

“Just tell me what to do. I’ll do anything... anything,” George said.

“Contact Mike and have him run a scan on my father. Tell him to be thorough, leave no stones unturned,” he instructed. “Now get me to New York. I need to see Maggie.”

“Sir!” he was brought back to the present by the customs officer. “May I have your ID?”

He hadn’t even noticed that he’d reached checkout. Never having flown commercial, he had to rely on all that George told him.

“What’s in the bag? Do you have anything to declare?”

“No, I have just clothes and personal effects in my bag,” he replied easily.

The man handed back his ID. “Enjoy your stay.”

Though he’d ridden in a cab before, he’d never had to get one himself, and never rode in one out of Florida. He found a few waiting in front of the MacArthur airport, all jostling to get passengers.

“You need a taxi?” one man, dark complexioned, with dreadlock asked.

“Brentwood,” he replied, getting in the back of the cab.

“Yes.”

From that moment, if Chase never knew before, he knew that his life was forever changed. He gave the cabbie the exact address, hoping that Maggie would listen to him for the last time. When they pulled up in front of the brownstone his heart started beating at an uneven pace.

“Wait for me,” he handed the driver a twenty-dollar bill. “Hold on to that.”

“Yes, Sir,” the man saluted. “I’ll keep the engine running.”

* * *

A knock at the front door interrupted Maggie’s meditation. Her uncle Tony had encouraged her to take a few minutes each day for this exercise. He said it would relax her and it did. Not able to sit crossed legged the way he’d done when teaching her, she sat on the sofa,

leaning back against the cushions.

The living room was twice the size of the one she lived in back in Temple Hall. In one corner was Tony's workstation, including desk files and a laptop. There was an electric fireplace. Over the fireplace was a mantle with photos of her when she was little, her mother and her uncle when they were kids and their grandparents. She'd also brought what photos she had and Tony put some of those up as well.

The knock came again. She sighed, trying to ignore it, but the person was insistent. She stood, waddled to the door and pulled it.

A gasp escaped her upon seeing Chase standing there with luggage at his feet.

"Honey, I'm home," he said, looking expectantly at her.

Like always, her heart gave a wild thud before it started its sprinting exercise.

"Chase?"

"I told you, I'm not giving up on us."

She didn't know what to do. Why did he have suitcases? They stood eyeing each other for a minute while many thoughts ran through her mind.

"I'm homeless Maggie, wont you let me in?"

"What?"

"I left home Maggie, and I have nowhere else to go. Will you let me in?"

Uncle Tony's voice sounded from inside. "Who is it Maggie?" he asked, coming up behind her. "You?"

"Hey Uncle Tony," Chase greeted.

"Maggie, step aside and let the man in," Tony said.

She turned to face her uncle, giving him a hard stare. He ignored her as Chase picked up his baggage and sauntered inside. She closed the door and turned looking at the father of her child. He was looking at her with those hooded eyes that made her stomach flutter.

"What's with the luggage?" Tony asked looking from Maggie to Chase.

"I left home, Sir," Chase replied, glancing at Tony. "My father took away the condo I bought for Maggie, he froze my accounts and even took my car."

Tony's eyes widened. "You bought my niece a condo?"

"Yeah, but it's only temporary. I'll get everything back soon."

"What if you don't," Maggie chimed in. "What happens if you never get anything back Chase?"

"Then I'll start fresh, with you," he said, meeting her gaze.

He seemed serious but Maggie wasn't certain he knew what it would be like being poor.

"I think you should return to your father and apologize," she said. "You have no idea what this life is like."

He moved towards her as Tony eyed them both. "Maggie, if you and my child can live this life, as you call it, why can't I? What's so special about me that I have to live *that* life and not this?"

She opened her mouth, but the words failed. What should she answer? Many people lost everything and lived on the streets. They survived, why couldn't he?

"I suppose you have a point," she said in a small voice.

"Then it's settled, you stay with us until you get on your feet," Tony said, picking up Chase's luggage.

"You mean that?" Chase's face enlivened.

"Of course," Tony replied.

"I have to go send the cab away," Chase smiled, rushing through the door.

As soon as Chase closed the door behind him, Maggie whirled to face her uncle. "What are you doing Uncle Tony?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, setting down the luggage he'd picked up.

"How could you ask him to stay here?" her voice had risen, not in anger but rather in fear.

How could she live with Chase? Seeing him every day, looking into those cobalt eyes, how could she? What if he wanted to be close, how would she resist him? She started pacing, her walk a little slow. She wrung her hands together as she moved back and forth while Tony's face broke into a wide grin.

"What's so funny?"

He laughed. “Look at you, I never thought my little Beanpole would be in love,” he said, amused.

“Shhh, don’t you call me that around him and who says I’m in love?”

“You, your actions, the way you’re now fretting.”

“I’m not in love... I’m not!”

“Me thinks Beanpole protests too much,” Tony chuckled as the door opened.

“Beanpole... who’s Beanpole?” Chase inquired, his eyes darting from one to the other as her eyes bulged and mouth gaped. “Ha, Maggie, yes, I see it now. She’s now *my* Beanpole.”

Tony beckoned to Chase to follow him while Maggie pouted, her eyes sending daggers at both men. *His Beanpole?* When did she become *his*? This wasn’t going to work, this living arrangement. How could Tony even suggest it?

It was then it occurred to her that Tony might have Chase stay in her room. With a shake of the head, she argued in her mind. No, he wouldn’t, would he?

Curious, she followed to see what they were doing. Voices reached her from the end of the hall. The door to the spare bedroom was ajar and she could hear them chatting like old friends.

Exhaling a long relieved breath, she went back to the living room, anxiously waiting for what would happen next. With Chase this close, she wasn’t sure how she would reign in her feelings. Every time he was near, her emotions ran away from her.

In the back of her mind was his father. Would the man give up now that he’d managed to alienate his son? Was Chase even telling the truth or was this a ploy to get close to her? She hadn’t checked the Florida news since coming to New York. Maybe it was time she did her own investigations and stop people from manipulating her.

While Chase and Tony chatted away, she took the time to do some research on her uncle’s laptop. Typing Chase’s name yielded more than one million results. She clicked the first one, reading the headline. ‘*Chase McMillan: The fallen playboy.*’

Reading several of the articles revealed many things she had not been privy to. She found out that he and his father had a falling out, though the article said it was only speculations, as none of them would confirm. However, the article that was written a week ago, a couple days after he’d visited, was the one that made her eyes bulge.

Chase McMillan, CEO of MacCorp has announced early this morning that he no longer will be with the company. According to the executive who took his family business into the twenty second century with innovations, he wants to pursue new ventures. He also told the press that he and Brittany D'Morne were never engaged, although they'd dated for four years. Mr. McMillan said he was to marry someone else, an African American woman, whose name he refuses to reveal. We believe she is out of state. He also implied that he was receiving opposition in this matter. Though he would not say, our sources reveal his father is against this marriage. Chase and his secret girlfriend are expecting a child.

Maggie sat transfixed to the seat. Her palms cupped her cheeks as she blinked, after reading the last article. Chase had been telling the truth about losing everything. Another article said he threw away his wealth for a woman. The article even speculated that perhaps there was no girlfriend and he had done something unethical why he was being punished.

“He’s not being punished you idiot,” she snapped at the unknown author of the article. “He’s doing it because...,” she paused.

Voices coming from the passage disturbed her musings. She snapped shut the laptop and rose. The men entered, their banter casual. Chase’s eyes searched the room until they rested on her. She rose and waddled to him. When she was a foot away, she stopped.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked. “Tell me now, once and for all.”

“I want to be with you and my baby,” he said. “I told you already.”

“That’s all?”

Chase puckered his brow. Maggie stared at him, waiting for the answer she needed to hear. After that, she’d decide what to do. He searched her face, then locked eyes with her. His face began to relax and he made a step, closing the space.

“There is one more thing,” he murmured.

She could hear Tony cleaning his throat and exiting the room. “What’s that?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“I love you,” he whispered, repeating it several times. “I love you Maggie.”

Pulling on some courage, she moved closer, until her belly was pressing into him. Reaching up, she cupped his face and pulled him close.

“Je promets,” she whispered. “I won’t back away this time.”

“You promise?” he asked and she nodded. “I’m trusting you with my heart,” he said, his voice sultry.

“I promise.”

CHAPTER 27

The decision was made. Maggie was keeping the promise she made to Chase. He'd left everything behind for her and now it was her turn to make sure he did not regret what he did.

After a week of living under the same roof, she was beginning to accept her new life. He certainly did not act as though he was missing his old one. He went to the store with Tony most days and when he was home, he waited on her. His attention was getting a bit much, like he was doing now as he insisted on rubbing her feet.

"Chase stop," she tried to pull her foot away, but he wouldn't let her.

"Stop complaining," he scolded gently. "Mother's coming today. I need you rested."

"Your mother is coming?"

"Hmm, she's getting us an apartment."

She yanked her foot away. His eyes raised to her and narrowed. "What's the matter?"

"I don't want your family getting involved. Your father..."

"Hold up," he stopped her. "My father is a different species altogether from my mother."

"I know, but..."

He cut her off again. "But, nothing. It's not a condo or anything expensive, just a small apartment for us, to start our family until we get on our feet."

"I don't know, Chase," she said, uncertain if accepting his mother's charity was okay.

She'd met Irene and the woman seemed warm, like her son. However, the memory of Chase's father was hard to push aside.

"Je promets," he said, reminding her of the last promise she made.

Her shoulders sagged and she relented. "Okay, je promets."

It was a week before Christmas. For the past week, she was sure that he would be able to fit in given his positive attitude about things. Now that he mentioned that his mother was buying them an apartment, she wasn't so sure.

Pushing her doubts from her mind, she concentrated on making the most of the foot rub. His hands were magic as he made her legs tingle from his gentle massage.

Her spa treatment was interrupted by the ringing of his cellphone. He gave her an apologetic look as he set her foot down and picked the cellular up from the coffee table.

“Hello?” he answered and then paused while he listened. “Are you sure? Really?” Chase turned his face to Maggie, gripping her hand. “You’re absolutely certain about this, right George?”

Maggie watched the expressions on his face move from wide-eyed shock to glee. He was still gripping her hand and staring into her eyes while speaking to George.

The conversation ended and he stood, letting go of her hand. When he threw back his head and howled, she stared at him with her mouth open.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

Coming to kneel at the sofa, he took her hand. “Maggie, my father returned what he stole from me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What did he steal from you?”

Setting himself back in the seat, he told her everything about his family and the business, the inheritance from his grandfather and how he came to own the yacht.

“You sold the yacht?” she asked, her brows raised.

“Yes, I was determined to take care of you and now I can,” he replied. “My mom threatened him and he released back the money to my account.”

“But Chase, I don’t feel good about this.”

“What’s not to feel good about? We can buy our own home now and I can take care of you.”

Maggie still was uncertain about what he was saying. Anything to do with his wealth gave her pause. In addition, his father was involved.

“Honey, this isn’t my father’s money. That company doesn’t even belong to him.”

“What?” she didn’t believe it. “I thought he built that company?”

“No, he married my mother and when my grandparents died, he changed the name.”

“Oh.” She fell silent.

“So stop worrying, that money was my inheritance and he had no control over that. Now, let’s be happy Maggie.”

After a moment to think, she caved in. “Okay, let’s be happy.”

* * *

Things happened quickly when you had money. Maggie learned that in one week, a house could be bought, decorated and occupied. That dream home of the yard, the picket fence and the small house was what Chase bought in Brentwood.

“Merry Christmas!” George greeted a guest at the door.

Maggie’s back was killing her and she took to the sofa as commanded by the lord of the manor. Christmas Eve dinner was ready and they’d invited a few people. However, as she watched the guests filter in, she started to panic. Where would so many people sit? They were supposed to have Irene, George, Andrea, Tony and Latoya.

She looked at the strange faces filtering in and noted they were men in suits with their wives. Counting the heads, she made out about twenty, while others were still coming in.

“Wait, the food isn’t enough,” she screamed. “Stop, there are too many people!”

Maggie! Maggie? Someone shook her. Her eyes flew open. She had fallen asleep on the sofa. Chase was looking down at her and behind him were Irene, George and her uncle.

“Merry Christmas!” They chorused.

Her eyes darted around, counting the heads. Relief washed over her when she saw that only the guests she’d invited had arrived. As Chase helped her to her feet, the doorbell rang.

“I wonder who that is,” George said. “I’ll get it.”

A moment later he shouted, “Carolers!”

She smiled as she thought how silly her dream was and how relieved she was that no more guests would be arriving. She had all the people she could manage right there.

Maggie looked around the living room of her new home. The Christmas tree she and

Chase decorated twinkled with the various color lights. The stockings over the fireplace were three; one for daddy, mommy and baby.

This had been her dream, not in the order it happened. This is what life gave her, but a shadow seemed to lurk nearby. She knew the battle wasn't over, nonetheless this Christmas, she would push it from her mind and concentrate on making her family happy.

“Merry Christmas everyone,” she said. “Merry Christmas!”

BOOK 2

CHAPTER 28

Originally the prologue

Maggie groaned. Her eyes flicked open as she let out a loud moan, enough that she knew Chase could hear it from his study. She started counting *one ... two ... three*. Chase hurried down the hall and was in the living room within four seconds. This was the third time she'd done it and it worked like a charm every time.

“What’s the matter?” His breathing was labored and his eyes wide. “Is it time?”

“Time for what?”

She tried to suppress a giggle as she rubbed her protruding nine-month belly. Her due date was close and this was a part of her drill. She wanted to make sure that Chase was ready when the time came. She must admit she was having more fun than he was.

“You need to stop scaring me like that,” he protested.

She raised herself from where she laid and sat upright, leaning against the sofa cushions. “Hey, I’m not doing anything ... ouch!” Her belly bottom contracted tightly.

“I’m not buying it,” he chuckled, returning to the passage.

“Ouch ... Oh, God!” she breathed, her voice barely a whisper.

Chase disappeared down the passage as her muscles relaxed. Closing her eyes, she let out a relieved breath. This time, her breathing stopped after another contraction assaulted her. The constriction in the lower abdomen lasted a little longer and was more ferocious.

“Ouch!” she yelped as the pain assailed her.

After a few seconds, the pain left as swiftly as it arrived and she scrambled to her feet. As soon as she made a step, she felt warm fluid running down her legs.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “This is it ... right?”

Inhaling and exhaling, she tried to keep calm. Another wave of pain slashed across her abdomen. This time it lasted longer than the last. She could feel the heaviness in her uterus, and knew it was time.

“Chase!” she shrieked. “Chase!”

“I’m not buying it this time, Maggie. You’ve fooled me enough,” he yelled from his study. She could hear the amusement in his voice.

She gritted her teeth against the pain as another hit her in the same spot as the last.

“You get in here this instant!” she screamed.

He was inside the living room within a few seconds. “If this is one of . . .,” his voice trailed off.

“Get the bag and start the car. My water broke!”

“What’s going on?” His mother’s voice came from upstairs. Irene’s eyes widened. “Maggie? Oh my God, it’s time.” Irene was down the stairs within seconds. “I’ll get a towel.”

For the many times they’d practiced for when the time arrived, everything was supposed to go smoothly. When Chase made a purposeful step forward, she closed her eyes, trying to relax through the pain. However, someone mumbling incoherently made Maggie’s eyes shoot open.

Chase’s legs moved one in front of the other, then stopped and turned, walking back a few paces. He did this several times while Maggie perused him.

“Chase,” her voice was a low growl through her teeth. “What are you doing?”

He stopped and stared a moment. “Yes, I’ll call the ambulance.”

“CHASE!” He whirled to face her. “The bag — in the coat closet — now!”

Making a mad dash, he yanked the closet door open and gripped the handle of the bag. Seemingly in charge of the situation, he rushed to the front door and was trotting to the car parked out front when he returned.

“Keys, where are my keys?”

“Stop horsing around, Chase,” Maggie said, her voice rising. “They’re on the mantle.”

Breathe Maggie, breathe, she told herself. Chase returned a minute later, stared down at the floor at her feet and went ashen. He stood staring down at the floor for what seem like ages. Maggie was losing her patience and wanted to slap him upside the head.

“Chase!” His head snapped up at Irene’s voice.

“Huh?”

“Start the car,” Irene instructed.

“Yes, mother,” he replied in a low tone.

Maggie gritted her teeth and grimaced through another onslaught of pain. “AAAHHH!” She screamed. Short shallow breaths followed as she tried to relax, while Chase stared at her with worry lines and wide eyes.

“Chase, go start the car!” Irene instructed once more.

He nodded and went off through the front door. Maggie gripped her belly and tried to breathe through the pain. She tried to remember the breathing technique, but the pain and discomfort was getting worse.

“Let’s ... *breathe* ... go ... *breathe*,” she managed.

Irene wrapped the large towel around her and assisted her out. It was difficult walking to the car as every step felt like she was going to bust her gut. Finally, after some shoving and pulling, she managed to get into the car. They were off.

“Are you in pain?” Chase asked as they drove off.

“No, I’m just enjoying the car ride ... no pain ... no ... pa ... Ahhhh! Hoo-hoo-hoo.”

“That was a silly question,” Irene chimed in. “Of course she’s in pain. She’s having a baby!”

Chase’s hand shook as he gripped the steering wheel. He’d practiced this many times, but when the time came, he panicked. Thank God his mother had arrived a few days ago to assist them. She came specifically to be there when Maggie gave birth.

The staff at County General was efficient. They quickly took charge of the situation and got Maggie into the delivery area.

“Aren’t you going in with her?” Irene asked as they took Maggie on the gurney and went through the double doors.

“I don’t know if I can do this mother. I saw her water on the floor and I swear I would pass out.”

“Go to her, you can do this.”

With a deep breath, he nodded, then trotted to the door as it was about to close, and slipped through behind the gurney. When they entered the birthing area, he was given scrubs to put on, and asked to clean his hands. His heart thudded loudly and his palms were sweaty, but he was determined to be strong for Maggie and the baby.

In the lounge, Irene paced the floor. This was a proud moment for her, and she could not love Maggie any more if she was her own daughter. This was a turning point in her family from generations of racial segregation.

She, too, grew up in a family where blacks were servants and nothing else. However, after attending college and meeting some extraordinary people of color, her views changed. She even had a crush on a black man while in college. He was her calculus professor, and he was brilliant.

* * *

For the last hour, he'd been chewing on antacids, but they were useless. Herman picked up the bottle from his desk and hurled it across the room. The bottle hit the wall with a clack and the contents spilled on the floor.

This was it, he thought, seething inside at the idea. That nigger was about to give birth to his son's child ... his grandchild. He shook his head and hardened himself against the thought. Why the hell did Irene have to call him? He was having a good day until she called with the so-called good news that the girl was about to give birth. It wasn't good at all. It was the worst news a white man could receive, that they were now the grandfather of a nigger baby.

What would his friends think? How would he face his peers after all this talk about making America '*great again*'? Of course, everyone knew what that meant. Niggers needed to know their place, and that place was not breeding with his kind.

He doubled his fist and brought it down hard on the desk. It shook as a photo of him and Irene toppled over. The sound of the frame hitting the surface of the desk irritated him further.

His chest tightened when he stood. A drink would certainly make him feel better. As he pushed the chair back, the feeling of constriction spread over his chest. The left side of his neck felt stiff as another more ferocious tightening in his chest cut his air supply. He wheezed

as he tried to breathe through the pain

Herman gasped for air, but the more he endeavored to breathe the tighter the muscles became. Then he felt as though his entire breath was leaving as a pain shot through the center of his chest and his world started to collapse.

He was falling to the floor, gripping his chest and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He reached a hand out to grip the desk, but he heard himself hit the chair, then the floor, with a loud thud. Something else fell with a clangor on the floor as his entire body stiffened.

CHAPTER 29

Six months later ...

Chase fixed his gaze upon her figure as she walked into the bedroom. Hair still damp from her shower with a towel wrapped around her, she detected the way the color of his electric blue eyes deepened. Maggie smiled, as she knew what he was thinking.

“Stop it!” she scolded.

“What am I doing?” he grinned, donning his black silk shirt. “Movies or dancing ... what’s it gonna be?”

“I want to dance.”

“Good, then wear this.”

He withdrew a box from the closet and tossed it on the bed. The Saks Fifth Avenue logo was emblazoned on the lid. Maggie clutched the top and dragged it off. In it was a sexy little black dress.

“What’s this?”

“Andrea helped me pick it out, she said every woman should have one,” he replied.

“Why do you always do this?”

Chase cocked a brow. “Do what?”

“Buy me clothes. I’m perfectly capable of shopping, you know.”

“Yeah, right,” he snickered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, picking the dress from the box and pulling it over her head. It fitted her slender curves perfectly.

“Just that every time you say you go shopping, you bring back baby clothes and stuff for me. What was the last thing you bought yourself, huh? Answer that.”

“Well, I didn’t see anything I liked.”

“Andrea said you liked that dress when you both went shopping the other day.”

Maggie made a mental note to have it out with George’s girlfriend when she saw her next. She was also Chase’s secretary and was now officially Maggie’s best friend. Andrea was also babysitting Maggie and Chase’s six-month-old son Colton while they went out on a rare date.

Excitement at the prospects of spending the entire evening alone made her nervous. This was special. Within the last six months, they’d hardly had time to themselves, what with the baby and Chase starting his own company.

The plan was set. For his first deal, he was acquiring shares in a new software company on the third largest Hawaii island, Oahu. With his business acumen and the engineer’s technical skills, they made for a great team. It was a perfect match, and she was proud of him.

After he left MacCorp, he’d been restless for a while until the baby came. Now that Colton was getting older, he thought it was time to do something worthwhile. Not that he needed to work. With one hundred million dollars invested in stocks, one-fifty million sitting in the bank, he could retire. Nevertheless, Chase had the art of dealing in his blood, and she was happy to support any decision he made.

She brushed her brown waves until they shone, then plastered scented oil on her skin, giving it luminosity. Her only makeup was wine red lipstick and translucent powder. Her thick lashes gave her a natural mascara and her deep honey complexion was smooth and silky.

Fingering the thin gold chain around her neck, she lamented that she had lost her mother’s wedding ring. Usually, she wore the ring on the chain to keep her mother close to her heart, but the ring disappeared without a trace. She pushed aside her sorrow and finished getting ready by dabbing her favorite Ellen Tracy cologne behind her ears.

When she turned around, Chase was staring at her with that gleam she’d come to know. Heat settled in her belly as their eyes met. It never ceased to amaze her at the electricity that flowed between them.

“If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t ever leave.”

He trotted over, coming to stand close that she could feel his heat. “I don’t mind. Not like dancing is more enjoyable than what we’d be doing here,” he murmured in his sultry voice.

His hand reached up to cup her chin as he brought her lips close to his. With heart fluttering, she parted her lips for his kiss, but he withdrew with an amused grin.

“Let’s go,” he murmured.

“You wicked man,” she pouted.

Thirty minutes later, at Club Euphoria ...

Maggie perched her pert derriere on one of the stools while Chase looked around the club and tapped his foot to the metal music. The atmosphere was electric and she felt energized. They were at the bar waiting for a table to clear.

It was their first date in two months, and Chase insisted that they have a night out before he left on his business trip to Hawaii. As they were about to order, his cellphone buzzed.

“Ah, I knew I should have left it,” he lamented.

“Answer it. It may be from your associate.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. As I’m leaving tomorrow, Denzel Craig may be confirming our plans. I’ll be right back.”

He left the counter and walked to the entrance of the club where there was less noise. Maggie surveyed his muscular arms printed through his shirt and the way his thighs bulged in his pants. Irritated that he aroused her before they left and hadn’t even finished the kiss, she looked away from his retreating figure.

The music was addicting and she was tempted to start dancing without Chase. She tapped her feet and snapped her fingers to the beat while she waited for his return.

“What’s a pretty little thing like you doing all by your lonesome?” a voice growled in her ear.

Hot breath fanned her cheek. The stench of stale alcohol burned her nose. She cringed and eyeballed the culprit from the corner of her eye. The man, a big burly fellow leaned in close — too close for comfort.

“You’re in my personal space. Mind stepping back a foot or two?” was her response.

“I thought you’d like some company, pretty lady,” he said, ignoring her request to step back.

“Look, I am neither lonesome nor alone. So, would you mind stepping away?”

“Come on. All I wanna do is buy you a drink, you don’t have to be so mean,” he insisted.

Behind the shelves of the bar was a mirror in which she observed the fellow. Around six feet, he had dark chocolate complexion which was almost a match to his tight brown muscle T-shirt.

“I told you, I’m not alone, so step away.”

He glanced from her to the other patrons at the bar, then back. “I don’t see you with anybody,” he observed.

She was beginning to become irritated. “You know what, you stay, and I’ll go.”

Sliding from the stool, she stood to her feet and started walking away when he grabbed her arm. Turning, she brought her other hand around and flattened her palm on his cheek. His eyes widened and his grip on her arm tightened.

“You just made a mistake, you little bi...!”

His open palm came up and was about to land on her face when a hand caught it mid-air.

“What the ***?”

“You’re messing with the wrong woman,” Chase growled, his face dark.

“Who the hell are you?” the man barked. He hadn’t let go of her arm.

Chase stepped close to his face, giving him a menacing stare. They were about the same height. “I’m her man. Now let go of her arm before I break yours.”

“Are you threatening me, buddy?”

“Call it what you will, just let the lady go.”

“And what if I don’t?” the fellow taunted.

Chase stepped closer — close enough that there was hardly any space between them.

“Then you and I have a problem.”

The man looked from one to the other as though contemplating whether it was worth the trouble. After some moments of stare down between him and Chase, he shrugged. The hand dropped and Maggie rubbed the spot where his fingers bit into her flesh.

“Now apologize to my woman,” Chase ordered.

The guy started walking away, scoffing at the request. Chase reached out to grab his arm, but Maggie stopped him.

“Let him go.”

“No one messes with my girl and gets away with it,” he said.

“Let this one go. We came here to enjoy ourselves, not get into fights.”

She moved close to him and started moving to the beat of the current song. He relaxed and started rocking as well. Winding her arms around his neck, she pressed her lips to his.

“What’s that for?”

“For being my hero.”

With brows knitted severely, he looked past her shoulders. “What are you looking at?” he snarled.

Maggie turned to see a fellow looking in their direction. “Chase, what are you doing?”

“I don’t want anyone looking at you.”

“We’re at the club. Guys are bound to look at me.”

“I know, but I still don’t like it.”

She kissed him again and this time, he pulled her close, taking her mouth completely. Ripples of excitement coursed through her as she pressed into him. Remembering they were in public, she pulled away.

“I don’t want to go,” he murmured against her lips.

She could feel his response to their closeness pressing into her pelvis. Her stomach quivered with the anticipation of what would come later.

“This deal is too important for you not to go,” she replied, caressing his face.

He sighed. “I know, and I’m pretty excited, but when you kiss me like that ...,” he grinned with a wink. “Okay. You know where my important documents are in the office safe, right? In case you need cash, ask George; he controls that.”

“Yada yada ... you tell me this every time you go on a business trip, as if you never plan on coming back.”

Chase brushed his lips against her cheeks. “How could I not want to come back to you?”

But, sweetheart, life is full of accidents. You never know what might happen.”

CHAPTER 30

Who would have thought that it would take being a mother to a six-month-old baby to become a gymnast? Being born and raised in the ghetto was one thing, it taught you street smarts, but raising a hell-fire infant was a different matter.

Colton almost overturned the stroller to get to his father. It was a bad decision taking him with her, but seeing Chase off at the airport had become a ritual for the three of them each time he traveled.

“Easy now, big fellow,” she said, both she and George catching the stroller and righting it.

He was strapped in, but his gyrating and fussing, wanting to reach over the edge, almost caused an accident. Chase was through the exit leading to the plane. She could no longer see him, but apparently, Colton didn’t care. He knew where his father had gone and was making no bones about wanting to go there.

The baby let out a long yowl now that Chase disappeared. Maggie had to take him from his seat and rock him, while mumbling soothing words.

A dull ache lingered in her chest as the plane took off. She tried to remind herself that he would be back in less than two weeks, and that this deal was important to his new business.

This deal meant independence for him. After spending all his adult life working in the family business beside his father, this was that break he needed. It was also a way to prove to himself he could make it on his own. He was on his way to seal the deal with the owner, a recent college graduate seeking investors. He would own controlling shares, while the young man would still be in control of software development. His role was to make the business a success as CEO.

Maggie was proud of Chase, and wanted this to go well, but every time he boarded a plane, she panicked. He’d gone to Oahu on three other occasions to meet with the man, and every time she felt the same unease. A small voice in the back of her mind kept telling her that Chase was not coming back.

After his outburst, Colton inhaled a shuddering breath, his cheeks stained with his tears.

She wiped his face with a moist towelette as he gazed up into her eyes. His bright electric blue eyes were a match to his father's. Maggie's heart did a double take as they stared up at her.

"Come on," George urged. "The plane is gone, Maggie."

"I know. I just get this weird feeling every time he goes away."

George chuckled. "And he always comes back, doesn't he? Chase has nowhere else to go, Maggie. It's time you put aside those doubts."

"I don't doubt Chase. I know he loves me ... it's just my gut."

"Maybe it could be that you're hungry."

"Very funny."

Reluctant and with faltering steps, she followed George out to the parking lot. On occasion, she found herself glancing back at the exit. As she secured Colton in the car seat, Chase's face flashed before her. It was amazing how much she missed him already.

On their way back to the house, Maggie struggled to push aside her worrying and concentrated on what she needed to take care of during the rest of the day. She had nine hours in which to occupy her time before Chase called her.

"When is your brother coming?" George's question broke through her thoughts.

A smile came to her lips at the thought that Tyler was free at last. Almost three years ago, he was sentenced to spend eight years in prison for robbing a store. However, new evidence recorded on camera phone, showed that he was nowhere near the scene of the robbery.

"I'm not sure. His letter said he'll call as soon as he can make it. I hope he's not planning on taking revenge on the ones who put him there."

George glanced at her through his rearview mirror as she was sitting beside the baby. She never let him ride alone in the back. Moreover, the way he'd been acting all morning, he'd certainly protest if she wasn't beside him.

"Does he know the people who pointed him out as the perpetrator?"

"The store owner called his name among the others. The new evidence shows that he wasn't even near the store at the time," she told him.

"If he was nowhere near the store, how did he end up going to prison?"

“Admittedly, Tyler and the other boys were friends. They always hung out together, so it was easy for the owner who we knew well, to assume he was in the lot.”

“That’s rough.”

“I just wish to God he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“If he’s like you, he won’t.”

She snickered. “He’s nothing like me, and that’s why I worry.”

Within the space of twenty minutes, George was pulling into the driveway. The baby was sleeping and she carefully removed the child seat. She turned once to wave to George who was on his way to the office. He honked as he always did when leaving, and she waited until the vehicle disappeared down the street before going inside.

George was Chase’s second in command and was instrumental in sourcing the current investment. He was more than just a friend; he was no less than a brother to Chase.

He’d followed Chase to New York when he came after her. They were high school friends and later went to college together. From then, they were inseparable. George was also the one who employed her as a waitress on the Chasmac Chase’s yacht. The memory of the boat brought a smile to her face, as that’s where she met Chase.

Colton squirmed in his sleep, causing her to hurry her steps. She was up the stairs and putting him in his crib within a few minutes. She stood, watching him for some time, her heart swelling with joy that she could create something so perfect ... well, at least when he was asleep.

CHAPTER 3 1

The day started out with her wrestling with Colton to take his bath. By the time he was clean, she looked like a wet rat. He'd made such huge splashes that she was certain to have swallowed a gallon of his bath water, sprinkled with a dose of urine.

At six months, she was a wreck. By eleven o'clock, she was almost crying, as her half-filled mug of coffee stood cold on the kitchen counter. She spent the morning running after him. On his hands and knees, he moved faster than Usain Bolt.

It was around two in the afternoon when he finally decided he'd had enough. He'd hugged his stuffed lion and fallen asleep on the floor. By the time she laid him down in his crib, the telephone rang. The nearest phone was in her bedroom across the hall. She waited a few seconds, hovering and silently praying that he'd stay asleep. He sucked on his pacifier and opened his eyes.

When he saw her, he gurgled, but as soon as she turned to leave the room, he let out a wail, dislodging his sucking instrument. Maggie turned back to the crib and gently patted him, replacing the pacifier. While the phone continued ringing, she waited until Colton relaxed, obviously falling asleep before she moved off again.

It stopped ringing before she left his room. However, while on her way to the living room, it began ringing again. This time she reached it before it woke Colton. She picked up the extension in the living room.

“Hello?”

“Sis, is that you?”

The man's voice on the end of the line was unmistakable. “Tyler?” she squeaked.

“Yes,” he quietly replied.

She swallowed a lump that rose in her throat as her eyes stung and watered. Tyler and their uncle Tony were the last ties to their parents. The tears that rolled down her cheeks were both a mixture of happiness and sadness. Her heart swelled at the thought of seeing her brother after almost three years.

“When are you coming? You have the address, right?”

There was a small pause before he replied. “Well, I’m kinda at the front door.”

“What?”

“I’m outside,” he drawled. “I didn’t wanna just ring the doorbell, you know. I don’t want you faint’n on me,” he laughed.

“My God!” she squealed.

She dropped the phone on the side table in the living room and ran to the front door. With trembling hands, she opened the door. There he was, a strapping six feet of muscles and ...

“What the hell happened to you!” she shrieked, coming to a halt.

Her brother’s neck and right arm were covered in tattoos, and his head was shaven clean. His brown eyes danced as they saw her, and he stood with his arms open wide, waiting to embrace her. Maggie looked him over, her mouth agape.

“It’s still me, your little brother, Tyler. Aren’t you gonna give me a hug?”

Too happy to let his new look matter, she ran into his open arms and allowed him to envelop her in a bear hug. He held her tightly and she clung to his neck.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” she cried, choking back tears. “I missed you.”

* * *

She couldn’t believe that her brother spent almost thirty months behind bars, and that for a crime he did not commit. He’d changed a lot from the lanky youth he used to be. He’d grown muscular and taller. The harsh prison conditions reflected in his eyes.

This was the following day after he showed up. They’d talked a lot about his case and how he was freed. Someone anonymous brought the evidence forward. In any case, it proved his innocence, and he was released two weeks ago. Maggie was worried that he’d take revenge on the store owner for turning him in falsely.

“I don’t want you getting into trouble,” she told him, while they sat in the living room.

Colton had taken forever to settle down after a morning of throwing things off the coffee

table, being stuck under the side table by wedging himself between the table and wall. She was exhausted and it was only two in the afternoon. She was finally able to get him settled after he tired himself crawling through every room on the ground floor. She fretted what she would do when he started walking.

“Naw, I put that behind me, Sis.” Tyler’s voice returned her to their conversation.

“What are you going to do now that you’re free?”

He fingered his chin. “I’m going to work with Tony at his new shop.”

“You’re staying in New York?” she was elated.

“Yeah. So you have a baby. Where’s his old man?”

“You and your ghetto talk,” she laughed. “His *old man* is on a business trip.”

The dull ache in her chest came back at the mention of Chase. He’d called when he reached Waikiki two days ago, but hadn’t called home since. She tried calling the hotel last evening but there was no response. Her mind went back to her brother, and what he was saying.

“Hey, I was born and raised in the ghetto, spent most of my life in the streets,” her brother said, leaning back on the sofa. “You were always the one who never fit in. I’m glad you left that dump.”

“My life hasn’t exactly gone the way I planned, but I’m not complaining.”

“You’re doing well, in my book. You have a baby with a rich dude.”

“Hey, you know me better than that. It’s not about the money, you know that.”

Tyler chuckled. “Chill, big sis. I didn’t mean anything by it. But it is good having money, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. I’m just a little sensitive after what ha . . .,” she paused.

“What happened?” he asked, sitting forward and placing his elbows on his knees, looking intently at her.

“Nothing. It was a long time ago,” she dismissed.

“I want to know. Did that guy do something to you? So help me god if he hurt you . . .”

“Tyler, chill. He didn’t hurt me,” she sighed. “His father did.”

Starting at the beginning, Maggie told him how she met Chase working on his yacht. She recalled the cool evening breeze as it played with her hair on the deck. They'd stood chatting while her heart galloped at the sound of his voice. All that time, she had no clue that the man she was meeting was the owner of the yacht. When she was summoned to the boss' cabin, imagine her surprise to find out the he was the same man.

“So his pops found out and then what?”

“Not yet.”

Maggie wasn't to be rushed as she told her brother how they ended up together, though she left out the intimate details. She told him of his birthday and their date and what happened when the feds raided the boat because there was an illegal casino.

“I found I was pregnant afterwards. That's when the trouble started.”

Uncertain about getting involved with Chase, she found another job after leaving the boat. However, George found her at her new job. That was the same time she found out she was pregnant. Working in a bar was not befitting her condition, so she found another job working in a restaurant. They both had a laugh when she mentioned the Jamaican named Byron. Byron's Jamaican dialect always brought smile to her face.

She told him her concern for the baby being born in Ybor City. Her old place was falling apart, and she found a new place in Temple Hall.

“That's across town from Ybor. I know the place. I have a friend from over there,” Tyler interrupted.

“Yeah, it was under development at the time.”

“Continue, this is interesting.”

“Hmm,” she smiled. “Anyway, Chase insisted that we were meant to be together, so he found me. But his father also found out and paid me a visit.”

“What did he say?”

She bit her lip before continuing. “He offered me money to disappear. When I refused, he implied the baby might not be his son's, and then he told me that I would ruin Chase's life.”

“That sonofa ... I wanna punch his face.”

“Take it easy. No use getting worked up over that now.”

He punched his palm with his fist. “I hope you slapped his face and showed him the door, right?”

“I was under a lot of stress with my hormones running rampant, and I felt sick all the time. I just couldn’t fight him at all. So I left and came here. I kept running from Chase, you know. I couldn’t handle all the drama.”

“And he followed you? Wow, he must really love you, I can’t wait until he gets back to meet the fellow who put that gleam in your eye.”

“Well, his mother is a darling, but trouble also followed me to New York,” she added.

“The old man?”

“Nope, but I believe he sent a woman to convince me to leave Chase.”

“Who is she?”

“The girl who they wanted Chase to marry. Some big business deal,” she informed him.

Tyler shook his head. “That’s some shit you went through with this guy. So when’s the wedding?”

“He hasn’t asked me ... yet,” she blushed.

CHAPTER 32

The night was long. Colton nagged for hours and would not drink his formula. She'd thought a few times of taking him to the emergency room, but he was not showing signs of any illness that she could pinpoint. He was just restless the entire five hours he was awake between ten and three.

About to get some well-needed sleep, something broke through her subconscious. Ignoring it, she tried to succumb to exhaustion. She was dozing again when the sound jolted her from sleep. Rolling over, she groaned as her clouded mind wondered what was making such a ruckus.

The phone on the nightstand interrupted her slumber once more. She tried ignoring its incessant ringing, but the sound jarred her. Maggie turned with an annoyed grunt and reached her hand out, feeling for the instrument.

“Hello,” she mumbled sleepily into the cordless.

“Miss Carter?”

A man's voice penetrated her haze. At first, she thought it might be Chase returning her calls, but somehow the voice was different. The person spoke again and brought her out of sleep. Blinking, she sat upright.

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Denzel Craig. I met Chase the day before yesterday for our meeting, but have been unsuccessful in reaching him since. Did he return to New York?”

Her stomach clenched. “No. Have you tried his hotel?”

“Yes, they haven't seen him since he left for our meeting. He hasn't checked out as far as I know from the last I inquired.”

“I've called and they said he wasn't in his room. I thought he was with you.”

The feeling of foreboding she'd felt before, overshadowed her. There must be some explanation as to why Chase wasn't picking up. She'd tried calling his hotel several times but

the receptionist always told her he was not in his room. She thought nothing of it since he was supposed to be meeting with the man several times.

“When last did you see him, Mr. Craig?”

By now, she was wide-awake and pulling back the covers. Thankfully, Colton was still asleep and would perhaps remain so for the next hour. With any luck, she could speak with Mr. Craig without interruption. She held the phone to her ear while she paced the room.

“Miss Carter, we had several meetings scheduled prior to me calling you, but he missed them all. After our first meeting on the day after he arrived, I have not seen him since.”

“Did the first meeting go well?” she asked, her mind racing. “You think he changed his mind about the merger?”

“No, I don’t think so. He expressed his satisfaction with our deal and took the legal papers with him. He said he’d look them over and meet with me,” was his reply.

“When was that?”

“Two days ago. We were supposed to meet at a local restaurant. He called about an hour before the meeting to confirm, but he never showed up. When I called the hotel, they told me he left already. I’ve been trying to reach him since.”

Maggie mentally recorded everything he told her as her mind whirred like a machine. By the time the conversation wound down, worry lines etched her features.

“Mr. Craig, don’t worry. I’ll find him. I know this deal was important to both of you.”

“Yes, but I am worried about him as well. I hope he is OK.”

“Me too, Mr. Craig,” she breathed. “I’ll see what I can do from my end. Give me a call if you hear anything.”

“I certainly will, Miss Carter.”

Before they said their goodbyes, he gave her his number. She had to switch the light on to grab a pen and snatched a piece of paper lying on the nightstand. While she took the number, she prayed that nothing had happened to Chase.

“Call me if he returns or you hear from him, Miss Carter.”

She nodded before realizing he could not see her. “Yes. I’ll do that. Please do likewise.”

“Okay, goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Craig.”

As she hung up the phone, she noted the time as four thirty in the morning. Her mind wandered to Chase, wondering where in the world he was and why he wasn't returning anyone's calls. She picked up her cellphone and dialed the hotel where he was supposed to be.

First, she dialed the number he gave her for the direct line to his room. There was no answer. When she called his cellphone, the operator said it could not be reached. After trying his room extension once again, she dialed the hotel front desk.

“Waikiki Sun Hotel,” a cheerful voice answered.

“Chase McMillan's room, please.”

“One moment.” It was not long before the receptionist got back on the line. “I'm sorry, it seems no one is picking up.”

“Can you check if something happened to him inside the room? We have been trying to reach him for days.”

“May I ask who is inquiring?” the operator asked.

“Maggie Carter, his ... hmm ... fiancé,” she replied.

“I will check for you. Please hold the line.”

Holding the line seemed like eternity. In that time, she tried to prevent her mind from envisioning the worse. Would they find him dead in his room or would he have some local girls ... no, she scolded herself. Though he was once known for his philandering ways, he wasn't like that anymore.

“Miss?” the woman's voice brought back her attention.

Her heart thudded loudly. “Yes?”

“Mr. McMillan is not in his room.”

“Thank you.”

She called again three hours later and still the same result. She was beginning to feel restless. Over the last few days that she was unable to reach him, she thought nothing of it. However, when Denzel Craig called, she felt a stab in her gut. A nagging feeling presented in

her stomach, with the urge to get on the next plane to Hawaii. Pushing the feeling aside, she tried to reach him once more.

Maggie spent the next two days trying his cell phone, the hotel room, and the front desk. Every hour she called, they told her the exact same thing.

By the end of the second day, the feeling of unease turned into panic. She called Denzel to find out if Chase had turned up. The answer was the same.

This was out of character for Chase. He was anything but lackadaisical when it came to his business. He was an astute businessman and an even a more vigilant father. He would never neglect checking in on his son once in so many days. After nearly forty eight hours of trying to reach him, she finally decided that she needed to find out what was wrong.

The following morning around ten o'clock, she called Denzel Craig. He seemed to have been waiting for her call. She told him about spending the last two days calling the hotel. Chase never showed up once.

“What are you going to do, Miss Carter?”

“I don't know. What do you think?”

“I think we should alert the authorities,” he suggested.

She agreed. “I was thinking the same thing. Do you think I should come to Waikiki?”

He was quick to answer. “Perhaps that is best. If something happened, they would need you as you are his girlfriend.”

“I will make arrangements and call you when I get there.”

“If there is anything you need just let me know,” he said.

“I will,” she replied, thinking that she would need to take a recent photo with her.

Then there was Colton. Should she take him with her? Was that a good idea? She'd never gone anywhere without him, except for a couple of hours on a few dates. There was no question about it, he was coming with her. In any case, it would be strange leaving him behind for however long she'd be in Hawaii. If she left him behind, she would have to explain why.

Not wanting to jump the gun, she decided against telling anyone anything. Only when she was certain that something was wrong, would she alert George or anyone else. After running through her mind what she needed to do, she made her flight arrangements.

Her flight would leave JFK Airport at nine thirty the following morning and would arrive at the Honolulu International Airport between 2:30 and 3 p.m. She'd need to be at the airport by 6:30 a.m. She contemplated asking George to take her, but not letting him know the truth was killing her. Calling a cab to come get her was what she decided.

While pulling garments from her closet and throwing them on the bed she recalled their last morning together. She paused and stared at the sunbeam streaming through the window as her mind flashed back to a few days ago. It was the morning he left for his trip.

The early summer sun peeped through the lace curtains, casting a golden glow on their rhythmic dance. Gentle sighs and ecstatic cries muffled by passion filled kisses. Writhing bodies rumbled the satin sheets as their bodies moved to the cadence of their lovemaking. Soft sheens of moisture coated skin as love culminated in rapturous bliss.

With a shallow breath, Chase murmured against her lips, "I love you."

"I love you more," she returned as his lips gently glided over hers.

She broke away from the thoughts as a heaviness settled over her. Still, her body tingled from the memory of their lovemaking and her nipples stood erect. Mind and body now in conflict as she worried about him. What if he was mugged? What if something happened to him and he was unable to call for help? These things happened to people sometimes, and though Chase was capable of taking care of himself, it could very well happen to him.

As she continued packing, she could not help but think back on that morning. There was an uneasiness that she'd felt knowing he was leaving for his trip. It happened every time, however, that morning the feeling intensified. She paused, flashing back to that morning after their lovemaking.

Breaking the kiss, he rolled onto his back, pulling her to lie with her head on his arm. Her finger trailed along his chest in a playful manner, something she found herself addicted to doing. Contentment swept over them, but was short lived as a shrill cry came through the baby monitor.

"Whose turn is it?" Chase asked.

"I think it's yours," she lied, knowing that Chase was last on duty.

"Are you sure?" he chuckled.

"Oooh," she moaned. "All right, it's mine."

“You stay right here, my sweet. I’m leaving in a little while, let me get this.”

He eased himself from the bed. While pulling on his shorts he winked at her. She blew him a kiss and watched as the muscles in his thighs rippled as he strolled away. A dull ache presented in her chest as he slipped through the door.

She brought back her thoughts to the present. In her heart, she knew something was wrong. All the calls she’d made to his hotel had gone unanswered. Usually when he traveled, he’d call twice per day and if he missed a call, he’d return it when he got the chance.

This time, he’d called her once when he landed. There was a five-hour time difference and that may have affected his schedule. She wasn’t expecting him to call twice per day, but he hadn’t returned any of the messages she left, either.

Now that Denzel Craig called, she was sure that something was amiss. Chase would never forfeit this deal. He’d been talking about nothing but this for the last three and one-half months. He was excited about starting his own business that one day he could leave to his son, a son he adored more than life itself.

That feeling of despair jabbed her in the chest once more at the thought of Chase. They’d been happy, and Chase was the most wonderful father and partner. He hadn’t done anything to make her feel that something was wrong. In fact, he’d done everything to convince her that being together was the right choice for them both.

With that in mind, she knew that going to Hawaii was the right thing to do. If he turned up before she got there, then all the better. Maggie hoped against all hopes that nothing serious was the matter. There were any number of possibilities why he could not be reached, she told herself.

“Don’t panic Maggie, he’s all right ... somewhere. We’ll find him.”

CHAPTER 33

Maggie reached Honolulu International Airport at 2:52 p.m. She hated leaving her brother after reuniting, but her priority was making sure nothing happened to Chase. Not to set off any alarms, she told both Tyler and George that she was going there to see him. Unless she had something concrete, she would not upset anyone. Moreover, Chase not answering her calls or returning her messages could be anything.

With Colton strapped to her back, she made her way to the taxi stand outside the airport. After giving the driver the name of the hotel where Chase was supposed to be, they were off. Her mind kept going back to their telephone conversation the day he arrived in Hawaii.

“Kiss my boy for me, I miss you already,” he’d said. “I’ll call you later.”

“I miss you, too,” she’d replied.

“How much?” his tone had become sultry and she knew what he was thinking.

In a hoarse voice, she’d answered, “A lot. I’m aching for you.”

“I can’t wait to come home.”

“I am waiting for you. Make sure you call later so I can hear your voice,” she murmured, her heart racing.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

She swallowed hard, trying to still the butterflies in her stomach. “I’ll be waiting.”

“I love you, Maggie,” he said.

“I love you, Chase.”

Bringing her mind back to the present, she observed the scenery as the taxi made its way closer to their destination. Waikiki was a beautiful beachfront city on the island of Oahu. This island was the third largest of the Hawaiian island with pristine beaches and festive atmosphere. It would have been a wonderful vacation if the turmoil in her heart wasn’t preventing her from enjoying the beauty of the island.

Colton grabbed at the sleeve of her dress, causing her to leave the view to look at him

instead. Fortunately, he'd been quiet since getting off the plane. Now, he kept looking from one place to the next as though he knew he was in a strange place.

"Mommy is going to find Daddy soon," she whispered, kissing his head.

"Huh," he made a sound as if to ask what she said.

Colton looked just like his father. Looking at him made her feel closer to Chase. He babbled incoherently and she smiled.

"Dada."

Startled by the sound, she cocked her ears and the baby said it again. She knew it could not be what she was thinking but, the sound was so much like "Dada" that her heart soared just the same.

Swallowing a lump which rose to her throat, she fought the conflicting emotions that assailed her. Joy bubbled inside her, but the fear of what she would find in Oahu eclipsed this joy.

"You said dada'?" she whispered, kissing his face. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and she wrestled not to allow the emotions to overwhelm her. "I'm sure you didn't, but I'm still happy. Your father swore you'd say 'dada' before saying 'mama'."

"Baba," Colton said, followed by his usual gurgle.

"We're here, Miss," the driver announced, interrupting her moment with her son.

"Thanks," she replied, gathering her things.

Upon payment, the cabbie assisted her with her bags while she carried the baby. He set the bags down at the entrance to the hotel. A few seconds later, a bellman came to her with a warm smile.

"Aloha," the man greeted.

"Aloha."

"I will take your bags, please follow me."

He strode ahead of her, his long legs carrying him swiftly. They stopped at the front desk for her to confirm her reservation and receive her key. The woman at the desk gave her a pleasant smile.

“Welcome to the Waikiki Sun Hotel,” she said. “If there is anything you need, please don’t hesitate to inform us,” the clerk said, handing her a key.

“Thank you.”

“Beautiful baby, ma’am, enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.”

She made to walk away when a thought struck her. She would have waited for a few more hours, but since she was already there, may as well get the ball rolling.

“Can you tell me which room Chase McMillan is in?” she asked, hoping the woman would ease her mind.

“I’m sorry ma’am, I can’t give you information about another guest. Are you a relative?”

“Kind of . . . we live together,” she replied. “This is his son.”

The woman looked at her a moment as if trying to make up her mind. Maggie opened her wallet and removed a photo she always kept of the three of them.

“Here.” She handed the woman the photo. “That’s the three of us. I have an album with more photos in my bag.”

“One moment,” she nodded, still smiling.

The clerk turned to a computer on the desk and typed, her fingers moving quickly. She turned back to Maggie with a strange look.

“I’m sorry, Mr. McMillan has already checked out, ma’am.”

“Really?” she silently thanked the heavens that he was all right. “When did he return?”

Her heart gave a little leap, anticipating that Chase might have checked out and returned to New York while she was en route to Oahu. The clerk bit her lips and looked sheepishly at her. Maggie’s smile faded, as she knew there was something else.

“What aren’t you saying?”

“He didn’t return ma’am. Someone else came to retrieve his things and checked him out last evening.”

Her heart sank. So he hadn’t returned home. “Who checked him out?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, it says here that his wife did.”

The receptionist glance back at the computer screen. Maggie didn't think she heard right. She blinked and stared at the woman while her brain tried to assimilate what she said. She must have heard wrong.

“What did you say?”

The clerk repeated, “His wife came to get his things and checked him out.”

She laughed at the ridiculousness she was hearing. This must be some joke, right? She looked down at the baby who was still awake. He looked at her, then at the receptionist, then came back to stare up at her.

“Your dad is playing a game with us, isn't he?” she chuckled, then looked up at the clerk, who seemed confused. Maggie peered at the woman's nametag. “Jessica, that is your name, correct?”

“Yes ma'am,” the clerk replied.

“Listen, Mr. McMillan isn't married, never has been.”

The woman looked at the computer screen and back at Maggie. “It says so right here that Maggie McMillan came to get his things and returned the key.”

“Maggie?” she asked, stepping closer. “Did you say ‘Maggie’?”

The woman nodded. Maggie pulled her driver license and handed it to her.

“Isn't it a coincidence that his wife's name is Maggie, when the woman he lives with has the same name?”

Jessica's mouth dropped open as she noted the name on the ID. “I'll get the manager, ma'am.”

She picked up the phone and spoke into it in low tones while Maggie tried to figure out what was going on. This was weird. What was Chase up to? Was he in trouble or, did he come to Hawaii and decide to stay? No, that last one didn't make sense. He would never do that. She trusted him and he would never leave her.

“Miss Carter?” Her head whipped around upon hearing her name.

A man about five feet ten inches tall, with brown receding hair and chocolate-colored eyes approached from the direction of a door to the right of the counter.

“Yes?” she answered.

“I understand you are inquiring about a guest in our hotel?”

“My child’s father, Chase. He arrived about a week ago, and we have not heard from him since. His business associate has not seen him, though he had a few meetings scheduled,” she informed them.

“Jessica here has informed you that his wife came to retrieve his belongings, and that is correct.”

“And I told her that he isn’t married, sir.”

The manager nodded and went to the computer where he spent a few seconds. After he was done, he raised his eyes to her, giving her a pitiful smile.

“Miss Carter, I was the one to help her collect the items he left behind. As the manager, it is my duty. I would not have done so without some proof of her identity.”

A needle pricked her behind the ear as the beginning of a headache presented itself. She felt the blood rush from her head and face. The man’s hard eyes stared at her.

“No, that’s not possible,” she uttered. “You need to call the police and they will confirm it.” Her voice rose a few decibels on the last sentence.

Colton must have sensed her distress as he squirmed and started wiggling from her grasp. She pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. He whimpered and relaxed.

“Hush, we’ll find daddy soon,” she whispered. “Mommy didn’t mean to shout.”

“You should get some rest, Miss Carter. We’ll sort this out later.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I’m not leaving here until we sort this out.”

The manager gave her a pleading look. “Miss Carter, the baby needs you now. I know this is difficult for you...”

“You don’t know anything,” she cut him short. “If you knew anything about this family, you’d call the police and have this rectified. My child’s father could be dead for all I know and you’re standing there with your condescending looks!”

“I’m sorry ...”

“No, you’re not sorry. Some woman shows up claiming she’s Chase’s wife and you let her do as she pleased. Here is his real partner standing before you telling you he has never been married and you don’t believe her.”

Somehow, Maggie knew she was being unreasonable, yet she could not help her outburst. The idea of Chase having a wife was utter nonsense.

“I know this is upsetting ...”

Not giving him a chance to speak, she continued, her tone betraying her irritation. “Have you considered the possibility that something may have happened to one of your guests? Are you prepared to bear the responsibility that woman may have harmed him?” He stared blankly at her. “You haven’t considered that have you?”

Colton was writhing in her arms. While soothing him, she struggled to make sense of all she’d heard. He tried to wiggle his way free, perhaps seeing something interesting he wanted to play with. Maggie held him tightly while she fought to comprehend what the manager said. Nothing was cohesive. All they’d told her was nonsensical crap!

“Whether you help me or not, I’m going to the authorities!”

With her last statement, she beckoned to the bellman who hadn’t moved a muscle since carrying her bags to the desk. He nodded and moved to the elevator.

She was so lost that she hadn’t even taken note of the spacious lobby with several indoor plants, the restaurant off to the left and the set of elevator doors to the right.

Absently, she entered the elevator and watched as the doors closed. The bellman silently pressed the floor number and they were off. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she wondered what was going on. Who was that woman who claimed to be Chase’s wife?

CHAPTER 34

Maggie paced the room. Sleep was the last thing she needed and even if she'd tried, she knew she'd be unable to, anyway. She ordered a pot of coffee for herself and hot water to make cereal for Colton. When her order arrived, she allowed the waiter to place the trolley against the wall given that the room was small.

The baby was now asleep. It had taken some energy to get him settled after getting to the room. When they had arrived, she'd given the bellman a tip of ten dollars, given Colton some juice and tried to get him to sleep. It took almost fifteen minutes before he closed his eyes. Now that he was finally asleep, she could concentrate on what action to take next.

As she contemplated the situation, the conversation with the clerk and manager made her uneasy. Something was going on, and she was sure to find out what it was. There was no way she would accept that Chase got married since he arrived in Waikiki. Moreover, what was with using the name Maggie?

Everything was puzzling, but she was determined to put the pieces together. Since she had some free time before Colton awoke, she called Denzel Craig to let him know that she'd arrived.

"I've been waiting for your call," the man said after the initial greeting. "I contacted the police, but they told me since I was not a relative, I could not make the report."

"I'd like to make the report, now that I'm here, but Mr. Craig ..."

"Please call me *Denzel*," he butted in.

"Okay, Denzel, you may call me Maggie as well," she replied. "I'm not sure what's going on, but the manager of the hotel said that Chase's ...," she paused, closing her eyes a second, her voice brittle. "He said that Chase's wife came to retrieve his belongings and returned the key."

"Are you certain that's what he said?" the man asked.

She inhaled a sharp breath. "Yes," she croaked.

"That is strange. All the more reason to get the authorities involved ASAP. Chase never

mentioned any woman but you. He gave me your home number and showed me his wallet with your photos. I felt I knew you before I even called you the other day.”

Maggie’s eyes welled with tears as she listened to Denzel talk about Chase. As soon as the baby awakened, she would head to the nearest police station... or should she call them now? She was confused as what to do having no clue how things worked in Oahu.

“Should I go to the nearest police station or ask the police to come to the hotel?” she asked.

“I’d go there, since no apparent crime was committed at the hotel,” he replied. “I’ll come get you and take you there.”

“I don’t want to trouble you.”

“It’s not a big deal. What time should I be there?”

She looked down at Colton’s peaceful slumber and wondered how much longer he would be sleeping. He sometimes slept for two hours in the morning, sometimes longer.

“The baby may sleep for another hour or more. He’s been down for a half-hour now.”

“I’m only ten minutes away, so call me when he awakens,” Denzel said. “I’ll see you in a while.”

“Thank you.”

While she waited for Colton to wake up, she took a needed shower, had two cups of coffee, and prepared his cereal. Her hand shook with her tasks as her mind kept going back to the conversation with the hotel manager.

Who the hell was Maggie McMillan? It was obvious to her that the name was an alias, but who was the woman, and what was her affiliation to Chase? What was going on? Why use her name?

“Herman!” The thought hit her and she said his name under her breath.

She didn’t know how he did it, but he was the one fighting their relationship. He’d been the one to warn her that she would ruin Chase’s life. This must be his doing.

Nothing was as it should be. She stopped her pacing to stare at the sleeping infant. He’d said his first words and his father wasn’t there to hear them. Tears stung her eyes as she imagined the worst thing possible, that Chase had been mugged and was perhaps lying dead in

a ditch.

“No, Maggie. You can’t think this way,” she chided herself for her thoughts. “He is alive. I can feel it.”

Colton awakened while she was still looking at him. She allowed him to stay inside the crib for a few minutes while she called Denzel to let him know the baby was awake. After the call, she went back to take care of Colton whose wide smile upon seeing her brought a smile to her face. He focused on her as she bent and kissed his cheek.

“Mommy will feed you now,” she whispered, picking him up.

On her way to the trolley to get the cereal she’d already made, her steps halted as someone knocked the door. For a moment, she thought it was Denzel, but he’d told her ten minutes. It was less than two minutes since they spoke. She waited for the person to knock once more but instead, a white envelope snaked its way under the bottom.

She trotted over with Colton on her hip and yanked the door open. No one was there. A prickling sensation presented at the back of her neck. Stooping, she picked up the envelope with a guarded scanning of the hallway. As she straightened, she closed the door, a shudder passing through her. The few paces back to the trolley were on gelatinous knees, fearing that the letter contained a ransom note.

Should she open it, or take it directly to the police? Uncertain, she dropped the envelope beside the coffee pot. Having no idea where the letter came from, cleansed her hands before feeding Colton.

While the baby ate, her eyes constantly strayed to the envelope, wondering what it contained. What if it had nothing to do with Chase and was from someone else? She never answered the door, therefore the person dropping it off may have thought she was not in. Perhaps they had the wrong room.

Done with feeding the baby, she placed him in the crib and haltingly walked towards the letter. She stared at it for a while, trying to brace herself for whatever was in it. As she reached to pick it up, the hotel phone rang.

The first thing that came to mind was that Chase knew she was there and was calling. It was unlikely, she knew that, but she could not help hoping for a miracle.

Placing the phone to her ear, she answered, “Hello.”

A female clerk responded. “Miss Carter, there is someone by the name of Denzel Craig here to see you.”

“Please send him up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Within the space of three minutes, a knock sounded at the door. Her heart thudded wildly as she anticipated another envelope slipping underneath it. They said it was Denzel Craig, but she could not help the feeling that settled in her chest.

“Miss Carter, it’s Denzel,” a warm voice said through the door.

Blowing out a relieved breath, she willed her heart to calm. In a few strides, she reached the door. With the security chain on, she opened the door a crack, peered out and saw a tall man with dark curly hair.

“It’s Denzel Craig, we spoke earlier.”

Having never met the man, she hesitated. But when he pulled his driver license and held it up to her, she closed the door, released the chain and opened it again.

“Come in, please,” she invited, her breathing shallow from releasing her earlier anxieties.

Denzel was almost six feet by her estimation, with dark skin, curly hair and brown eyes. He strolled into the room with a smile and his hand outstretched. They shook hands and started talking about Chase right away.

Denzel quickly recounted his and Chase’s schedule, and the only meeting Chase attended. Remembering the letter, Maggie thought it would be a good time to open it, now that she had someone with her. She picked up the envelope and turned it over in her hand. “I got this today,” she told him.

Denzel made a step towards her. “What’s in it?”

Glancing up, she met his eyes. “I haven’t opened it. Someone slipped it under the door and took off.”

“You didn’t see who left it?” Denzel frowned.

“No, when I got to the door, there was no one there.”

A myriad of thoughts ran through her mind along with the fact that someone knew she was in Waikiki at this particular hotel. The thought made her stomach quiver. Shaking her

head, she steeled herself to face whatever was inside it. This letter could have been meant for the previous guest. What if they had the wrong room? There was no name on the envelope or any mark that would indicate it belonged to her.

“I can’t do this?” There was a tremor in her voice.

Denzel reached his hand out. “May I?”

She gave him the envelope, which he immediately tore open. Maggie watched anxiously as he pulled out a single sheet of paper. He gazed at the paper for a few seconds and then glanced up at her.

“What is it?” she searched his face.

With impatience, she snatched it from his grasp. Apprehensive, she gawked at the words, her mouth moving as she read them. *Chase is fine. Go back to NY ... Nigger.*

“We need to get to the police now. This proves he’s been taken ... don’t you think?” she said.

The word ‘nigger’ stood out. To her it was indication that Herman was behind this. Would he hurt his own son? She doubted that. What did he hope to accomplish by doing this? If Herman took Chase, it would mean he was no longer in Waikiki, didn’t it? He owned a jet. He probably flew Chase back to Florida.

“I think we should report this as soon as possible,” he replied. “If he was abducted, the sooner they start searching the better.”

Denzel was right. It was frustrating having no proof that he Herman took him so she could not point fingers in that direction. If he kidnapped Chase, the authorities would find out. Kidnapping was a federal crime, even if it was your own child.

Taking care of Colton took about fifteen minutes, and then they were on their way. For a moment, she was tempted to stop at the manager’s office to clarify what he told her. Her instincts told her to leave it alone. The police would find out what was happening soon enough.

Denzel took them to the Waikiki Beach division of the Honolulu Police Department. The drive was approximately twelve minutes from her hotel.

When they arrived, Denzel assisted Maggie and Colton out of the car and escorted them into the building. The officer at the front desk had his attention glued to a computer screen. As

they reached the desk, he looked up.

“Aloha,” she greeted.

“Aloha,” he replied. “Can I help you?”

“We are here to report someone missing,” she replied in a wobbly voice.

Maggie looked fixedly at his badge on his left breast, noting his name to be Ryan Bent. She watched as he opened a file cabinet and pulled a form.

“Please tell me what happened,” he said.

“My son’s father went missing a few days ago. He was here on business from New York.”

Briefly, he looked up, asking, “Name?”

“Chase McMillan,” she replied. “He’s thirty-two

“Your name, ma’am,” he corrected.

“Maggie Carter.”

“When did you last see him?”

“I saw him at the JFK Airport when he left for Oahu,” she said.

The man looked up at her, his writing paused. “Are you sure he’s missing, ma’am?”

Denzel stepped up to the counter. “I can confirm that something is wrong, officer.”

“Who are you?”

“The business associate Mr. McMillan came here to see.”

Officer Bent filled the form as Denzel informed him about their meeting and the last time he saw Chase. He asked a few more questions, all of which they answered until the hotel came into the conversation.

The officer asked, “So the manager said his wife returned the keys and took his things?” Maggie replied with a nod, and he continued, “This could be a case where a tourist meets a local girl and gets married. Kind of like running away from reality.”

“Chase would never do that!”

“Are you certain of this?” The man in uniform asked, directing his gaze at her.

Her reply was an adamant, “I’m sure.”

“What else did the manager say?”

Maggie was beginning to feel impatient by all the questions the police officer was asking. It seemed to her that he was amused rather than trying to help her. She could tell he was only asking the questions because they were expected of him, or he needed to have something for his report.

“Are you taking this seriously?” her voice raised a notch while she scowled at the officer behind the desk.

“Ma’am, calm down, I need to have all the facts.”

“Her name is Maggie McMillan,” she said. “Think about it. My name is Maggie, and this ... this woman’s name is Maggie?”

The writing halted and he looked at her with narrowed eyes. For the first time since the conversation started, the officer seemed to take her seriously. “That is a coincidence. What else do you know?”

Maggie pulled the envelope she received that morning from her handbag and pushed it across the counter. “Someone left this under the door this morning.”

Large strong fingers picked up the envelope and removed the note. “I’ll keep this. Come this way, please,” he said.

Indicating an open office space to the right of the front desk, he led the way. A few desks lined the room, some occupied by other officers. He led them to an unoccupied desk and offered her a seat. Denzel pulled a chair from another desk while the officer took his own chair opposite her.

She glanced around the room as the other police personnel quietly did their duty. Most were typing on computers while a couple of them seemed to be interviewing civilians. A commotion coming from the direction she just left had a few officers on their feet.

A man was escorted inside. He seemed to be resisting the grasp of the officers with him. His hands were cuffed behind him and he snarled at one of his escorts. The officer attending to her brought back her attention.

“We’ll run some prints on this. It might give us some clues,” he informed them. “I’m Sergeant Bent, and we’ll do all we can to find your child’s father. Do you have a recent photo?”

She pulled a photo from her purse along with a small family album.

“Let me run through this again,” Officer Bent said. “Chase McMillan left New York about a week ago to attend business with Denzel Craig here on Oahu Island. They met once and were supposed to meet again to finalize their deal. He called to say he was on his way, but never showed up. How is that so far?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Denzel replied.

The officer continued, “After trying to reach him several times you were told he was not at his hotel?”

Denzel nodded. “Correct. I went to the hotel as well, and he was not there. I was told they hadn’t seen him in a few days, but he had not checked out.”

“That’s when he called me,” Maggie chimed in.

Sergeant Bent addressed Denzel. “Why did you call her?”

“I thought maybe he’d returned to New York or something. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Sergeant Bent looked at Maggie, pausing his writing, “So you got on the first flight and came here?”

“No,” she croaked, her heart beginning its heavy thudding. “I tried reaching him for two days. That’s how I made up my mind to get here. He would never neglect calling his son for so long.”

“But when you came, you were told that Mr. McMillan’s wife retrieved items and returned the keys?”

“Yes, that’s the story,” she blew out a breath, trying to make sense of it all. “Will you help me find him?”

“Miss Carter, I’ll be honest with you. The story is bizarre, but the note does imply that someone knows something.”

She nodded slowly with comprehension. “Right.”

“Have you told anyone else that you are looking for Chase?” he asked.

“Only the hotel manager, the front desk clerk at the hotel, Denzel and now you. Why do you ask?”

“I’m just thinking about the note and how anyone would know to leave it at your room. They know your hotel room, they know you and that you are black. They may be trying to intimidate you ...,” he paused. “Given that they wrote the ‘N’ word, it’s likely someone who doesn’t like you at all.”

The uneasy feeling of the last few days settled over her like a dark cloud. The intense feeling of foreboding made her jittery. The headache she’d been feeling since she arrived magnified.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll report this to the detective on duty.”

Sergeant Bent rose and walked through a door to the left, taking the envelope and his notebook. Both she and Denzel eyed each other while they waited for the Sergeant to return. With her mind troubled and her heart heavy, she hugged Colton close, perhaps trying to reassure herself that all would be well.

CHAPTER 35

Meanwhile in Florida ...

Herman McMillan splashed Hine-250 into two cognac glasses and handed one to the man standing at the window. They were about the same height, but whereas Herman had a slight paunch, the visitor was lean. The other man's angular face was sun kissed and slightly ruddy, with deep crow's feet. His black beady eyes perused Herman's outstretched hand.

Antonio D'Morne took the glass and brought it to his nose, sniffing the aromatic drink. They were in Herman's office in the MacCorp building where Herman hoped to proceed with business as usual.

Herman stuffed a hand in his slacks pocket and swirled the cognac glass with the other. A pleased smile settled on his face at the prospects of a merger with the D'Mornes. This would have been a done deal if Chase hadn't turned down the marriage with Brittany to run off with ... His thoughts trailed off and he blinked. Bile rose in his throat thinking about the woman for whom his son left Florida.

"So why did you want to see me?" Antonio asked, breaking through his thoughts.

"Now that I am back on my feet, let's sign the merger the old-fashioned way," Herman suggested, taking a sip of the amber liquid. "Forget about the marriage."

Antonio downed his drink in one gulp and walked to the desk where he carefully set down the glass. He straightened his tie and picked up his briefcase. Herman looked at him with furrows in his brows.

"What's the matter?" he asked, coming to stand beside the man with the dark slicked back hair and dark suit. "I thought this was what you wanted."

Antonio turned and gave him a sly look. "That won't be necessary Herman. We have made alternate arrangements."

"What?"

“Is that why you invited me here?” Antonio asked, lifting a brow.

“When I asked for the meeting and you agreed, I thought you were ready to move on with this,” his pitch increasing almost to a shout.

Antonio gave him a sharp look, but his voice remained calm. “No need to raise your voice, Herman.”

Herman slammed his glass onto the desk, his fist doubling at his side. This was all Chase’s doing. He’d have to make sure his son learned a valuable lesson.

Antonio saluted. “I’ll be taking my leave now. Have a good day,” he said, striding to the door.

As soon as Antonio closed the door behind him, Herman’s fist came down on the desk. “Chase!”

CHAPTER 36

Five hours at the police station was like an eternity. When Maggie finished speaking with the police, was already dark out. The interview with the officers left her feeling as though she had been interrogated. They handled her as though she was the suspect. Having to answer many questions repeatedly wearied her. Questions such as her relationship with Chase, if she knew of Chase having a wife, and if they'd had an argument before he left New York, were thrown at her.

She closed her eyes and ran the events through her mind. After Sergeant Bent left to report to the detective, he'd returned rather quickly. Accompanying him was Detective Akoni. The man grilled her as if she was a criminal, but knew enough to know they were just doing their jobs. Still, she felt chaffed by it.

The good thing was that they verified her identity and had found that Chase had not left the island on any commercial flight. If he did leave, it would have been by a private plane or his father's jet.

When she told them about Herman, they implied that perhaps Chase had returned to his father's business. That, she refused to believe. Since they hadn't patched up as far as she knew, the chance of that happening was miniscule.

Still, Maggie could not shake the feeling that Herman was responsible. It was just eight months ago that he conspired with Brittany to drive a wedge between her and Chase, knowing she was with child. Though she could not prove it, she knew the woman pretending to be Chase's wife was Brittany.

One thing was certain; she could not sit still and wait for the police to find him. She had to do something. If Chase went back to Florida, she needed to know, instead of wasting her time in Hawaii. Answers were what Maggie needed, and she needed them urgently, before she went crazy.

As she got Colton ready for bed that night, she thought about calling George, but decided not to do so. He would drop everything and come to her now. As far as she told him, she was coming to meet Chase, not wanting to alert him until she was certain of what was going on.

The fact remained that Chase was missing, but she needed George to keep things together at their new office. If he left as well, things could fall apart. She would only let George in on what was happening when she had something concrete.

That night, sleep evaded her the way it had all week. Anxiously, she watched the phone, willing to ring. She knew it would take time for the police to find anything, but she still hoped they would call.

Maggie spent the following morning biting her nails while she waited. The urge to return to the police station was extreme. By midday, not having heard from them, she made her decision to do what she could to find Chase.

She knew they would do their jobs, but they were moving at their own pace, while she was living on the edge of despair. She was scared ... scared that Herman would do anything to get rid of her, even hurting his own son. About the time she made up her mind to return to the police station, the hotel phone rang.

“Miss carter, there are three officers here from the Waikiki police station to see you,” the receptionist told her.

“Yes, please send them up.”

Restless, she paced while waiting for them to arrive. Would they have news of Chase? She hoped so. The suspense was difficult to handle. A few minutes later, someone knocked the door.

“Miss Carter, Sergeant Bent.”

Anxious to get a report, she rushed to open the door. Sergeant Bent and one of the others were in uniform while Detective Akoni wore white shirt and jeans.

“Miss Carter, you remember Detective Akoni, and this is Lieutenant Manu.”

“Hello,” she greeted, stepping aside for them to enter. “Please come in.”

“Miss Carter,” the detective addressed her. “We checked on a few things, and Mr. McMillan has been officially declared a missing person. We are not certain of all the facts just yet, so we have no updates on his whereabouts. We viewed the hotel security footage and we saw him leave at the time Mr. Craig gave us. He did not return to the hotel.”

“Now you believe me, right?”

He nodded. “Well, we are still checking into your story, Miss Carter. We have no proof that Mr. McMillan is married. We are checking all the registries in the city. Is there anything else you can tell us that may help us locate him?”

“Did you see the woman who came to return the key?” she asked.

“We have not checked that part of the footage yet. We are taking it with us to have it analyzed by our tech team. Is there something you need to tell us?”

“Brittany D’Morne. I think it’s she.”

Detective Akoni got out a small tablet from his left breast pocket and began making notes.

“Thanks for telling us about that. It could help us in our investigation,” he smiled. “About the note. There were no other prints on it except yours and Craig’s.”

“Oh?”

Did that mean the person wore gloves? She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t ask. More important things were on her mind, like getting Herman to pay for his crime. Even after a heart attack on the day Colton was born six months ago, the man was obviously still up to his old tricks.

“We’ll keep you abreast of our progress, Miss Carter.”

He bowed slightly as he departed. Sergeant Bent gave her a reassuring nod that made her feel that they were doing something and a breakthrough would happen soon.

Three days passed, and no word from the police. When Maggie called for Detective Akoni the morning of the third day, Sergeant Bent informed her that he was out. He could not provide any information regarding the progress in the case, though he tried to reassure her.

“Miss Carter,” he said. “I’m sure they will have something for you soon. Sit tight, we’ll find him.”

“That’s not good enough Sergeant. The detective promised to keep me posted. It’s been three days already, and no report!” Her voice took on an edge.

“Calm down, Miss Carter,” the sergeant cajoled.

“Calm down? How can I calm down when no one is taking me seriously?” A sob escaped her. “Okay, you want me to keep calm? I’m calm.” Taking a deep steadying breath, she resolved to do what her gut told her. In her calmest, most controlled tone, she added, “You do

your job, sergeant, and I'll do what I need to do to find my child's father."

She hung up the phone and trotted to the closet where she'd hung a few items of clothing. Taking them off the hangers, she dropped them on the bed and opened her suitcase. Colton squirmed in his sleep and she paused, praying that he would stay asleep until she finished.

Before completing her task of packing, she made flight arrangements. The quickest flight she could get on would be five forty that evening. There were no nonstop flights to her destination that was leaving that day. The plane would first make a stopover in Atlanta before getting to her final stop.

It was now 10 a.m. and she would need to be at the airport by 3 p.m. the latest. This gave her five hours to plan. With that much time on her hands, she called Denzel to inform him of her plans and finally dialed George's number.

As she waited for George to pick up, she contemplated her next move. She thought of Chase's friend Mark and figured he would not hesitate to help. He was the one instrumental in finding her when she'd ran away from Chase.

"Hello?" George's usual baritone said into the phone.

"George, it's Maggie."

He swore under his breath before almost shouting into the phone. "Maggie, what's going on? I've been trying to call you and Chase at the hotel, but some woman told me she could not give me any information over the phone. I even called your cell phones and you both weren't answering."

She ignored his outburst. "George, listen to me. I need Mark's number right away."

"Maggie, first tell me what's going on and why you need Mark's number," he said, as he seemed out of breath. "Where's Chase?"

Since she spoke with Sergeant Bent, she'd become resolute in her actions ... in her mind. With a calmness she bore of her determination, she replied, "George, Chase is missing."

"What? Why are you now telling me?"

"George ..."

"Are you sure about this? When did this happen?"

She bristled, gripping the phone tightly. "George, listen to me"

“I’m coming to Hawaii. How could you not ...?”

“George!” her voice was sharp.

“What!”

“I need you to remain in New York while I take care of this.”

“Maggie, how could you ask me to stay when you just told me Chase is missing?”

“I’m taking care of things here and the business needs you. You can’t just up and leave now. Chase would want you to keep things in order.”

“But”

“Don’t you trust me, George?”

She heard his sigh through the telephone. “Yes, I trust you.”

“Then, please, just let me do this. OK?”

There was silence for about a minute before he replied. “OK, but if you need me, just say the word.”

“Sure,” she returned. “May I have Mark’s number?”

She wrote down the PI’s number. George agreed to stay in New York, but made her promise that she would keep him posted on every detail of the investigation. She filled him in on what the police had told her, which was not much. What she failed to tell him was that she was getting on a plane soon.

She knew it was a lot to ask George not to come to Waikiki since he and Chase were best friends. Chase would want him to stay and ‘hold down the fort,’ as he always said. In addition, there were things she needed to go about which George would perhaps convince her otherwise.

By the time she hung up the phone, Colton had awakened. First, she fed him, and then bathed him. Having showered when he was asleep, she only had to change and complete packing.

It was close to 2:30 p.m. when she checked out of the hotel and got a taxi to the airport. Before she left the hotel, she made a call to Detective Akoni, informing him about her trip, and how to reach her if needed. Leaving the island of Oahu was perhaps unwise now, but she knew she must do what she needed to do to find Chase.

This was no case of someone taking time out from reality, as Sergeant Bent suggested. Moreover, what was with this woman claiming to be Chase's wife? Why couldn't Chase check himself out of the hotel? What need was there to send someone to do it? All those questions needed answers, and she knew the person who could provide them.

CHAPTER 37

Eight and a half hours after leaving the Honolulu International Airport, Delta Airlines touched down at the Hartfield International Airport. The plane departed once more, six hours later, landing in Florida at around 9 a.m. Maggie managed to take a nap on the plane, though she hadn't slept much during the past week. After her mission, she'd have to go back to Waikiki if she didn't get the answers she needed.

The first thing Maggie did was check into the hotel she'd already booked, and then she charged her cell phone. After that, made a call to Mark and asked to meet with him. He was shocked to hear that his friend was missing and was willing to do all he could to help. They met at a café close to Chase's former office, the MacCorp building.

"At last I finally meet you, Maggie," Mark greeted, taking her hand and giving it a vigorous shake.

"I wish it was under more pleasant circumstances," she replied, her voice brittle.

Maggie was surprised to learn that Mark was black. All the times Chase mentioned him, he never mentioned his race. She just assumed he was white. As she looked across the table at him, he reminded her of the comedian Tony Rock.

They ordered coffee and sandwiches, and mashed potatoes for Colton. He'd been fussing since they left Hawaii, and now he refused to eat his breakfast.

"Excuse me," she called the waiter who served the coffee.

"Yes, Miss?" he smiled and trotted over.

"Can I have a small bowl with warm water to make the baby's cereal? He's not eating the potato."

"How about if I make the cereal and feed the baby while you have your coffee and sandwich?" he offered.

She was both surprised and pleased. "Would you do that?"

"Of course, we do it all the time. Don't worry, you look like you need a coffee break."

“Thank you!”

“No problem.”

He smiled and went off, returning moments later with a tiny bowl of cereal for Colton. He scooped him up and took him to another table close by while another server brought out a high chair.

“That was nice of him,” Mark remarked.

“I hope he doesn’t get into trouble for it,” she worried, eyeing them as the waiter fed her baby without a fuss.

“Don’t worry, I know the owner, he’s a nice guy.”

Maggie sipped her coffee, but her mind was still in Waikiki. What if they solved the case and she wasn’t there? What if Chase showed up and needed her?

“Can you find out if someone got married in secret?” she blurted out.

Mark cocked a brow. “Who?” He brought his cup to his lips and took a sip while waiting for her to reply.

“Chase.”

The mouthful of coffee squirted back into the cup, some splashing unto the surface of the table. The hand returned the cup to the table while he stared at her, befuddled.

“What are you talking about?” Mark asked.

“Apparently, Chase got married while in Waikiki, or perhaps before. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t asked me to marry him yet.”

Mark shook his head. “What you’re saying makes no sense, Maggie.”

“A woman picked up Chase’s things from the hotel, claiming to be his wife. She returned his hotel keys.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” he replied. “In fact, that may imply he was taken.”

“That’s what I thought. But nothing makes sense, Mark.”

“I’ll have to go to Hawaii. Are you going back there?”

“Yes, but can you still just check if Chase got married? Maybe he was forced to ... or something,” she pressed, her voice trailing off at the end.

In all this, she'd been holding back from breaking down for the past few days. With tears threatening to erupt, she sniffled, trying to reign in her emotions. This was no time for crying. She closed her eyes and wiped the trickle that ran from the corners of her eyes.

When she opened them, Mark was staring at the table with a line in his forehead. "Yeah, I see what you're saying. I'll check into that as well. Now give me all the facts."

Everything she knew, she told him, along with what the note said. She regretted not taking a photo of the note, but she remembered every word. While she talked, he took notes and asked a few questions like the ones the police had asked.

"How much will it be?" she queried when he closed his notebook.

Mark narrowed his eyes. "How much what?"

"How much is the fee to find him?"

He chuckled. "I'd be crazy to charge you for finding my own friend. Now, take it easy and let me take care of this. When are you returning to Hawaii?"

"I have something to take care of first. I don't know, maybe tomorrow, depends"

She turned her head and her eyes caught the high-rise building that belonged to Chase's family. A shadow crossed her face as she stared at it. Mark's gaze followed her stare and he nodded slowly.

"Be careful ... whatever it is you have planned."

"Thanks," she smiled.

Reaching across the table, he squeezed her hand. "Don't worry. Chase would never do anything intentionally to hurt you. Gosh, the trouble he gave me to find you last year told me he loves you a lot."

"I know," her voice came out hoarse, barely a whisper.

"Come, I'll take you wherever you need to go."

"I don't want to trouble you," she said, rising to her feet.

The waiter glanced over and smiled. He then removed Colton from the high chair and brought him over. The baby's face was clean and he was babbling happily.

As she took Colton, she complimented the waiter. "You are awesome. He's usually

difficult with strangers, but you calmed him right down. Thanks.”

With her gratitude, she gave him a tip of one hundred dollars. He seemed surprised and pocketed the money with a huge grin. Mark picked up her bags and led the way to his car. Within three minutes, he was driving into the parking lot of MacCorp. Her stomach fluttered as she got out of the car.

“Go on, I’ll wait for you,” Mark said. “If you need me, just dial my number, and I’ll be there in a flash.”

“Thanks,” she replied, her heart beating heavily.

The memory of the last time she saw Herman was fresh. He’d been cruel, but today she would not stand for his bigotry. If he was not responsible for taking Chase, she hoped that he’d at least work with her in finding him. Chase was his son, after all.

Her thoughts came to a halt when she pushed the glass doors and entered the cool reception area. The girl at the front desk smiled. Her pink glossy lips stretched across white teeth. As Maggie approached, the receptionist perused her with her pale green eyes.

“Welcome to MacCorp; how may I help you?”

“I’m here to see Herman McMillan,” she replied.

Her stomach quivered at the thought of seeing him, but she was determined to get this over with.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, please tell him Maggie Carter is here to see him.”

“One moment,” the girl smiled.

While she waited, the receptionist spoke into her earpiece. Maggie could not hear the conversation, but when the girl looked at her with a sympathetic smile, she knew the man refused to see her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. McMillan is in a meeting and is asking you to come back another day.”

It was no surprise he would not see her. She knew he hated her and the fact that Chase left the business to follow her to New York.

“Tell Mr. McMillan that his grandson, Chase’s son, would like to meet him, and if he refuses, I’ll just have to introduce him to the entire building.” Her voice was deathly calm, but

her usually soft brown eyes hardened.

The receptionist bit her lips to suppress a smile. “You’re that Maggie?” she whispered, leaning forward as though spilling some secret. “I’m Lana. I’ll send you through. It’s on the twenty-fifth floor. I’ll let the secretary know you’re coming.” Maggie stared at her bug-eyed. “Chase was the best. Now go.”

“Thank you,” she mouthed the words as she trotted to the elevator.

In the space of a few minutes, Maggie was standing in a spacious lounge separated from an office by a glass wall. A woman she figured to be the secretary waved to her from inside and pointed to a door to the left. This she assumed to be Herman’s office.

With a smile, she wobbled over, trying not to let her gelatinous knees buckle. Butterflies flitted in her stomach as she made it to the door. Hesitantly she knocked. A sturdy voice from inside told her to enter. She gripped the knob, then paused. Was she really doing this after all she’d gone through because of this man?

Her mind flashed back almost nine months ago when she was six and one-half months pregnant. She recalled his disgusting words to her. “His life will be ruined; can you live with that?” Even now, the words resounded in her mind.

With a shake of her head, she blinked and pushed his words aside. The most important thing now was to find Chase and if he had anything to do with it, he’d have to pay. With her mind made up, she pushed the door and stepped inside.

His eyes widened as they settled on her. “How did you get in here?” he barked.

Ignoring him, she strolled inside as Colton cringed from the sound of his voice. Having her jaw set and her lips pursed, she moved to stand in front of his desk. He stood, scowling at her while Colton buried his face in her shoulder, perhaps scared.

The hatred in Herman’s stare caused Maggie to forget all sense of reasoning. She’d come to his office in the hopes to have a civil discussion and to come to an agreement for the sake of his son. But it seemed that wasn’t to be. Maggie found her anger boiling over while looking into his eyes.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” She accused.

His face twisted. “What are you babbling about?”

“You would hurt your own son to get to me?”

A blank expression crossed his face before he frowned. "Stop talking nonsense and say what you came to say." He moved from behind the desk, walked to a side bar where he poured a glass of water and drank half of it.

"Chase is missing, and I know you're responsible," she spat.

Herman spun around, spilling water from the glass. He looked down at the front of his navy colored jacket where the water made a mark. He then settled the glass noisily onto the surface of the sidebar and strode over to her.

"What did you say?"

"I know you did this!" she hissed.

Raising his finger, he pointed to her face. "Now listen to me, stop accusing me of things of which I have no knowledge. If anything happens to my son, I hold you responsible!"

"No, you listen to me ..."

"Don't raise your voice at me," he ordered. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

Maggie shifted Colton to her left arm and moved to within inches of Herman. Her arms were tired. She was tired, and most of all she was irritated. The baby struggled from her grasp and she set him down on the armchair in front of the desk, still gripping his hand.

"You had better not be the one to do this Mr. McMillan, or I swear ...," she said through gritted teeth, while Colton tried to wiggle off the armchair.

"Now listen ... nig ... young lady"

"You may call me *Nigger*. That's what you were about to say wasn't it?"

His features became ugly while he turned crimson. "Don't put words in my mouth."

"I'm telling you for the last time, if you had anything to do with this, you'll have me to contend with."

His eyes bulged, while his nostrils flared. Maggie could see Herman's ears turn red as he tried to reign in his temper. She must have hit a nerve.

"Get out and take your bastard child with you," he growled.

Before Maggie formed a thought, her open palm landed on her father-in-law's cheek, resulting in a loud splat. Her palm stung from the contact as Herman's mouth fell open and his

hand flew to his face. Red welt marks revealed her wrath. The baby stopped squirming and stared at them both.

“You ... you little ...,” he growled, shifting forward an inch.

Standing her ground, she met his stare. Her breathing was heavy as she pointed to his face, her finger less than an inch from his nose. “You may mess with me all you want, but don’t you ever mess with my son!”

She twirled and snatched Colton from the seat. When she picked him up and turned, the man was glowering at her. If looks could kill, she’d surely be dead.

Before she left, she gave him one last warning. “I know you hate me, but Chase is your son. If you had nothing to do with this, then you do your part as a father and help find him. But if I find that you were responsible, you’ll be seeing a lot of this nigger.”

She left with him staring after her, still fuming. She snapped the door shut behind her, gasping to level her breathing. When she passed through the outer office area and into the lounge, the line on the secretary’s desk buzzed.

“Yes, Mr. McMillan,” the secretary said after picking it up.

Maggie hurried with her son to the elevator, knowing he was scolding his employee for allowing her entry. Although she felt bad for getting them in trouble, she didn’t regret her actions. As the elevator descended, with Colton held in one hand, she looked at the hand that slapped Herman. Biting down her bottom lip, she wished she’d given him a second one, she owed him that much.

* * *

Herman rubbed his jaw, which smarted severely. How dare she? He fumed, pommeling the desk with his fist. The nerve of that ghetto trash, storming into his office unannounced. The gall of that nigger putting her hands on him!

Yanking the cabinet door open, he picked up the cognac, then replaced the bottle. From the back, he pulled out a bottle of scotch instead and poured into a short glass.

Taking a huge gulp, his mind returned to her words and more so her threat. After pondering the conversation, if one could call it that, he made a few calls. There were things he needed to set in order, and he needed them done as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 38

Maggie didn't waste time in Florida. When she left MacCorp, she had doubts. If Herman was responsible for kidnapping his own son, he wasn't showing it. In fact, he seemed affected by what she'd told him. Maybe if he'd stopped long enough to find out what happened ... She let the thought go. She was partially responsible for the blow up, having gone there with her pent-up frustrations and old grudge from months ago.

One thing was evident; he hadn't changed, even after a death scare. She cringed at the memory of the word 'nigger' that almost came out a few times. It wasn't the word that angered her, it was the connotation. He saw her as nothing but trash. How could two people from the same DNA be so opposite? Chase was kind and loving, while his father was a hateful bigot. She shuddered thinking about him.

Mark took her back to her hotel where they continued their conversation about Chase. He told her he would do some checking in Florida and New York before going to Hawaii, unless Chase turned up first.

There were no messages on her phone, which meant that the police hadn't contacted her. She had hoped that there would be some word about the case. This was frustrating, but she trusted that Mark would find something.

She told Mark what she thought about Herman and his role in Chase's disappearance. Still, it was hard to think he would hurt him. In her mind, he perhaps had him locked up somewhere, hoping Chase would soon cave and return to Florida.

She hated the thought of him emotionally blackmailing Chase into doing anything. The thought also crossed her mind that maybe Chase himself was testing her love, to see how far she would go to save him.

"No, that's silly," she mumbled.

Many thoughts crossed her mind, even the thought that perhaps things were as they appeared, and Chase married some woman named Maggie. This was too puzzling.

Instead of going directly back to Oahu, Hawaii, she returned to New York. It had a been a

difficult week having Colton with her while trying her best to do what she could to find Chase. This time, she would not take him with her. Andrea agreed to babysit while she was away. It was better that way, as she didn't want to put her son in danger, should anything untoward arise from her search.

Her brother Tyler and Uncle Tony were also there to keep an eye on Colton, not to mention George. Therefore, she was comfortable leaving her son for the first time since he was born. She would miss him, but she believed she was doing the right thing.

Immediately after her return from Florida, she called a meeting in her living room. Tyler and Tony showed up together, after which George and Andrea came. She noticed that Tony hadn't brought Latoya along. The woman never liked her anyway, so it mattered little that she wasn't there.

Starting from the beginning, she filled them in on what was happening, leaving out the part about her slapping Herman. George looked pallid throughout the whole briefing. His red curls were tousled and face grim.

Telling them what happened took a lot of strength not to break down. She found she could not sit still while talking. Occasionally, she ran her fingers through her mass of brown hair. Everyone watched her as she stood in front of them like a captain.

“Sis, what can I do? Do you want me to make this dude talk?”

Tyler was on his feet, standing next to her with his jaw set and a fire in his eyes. She knew exactly what he was asking. Even though she wanted answers, she didn't want her brother making matters worse.

“No, Tyler.”

“I can make him talk. I got my ways,” he said, his tone serious.

“I don't want you getting in trouble. Let the police handle this.”

“Big Sis, these guys don't follow the law. The law means nothing to them,” he replied, his mouth twisting in anger.

George, who'd been standing by the window, turned. “He's got a point.”

“You, too?” she couldn't believe that George agreed with this.

“I know Herman, and I know him well. We have all the dirt on him. It could be about

that,” he informed them.

She strode to stand beside him, narrowing her eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Chase had him investigated. He was supposed to reveal everything last year, but changed his mind at the last minute. I’m just saying that maybe Herman knows that Chase has this information and is trying to intimidate him into not revealing it.”

“Where is it now?”

George made a face. “Chase had it locked away in a safe deposit box somewhere. He didn’t give me the details.”

This was news to her and maybe the clue they needed to find Chase. She wondered if Irene knew about this as well. She should have visited her while in Tampa, but didn’t want to alarm her. Until they had hard evidence to support their theory, she would wait to tell her.

“Mark, he was the one to investigate, right?” she hoped she was correct.

George nodded, his red curls plopping. “Yep.”

“Then maybe he has a copy somewhere.”

His silvery gray eyes lit up. “You’re a genius. I’ll call him now.”

“Don’t worry Maggie, we’re with you,” Andrea said, moving up beside her and embracing her.

Maggie returned the hug, taking comfort in her warmth. Being a couple of inches taller than the woman, meant she had to bend in a little for the hug.

Maggie pulled away to look into Andrea’s eyes. “Thank you.”

“Always,” Andrea replied. “You’ll find him and bring him home safe.”

* * *

Her flight was due to leave the following day at noon. This gave her time to spend with her son. After the meeting with her crew, Tyler and Tony took off, making her promise to call them with any news. George and Andrea lived together. They left for their apartment, promising to pick up Colton the following morning.

She was glad for the time alone with Colton before she had to leave him. After tucking him in, she called Waikiki police station to see if there was any update on the case. She

couldn't get through as the line was busy.

Next, she called Mark. He was unable to talk as he was in the middle of a sting. Having had little rest in the past week, she went to bed early.

Uncertain about how long she'd been asleep, something awakened her. Sitting upright, she switched on the bed lamp. By habit, she also checked the time. It was close to midnight. Cocking her ears, she tried to listen if the sound came from the baby's room.

Pushing back the covers, she slipped from the bed and put on a robe. Since she was awake, may as well check on Colton. She was out of the bedroom and going across the hall to the baby's room when she heard a sound as though a door snapped shut.

Pausing to listen, she made out footsteps downstairs. The hair on her nape stood on end as a chill ran down her spine. The conflict between the rushing of heat up her neck and the cold feeling in her spine was telling.

Don't panic Maggie. It could be Tyler.

"Is somebody there?" she called out. "Who's there?"

She moved to the top of the stairs. A light flicked on in the living room and she made a wobbly step down. When she was in the middle, her legs refused to go further as they trembled.

A staggering figure appeared from the living room and came to lean against the banister at the foot of the stairs. She cringed, a gasp escaping her, her heart beating wildly.

Maggie tried to scream but her voice failed. Breathing heavily, she retraced her steps on jellied legs while her heart raced out of control. When she was almost at the top, the person spoke, stopping her in her tracks.

"Maggie." His voice was hoarse, but it was distinctive. Her pulse raced as she whirled and widened her eyes. "Maggie." He said once more.

"Chase!" Rushing down the stairs, she almost stumbled. "Chase," she breathed.

Relief and confusion engulfed her as she reached him. He held out his hand to her and she grasped it. The usual electricity she always felt at his touch galloped over her arm, spreading through her body.

Breathing shallow, she gazed into his face. Maggie could not believe that he was standing

there before her. Rushing in, she held him close. He rocked back against the banister and she felt the weakness in his body. However, when his arms circled her, they held her firm. Her breasts crushed into his chest and her air supply cut off due to the tightness of his grip. She didn't care so long as he was safe in her arms.

Still not believing fate, she pushed back, searching his face, before plastering kisses all over him. A low growl rumbled from his chest as she pressed her lips to his. Her moment was cut short when his knees began to buckle and he winced as though in pain.

“Come, let me help you up the stairs. I'll call the doctor.”

“No,” he said, his voice still hoarse. “No doctor. I'm fine.”

“But Chase, you don't look fine,” she protested. “How could I not call the doctor when you've been gone two weeks?”

He shook his head and grabbed her hand, holding it in a tight grip. “Please, do this for me. No doctor. I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Was this a nightmare or a dream? She circled her arm around his waist and assisted him up the steps. So many questions attacked her, but the most important thing was making sure he was all right. Taking him to the hospital was what her gut said, but he'd said no doctor. She would wait to see if he was hurt, then insist, if necessary.

When they got to the bedroom, he dropped down onto the bed. There was no doubt he was tired. His cheeks were sunken, and his complexion pasty. Helping him out of his clothes, she scanned his body for any signs of harm. There were none visible to her. There were no bruises, scratches, cuts, or other kinds of wounds.

Something was off, though she could not tell what it was. He looked different from when he left her that morning. Did he not eat? He appeared thin and pale. She looked for signs of anything to imply he'd been abducted, but saw nothing. There were no marks on his wrists and ankles to indicate he'd been tied up.

He didn't even seem dirty. He smelled clean like he'd taken a shower recently. What stood out most was that he seemed out of it, like he was drunk. After his clothes came off, he settled under the covers.

“Chase?”

A light snore was the reply, which told her he was already asleep. She watched him for several minutes, wondering where he had been. How did he return to New York just like that? Did Herman let him go? It was strange that he showed up right after her visit with the man.

She settled beside him, turning her face towards him. Sleep evaded her for the next few hours as she watched him. His facial hair had grown some inches, and a line creased his forehead. He was frowning in his sleep; that wasn't good. Absently, she caressed his forehead with her fingertip, noticing how it relaxed at her touch.

“What happened?” she whispered.

Around two o'clock she drifted off to sleep, her face still turned toward Chase.

CHAPTER 39

Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Maggie stretched and yawned. It's been over a week since she slept this soundly. She could tell that she overslept by the sunlight that streamed into the room.

The side of the bed Chase had occupied was cold. It told her that he was already awake and perhaps playing with his son. Anxious to see him and hear about his ordeal, she swung her feet from the bed and stood. She smiled as she noticed a figure at the door.

Chase was standing there with a strange look on his face. Dressed in a dark gray suit with silver tie, he was freshly shaven. This was the man she knew and loved, except the look in his eyes was different ... distant.

"Where are you off to?" she asked, baffled by his demeanor. "You should at least rest. I mean, you were out of it last night."

In three strides, he came to stand at the foot of the bed. His body language was one of rigidity. That's when she noticed the suitcases. Blinking, her mind went blank. Still not able to comprehend anything, she watched as Chase gripped the handle on the large suitcase, also picking up the small one. Her mind seemed to have snapped back into place as questions ravaged her.

"What are you doing? Where are you going? You just got back."

His jaw clenched and he strode to the door, pausing to turn. "I'm sorry Maggie. I have to go."

"Go where?"

Confusion and panic were two emotions that Maggie learned weren't her friends. The two of them together made for a dreadful feeling.

"I'm going back to Florida." His voice was like steel.

Chase continued through the door. What was happening? She had no clue. This was a nightmare, not the fairytale she envisioned with her prince. What did he mean going back to Florida? On business ... right? *Remain calm Maggie.*

“Okay,” she sighed. “Another business trip. How long this time?”

He halted. “I won’t be returning.”

His words echoed in her head and she stood transfixed to the spot. As he moved off, she remained motionless. Her eyes followed him as he left the room and disappeared down the hall. She knew when he descended the stairs.

“No. This can’t be,” she mumbled.

Finally able to move her feet, she sprinted to the closet to make sure she wasn’t misreading him. His side of the closet was empty. When did he pack? He must have awakened sometime after she fell asleep, packing quietly.

With a mad dash through the door, she raced down the hall. By the time she started down the stairs, he was about to head through the front door.

“Chase, stop!” He stopped, but did not face her. “What are you doing? Is this some game? First, you went missing. Then you show up in the middle of the night, and now you’re leaving?”

She shook her head, refusing to believe what was in front of her. He offered her no explanation, and she needed answers. She bounded down the rest of the stairs and screeched to a halt a foot behind him.

Still with his back turned, he replied, “I’m sorry, Maggie.”

“Sorry? Is that all you can say?”

“What else do you want me to say?”

Her bosom heaved as her breathing became shallow. Heat burned in her belly at the beginning of anger. Her skin flushed and she felt her chest tighten.

“Look at me, Chase. At least you can do that.”

The suitcases dropped to the floor with a thud. Slowly, he turned.

“I need answers Chase. Where have you been for the last two weeks, and why are you returning to Florida without discussing your decision with me first.”

“There are some things I don’t need to discuss with you first. What don’t you understand about this?”

Stepping close to him, she made direct contact with his eyes, trying to read him. A shutter closed over them as she approached. She saw him visibly stiffen, yet the pulse at the base of his neck moved at a rapid rate.

“We always discuss everything. That was the promise ... *je promesse*, do you remember that?”

“Maggie don’t....”

“You made me promise to meet you after we left the boat, but I kept running away from you. You found me and then you made me promise to give this relationship a chance”

Chase cut in, “Maggie, don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what? Remind you of the many times you made me promise to stick it out? When you followed me to New York, I finally thought this was meant to be, and I promised. *We* promised each other that no matter what” Her voice cracked. “We always discussed everything. What happened?”

“Maggie...”

“Something has changed in the last two weeks to make you break that promise. What is it?”

“I’m sorry Maggie.”

The pent-up panic, fear, and despair of the last week finally broke her. She was sobbing from within her chest. There were no tears, just heaving and her voice breaking.

With all the energy she could muster, she steadied her breathing. “Just remember, you broke our promise.”

A shadow crossed his face, but he did not relent. Without a word, he picked up his luggage and continued through the front door, Maggie could not stand to see him walking towards his car.

Sprinting into action, she ran after him and encircled his waist with her arms. Resting her cheeks on his back, she felt him stiffen. “Please, Chase don’t leave us. I love you ... I love you so much! You can’t leave us. What about our son?”

Dropping the cases, he gently pried her hands away. Then he turned. A hand came up as if to touch her face, but he let it drop. She saw the pain in his eyes as he looked at her, for a

moment, and then they hardened.

“You’ve got to be strong for our son, Maggie. I’m sorry to hurt you like this. But I can’t be with you anymore ... I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying you’re sorry,” she shrieked. “And tell me why... why Chase ... why?”

Sobs wrenched from her core, watching Chase dump the suitcases in the trunk of his car. Her shoulders rocked as the pain erupted from her. She was crying, but no tears came. Breathing became difficult with the way her chest constricted. Without a glance back at her, he settled behind the wheel. She saw him start the car and back out of the driveway.

As the vehicle turned and started down the street, she screamed his name, repeatedly. For over an hour, she doubled over. Her gut twisted painfully as she continued to yell his name. The screams tore from her center, until her voice was a hoarse whisper.

The baby’s cry brought Maggie out of a stupor. On wooden legs, she moved to go back inside, not bothering to close the front door. In a daze, she ascended the stairs to Colton’s room. He was awake and needing attention. Like a zombie, she picked him up and brought him back down the stairs, setting him on the rug in the center of the living room.

From the open plan kitchen and dining area, she could see him as she boiled water for his cereal. Occasionally, a quavering sob escaped her, followed by hiccups. She completed her tasks without pausing.

After she fed the baby, she let him play in his playpen while she stood watching him. Standing in the living room, everything seemed out of place. Her mind had grown numb and her body cold.

“Maggie?” someone said her name. She didn’t turn. “Maggie?” the person said again.

It was Andrea. She knew the voice, but it seemed distant. She could tell that the person entered the house, but she kept watching her son play with his toys.

“I came early ...,” Andrea’s voice trailed off as she came to stand before Maggie. “What’s the matter?”

Maggie heard the words but she could not decipher them enough to return an answer. The echo soon faded as her mind went back to watching her son play. Andrea gripped her shoulders and gave a light shake.

“Maggie? Are you all right?”

Her eyes moved, resting on the dark-haired woman before her. It barely registered that someone was inside the house. Staring at Andrea, she saw her mouth move, heard her speak, but the words were detached.

For a moment, the hands dropped from her shoulder and she stepped away to sit on the sofa. Her eyes came back to rest on the woman who was speaking on her cell phone.

“George, turn the car around. I think something’s wrong with Maggie,” she paused, listening on the line. “I don’t know, she looks weird.” Andrea hung up the phone, coming to sit beside her. “Maggie, can you hear me?”

Giving her head a shake, she forced herself back to reality. “I’m fine,” she said, but no words came. Her voice was completely gone.

“I’ll get you some water.” Andrea stood and walked to the kitchen. In that instant, the sound of a car hitting the driveway brought Maggie to her feet.

With expectancy, she stared at the front door. A moment later, George rushed in and her face fell.

“What happened?” George inquired as he entered.

Andrea handed Maggie a glass of water, which she tried to push aside. But the woman would have none of that. Andrea brought the glass to her lips and insisted she take a sip.

“It will clear your dry throat.”

George stood a few feet away. Looking on with worry etched on his face, he repeated his question. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. This is the way I found her. Do you think she got some bad news?”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Should I call the doctor?”

“I’m fine,” Maggie managed to say.

Her voice was husky but audible enough for them to hear.

“What happened?” George asked once more. “Did you hear ...?”

“He’s gone.”

Deep furrows creased his brow, his eyes narrowing. “Who’s gone?”

“Chase,” she almost choked on his name.

“Gone? Is he dead?” George’s face went white and his eyes bulged.

“No, he left me!”

He gripped her shoulders. “Maggie,” his voice thick. “You’re not making sense.”

“He’s gone back to Florida. WHAT’S NOT TO UNDERSTAND?”

“How do you know this?”

Shrugging off his hands, she lumbered to the window that overlooked the lawn. “He came home last night, packed his belongings, and left this morning.”

“He came back?” George’s voice was close as he’d followed her to the window.

“Yes, last night.”

“Tell me exactly what happened, Maggie. I need to make sense of this.”

She turned to face her friends. “He came home in the middle of the night, staggering through the living room. I had to help him up the stairs. He seemed drunk, yet he didn’t smell of alcohol.”

“Then what?” He urged.

“I put him to bed and when I woke up this morning, he was showered, shaved and ready to go, with his bags all packed,” a shudder ran through her at the memory.

George raked a hand through his hair. “What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

It was almost unbearable to continue the conversation as a sharp pain pressed into her chest. Her brain felt like it was branded with a hot iron and her body felt cold and numb.

“That’s it?”

“He said he couldn’t be with me anymore, and he was sorry.” Another round of dry sobs erupted from her. Her breathing became rushed as she started to hyperventilate.

“Relax,” George encouraged.

George placed an arm around her shoulder and led her back to the sofa. “Just relax,” he said. “I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

CHAPTER 40

Herman passed the cigar under his nose and sniffed. This was the happiest day he'd had in a long time. Should he go to his office and wait there? No, he wasn't sure what Chase's attitude would be. He'd stick around in his own office and get word of his arrival first. Still, his heart soared at the return of the prodigal son.

Placing the cigar between his lips, he pretended that it was lit. The doctor warned him against smoking or drinking. He'd had a few drinks, but he decided against the tobacco.

Finally, Chase came to his senses and left that girl. She was well taken care of. If he was correct, the idiotic son of his may have left her his inheritance of two hundred and fifty million dollars. It might be more than that since he knew Chase liked to dabble in the stock market.

It didn't matter. With that money, she could care for the child without bothering them. His son was back and that was reason to celebrate.

A sound at the door made him rise to his feet. Chase would be in the building by now. He quickly put the cigar away and straightened his jacket. His face brightened as the door opened. Moments later, his smile faded as the secretary came in with a file.

"Sir, this is the file you requested for the meeting. The board members are waiting for you."

The moment he learned that Chase had made up his mind to return to the business, he'd rallied an emergency board meeting to have him reinstated. Due to Chase's departure eight months ago, along with his heart scare, the company's profits fell by nearly fifty percent. With Chase at the helm, things would get back to normal.

There was only one issue, and that of the papers his father-in-law left behind. If his wife got her hands on them, he would be a dead man. His wife told him clearly that she knew about the clause in those documents. Irene would not hesitate to throw him out of the company. She must have something on him why she was being so adamant about finding them.

"Thanks. Has Chase arrived yet?"

She smiled. "Yes sir, he's waiting with the others in the board room."

“OK, I’ll be there shortly,” he replied.

Chase had arrived and waiting in the boardroom. Herman wasn’t sure if he should be pleased or not. He’d thought his son would alert him of his arrival at the very least. His elation at Chase’s return would not be dampened by the slight disappointment of his son not checking in with him.

With a bounce in his steps, he made the short trek a few meters down the hall to the boardroom. As he made his way to the meeting, he pushed his wife to the back of his mind. The papers were safe and that’s all that mattered.

When he entered, all eyes, except his son raised to greet him. Chase was sitting in his usual position at one end of the table, with his attention on a thick file. There was a lot to catch up on, and he seemed to be diving right in.

“Let’s get started,” Herman told the group. Taking his seat at the opposite end, he kept his eyes on Chase. “First on the agenda is the return of the rightful CEO, my son.”

Everyone applauded and Chase barely raised his head to acknowledge them. He didn’t seem too happy, Herman noted. Or, was that him getting back to business? He could not tell.

The meeting progressed smoothly without any hiccups, but Chase kept silent for the most part. He interjected a few times to ask about the accounts and the market report. Near the end of the meeting, he stood and everyone fell silent.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll be getting to my office now. But I wanted everyone to know that I’ll be employing my own personal assistant. The current one will be redirected to another department.”

“Whatever you want, my son. Welcome back,” Herman said.

Everyone nodded as he picked up his file and walked out. Herman excused himself and followed him out. Chase was already slipping into the elevator when he entered the hallway. He rushed after him, but the door closed before he got there.

Herman had to wait a while for the elevator to clear before entering. He was in Chase’s office within minutes. Not bothering to knock, he entered as Chase removed his tie and jacket. His son glanced his way and continued to take his chair.

“I thought we could have lunch together,” Herman suggested as he took the chair in front of the desk.

“I have a lot to catch up on, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, at least come home for dinner. The cook is preparing roast.”

Chase raised his head from his file. “No thanks. I’m apartment hunting later.”

“What’s the need to get a new place? You have a wing all to yourself at home, plus the penthouse.”

“Call it a new beginning?”

“All right,” Herman relented. “But you tell your mother why you’re not coming home. I don’t want to be the one to tell her.”

“Sure. Now, if you don’t mind, these market reports won’t wait.”

“Okay, I’m leaving, but it’s good to have you home, son. I’m happy ...”

Chase snapped the file shut, his voice grated. “I knew you’d be happy.”

“What’s the matter? I thought you were happy about coming back. Do you want to go back to New York?”

“Not at all, Father.”

Chase stood and walked to the right of his desk where a cabinet with a small fridge stood. Pulling it open, he extracted a mineral water and pulled the cap off.

“I won’t be going back,” he continued after taking a sip.

“Good. Now this nonsense with that girl....”

“I don’t want to discuss her, not now, nor in the future.”

Herman threw up his hands. He was okay with not discussing the girl. Chase seemed to have erased her from his mind and heart, he was happy to forget about her as well.

“Very well, we won’t discuss her. I’ll be off then.”

He left Chase’s office with a few things on his mind. In particular was Chase’s demeanor. He wondered if perhaps his return was premature. However, Herman was determined to see that Chase got over that girl finally. Now that he was back, he would do everything possible to prevent him from leaving again.

A moment later, when Herman opened his office door, he halted upon seeing someone occupying his chair. His brows knitted as he closed the door and strode in. She didn’t bother to

rise, and he had to take the armchair facing the desk.

“What brings you here, Irene?” he asked his wife.

Her hazel stare penetrated his soul as though she saw right through him. His heart thundered as her lips curved into a sly smile.

“I just stopped by to see my husband, can’t I do that at least?”

“Of course!” he quickly replied as he wondered what she was up to.

Her beautiful face never betrayed her emotions. He watched as she tapped her perfectly manicured nails on the surface of the desk. She leaned back in his high back chair, messing up her neatly coiffured blond hair.

“Did I tell you the shock I got when I walked into the building?” she asked, her eyes still closed and her tone silky smooth. “Chase, my son has returned to Florida. He didn’t even let me know he was coming. Is that why you ordered the cook to make roast?”

“Yes, but I had no idea he didn’t tell you,” he said. “In any case, he refuses to come home to dinner.”

Her eyes popped open, and she glared at him. “What did you do to make him return all of a sudden?”

“I did nothing. He returned of his own free will.”

“That’s crap, and you know it! Chase would never leave Maggie. He would never leave his son.”

“Listen here Irene, you can’t accuse me of something I didn’t do.”

Irene rose slowly, straightening her beige designer suit. “I am not accusing you of anything, Herman,” she replied while moving from behind the desk to stand before him. “If I find that you had anything to do with this, you’ll have me to deal with.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Consider it a warning,” she smiled. “Dinner is at seven sharp. I’ll convince Chase to come home for dinner.”

As his wife glided through his office and exited, he gritted his teeth. Something about Irene’s attitude bothered him. She seemed too calm, and the way she sat in his chair made him uncomfortable. Did she find the papers?

Rushing from his seat, he picked up the phone and dialed. A few seconds later, he was speaking in low tones. He hung up with a relieved sigh.

He'd hidden the papers his father-in-law left in a safe place. He doubted she'd be able to find them. Those papers contained the death sentence for him. He could lose everything if she got her hands on them.

CHAPTER 41

Hot lips trailed along her spine, sending electric shockwaves through her. Maggie groaned. Chase's lips continued to caress her skin. Turning, she reached for his embrace, hoping to feel his lips on hers. Emptiness returned to her.

Her eyes flicked open. She was hugging the pillow and Chase's side of the bed was cold to her touch. It was yet another dream. She'd been having them every night and awoke to them in the morning. His face constantly appeared before her and she heard his voice in every sound.

The days moved ahead at snail's pace. Before she knew it, almost two weeks had elapsed since Chase's departure. She crawled around the house like a sleepwalker, doing her motherly duties.

The first few days after Chase left, she'd rushed to answer the phone as soon as it rang. However, as the days dragged on and he hadn't called, she hated the ringing of the phone, so she took it off the hook. She left her cellphone uncharged to prevent anyone from disturbing her.

George and Andrea came by every day and when Tyler wasn't at the store with Tony, he was there, watching her like a hawk. He'd insisted that she should follow Chase to Florida and let him explain himself. That was a ridiculous suggestion. Maggie was never one to run after a man.

On this day, she eased herself from the bed as usual, but something made her replace the phone on its cradle on the nightstand. Following that, she put her cellphone to charge. Maybe she was still hoping, she wasn't sure, but she knew by now that she could not lock herself away forever. Her son needed a mother, not a zombie.

Not a moment went by without Chase eroding her mind. While she showered and dressed, and while she made the bed, he was there. Her dream from earlier lingered, its erotic effects arousing her body and mind.

What was Chase's game, anyway? Was this some new drama? Was he bored? Did he need to spice up their relationship? Unrealistically, she hoped she was right, but the look in his

eyes and the sound of his voice contradicted that.

He was gone. He'd packed and left without an explanation. It was difficult accepting it. At first, the denial and then the realization. She wasn't sure what stage she was at now. All she knew was that she felt alone, or rather, she preferred to be alone.

For the last couple of days, she insisted that Tyler stay at Tony's to give her space, but she knew he would still come by later. At least he'd stayed the night there and she could think about things without him hovering like a mother hen. She needed to deal with this on her own, but every time she tried to accept it, the pain crushed her.

The only thing she found which eased the pain was work. Like a robot, she started cleaning, making everything spotless. Other women would be exhausted, but not Maggie.

Colton was restless. For the past few nights, he'd not slept well. She'd had to stay up half the night to tend to him. It was as though he was telling her that he missed his father.

When Chase was home, he'd spend time each evening with him. Most nights, he was the one to put Colton to bed. It seemed Colton knew his father wasn't there. What should she tell her son? It's not like if she explained he would understand. What would she say, anyway, that his father just up and left without any justification?

What if he'd stayed and clarified why he was leaving? The outcome would be the same, wouldn't it? Therefore, it made no difference that he left suddenly, as opposed to making a transition. The fact remained that he left her and his child.

Along with her restless nights came some weight loss. She felt the way her clothes hung on her, but what was she to do? Her appetite disappeared along with Chase's leaving. Work was all that kept her sane. Cleaning the house from ceiling to floor gave her purpose.

Colton was sitting on the rug near the coffee table playing with his toys. She'd just about completed the dusting when he dragged the Brentwood Sentinel off the table and began ripping it to shreds.

"Not another mess," she muttered, trotting over and gently extracting the paper from his chubby little hands.

She was gathering the ripped sheets when her eye caught the financial section with the headline. '*D'Morne McMillan Merger*'.

Snatching up the paper, she stood, scanning the contents of the article. According to the

report, Chase and Brittany finally agreed to the marriage merger as the two families put aside the grievances of the past year, when Chase left to be with the mother of his child. The article did not mention any reason for Chase leaving New York, except that he could not be reached for a statement. The writer went on to congratulate the couple, as this was perhaps one of the biggest deals of the decade.

Her heart stopped for a second, before a ball of heat slammed her in the gut. Bile rose to her throat when her stomach churned. The bitter taste lingered in her mouth long after she swallowed.

Steeling herself against the feelings assaulting her, she crumpled the paper, and dumped it in a wastepaper basket.

CHAPTER 42

Chase's hand hovered over the phone. It's been almost two weeks since he left New York, and he hadn't the courage to call. What should he say to Maggie? How could he explain leaving her and his son?

A bout of weakness assailed him followed by pain in his chest. The blood in his veins felt chilled, while his skin felt clammy. He winced as another shot of pain hit him.

A knock at his office door indicated that his appointment was there. He gritted his teeth and stood, fighting the pain while straightening his tie. Lately, it seemed that wearing a suit was akin to wearing a straightjacket. Pushing aside his discomfort, he planted a smile on his face as the door pushed open. His assistant came in.

"Mr. McMillan, the D'Mornes, as well as your father are here to see you."

"Send them in," he instructed.

Moving from behind the desk, he came to stand near the armchair. He'd arranged it so that the sofa and arm chairs faced each other. Antonio, Brittany, and his father walked in together, and he indicated that they take a seat.

"Aleah," he called to his assistant as she was about to leave. "Please get coffee for everyone."

"Yes, Sir."

"Let's get started, shall we," Chase said, taking a seat.

Brittany's phone beeped and she took it out of her Gucci purse, fixing her eyes on the screen. Chase narrowed his eyes as he watched her, seething at the fact that she hadn't bothered to switch the phone off. Her reaction to reading the message was the same as it had been before he left Florida. The tightening of her lips as she read the message and the ashen color of her face was indication that she was involved in something.

"I take it you have agreed to go ahead with the merger as previously planned?" Herman asked.

“Yes, Father. I have decided to marry Brittany.”

Her head shot up at his words and she stared at him icily. Antonio’s face broke into a bright smile, while Herman’s sly look did not get past Chase.

“That’s good news!” Antonio grinned. “Your father is very convincing.”

“I think Chase made this decision on his own.”

“Oh, but you must have done something. Why else would you have that look on your face?”

“Trust me,” Herman replied. “I am just as shocked as you are about all this.”

Antonio chuckled as he shifted his gaze from Herman to Chase. Chase met Antonio’s stare, the man’s dark eyes boring into him. Herman looked from one to the other with interest.

“What about that girl in New York? She won’t make trouble, will she?” Antonio asked.

Chase’s chest tightened at the question. “Why would she make trouble? She has never been a trouble maker, Sir.”

“No need to be so defensive”

“With all due respect, sir. I would rather not discuss Maggie with anyone.”

“Very well, then. When shall we proceed with the engagement? Shall we have a big soiree or not?”

“Whatever you wish. By the way ...” Chase reached into his left breast pocket, pulling out a small jewelry box, which he handed to Brittany. “Brittany, I think this belongs to you.”

With some hesitation in her movements, she reached for the box. Her face was set, and she gave Chase a hard stare. The coffee came while they still eyed each other.

After Aleah left, Brittany opened the box and stared at a single two carat solitaire. He knew she was expecting something flashier, but would not complain. In his mind, if she needed a more expensive ring, she’d have to get it damn herself.

“Why, thank you,” she sweetly said, her voice contradicting her features.

“You’re welcome.”

“Well then, it’s official,” Herman announced. “We should plan the party as soon”

“Uncle Herman, please. I don’t want a party,” Brittany said.

Antonio's brow shot up. "Why on earth not?"

"I'd rather just get married as soon as possible rather than waste time on a party."

"Aha! Smart girl," Herman agreed.

"So it's settled. Have you thought of a date?" Antonia asked.

Everyone looked at Chase, including Brittany. Apparently, they were expecting him to set the date as well. All right, he said in his mind. He'd give them what they all wanted.

"A month from today. Is that okay with you, *darling*?" He knew he was laying it on a bit thick.

"Y-y-yes, that's fine," Brittany stuttered, her cheeks staining crimson.

* * *

The day went by quickly, as Chase tried to keep his mind busy with work. He started several times to call Maggie, but decided it was too risky. They were perhaps keeping tabs on his phone that would intercept the call. What would he say to her anyway, that he was sorry? That was no good now, was it?

Reaching inside his pants pocket, he pulled out a small box. In it was an empty vial, which he extracted and turned over in his hand. Traces of a dark substance settled at the bottom as he held it between thumb and forefinger. His grip tightened around it when the past few weeks flashed in his mind.

A wave of nausea assailed him. Wrestling against the sick feeling in his stomach, he inhaled deeply and remained still, until the feeling passed.

Clenching his jaw, he replaced the vial and returned the container to his pocket. The sound of the door opening made his head snap up. The door pushed open with a violent force, banging against the wall. Chase scraped his chair back and stood as a red-faced George stormed in.

George glowered at him and his mouth twisted angrily. Chase had expected this sooner, but he knew George was trying to come to terms with what happened.

Everything had been unexpected. His disappearance, his return, and his leaving New York had all been abrupt. He wished he could tell his best friend who was no less than a brother the reason. He wished to explain, but it was too late. George was upon him and he came around

the desk to meet his wrath.

“I’m sorry, man,” he said.

When his friend’s fist tightened and came up, he saw it. He saw George’s fist coming towards him, but he did nothing to stop it. The fist landed on his chin, a powerful blow that made him stagger back against the desk. His ass hit the desk, knocking over the pencil holder. For a moment, he was dizzy, but he shook his head to clear the fog.

His hand came up to rub his chin while George’s nostrils flared. Chase heard him breathing heavily and knew he was irate.

“I suppose I deserved that,” he said, still rubbing his mandible.

George came forward, his finger pointing directly at his face. “I don’t ever want to lay eyes on you...”

“You need to hear ...”

“Shut up! Just shut the hell up!” George’s voice echoed in the office.

The secretary ran to the door, a shocked look on her face. Discreetly, she pulled the door shut, leaving them alone.

“There’s nothing you can say to me that will make a difference. Do you know what Maggie went through because of you? How she ran around trying to find you? Flying to Hawaii, coming to see your father ...”

Chase’s eyes met George’s. “She came to see my father?”

“What do you think?”

“She shouldn’t have done that,” he said, turning away from his friend.

“Damn right, she shouldn’t. You don’t deserve her. So stay the hell away from her. The only reason I’m even considering continuing with the business is because of Maggie.”

“Thank you. I need you to take care of her.”

“Don’t act as if you care!”

Chase turned back around, his eyes glinting. “I still care. Colton is my son and she’s the mother of my child!”

“Why didn’t you just leave her alone when you had the chance last year? She kept

running and you kept chasing. It was all a game to you?”

“Why are you so protective of her? Are you in love with her?” Chase asked, a stab of jealousy hit him in the gut. His features darkened.

George glared at him. “Don’t make this about me. This is about you breaking the heart of a woman you said you loved!”

“There are things you don’t know”

“Then explain them to Maggie, she needs to hear your reasons.”

“I can’t.”

“You can’t, or you won’t? Just leave her the hell alone. I’m helping her file for full custody of her baby. Hell, I’ll marry her if that will help. Now that you’re marrying Brittany, I’m sure she doesn’t want a biracial stepchild.”

“What’s this about marrying Maggie? She’ll never marry you.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Maggie loves me,” he grated. “She will never marry anyone else.”

“She’ll be alone while you are free to marry Brittany. Is that what you want?”

“How did you know I’m marrying Brittany? We only got engaged today,” he frowned.

“Why do you think I flew to Florida? That announcement was in the Brentwood Sentinel a few days ago.”

Chase stared stone faced at him. It seemed they anticipated his decision and announced it. They had good reason, he thought. They knew his hands were tied, and he would give in.

“I’m sorry about that. That’s shouldn’t have happened.”

“Sorry?” George asked, his voice taking on a note of incredulity.

George advanced as if to punch him once more, his fists clenched at his side. Chase braced himself for another hit, but George shook his head.

“You could have at least told her.”

“How did she take it?” Chase asked, his voice thick.

Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead as another bout of nausea hit him. He blinked

and swallowed, trying not to let George see his weakness.

George scowled at him. “How do you think she took it?”

George began to tell Chase how he found out about the engagement and the state Maggie was in. The day had gone the same since Chase decided to return to Florida. They were all angry and heartbroken that he didn’t even call. Chase and George had known each other most of their lives and considered each other best friends. Chase’s actions had devastated him as much as it did Maggie.

He was in the office when Andrea knocked on his door.

“You haven’t seen the paper yet, have you?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, looking up from his laptop.

She placed the Brentwood Sentinel on the desk before him. He peered at the paper with a frown, expecting to see the latest stock market numbers. Then his breath stopped as he saw the headline: *‘D’Morne McMillan Merger.’*

“Sonofa... Have you heard from Maggie?” he asked.

“No, I tried calling the number but it rang without being answered. I think you should deal with this one. I’ll take care of things here,” she suggested.

Sparing no time, he left the office, speeding across town to get to her. When he reached the house, she would not answer the door so he tried the knob and it was unlocked. He found her sitting in the living room. Colton was in his playpen tossing out the toys and trying to climb over.

“Maggie, are you okay?” he’d asked

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she laughed.

She stood and started picking up the toys as though everything was all right. He watched her making the living room neat.

“You saw the paper didn’t you?” he asked.

“Of course, I saw it. What of it? Why are you here anyway? Shouldn’t you be helping your friend plan his wedding?”

“What are you talking about, Maggie?”

“You’re his best friend, you knew about this, didn’t you?”

“Of course not. I’m with you on this.”

“Why would you be on my side? He’s your friend. You’re running his business,” her voice cracked.

“I’m your friend, too.”

“No, I was just an employee on his boat, a girl you introduced to him. Why would you be loyal to me? It doesn’t make sense that your loyalty is with me and not Chase.”

“I met you first ...,” he began, but his voice trailed off.

Her head snapped up and she met his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m doing this now because of you and the baby. He may have been my friend. I can’t condone what he’s done, Maggie.”

He knew he’d diverted her attention from what he really wanted to say. How could he admit that he liked her more than he cared to admit? Those feelings had since turned into something else. He’d forced them aside and now saw her as a younger sibling, especially since he’d seen Chase as his brother.

“I don’t want to have anything to do with him anymore. I’m moving back to my uncle. I can’t stand being in this house.”

He grabbed her shoulder and willed her to look at him. “You listen to me Maggie. Everything is in your name, this house, the business, everything.”

“But Chase...”

“They’re yours. You have a son with the man. I don’t know what he’s doing, but whatever it is, it ain’t right. I can’t believe he’s doing this after all that you two went through to be together.”

“Maybe he has a reason.” The words flew from her mouth without notice.

“Are you defending him now?” George’s surprise was evident on his face.

“No ... I don’t know,” she said, her voice brittle. “George, it hurts and I don’t know what’s going on. Why is he doing this?”

He pulled her into his arms and caressed her hair. She rested her head on his shoulder as

she did that dry sob he'd grown used to. He didn't mind as long as she let it all out.

"Why," she cried, her words muffled against his shoulder.

"I don't know, but I aim to find out."

A shudder and sob escaped her. "He hasn't even called his son."

When George finished recounting the events of the encounter with Maggie, Chase's face seemed crestfallen. He couldn't understand what Chase was feeling. The man staggered to his chair behind the desk and ran his hand through his hair. He then closed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

George watched him closely but could not figure him out. There was sweat on his forehead and his skin looked pale. Chase seemed different somehow and he wanted to inquire about his health. But when he opened his eyes, George saw a resoluteness in them that was never there. Chase set his jaw and his lips tightened.

"Take care of her, please. Do whatever it takes to make things easier," Chase said, his voice like steel.

"You're really doing this? Don't you love her?"

"George please, for what it's worth, we were like brothers, so for the sake of our kinship, just take care of Maggie and my son."

George gritted his teeth as Chase refused to give him any answers, even to say whether he still loved Maggie. Why was he taking this road? It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

He was there last year when Chase gave up everything for Maggie. Was he doing this as revenge on Herman? Was he marrying Brittany to dig up more dirt on them? He knew Chase had them investigated. However, why would he not say anything? Why make such a drastic move as to marry Brittany? Why break Maggie's heart?

"You'd better have some darn good reason for breaking Maggie's heart because I swear...."

Chase walked to the window, which overlooked the streets below. Digging his hands in his pockets, he stood with his back straight. In George's eyes, his friend looked thin. Was he ill?

"Just take care of her, George. If you can't do it for me, at least do it because you like

her.”

“She’s like a sister to me...”

Chase’s head whipped around. “You’re sure acting like a man in love though.”

“What if I was in love with her? Does it matter to you now that you’re marrying the enemy?”

George wasn’t sure why he said that. Perhaps he needed to get a rise from Chase, something to make him admit he still loved Maggie. But Chase was showing nothing. Whatever game he was playing must be something so dangerous that he could not even admit that.

“I’m asking for the last time. What happened? A love like yours doesn’t disappear overnight.”

When he arrived earlier he wanted to bite Chase’s head off, but now the beginnings of doubt wiggled its way to the back of his mind. Something was off and he wanted answers. Not to mention the way Chase looked.

Chase turned to face him, a stride or two brought him to within inches. Chase gripped his shoulders and looked him directly in the eye.

“I need you to stop asking questions. Just take care of Maggie and my son, please.”

The pleading in his voice jabbed at George that by the time he left MacCorp, he was sure something was going on. This was not the Chase he’d known for nearly thirty years. They shared everything, every secret. This time it wasn’t so, and that set alarm bells ringing in his head. If Chase was in trouble or sick, he aimed to find out.

The shock of the past couple of weeks had been so immense that he’d refused to see it. It was a big mess of confusion, and he hadn’t stopped to question Chase’s actions. Maybe Maggie was right and Herman had done something to make Chase return to the company and become engaged to Brittany.

This was something that would take a lot of investigating, and George was determined to figure it out. Maggie deserved to know what was going on ... hell, *he* wanted to know. If Chase was not forthcoming about it, then he’d just have to do his own digging.

CHAPTER 43

The day started out as any other. Chase had been gone nearly a month and the ache she'd felt when he left was still there. Like an automaton, she did her chores each day. Keeping busy, she tried to prevent herself from thinking about him, or what she might have done to cause him to leave.

Some moments were odd, like the times she felt his presence in the room. He wasn't dead, so the most she could make of it was that he missed her. She told herself it was hopeful thinking. There were other things that reminded her of him like his scent, which still lingered in their bed.

She found a box of clothes they'd put in storage to give to charity. In it were a few of his shirts and some jeans. She wore his shirts, perhaps to feel close to him or to make herself feel like he hadn't really left. Most of all she was confused.

The questions kept coming. What had she done? Why did he leave? Should she have gone after him? What was she to do now? She knew she must move on, but something inside hoped that he'd walked through the door any moment.

Maggie bathed and fed Colton, put him in his playpen, and went to get a cup of coffee. She grabbed an apple from the bowl on the counter and opened the cupboard over the sink to get the coffee mug when the one belonging to Chase caught her attention.

The two mugs were a pair, his and hers. They'd had them made for Valentine's day. They'd hoped that Colton would have been born on the day, but he was two hours too late. His birth date was February 15, 2:12 a.m.

After staring at it for a moment, she absently pulled it from the cupboard, turning it around to look at the heart and inscription, *Maggie's Chase*. She took hers out, as well, and stared at the inscription on it, *Chase's Maggie*.

Her hand tightened around the mug as a ball of fire flared within her chest. The flame spread throughout her body, flushing her from head to toe. With a shriek, she tossed the mug against the wall and followed with the other. The clash of the glass against the wall echoed in the silence.

At that moment, the phone rang and she ignored it. She was in no mood to talk to anyone. Her breathing was heavy and her hands were shaking. Her shoulders rocked as she convulsed.

The ringing stopped, replaced by the doorbell. She thought of ignoring that too, but she knew the person wouldn't go away. She left the mess on the kitchen floor and went to open the door. It was George, looking at her strangely as though he knew what she'd done.

“Maggie, we need to talk.”

She stood aside to let him pass. “If this is some pep talk, I'm not in the mood.”

The phone rang again, and she grumbled. She felt that her head would explode now that she'd worked herself up and a headache was now pounding her temples.

“I'll get it.” George rushed to answer it before it stopped.

Her attention was drawn to the playpen, where Colton had one leg over the side and had almost made it out. With a grunt, he fell back onto the rubber flooring and came back to attempt climbing again. He was getting bigger and she knew that soon, this baby pen would not hold him in.

She only allowed him to spend one hour in the mornings and another hour in the afternoons in it. At other times, she let him roam free around the living room, which she steam cleaned once a week. Maybe it was time to get a bigger playpen.

Maggie's mind wandered in several directions, while she watched her son getting frustrated at not being able to climb over the sides of his pen. He'd already thrown out the toys so he had nothing to play with inside.

“Maggie,” George's voice interrupted her. “Maggie!” She turned to stare at him holding out the phone. “It's for you.”

Still watching the baby, she took the handset. George started picking up the toys as she brought the instrument to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Miss Carter?” the voice was unfamiliar.

“Yes?”

“This is Vikran Surajhi from Surajhi Jewelers. Mr. Chase's order has been ready for pickup for a while now. But I am unable to reach him. I've been calling this number for a

couple of weeks as well, but the number was always busy.”

Hearing Chase’s name brought a stab to her chest. Her heart jumped and began its usual heavy drumming. “What order?”

“It was supposed to be a surprise, but I wasn’t sure what to do since the pick-up date passed a month ago. It’s the engagement ring, ma’am.”

What little blood she had left in her face drained away, leaving her ashen. Her head became light as she gripped the phone. So he’d planned to marry Brittany all this time? He even ordered the ring while here in New York?

The cordless fell from her grasp as the pain in her chest intensified. The sound of the phone hitting the area rug seemed distant. A hand flew up to massage her chest as she grimaced in pain.

George was by her side in an instant. He picked up the phone and spoke into it, while eyeing her carefully. He stayed on the phone while she winced and tried to steady her heartbeat.

“Maggie,” George said her name. She looked up at him. “I think you should hear him out.”

“Why should I listen while some jeweler tells me about an engagement ring for another woman?”

“The ring is yours,” he said.

She blinked. “What?”

“Talk to him,” he repeated, shoving the phone back into her hand.

With heart racing like a spooked horse galloping through a meadow, she brought the phone back to her ear. “Hello?”

“Miss Carter. I’m sorry to have startled you. Mr. Chase said he wanted to surprise you with the ring when he returned from his business trip.”

“He did surprise me,” she muttered in an undertone.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear that.”

She laughed, a hollow sound without mirth. “Nothing, go on Mr. Surahji.”

“Will you come to pick it up?” he asked.

“Are you sure this ring belongs to me?”

He hesitated a second before asking, “Aren’t you Maggie Carter?”

“Yes.”

“Then it definitely is yours. The diamonds were specially ordered from Australia because Mr. Chase wanted conflict free. It is a custom design.”

“Can’t you sell it...,” she began to ask but someone snatched the phone from her hand. “What are you doing?” she asked George.

“We’ll be there to get the ring, please don’t sell it,” he said into the phone before hanging it up.

“Why’d you do that?” she hissed.

He strolled to the side table where he rested the handset in its cradle. Coming back to stand before her, he folded his arms and looked at her with a smile.

“Don’t you see what this means?” he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Something is off with this engagement with Brittany. The proof is that ring.”

She wasn’t convinced. “I don’t know.”

George was unwavering. “I think I’m right and that Herman may have threatened him.”

That very thing had crossed her mind. However, Chase was never one to be afraid of his father. It didn’t make sense at all that a threat from Herman would make him leave without notice.

“Do you think so?”

George nodded. “Let’s get to the jeweler’s and hear all the facts. We’ll drop Colton at Andrea’s, so you can get a break. You look exhausted.”

“Okay, just let me change,” she reluctantly replied.

Going out was the last thing she wanted to do. Getting that ring from the jewelers was not something she was prepared for either. Still, her curiosity about the ring got the better of her, and she allowed George to convince her to go.

* * *

When they exited the front door, Maggie's eye caught a black sedan parked a few meters down the street. Something about the vehicle seemed familiar but she could not place it. Before getting into the front passenger seat of George's car, she stared at the vehicle. Tried as she might to figure where she saw it before, she could not.

"What happen?" George queried.

"Nothing, let's go."

As they made their way to the jeweler on Bean Alley, Maggie wondered about what George said. What if Chase was threatened? What if he was abducted by his own father? She wished she could find the answers. They would help her to get a handle on what's going on, or at least give her closure. Was this moving on? She asked herself. Was going to pick up that ring the right thing to do?

"Stop the car," she ordered George. He glanced at her with a frown. "Stop the car!"

"What's the matter?"

"I can't do this," she bewailed.

"Maggie, I am not stopping this car. Don't you want to know about that ring? What if it proves that Chase never willingly left you?"

She closed her eyes. "That's what I'm scared of, that he left of his own free will."

"I don't believe that. You should have seen him when I paid him a visit two weeks ago. I could tell something was wrong."

Maggie scrunched her face. "You went to see Chase?"

"Ah, I didn't tell you because I didn't want to upset you."

"And you're telling me now?"

"I was upset when I went to see him. It was right after I saw the news of his engagement. I wanted to smack him really bad."

"You didn't hurt him, did you?"

"I may have hurt him a little," he admitted.

"Why'd you do that?"

They were pulling into the parking lot of the small brownstone building.

“I can’t believe you’re defending him.”

Lowering her voice, she denied it. “I’m not defending him.”

“I was angry, and I just had to get it off my chest. But he made me promise to take care of you. I could see in his eyes that something was going on, but he wouldn’t say. When I told him I’d marry you, he was jealous.”

“You told him what!”

“Let’s do it, just to make him squirm,” he suggested with a grin.

For the first time in a month, Maggie chuckled. And it was not the hollow sarcastic laugh as before. This time, she was amused by what her friend said. He was telling her this to make her feel better.

Nevertheless, she could not help wonder if what George said had any merit. Was Chase jealous of her? Would he come running back if she became engaged to George? It was tempting to see what he’d do, but it wasn’t a chance she was willing to take. Maybe she’d leave that for a last resort.

When they entered the building, a clerk greeted them. She directed them to a display case where a man with balding dark hair and black thick-rimmed glasses stood waiting.

“Miss Carter, you’re just as beautiful as Mr. Chase described,” Mr. Surahji said.

Her stomach fluttered at the complement. “Thank you.”

“This is the ring,” he said, pushing a red velvet ring box forward. “And I believe this is yours as well.”

He stretched his hand out with a thin gold band. She took it and stared as her eyes watered and a lump came to her throat. The ring belonged to her mother. She thought she’d lost it a couple of months ago.

So, this was what happened to it? Chase took it to the jewelers because he knew it fitted her ring finger perfectly. Her knees threatened to buckle from the weakness that incapacitated her. Reaching out, she grabbed the smooth surface of the display case.

George leaned close and murmured, “Are you OK?”

Steeling herself to regain some composure, she nodded. “I’m fine.”

Placing her mother's ring on her right ring finger, she bit back the tears that stung her eyes. "Thank you," she croaked through a frog in her throat.

"Now, here's the ring he ordered for you," Mr. Surahji said.

A gasp flew from her lips when she beheld the sparkling radiant cut diamond. It was set in a halo design with multiple stones running along the sides. It was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen.

"Did Chase really order this for me?" She could hardly breathe.

"Yes, he even had it inscribed."

Tears sprang from her eyes. More accurately, the tears finally unhinged from somewhere deep within. She could not help bawling in front of the man who looked at her with a stunned expression.

"Is something wrong?" he asked George.

"No, she's just happy," replied George, placing an arm around her shoulder and giving her a handkerchief. "It's okay, Maggie. Let it out."

It took some will power to fight back the waterworks and regain some control. After some minutes, she wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and picked up the ring.

"How much does he owe on it," she asked with a sniffle.

"It's all been paid for," Mr. Surahji replied. "Won't you read the inscription and try it?"

With a trembling hand, she picked up the ring and peered on the inner part. The writing was small but she read it clearly ... *Maggie, my lifeline.*

CHAPTER 44

Maggie patrolled the living room while George observed. Since coming from the jeweler's, she found she could not sit still. Colton was with Andrea and that was good. She needed some space to think clearly for the first time in a month.

That inscription on the ring was all she needed to know that Chase loved her. He loved her six weeks ago, when he ordered the custom-made ring, and he perhaps loved her now. She lifted her left hand and stared at the ring, which she hadn't taken off since putting it on in the store.

"Let's do this!" she whirled to face George who was sitting on the sofa. "Let's find out what happened. I can't let him marry Brittany. He loves me and I love him."

George's face brightened. "That's my girl! Should we go to Florida and see him?"

"Not until we have some proof. I mean, if Herman has something holding over his head, he may not admit that he was held against his will."

"You're a genius," George grinned. "I'll call Mark, he may want to help us."

"I'll speak to Detective Akoni from the Waikiki Beach police, to see if they'd found anything. I haven't had the courage to call them since Chase returned."

"Good idea," George agreed.

While George called Mark, Maggie called Waikiki using her cellphone. It took a few tries before she got through. The detective was happy to speak with her.

"I've been trying to call you for about a month now Miss Carter," he informed her.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "A lot has happened since."

"I know that Mr. McMillan has returned, but I had a few things I wanted to discuss with you. I think it's important."

"Please tell me," she urged, anxious to hear what he wanted to say.

"Though the case is officially closed, I thought it pertinent to bring you up to speed about what we found. We thought some things didn't make sense. The reason I'm doing this is

because there are times when persons have been kidnapped and set free for some reason.”

“Go on, Detective.”

“The woman who came to return the keys to the hotel was not Brittany D’Morne, like you suggested. The hotel manager verified that the woman who returned the hotel key was a black woman. We believe she was trying to impersonate you.”

“Why?”

He continued, “That we don’t know. However, we did find something of interest. When we sent out the bulletin, we received a report from the Waihawa district. About a month ago, some suspicious activity was reported at Kaena Point.”

“Where is this Kaena Point?” She asked.

“That’s about an hour away from Waikiki, on the southern shore of the island.”

“Oh.”

“At the foot of the hills near the Mokuleia Forest Reserve is an old farm house. We have reason to believe that’s where they took Chase.”

As she listened her mind began to picture how they might have held him at gunpoint, cuffed and gagged him into submission. Pushing aside her wild imagination, she concentrated on what the officer was saying.

“How so?” she asked,

“When we went there we found his shredded itinerary along with a few more items that we feel belonged to him.”

Her heartbeat deafened her now that her suspicions were being confirmed. Her mind spun like a wheel on an axle. Would Herman have done this to his own son? She wished she’d slapped him more than once.

“Miss Carter?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“I would have liked to question Mr. McMillan, but now that he has returned to New York and we have no clear evidence, there’s nothing more we can do.”

“Did you take photos of these items, detective?”

“Yes, we did. Would you like me to email them to you?”

“I’d like that very much.” She gave him her email address.

“There’s one more thing, Miss Carter. We checked for any aircrafts that were issued clearance for landing at either airports.”

“Yes?”

“The McMillan jet never came to Oahu during that period.”

“Are you saying you don’t think Herman did this?”

“No, what I’m saying is, we did some checking and based on what we found, a group of MacCorp board members used the jet to attend a conference in Europe. But a small private plane registered to an Alexander Sierras was cleared to use the Kalaeloa Airport around the time Chase McMillan arrived on the island. The plane was there for some time and departed the island around the time you left Oahu.”

“That means Chase was in Oahu while I was there!”

The detective agreed. “That could be so.”

“Thanks Detective, I appreciate this.”

The officer continued, “You’re welcome. Anyway, since this is now out of our jurisdiction, and the case is officially closed, there is nothing more we can do. You mentioned a PI friend of yours. If you want to know more, maybe you should consider hiring him.”

“Thanks, detective,” she said, her mind racing.

After ending the call, she placed the phone on the coffee table while her mind tried to unravel the puzzle. Now, more confused than before and even doubtful, she wondered if her new found confidence was just hopeful thinking. What if things were as they seemed, and Chase wanted to marry Brittany all along? What if he willingly went along with them?

Then she glanced at the ring on her finger, her mind going back to the night Chase came home. The events unfolded as if it was yesterday. She’d been asleep, only to be awakened by a noise. She thought about checking on the baby, but by the time she reached the passage, she heard a door close.

The dread had made her hair stand on end and her heart pound at a rapid pace. She’d made her way halfway down the stairs when he’d staggered in.

With eyes closed, she pictured his face, the ruggedness, unshaven, and the weakness in his eyes. She regretted not taking him to get checked at the hospital that very night. He was so out of it, that she wanted him to rest and then she'd have insisted he see the doctor in the morning.

Chase seemed happy to see her that night as she kissed his face. The familiar growl had erupted from his chest as she pressed her lips to his. His arms had encircled her in a tight embrace. She felt his heart thud against his chest as she held him close.

Then her mind fast-forwarded to the following morning and the pain erupted inside her once more. She fought through it as she played the scene over in her mind. The look on his face was one she'd never seen. It was as though he'd deliberately shielded himself from her seeing what he was feeling.

Why couldn't she have seen how he was fighting against his own feelings? He'd raised his hand to touch her face. The pain in his eyes had been evident. She was too distraught to see it.

"Gosh, I was so blind," she mumbled.

Something else about that morning seemed odd. She went through the scene several more times, trying to pinpoint what was off about the event, but failed.

Chase had packed before she had awakened. She followed him down the stairs and into the driveway, begging him not to go. He didn't listen. She'd watched as his car disappeared down the street.

Maggie's eyes flew open and she gasped. She held her palms to the side of her head as she played the scene once more. The car parked down the street. It was there before Chase came home from Hawaii, it was there the morning he left and even when she and George left for the jewelry store. Come to think of it, she'd even seen it on several other occasions while going about her business. She walked to the window and peered through a slit in the curtains. The car was there.

"George!" she shrieked.

He was still on the phone, but he turned at the sound of the urgency in her voice. Cutting his call short he trotted over with worry lines etched on his face.

"What's the matter?"

Her breathing was heavy and her mind abuzz with questions. "I think someone is

watching us.”

His look was one of disbelief. “What makes you say that?”

“The car down the street. I was so distraught that I hadn’t paid it much mind.”

“What car?” George asked, puzzled.

She let him peek through the curtain at the vehicle. Closing her eyes once more, she drew up the picture. All the times she’d seen the vehicle she pulled up in her mind. It was the same car. She could not see inside but she did remember noticing that it faced the direction of the house.

“It was there before, several times,” she was adamant. “I know my neighbors, and that car does not belong on this street. God knows how long it’s been there. I think it even followed me a few times, as well.”

“Are you sure it’s the same car? And are you sure it doesn’t belong to your neighbors? It could be anybody’s car.”

Biting on her lips, she thought about it some more. “Well, I’m not one hundred percent sure, but close enough. My gut tells me so, and no, it’s not hunger.”

“Given the events of the last few weeks, I’ll never doubt your gut again,” he remarked. “We’ve got to get a photo of it ...”

“Shhh,” Maggie said, placing a finger on George’s lips and one on hers.

Moving to the coffee table and picked up the phone, then indicated he do the same. She continued to talk as if she hadn’t broken the conversation.

“We need some photos of the baby to send to his grandmother,” she said.

She knew it was perhaps silly, but desperate times called for silliness. Maybe she’d watched too many crime programs on television, but when someone was being watched, it was likely they were being listened to, as well.

They continued to talk about the baby, switching the subject away from the vehicle. While talking animatedly about baby photos she texted to George her thoughts about the house perhaps being bugged. She didn’t know exactly what made her do it, and perhaps she was wrong.

“You know what I need?” she asked after she’d run out of things to babble about. “Pizza.

I'm longing for some pizza."

"I'm hungry too. Let's go," George agreed.

They could talk freely in a neutral place. When they left the house, the car was still there. George said he was noticing it for the first time. They drove out slowly while Maggie tried to get the number on the plate.

"That's strange," she uttered.

"Can't you see it? Should I slow down?"

"They taped it out... they taped over the numbers!"

He slowed his car to snail's pace to get a good look at the number but nodded moments later. "That is strange," he agreed. "I've been thinking about something. If they've bugged the house, they heard everything. They'd know we figured out they are watching the house."

Maggie agreed. Thinking for a moment, she tried to come up with a plan, but nothing surfaced. All she could think was that, she'd need to have the house checked as soon as possible.

"Well, if they heard us they may change their tactics. The black car may leave and they may try something else."

"Maggie, shouldn't we call the police?" he suggested.

"And tell them what? That a car is parked down the street?"

"You have a point," he agreed.

She half turned in her seat, looking pointedly at him. "Don't panic, but this car may be bugged as well," she whispered.

George slammed the break. "What?" he yelled.

"I said not to panic," she scolded.

The car jerked forward before moving smoothly unto the throughway. Not certain if her theory was correct, they both kept quiet until they reached their destination.

Domino's Pizza was a few blocks from the jewelry store on Bean Alley. They parked and quickly made their way into the restaurant.

It was Thursday, around three in the afternoon, which meant that the lunch rush had gone.

The thought occurred to Maggie that maybe they'd been followed as well. However, there was no clear indication of that. If they were, the antagonists remained unseen.

Once inside, they took seats near a window. This way they had a clear view of the parking lot and street. Now settled, they ordered a large pizza and drink. The strangest thing was that her appetite seemed to have returned with a vengeance. The adrenaline rush she felt, flushed her skin from head to feet, while her heart raced with the anticipation of getting Chase back.

“Now that we're here, let's plan our next move,” she declared, barely masking her excitement.

“What do you have in mind?”

“We have to find out who Alexander Sierras is.” George looked puzzled, so she explained. “While you were on the phone with Mark, I had a very enlightening conversation with the detective. He found out that Herman's jet was in Europe during Chase's disappearance.”

“Ha, the top level executives attend a conference in London every year,” he informed her. “He usually allowed them use of the jet.”

“You knew about that?”

“It's an annual thing. Chase usually attend as well, so I suppose they'd have to continue without him.”

Maggie thought for a moment, then asked, “What if Herman used that as an alibi?”

“That's a possibility. What else did the detective say?”

“That he found Chase's shredded itinerary at an abandoned house near an airfield. The only private plane to have used the strip belonged to this Sierras fellow. Herman could have hired him”

“Where have I heard that name before?” George frowned.

“You worked at MacCorp, so maybe he's Herman's associate?” she suggested. “By the way, what did Mark say?”

“He warned me to be careful, and he said he would come to New York to see me. He didn't say much more. It seems he's in the middle of an operation.”

“Did he say where those documents were?”

“No, just that he would come see me in a couple of days.”

“We don’t have much time. Chase is marrying that ice queen in less than two weeks. If we don’t find the evidence, I lose him forever. Should we hire someone else?”

“If they are keeping tabs on us, don’t you think that would make matters worse? Mark is a master of disguise and it sounded to me like he knew what was going on,” George informed her. “So I think we should let him handle it.”

“Did he say something?” she was curious and apprehensive at the same time.

George reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Not really, but I know him. Look, let’s be patient. We’ll come up with something, don’t worry.”

It was difficult to stay sane and have patience while the love of her life was forced to marry a woman he didn’t love. If she could only prove that he was doing it under duress, they could call off the wedding. How would she prove it? That was the moment she remembered the other thing the detective told her about the woman who claimed to be Chase’s wife.

“If we could find that woman, we could make her talk.”

“What woman?” he asked.

“Detective Akoni said the woman who retrieved Chase’s belongings from the hotel was black.”

“Whoa. So, it wasn’t Brittany after all?”

The afternoon sunlight streamed through the glass panel, landing a beam on her engagement ring. The diamond sparkled. Her throat constricted and she bit her bottom lip to suppress a moan. The heaviness in her core weighed on her, but she was determined to fight it.

If Chase hadn’t gone back to Florida, they would be the ones planning their wedding. The ring on her finger proved that. She stared at it for a few minutes, trying to figure out how they would find that woman.

“I wish I could see the tape,” she bemoaned.

“Can’t your detective buddy forward it to you along with the photos he promised?”

“George, you’re the best!”

Without delay, she made the call. Her anxiety fueled her determination, not only to find the truth, but also to bring Chase home. Maggie felt that nothing would now stand in her way

of finding the answers she sought. She was even prepared to return to Hawaii, if needed.

“Hello?” Detective Akoni answered.

“Detective, it’s Maggie Carter, once again.”

“I was about to send those photos you requested.”

“There’s something I need to ask detective,” she said. “The manager said the woman who returned the key had some kind of proof she was Chase’s wife. Did he tell you what it was?”

“It was an identification card. We think it was fake. Miss Carter, as I said before, there’s nothing more I can do. Now that your fiancé is safely home, maybe you should put all that behind you?”

She let out a frustrated breath. “That’s it detective, he’s not home.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left detective, he left me the morning after he returned, and is now engaged to Brittany D’Morne!”

The man swore. It was loud enough that she heard it clearly through the phone connection. “This is some drama. Tell me from the beginning, Miss Carter.”

Telling him the whole story from the time she met Chase to the moment he left her was a painful ordeal. Recalling her run-ins with Herman and later Brittany, was excruciating. When she was done, her chest ached as though someone wedged a spear into it.

“I wish I could help you,” he said. “You should consider hiring a PI as I suggested before.”

“I know but we are being watched as well.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Ninety nine percent sure. But what would I say to the police? That a car is parked meters away from my house?”

“Yes. If you feel threatened in any way you should report it,” he encouraged.

“They haven’t done anything and what if me reporting it puts Chase in more danger?”

“I see what you’re getting at. I wish there was something I could do to help you Miss Carter. This situation sound like a classic case of intimidation to me. Consider reporting it if

those people contact you or make any direct threats.”

“I will.”

“Is there anything else?” he inquired.

“Detective, there is something you can do for me. Along with those photos, can you send me the hotel security footage? I’d like to find the woman, so I need a photo.”

“Here’s what I can do for you. I’ll have my tech guy do a still and send a composite. How’s that? I can’t send the footage because that’s against our policies, I can only send the photos.”

Elated, she relaxed her shoulders and showed George a thumbs-up sign. “That’s perfect, Detective, better than I hoped.”

“All right, give me a few minutes, and I’ll send them to the email you gave me.”

“Thank you.”

“If you like, I can give you the name and number of a guy in New York City who could help. He’s an ex-Marine and very thorough.”

“Please do that, Detective,” she breathed.

“Good. I’ll send all that in the email. Good luck, Miss Carter. I hope you find the answers you seek.”

The blood rushed hot through her veins and she squirmed in her seat. The wait was killing her. She told George what the detective said to her, and he agreed that perhaps Mark was too busy to take this on.

The wait for the email was like eternity. She ordered another drink and finished the pizza, which was now cold. She’d been so excited that she hadn’t realized when the pizza arrived at the table. While she ate, she contemplated what she would do when the email arrived, and how in the world she would find some random woman.

Beep-beep-beep!

The phone buzzed and vibrated. Wasting no time, Maggie snatched it from the surface of the table and opened the email. The first photo was that of the shredded itinerary, and then one of an airplane hangar, followed by the decrepit farmhouse. She scrolled through several others, anxious to see the woman’s face.

A gasp escaped her lips and her forehead creased deeply as the face popped up on the screen. She zoomed the photo to see clearly, while she gawked at it. Maggie blinked a few times, trying to see if perhaps she was seeing things.

“What’s the matter?” George must have seen her expression.

Without answering, she pushed the phone across the table. He picked it up and stared bug-eyed at the screen.

“Did she send this to you?” he asked.

“No, Detective Akoni did,” she replied, her voice strained.

“What the hell? She’s the woman who faked her way into the hotel?”

Maggie nodded. “Yep.”

“Why would Latoya do that? She’s your uncle’s girlfriend.”

“I know. I’ve got to talk to Tony about this.”

George rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Maggie, this is good news.”

“How do you figure?”

“We got the woman. We can make her talk.”

George was right. Instead of feeling betrayed, she should feel happy that at least they had gotten somewhere. Nevertheless, she knew Tony would not take this news well. She fretted about what he would do once she told him.

“Let’s go,” George urged, standing and stretching.

Latoya never liked her, of that she had always been certain. But to do this was beyond Maggie’s scope of understanding. Latoya was Tony’s girlfriend; therefore, she was family.

CHAPTER 45

The drive back to Brentwood was in silence. To get to Tony's Hardware store, there were three routes, including passing by the house. George took that route to see if the black sedan was there.

When they entered their street, George slowed the car. The vehicle was not there. George passed by Maggie's gate, and a few yards later, slowed down. He focused on the rear view mirror for a while before speeding up once more. When they reached Tony's Hardware, he shut the car off and turned to her.

"I think they followed us," he declared.

"What?"

"The car was behind us since the throughway. When I braked, that car slowed."

"Well, that confirms our suspicions that we're being watched. Detective Akoni gave me the number for a private detective. I think I'll call him when we're done talking to Latoya."

"That's good."

They found Tony packing items on a shelf in one of the aisles at the front of the store. When he saw them, his face lit up like a three hundred watt bulb.

"Hey!" he stopped his packing and strode towards them. "Maggie, are you all right?"

She smiled with a nod. "I'm good, Uncle Tony."

"Hey, George. It's good of you to take her out," he said, peering behind her. "Where's my big boy?"

"He's with Andrea. We had some things to do, so we left him with her."

Tony searched her face. "Now tell me, what's going on?"

Wanting to broach the subject with care, she eased into it. "Where's Latoya? I haven't seen her in a while."

"I don't know what's going on with her. I don't know if I want to ...," his voice trailed

off. “Let’s just say things aren’t working out between us.”

“You broke up?”

“Not really. She still lives with me. What’s going on?”

She took his hand. “You know I love you and would never do anything to hurt you, right?”

“Of course. What’s the matter, Beanpole?”

“Uncle Tony!”

George laughed. “I already know about that, Maggie, Chase told me your knick-name.”

“Ugh. When I get my hands on him,” she muttered. “Anyway, the reason we’re here is because we found the woman who pretended to be Chase’s wife.”

Footsteps came from within the store as Tyler approached. He came up to the group, hugged his sister and shook George’s hand.

“You’re here?” Maggie asked.

“Yes, I told you I’d be working with our uncle. What brings you by?”

Tony was the one to reply. “She said she found the woman who returned Chase’s hotel room key, the one who said she was his wife.”

“That’s good news!” Tyler’s face shone with glee, before his brows knitted. “You don’t look so happy.”

Tony agreed. “Yeah, what’s going on?”

Maggie showed them the photo of Latoya in the hotel lobby. Her face was clear, facing the camera behind the front desk. Her dark weaves pulled back from her oval face made it easy to identify her.

The woman was thirty years old, only four years Maggie’s senior. It was easy for her to pass off as Chase’s wife. No one would question her, given the age difference wasn’t that far apart.

With some hesitation, she pushed the phone towards her uncle. He frowned before taking it. When he looked at the photo, his frown deepened, his lips spewing expletives.

“What the ... that’s Latoya!”

Tyler peered at the screen of the phone. “Shit! That’s your chick, Uncle Tony.”

Maggie placed a hand on her uncle’s arm. “At any point, did she go anywhere for a few days, or even one day without telling you?”

He blew out a breath and squinted in concentration. “She did. About a month or so ago, she left for a couple of days. She said her grandmother was sick and needed her.”

“Was it around the time Chase went to Hawaii, Uncle Tony?”

He closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “Yes, she returned after you left to Oahu.”

Tony spun around a couple of times, before he eyed the phone screen once more. Passing his hand over his dark curls, he grunted.

“Tyler, you stay here. George, can you stay with Tyler? I think Maggie and I can take care of this. Let’s go Maggie.”

Tony’s stride was rushed as he left the store. Maggie lagged a few inches behind him. His warm olive skin now deepened in shade from his obvious flush of anger. When he reached his pickup truck parked at the side of the single building, he opened the front passenger door for her. With his jaw set, they set off.

The drive, which was usually a ten-minute trek, now took Tony six minutes. He was first to jump from the vehicle and headed up the steps of the brownstone. Latoya was lounging on the sofa in the living room with the TV on.

“You’re home . . .,” she began, her words trailing off when she saw Maggie.

Tony’s response was to step menacingly towards her, but Maggie gripped his arm, stopping him.

“I’ll do this,” she said, her voice tight.

“What’s going on?” Latoya asked, rising to her feet.

That’s good, Maggie thought. *Stand up so I can face you squarely when I look into your eyes.*

“I know you don’t like me,” Maggie told her, closing the space between them. “But being my uncle’s girlfriend, I consider you family. How could you betray him like this?”

Latoya stared vacantly at her, giving away nothing. “What are you talking about?”

Maggie tried not to let the emotions she'd repressed for the last month boil over. She swallowed the urge to scream at the woman. Doubling her fist to her side, she continued in her calmest voice.

"Who hired you to pretend to be Chase's wife?"

A flicker crossed Latoya's face and she looked away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Latoya turned and made a few steps. Maggie grabbed her arm and pulled her back. The woman snatched her arm away and continued towards the passage.

"I'm not done talking to you," Maggie snarled, her frustration slowly rising.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she replied in a sardonic tone.

"You little" Tony's voice grated beside Maggie as he lunged towards his girlfriend.

Maggie reached a hand out to block him. "Let me finish this one, Uncle Tony."

He backed away, his hands up. Maggie advanced, grabbing Latoya, and yanking her around. Without a second thought to her actions, she seized the girl's throat, pushing her up against the passage wall.

"Let ... me ... go ...," Latoya gasped, grabbing at Maggie's hand.

Maggie's strength was borne of the anger and frustration from the past month. The idea that someone close was involved made the pot boil over.

"Who hired you?" she asked, her voice deadly. "I won't let go until you give me a proper answer."

"Go ... to hell!" Latoya wheezed.

Maggie's grasped tightened as fury became her ally. "Wrong answer." Latoya's choking sound didn't faze her, she continued to pin the girl up against the wall.

"A-a-all right, I-I-I'll t-tell you," she managed to choke out.

Maggie loosened the grip just a tad, but she did not let go. "Now talk fast before I lose my cool," she warned.

"It was D'Morne."

"Who?"

That was not the name she expected to hear. All this time she thought the culprit was Herman, but they could be in on this together, just like before. This information did not rule him out.

“It was Brittany and her father.”

Maggie’s hand fell. She’d never met Brittany’s father so he was new in the picture. Not knowing what to make of this, she stared at Latoya while the girl massaged her neck. Red welts remained where her fingers pressed into Latoya’s neck.

“How do you know them?”

The woman continued to rub her throat, coughing a few times. “She came to see you that time, remember? That was the first time I saw her.”

“You met Antonio?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“Yes, that’s his name, I met him in Hawaii.”

“Go on,” Maggi urged.

“Brittany came to me about a month ago, and asked me how I would like to pretend to be you. She said it would only take a few minutes, and that I wouldn’t get in trouble. I didn’t know what they were planning.”

“Didn’t it occur to you that it might be something illegal. Why would you agree to this?” Tony yelled.

Latoya shook her head. “She said it wasn’t. She just wanted to play a prank on Chase for dumping her.”

“That’s bull, and you know it!” Tony’s thunderous voice resonated through the apartment. “Do you hate Maggie that much... do you hate *me*?”

She shook her head. “Of course not.”

Maggie wanted answers and was growing impatient. “How did you get to Oahu?”

“They took me there in a private plane, and took me back a few days later. Can I go now?”

Maggie laughed. “Go? You’re coming to the police with me and Uncle Tony. Right Uncle Tony?”

He agreed. Maggie was bluffing, but she needed Latoya's cooperation if she was to get Brittany and Antonio for what they did.

Latoya's eyes widened and her face went white. "But I didn't do anything."

"Do you know that kidnapping is a federal crime? Federal prison is worse than regular prison. They have ways of extracting information from people. I heard they use needles to prick at one's fingernails until all the nails come out."

"Jesus Christ! I wasn't involved, I swear. I didn't know what they were doing." The girl visibly trembled as she shook her head vigorously.

"How much did they pay you?" Maggie asked.

"Twenty grand. I swear, I didn't know."

Maggie chuckled. "You like money a lot, don't you? I'll pay you fifty grand if you help me. Either that, or I take you to the Feds. What's it gonna be?"

"Okay, I'll do it. What should I do?"

"I'll let you know. But if find out you told anyone about this conversation, you're dead meat!" Maggie held up her phone. "I taped the whole thing."

Latoya cringed, promising to keep her mouth shut. Tony and Maggie eyed each other. He'd calmed down, but Maggie was just getting started. She had a few choices. She could either get mad or get even. Her decision was simple, she was getting even, but not without them tasting her wrath.

CHAPTER 46

Chase closed his eyes, picturing Maggie's smiling face. The ache of not seeing her was almost unbearable. Not being able to see and play with his son was equally painful. His mind went back to a conversation he had with his mother about an hour before.

"Chase, what's going on?"

He'd just come home to the penthouse to find her waiting on the black and white couch in his living room. Dropping the briefcase on the counter separating living, kitchen, and dining spaces, he loosened his tie.

"Whatever do you mean, Mother?"

"What's with marrying Brittany? What does Maggie have to say about this?"

"Mother ..."

"I tried calling Maggie, but it seems her landline phone isn't working, and I couldn't reach her on her cell phone. You've been avoiding me, as well. What's going on?"

"I can't talk about that now, Mother."

"Then when? Maggie must be devastated."

An invisible blade wedged itself in his heart. "Please, Mother, not now."

"Then when, Chase?" she asked once more, her voice rising. "I'm going to see Maggie and my grandchild."

"Don't do that, Mother."

"Why on earth not?"

In a few strides, he was at the drink cabinet a few feet away, where he picked up a bottle of scotch and splashed some into a glass. Downing it in one gulp, he poured another which he consumed the same way. He was about to pour the third drink when Irene snatched the bottle away.

"I knew something was wrong. Now tell me what's going on, or I swear I'll do everything

in my power to find out what it is.”

“Just drop it, Mother.”

“I know you don’t want to marry Brittany. This wedding will not take place!”

Chase twisted to face her. “Mother can’t you just support me on this and don’t make this difficult?”

“I’m not doing anything, but I know you love Maggie. Am I right?”

“Mother, please,” he pleaded.

“Answer me, don’t you love her anymore?”

“Of course, I love her!” he almost shouted. Admitting it was someone freeing, yet painful. He turned to his mother, his voice thick, “Do you think for one minute that I don’t love her? Every second of every day I love her.” A sob erupted from him so strong that he had to grip his chest. “I miss her so much.”

“Then call off this farce of a wedding.”

“I can’t do that, Mother.”

“Then, I will,” Irene declared.

He gave his head a vigorous shake. “No! It’s too risky. And mother, please don’t go to Maggie, I can’t put you in ...,” he halted his words in a strangulated voice.

“Put me in what?” Irene’s brows furrowed as she searched his face. “In danger? Are you in danger?”

His shoulders sagged. “That’s enough Mother. I’m tired.”

“No, you answer me, Chase. Did someone threaten you?” she gripped his shoulders, willing him to answer. “Tell me.”

“Not me mother. They threatened...” he swallowed hard. “I’ve said enough, now please don’t ask any more questions. It’s too risky as it is.”

“Chase, you can’t let them get away with this.”

He grounded his teeth together, inhaling a deep steadying breath. “I won’t mother. Just trust me and support me on this. Trust me this once and don’t do anything. Everything will be over soon.”

Her face relaxed. “What are you planning?”

“That, I can’t tell you, but promise that this conversation will remain between us. Don’t call Maggie. Act as though you are supporting this marriage, please.”

Irene paced a bit, as she seemed to ponder whatever information she had gathered from Chase. Minutes passed as he regarded her before she came to a halt in front of him.

“Okay, I’ll trust you. Only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I need your support when I reclaim the company. You know about the clause, right? We have all we need to remove your father as Chairman of the Board and rescind all his claims on the company. He has no idea that copy of the documents he has is a photocopy and not the original.”

“OK, Mother, I’ll support you, only because I want to clean up the family name after the things Father has done.”

“That’s the reason I’m doing this,” she said. “I can’t say I’m happy about it, but it has to be done.”

Opening his eyes, he pushed the conversation from his mind and withdrew the small box with the vial from his pocket. It was all because of this. That vial and the poison it once held was the reason for him breaking the heart of the woman he loved.

CHAPTER 47

When Maggie left Tony's house, she was unsure of what she would have Latoya do. There were a few ideas swirling around in her head, but she wanted to strike when the iron was hot. She needed a solid plan. In that plan was the name and number that Detective Akoni gave her.

While descending the steps of the old brownstone apartment building, she dialed the number. It went to voicemail, where she left a message introducing herself and promising to call at another time.

If Brittany and her father were having her followed, it was probable they were watching Chase and his friends as well. Before sending Latoya on her 'errand', she needed some answers. Why was Brittany and her father determined to merge with MacCorp, and why the marriage? As far as Maggie knew, there were other methods of forging a merger, for instance, signing a legal document.

One question haunted her. Who would benefit more from this merger, Herman or the D'Mornes? In that question was the answer as to who kidnapped Chase and why.

She asked George to come get her, leaving Tony to deal with Latoya. She hoped the woman was scared enough to stay put until she needed her, and not run off to Brittany to blab about what they discussed. All Maggie knew was that she could not be trusted. However, if things went well with the PI, she would perhaps not need Latoya at all.

They rode in silence the short distance home. It was getting dark out and she was exhausted. George must have figured she needed space. He didn't question her about Latoya and she wasn't in the mood to say anything just yet. When he stopped on the driveway, the black sedan was in its usual place.

"Look, George, I'll talk to you later. All on a sudden, I'm tired. Thanks for keeping Colton tonight. I'll tell you in the morning how it went with Latoya."

"Sure thing, Maggie. If you need me, just call."

"Yes, but Tyler will be staying with me tonight. He insists."

“And he’s right. I don’t trust those guys or Herman,” he commented.

“It’s not Herman we should be afraid of,” she remarked.

She’d told herself she had no strength to tell George anything tonight. Nevertheless, she found herself saying what was on her mind.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“It was Brittany and her father.”

George sagged back into his seat, his face blank as he stared through the windscreen. She understood his reaction. They were on the wrong track all along, unless both the D’Mornes and Herman were in this together.

“Sonofa ... darn ...,” he slapped his palm on the steering wheel. “I’m not surprised, though. Chase did suspect they weren’t as clean as they made out to be. All the more reason to be careful. We don’t know who these people really are.”

“I agree. That’s why I won’t do anything until I get some hard evidence. Of what, I’m not certain. But I need something tangible to either take to the police or with which to confront them.”

“I’ll call Mark in the morning, and you call that guy. In the meantime, get some rest. We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

She opened the door and stepped from the car, eyeing the sedan a few yards away. Knowing it was there made her uncomfortable, as she had no idea how far their surveillance extended. Were they listening as well as watching her? The house would need to be swept for bugs as soon as possible.

Leaning her head through the car window, she bade George farewell and told him to keep an eye out for anyone following him. She watched as he drove away, and waited until his taillights disappeared before going inside.

The house felt empty without Chase and her son. For a few minutes, she stood in the center of the living room, running through her mind the events of the past five weeks. She had less than two weeks to find the evidence she needed to get Chase home. How she was going to do that was beyond her. If all else failed, she’d just have to face Brittany head on.

Maggie strolled to the kitchen and flicked on the light. The shattered mugs still sat on the floor where they hit the wall and broke into several pieces. Gingerly, she picked up the larger

pieces and set them on the counter, trying to match them together.

I have some glue somewhere. I'll get them back together, Chase, I promise I'll piece them back together.

The glue was in the desk drawer in the living room. Quickly, she retrieved it and returned. As she pieced back the broken mugs, a knot twisted in her chest and tears rolled down her cheeks. Tears that had previously refused to surface now erupted like a spring after a long shower of rain. By the time the pieces stuck together with a few gaping holes where the tiny shattered parts would have been, she was a blubbering mess.

Even as she ascended the stairs, she found she could not stop crying, neither when she took her shower. When she snuck into bed around 8:30 p.m., she had almost finished a box of tissues.

* * *

Maggie woke to a damp pillow and equally damp eyelashes. It was apparent she'd been crying in her sleep. The smell of fresh coffee wafted up to her nostrils and for a moment, she thought Chase was home.

Springing off the bed, she pulled on her robe. With hastened steps, she was halfway down the stairs when she came to a halt at seeing her brother leaning against the banister.

“You don't have to look so disappointed, Big Sis.”

“I'm sorry, Tyler, for a moment I thought...”

“I realized that when you sprinted like Merlene Ottey down the hall.”

“Very funny,” she snorted. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Yes, I thought we could have breakfast together and talk.”

Maggie heard the seriousness in his tone and knew what he was up to. Tyler was the opposite to her. While she would wait to act, he was the one who liked to be front and center in the battle. No doubt that he would propose some plan to do something that might get them both in trouble.

“No,” she said, running the rest of the stairs and brushing passed him into the kitchen.

“You haven't even heard what I have to say.”

“It's still, no. I know you and what you're thinking.”

The kitchen also smelled of eggs and bacon. It's been over a month since she'd had breakfast. For some reason, she was now famished. Her mouth watered as her brother fixed her a plate and placed a mug of steaming coffee before her.

While they ate, she brought him up to speed about Latoya, although Tony had already filled him in. She told him her plans to use Latoya to get to Brittany, but would hold off until she heard from the PI Akoni referred her to. Things were moving too slowly for Maggie, but she knew that patience was the key to getting what she wanted.

She could not help but think how Chase must be feeling about being backed into a corner. If she was correct, he was probably trying to get himself out of this mess. She wished she could console him; tell him she knew he still loved her. However, doing that would perhaps put him in more danger, as she had no clue what they were using to keep him tied to them.

They were done with breakfast and putting the dishes in the kitchen sink when the doorbell rang. Tyler opted to go get it while Maggie poured herself another coffee. She was taking her second sip when his voice brought her attention.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Hey!”

Curious, she set the mug down and went to see what the problem was. He was in the middle of the drive yelling at a car speeding down the road. At the front step was a rectangular box about three feet long, two feet wide and a foot deep.

“What's this?” she asked, bending down to take a look.

Her brother strode up beside her. “I don't know. I saw a car drive off as soon as I opened the door. They must have left it because it wasn't there before.”

“Let's see what's inside. It could be from Chase.”

She knew she was being overly ambitious, but she was anxious to see what was inside the carton box. If it was from Chase, there was hope yet. It could also be from Irene, one never knew with that woman.

Tyler pulled a switchblade from his pocket, easily extracting the blade and cutting the tape on the sides. A little flutter happened in her chest as she pried apart the flaps of the box.

Her excitement was short lived upon seeing what was inside. Maggie's eyes knobbed, her heart thundered and mouth gaped as she stared at a small wooden coffin. It was beautifully made of cherry wood, varnished to perfection. The sight of the container caused her hair to

stand on end and a chill rushed up her spine.

“WHAT THE ...!” Tyler yelled.

Maggie blinked as Colton flashed through her mind. With a sprint, she was inside within seconds. From the cordless, she dialed Andrea’s number.

“Hello?” Andrea answered after two rings.

“Where’s my baby?”

“He’s still asleep. He only went to sleep a couple of hours ago. You sound out of breath, what’s the matter?”

She ignored Andrea’s question. “Why didn’t you call?”

Maggie could hear her chortle. “Because you needed some rest. George and I took turns until he went to sleep.”

“I’m coming to get him.” Someone tapped her shoulder and she turned. Tyler was shaking his head at her. “Hold on Andrea,” she said, placing a hand over the mouth of the handset. “What’s the matter?” she asked Tyler.

“I think you should let the baby stay there. The security at that apartment building is tighter than Fort Knox.”

“I need my baby with me,” she insisted. “If someone is threatening my child, I need to know he’s safe.”

“Listen to me, Sis. Bringing back Colton into a house without security guards, security cameras and an electronic system is unsafe. There are cameras, guards, and alarms at that apartment complex. Everyone who enters is checked. He’s safer there than here. Trust me.”

Her panic was making her irrational. “No.”

“Stop and think. Security or no security. Plus, you can always hire someone without alerting anyone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hire a guard and say it’s Andrea’s cousin, if anyone asks. But with these guys watching this house, the guard would stand out like a sore thumb. They probably know that your only relatives are me and Tony, right?”

“I don’t know,” she wavered.

Tyler moved closer. “There is another option,” he indicated in a low tone. “I have a few buddies. No one would question that they’re my friends. You keep the baby here and I stay close with my friends.”

Maggie needed time to think about it. She needed her son safe, but she needed to make the right decision as well.

“Andrea, I’ll call you back,” she said into the phone.

“Okay. He’s asleep anyway. Talk to you later.”

On the insistence of her brother, after hanging up with Andrea, she went back to the front door. Steeling herself against what she may find inside it, she opened the lid. Inside was a note folded in half. With trembling fingers, she extracted it. It read: *Keep away from Chase if you don’t want to see your son buried in this.*

Meanwhile in Florida...

Chase put on his jacket, straightened his tie, and picked up his briefcase. He was about to head through the door when his phone alerted him to a message.

He would have ignored it when it occurred to him that it might be Maggie. What if something happened to his son? They’d assured him that his family would be safe so long as he followed their orders. He’d done everything they’d asked. Still, he didn’t trust them at all.

Chase plucked the phone from his left breast pocket and unlocked the screen. The message was from an unknown number, but he opened it, just in case.

His stomach clenched from seeing the photo of a coffin, with Maggie and a man he assumed to be her brother. They were standing over the box. It was apparently taken a few minutes earlier from the time stamp on the digital photo. The message below the photo read: *‘Just a reminder of what will happen if you break your promise.’*

“So this is how they want to play?” he growled. *All I need is a few more days and this will be over, you bastards!*

As he left his apartment and took the elevator to the underground parking garage, he tried to remind himself that he was doing this for the sake of his family, to keep them safe. The urge

to break Antonio and Brittany's neck was powerful, but he knew they had someone else in their pockets. All he needed was the ammunition to take down Alexander Sierras as well.

He had all he needed to bring down the D'Mornes but this Alexander fellow was hard to track. He was slick as well as dangerous. Mark was doing all he could but, he worried for his friend.

It was a good thing that Mark kept his actual identity a secret. The man knew the art of disguise in such a way that he could meet with him several times at the office without anyone suspecting a thing.

Who would have thought the janitor, an AC repairman, and a business associate from London were bringing him all the information he needed?

With Maggie and Colton at the front of his mind, Chase hardened himself to face the new day. His sole purpose was to end this farce the best way he could, but he missed his family. If only he could at least call and explain, but that meant putting them in danger.

He touched the small box in his pocket, a reminder that he could not get weak. His mind went back to the house in Kaena Point and the days he spent there. Those few days made him realize just how short and precious life was. He was determined not to spend what little life remained away from his son and the woman he loved.

CHAPTER 48

“Tyler, who are these people?”

After the incident with the box, Maggie had gone to take a shower. While she was upstairs, she tried her hardest not to panic and think about what her brother suggested. It was either hire a bodyguard for her son and let him stay with George and Andrea, or allow Tyler and his friends to protect them.

The decision was not simple. How could she trust the stranger she'd hire wouldn't be someone in D'Morne's pocket? Thy seemed to have many contacts all over the place. Then there was Tyler and his buddies. What if something happened, and her son got caught in a crossfire?

When she returned downstairs, there were three men in the living room. They seemed to be searching for something, while one of them had a small black device in his hand. A beeping sound emitted from it.

“Ah, these are some friends of mine. They're checking the house for bugs. Hey guys, meet my big sister.” He pointed to the one with the instrument. “That's Ron, over there by the sofa is Kevin, and the one checking under the mantle is Phil.”

“Hi,” they chorused.

“Hi,” she greeted.

“We didn't find nothin',” Ron announced. “But we gotta check your cell phone too, Miss Maggie.”

“Give him your cell, Sis,” Tyler suggested.

She handed the man the phone and immediately the device started beeping rapidly.

“We found something,” he announced.

He removed the back of the phone and the battery; underneath was a tiny chip, which he pointed to. “See that? That's what they use to direct your calls and messages to their own system.”

So much for her texting to George about the house being rigged, when in fact it was the phone. She'd miscalculated these people. They knew everything she'd talked about or whenever she texted to anyone. Well, now, she would be careful.

These people were good. How did they insert the chip in her phone without her knowing? How long had it been there? Anyway, that mattered little now. What mattered was being discreet.

"If you remove it won't they get suspicious?" she asked.

"They'll know you know about it. The best way is to break the phone and get another. We can get you a phone that is blocked that they can't trace, even with the chip."

She thought for a moment. If she broke the phone, they would not be able to track her calls.

"No, leave it. But get me the new phone."

"What are you thinking?" Tyler asked.

"Maybe spying on me isn't such a bad thing."

Going with her gut was what she did, whether it would yield any fruit, she wasn't sure. She also wasn't sure why she thought to keep the phone, but it seemed like the best option. Having a separate phone she could use to make private calls was also a good idea.

It occurred to her that the reason Chase hadn't called was perhaps his phone was monitored. She needed to get him one of those blocked phones as well. That way they could communicate and perhaps come up with a plan together. He needed her, whether he would admit it or not, just the way she needed him now.

When the men left, she felt more relaxed than she was before. Now she knew her conversations were safe and that she should be careful with her calls. They knew she had information about Oahu Island and that was perhaps why they sent that horrible warning.

Her blood ran cold recalling it. Tyler had taken the box and placed it inside the living room. He said she should see it to remind her of what she was fighting for. He was right.

Now that the wedding approached and they were openly threatening her, she would need to move quickly to get the evidence. From Tyler's cellphone, she called the number Akoni gave her but it went to voice mail. This was frustrating. She had no idea how to move forward.

They knew she was aware of what they'd done and that's why they sent the coffin. Therefore, she would do all she could to protect her son. If she could keep her son safe, she'd be able to move forward without worry. How to do that, she had no clue.

Again, she contemplated her brother's suggestion. Keep Colton with her while thugs protected him. That thought made her uneasy. The next option would be to hire some kind of bodyguard and let him stay with George. That's extra security with the cameras and apartment security.

She could hire the guards to secure the house and add cameras, but time was running out. She needed to make a decision fast. Her son needed to be with her, therefore she called a security company she knew provided home security. They would install an alarm, the cameras and guards if needed.

The security company's express service would cost double, but that would be the price she'd have to pay to keep her child safe. While her brother watched television, she made the arrangements to have them come later the same day. This enabled her to start making her plans to get to the D'Mornes.

So far, it didn't matter whether they knew she was securing her home. The cat was now out of the bag and she would be stupid to stand by and not do anything to keep her home safe.

When they sent that coffin, they made one of the deadliest mistakes they could have made. Not only did they reveal themselves, they awakened a sleeping beast.

* * *

The security company was due to arrive at around two that afternoon. Maggie hadn't yet formulated her plan, but she thought of having Latoya confront Brittany to ask for more money. It was a weak plan, but she could have the girl record the conversation with her cell phone.

It was risky, but being desperate she didn't know what else to do. She tried calling the number Akoni gave her but the voicemail kept picking up. This began to irritate her that she was tempted to source her own private detective. But with them watching her, they would know what she was up to. She could not risk them finding out about her investigation, which would only thwart her plans.

"Chase, what have you got yourself into? What should I do?" she whispered.

When the doorbell rang, she hastened to open it, thinking the security company had arrived. Two women and a man with bibles stood at the door. Voices in the street summoned her attention to a few more people conversing with the men in the black car. A couple also chatted with her neighbor across the street.

“Hello ma’am we are from the Unity Baptist Church a few blocks away. Do you know Jesus?” the man asked.

His voice was familiar but Maggie was certain she’d never seen him. His pale blue eyes, bird beak nose and severely thinned blond hair were unfamiliar.

“I attend that church, but who are you?” she replied.

“I am a messenger from God. This is your day of deliverance,” he said before stepping closer.

Tyler came up behind her, questioning, “Maggie, who is it?”

“Hello Sir, are you the husband?” the man asked.

Maggie shook her head. “No, he’s my brother.”

The man reached his hand out. “Nice to meet you, Brother.” Tyler took the hand and they shook vigorously.

The two women, whom she had never seen before, started praying rather loudly while the man held his head down, concentrating on Maggie. He spoke but Maggie was unable to hear anything above the prayer. He stepped closer and placed his hand upon her shoulder. Being so close, Maggie was uncomfortable, but the grip of the man made her look questioningly at him.

“It’s me, Mark,” he said. Then he shouted, “Hallelujah, Lord.”

“Mark?” she whispered.

“Pretend you’re praying, too. Lower your head and listen. Be careful, but you need to save Chase.”

She followed his advice and lowered her head. Her heart jumped at the mention of Chase’s name. How did Mark disguise himself so well? No one would believe this was a black guy, or was he? Was it really Mark?

“I know,” she whispered.

“I’ll be getting in touch soon. I’ll leave something with you.” He turned, and the women

stopped praying. “Brother Henry, do you have any more tracts?”

One of the men standing by the car replied, “I’ve got a few left.”

“Hold on,” Mark said, trotting across the street to get the tract. He returned within a few seconds and handed her a booklet. “Enjoy reading it, Sister,” he said loudly. “God bless you.”

Maggie was still in shock as they left the front door singing a hymn. She watched as the group moved from the car and met Mark in the center of the street. They moved along the street, making stops at the other neighbors, praying and carrying on as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

She shook her head and closed the door. Mark said to enjoy reading the track, so she opened it and flipped the pages. The centerfold of the booklet had a handwritten note signed by Mark.

The wedding date has moved up to two days away. Call me at 12007681246 from a payphone. Read the tract!

Her heart sank. How would she get the evidence she needed in two days?

“Sis?” Tyler was standing beside her.

“What?” Her exasperation reflected in her voice.

“Do you know that guy?”

“Why?”

He held his hand out. “That guy handed me this when he shook my hand.”

In his palm was a tiny silver key, about two inches long, that she had no idea to what it belonged.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. He shook my hand and when he let go, this was there. I heard him talking to you, so I figured he was someone on your side.”

“He’s Chase’s friend. He warned me to be careful, but Tyler, the wedding is two days away. What am I to do?”

“Maybe this is the answer.”

A key with no clue what it opened added to Maggie’s headache. Taking it from Tyler’s

outstretched palm, she tried to remember if Chase told of her any safe deposit boxes anywhere. Nothing came to mind. She wondered if the bank would have any idea.

It was Friday, already late in the afternoon. The bank Chase used was in New York City. There was no way she could get there before closing. The wedding was Sunday. Why didn't Mark come earlier so she could figure this out?

Wracking her brain to come up with answers, a bulb went off. The tract! He said to read the tract. But she didn't need to read it to know where the key opened. The church had a mailbox for their members.

“Oh, my God!”

“What's the matter?” Tyler asked.

“We're going to church. Hallelujah!”

Still, to make sure her assumptions were correct she read the booklet from start to finish. At the back of the booklet was an about section from the church. It included worship times, functions and of course the information about the mailbox with an asterisk beside it.

“I'm going to need you to take care of something for me real fast,” she told Tyler.

Her brain was ticking like a clock now that she believed Chase hid the evidence she needed in the church mailbox. In addition, she would need to get to Florida and do so without alerting D'Morne's goons.

A vehicle came up the driveway. Tyler went to see who it was. A moment later, he returned with a representative from the security company. They spoke about her concerns, and what she needed them to do.

While the security system was being installed, she filled Tyler in on her plans. It was all or nothing now, but first she needed to see what was in the church mailbox.

CHAPTER 49

“Where’s the phone your friend promised?” Maggie addressed Tyler, in a state of disquiet.

She was beginning to become impatient with the sluggishness at which things were proceeding. It was near five o’clock and she needed to get to the church at the beginning of the evening services. The security company was still installing the alarm system, and she was tempted to have them complete it the following day.

“I’ll give him a call,” he said, taking his phone from his pocket.

While he called his friend, Maggie called Andrea. She needed Colton at home tonight, if she was to carry out her plans. It might not be the best idea. Nevertheless, it was the only plan she could contrive, especially on such short notice without alerting D’Morne’s thugs of her movements.

D’Morne’s people were be minoring the call, but that was a part of the plot.

“Hello Andrea?” she greeted when Andrea answered.

“Are you okay?” her friend asked.

This had to be done right, she told herself. Her stomach quivered at the thought of them invading her privacy.

“Well, I don’t know. I thought I was, but I got a package today and it really scared me. Andrea I can’t pursue this thing with Chase anymore. I’ve got to give him up,” she told her friend. However, her heart contradicted, ‘over my dead body.’

“What happened?” Andrea’s concern was evident.

Maggie swallowed, her voice cracking. “They sent me a coffin, a small one, Colton’s size.”

“What!” her friend shouted. “Jesus!”

“I need you. I want you to stay with me a few days, can you do that?”

“Sure, you don’t need to ask.”

“Just pack some clothes and bring Colton with you tonight. Bring him to the church. You know the one we attend, there’s a prayer meeting tonight and I really need some spiritual healing.”

“What are you going to do about the coffin? Do you know who sent it?”

“No. Anyway, I’m having a security system installed. I’m not taking any chances.”

“That’s a good idea securing the house. Chase should have done that a long time ago,” Andrea mentioned.

“Well, better late than never.”

“Oh Maggie, I’m really sorry you’re going through this. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Don’t worry.”

“Remember come straight to the church and not the house. I’ll be there a couple of hours praying for guidance.”

“What made you want to go to church all of a sudden though?”

“I received a visit today from people handing out tracts. They even invited me to evening services.”

“That’s good.”

“While I read the tract they gave me today, I found the key to solving my problems. I need to go to church more often. Jesus always has the answer.”

They chatted a while longer, while she sobbed and broke down for the sake of those listening. But as she hung up the phone she was back to getting things done. She thought her performance was Oscar worthy, acting all scared, telling Andrea how much she resented Chase for doing this. She smiled as she turned to Tyler.

“Well?”

“He’ll drop it off soon,” he informed her.

The secured cell phone was on its way. It was getting late, therefore, she left her brother to supervise the work going on while she showered and dressed. As she ran through her mind what she needed to do, she realized she had one problem and that was cash flow.

Chase had a safe at the office, but how would she get the money to do what she needed? The phone was taking too long to arrive and she needed it to carry out the rest of her plans.

Knowing George well, he would be accompanying Andrea. They wouldn't have time to go to the office and get the money from the safe.

Taking a chance, she called George from Tyler's phone. She knew her brother's cellphone was safe, but chances remained that they were also keeping tabs on George. Being desperate, it was a risk she was willing to take.

"I need the money from the safe," she informed him when he answered. "Can you bring it to Unity Baptist? I'll be there for a while. Did Andrea say anything?"

"Sure thing, Maggie. She did," he'd replied. "I'll be there in a little while."

There were no questions asked from George's end. That was good. In the event they had tabs on his phone, they kept the conversation short.

The plan was set. She'd meet Andrea at the Church while George retrieved the cash. She was uncertain how much money was in the safe, but she believed George would take all that was there.

If she were to get to Florida without using a commercial flight, she'd need the money. One of Tyler's friends was supposed to arrange the charter in his name, in the event the D'Mornes were checking her activities. She only hoped that Tyler's friend knew what he was doing.

When the security firm completed their installation, she set the password on the alarm. One camera was installed in the baby's room, while a few were strategically placed throughout the house. She hoped that Tyler and his friends would not disappoint her.

* * *

Tyler drove her to the church after which he left to meet his friends who were arranging small charter plane. He would also pick up the secured cellphone from Ron. Checking to see if they were followed, they confirmed the same. It was apparent that D'Morne's men were no longer trying to hide. The car followed intimidatingly close behind. They even parked where they could be easily spotted. The church yard had one gated entrance and the same for the exit. The plot was to leave without D'Morne's men knowing what was happening, so they had to be careful.

There were other people involved in her scheme, all arranged by Tyler and Tony. She fretted that Tyler may have messed up and something may go wrong. In addition, she had no

idea what was in the church mailbox. Fingering the key in her hand, she rubbed her thumb against the number stamped on it. The number twelve imprinted in her mind.

Shortly, Andrea arrived by taxi and came into the church with the overnight bag. Maggie was pleased that things seemed to be moving along well.

“Hey, sorry, I’m late,” she puffed, slipping into the seat. “George took my car. His wouldn’t start.”

The baby was asleep in Andrea’s arms and Maggie’s heart ached to hold him. Not yet, she told herself. All she did was kiss his forehead, allowing him to remain with Andrea.

“No worries, this is perfect!”

“You look better than you sounded earlier,” Andrea observed. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll soon find out.”

Maggie peered anxiously through the church window for when her next guest would arrive. Sweat trickled down her neck and back, even though inside the church was cool. Rubbing her palm against her thighs, she tried to calm her nervous tension.

Andrea leaned close and whispered. “What’s going on?”

“Be patient, you’ll see,” she whispered back.

The meeting was about to begin when a midnight blue Toyota Avalon rolled in and parked close to the side of the building. Out of it came a woman with a baby and a man. They made their way to the side entrance where the lighting was dimmer than the main entrance to the building. From there, the couple entered the section where the rectory was located.

Maggie released a sigh. Her nerves had threatened to get the better of her as she anticipated her next actions. It was time to act and she left her seat on wobbly knees.

“Where are you going?” Andrea inquired when she brushed passed her.

“Stay here, I’ll be back soon,” she told her.

To the right of the pulpit was a door that led to the private members only section of the church. This was where the rectory, a classroom, the choir practice room, the restrooms and mailboxes. Her stomach was like jelly as she made her way to the back there.

The door opened up to a long passage. She knew the building well and knew she had to pass the other rooms before getting to the mailbox. She just made it a few feet when she met

the couple from the Toyota Avalon.

“Hi,” the woman greeted.

“You’re Lola?” Maggie asked, her voice registering a tremor.

Lola nodded. “Yes, and this is Bobby, my husband.”

“Thanks for doing this.”

“No problem. Tony has helped us out lot. We’re happy to do anything for his niece.”

Bobby agreed. “We’d be homeless if it weren’t for your uncle. He told us what’s happening and we had to help.” He turned to his wife. “Lola, give me Ryan and go with her.”

The woman handed her husband the baby and followed Maggie. They made their way to the mailboxes first, as that was on the way to the restrooms. Not knowing what was in the box made her worry. The number twelve played over in Maggie’s mind. As he tried to put the key in the slot, it slipped through her unsteady fingers.

“Allow me,” Lola said, taking the key and opening the box. “There.”

“I’m so nervous.” Maggie was breathing shallow and her heart would not steady.

Peering into the compartment, she saw a single brown legal envelope. Upon opening it, she found an SD chip. She turned it over in her hand with a groan.

“Jeez! How am I going to know what’s on it without a computer?”

“You could use a tablet or smartphone,” Lola suggested.

Maggie let out a sharp breath. “I know, but I can’t use my phone and I don’t have a tablet.”

“You can use ours. It’s in the car, I can go get it,” she offered.

“Not yet. We’ll check it later. Come with me.”

They headed to the restroom and locked the door. Then they both proceeded to exchange clothes. She’d worn a scarf around her hair which she gave to Lola along with her jeans and shirt. Lola’s long bohemian dress was a little wide, but it had to do. She noticed that her clothes were somewhat smaller for the other woman, but Lola didn’t complain. When they were done, she sent Lola to the seat she was sitting at inside the church, while she waited in the passage with Bobby and his baby.

Andrea...

Colton opened his eyes and looked around. Andrea prayed that he would not make a racket. She was about to go see what was taking Maggie so long when she glimpsed her retuning. When Maggie slipped into the seat, she leaned close.

“What took you so long?” Maggie turned with a smile, only it wasn’t Maggie at all. “You’re not Maggie. Where is she and why are you wearing her clothes?” she asked.

“Maggie wants you to bring Colton. She will explain everything.”

She opened her mouth to respond when it dawned on her what Maggie was doing. Without delay she did as instructed, following the woman’s direction to where Maggie was waiting. She found her in the passage with a man and baby.

“Maggie, what’s going on?”

“You know we’re being followed so I had to be careful,” Maggie told her. “You will take this baby to Lola and the two of you will leave in my car where you’ll head to my house and stay there. Bobby and I will take his car to the airport.”

Andrea shook her head, blinking. “How did you plan all this?”

“Tyler and Tony helped. Is George here yet?”

“I saw him pull in a few minutes ago. He’s outside leaning against the car.”

“You have to do me a favor.” Maggie said. “Go get the money and bring it here. Where is the bag with the clothes?”

“It’s in the church,” Andrea replied.

“Darn.”

“I’ll bring it too.”

“That may be too suspicious. I don’t know if anyone in the church is watching me. Just get the money.”

She hastened her steps and went back the way she came., taking Lola’s baby. Maggie watched as Andrea went back through the door to where the service was now in high gear. She stopped to give Ryan to Lola, then headed outside.

Maggie needed the clothes, but she'd just have to leave the bag and find an alternative. She was planning to depart the service before it ended. The meeting would last another forty-five minutes or so. She should leave the building within the next half-hour.

Lola and Andrea would go when the service was over, after staying back to chat and make nice to everyone. This would give her time to get as far away as possible should D'Morne's men realize what was happening.

A groan erupted from her at the risk she was taking. What if they found out her plans? What would they do? That coffin was lying in her living room as reminder of their threat. She could not allow D'Morne to know she was on her way to save Chase from a marriage they were forcing on him.

Andrea was back within minutes with a small pouch. It didn't look to be much in it, but when Andrea whispered in her ear, her mouth fell open.

"For real?"

"Yes," Andrea said.

Two hundred thousand was in the pouch, mostly in hundred dollar bills. That could more than do what she needed to get her to where she wanted. It would prevent her from having to stop at the ATM to withdraw money. Tyler would be with her as well, so she wasn't worried about getting ripped off.

It seemed that her brother developed a number of contacts while in jail. He called them his buddies, but she strongly believed they were a gang. Pushing the thought aside, she focused on her mission. However, she would certainly get back to it when this was all over.

CHAPTER 50

“I think they caught on!” Andrea muttered, contemplating whether to call George.

Andrea worried that the men following might have realize that the woman with the baby was not Maggie. On the other hand, if they knew that, wouldn't they go after Maggie instead? It didn't matter whether they knew who was in the car. The fact remained that they were in trouble.

They were on the throughway heading to Brentwood when she noticed that a car had been tailing her for a few minutes. It was expected that she would be followed, but when the car came within a foot behind her, almost touching her bumper, her bely bottom sank.

This went on for about seven minutes. The vehicle would gain on them and then fall back. At one point, they fell back a distance and Andrea released a sigh. However, her eyes widened when she glanced through the rear view mirror.

The car trailing them was gaining speed and almost hit her bumper. She stepped the gas and the car sped forward. Using one hand to steer, she touched the speed dial on her cell and put the phone on speaker.

While waiting for the call to be answered, she checked on Lola in the rear mirror. “Are you okay,” she asked the woman.

“Y-yes,” Lola replied, glancing through the back screen of the car.

“Hello?” George came on the line.

“They're riding up on us George, I think they're trying to run us off the road or something!”

The black sedan, brushed the rear end of the car. Remembering what Maggie said about the phones being monitored, she did not mention Lola or anything that may give them away.

“Hold tight and drive carefully, I'm calling the police. Where are you now?”

“We're on the throughway,” she told him, glancing at the headlights of the car as they gained on her again.

“A police patrol is always stationed there. I’ll make a report.”

He hung up as she tried to keep her hands steady. They were trembling as they gripped the steering wheel. Glancing behind her she saw Lola hugging her baby tightly, fear etched on her face.

For the next six or so minutes, the other car rubbed the side of hers, then fell back a few feet, then did it again. Each time the sedan touched her car, she fought to keep the vehicle under control.

The sound of sirens ahead made her breathe a little easier. The car behind her slowed as flashing lights on police cars appeared ahead. Three patrol cars were on the soft shoulder and a policeman in uniform stepped out into the road, indicating she stop.

By this, her intimidator lagged some distance behind. As her car came to a halt, the black sedan turned and sped off. One of the patrol vehicles moved off, chasing the sedan with lights flashing and siren blaring.

One of the officers tapped her window and she rolled it down. “Are you okay ma’am? We got a report that someone was tailgating you?”

“Y-y-yes,” she stuttered.

Her body shuddered as well as her voice.

“We understand there’s baby in the car?” he glanced in the back seat at Lola and the baby. “Would you like us to escort you home?”

The officer put her at ease by requesting one of the other policemen follow her home. When they reached, he waited until she input the code Maggie gave her. The officer even checked the yard for any one lurking around, and encouraged her to secure all doors and windows.

It dawned on Andrea just how much danger Maggie was in. She was grateful that her friend had the good sense to secure the house. She just prayed that she would get safely to Florida and finish her mission before D’Morne found out. It was apparent that they thought Maggie was in the car and tried to terrorize her. If they knew she had already left for Florida, they would have gone after her instead.

CHAPTER 51

There were several airports closer to Brentwood than JFK. Maggie chose Lufker Airport twenty-seven miles away in Suffolk County. Not only was it among the six closest in proximity, it was also the third farthest away.

If they should realize that Lola was in fact not she, it would take them a while to figure out which airport she may have gone. They may even check for commercial flights from JFK first, giving Maggie enough time to leave.

Peering out in the dark, she was certain that they were not being followed. Colton was beside her, strapped in Bobby's son child seat. Her mind kept straying to Andrea and Lola. George was going to spend the night as well, so they would have a man in the house, but she still worried.

What if they realized that the woman with the baby was not she? This was a dangerous game she was playing. As Bobby sped toward their destination, she wondered what was in the chip. The tablet was in the car as Lola promised, but Maggie wanted when she checked the file she would be able to concentrate.

She'd be in Florida all day Saturday where she would have time to view it. Her apprehension and dread would perhaps make her miss important details in the middle of the night. The envelope with the chip was safely in the inner compartment of the baby's bag.

On their way, they made one stop to pick up Tyler. He'd brought the new cell phone from his friend which she used to send a message to George. The message stated that Lola thanked him for the gift and she was home safe. That should let him know that they were okay.

"Big Sis," Tyler said.

He was sitting in front. Turing as much as his seatbelt would offer, he handed her a rectangular velvet box about a foot long.

"What's in it?" she asked.

"Open it, and don't tell me you don't want it, OK?"

Hesitating, she lifted the lid as Tyler switched on the roof light. Dumbfounded, she stared

at a gun. It had a black grip panel with a chrome barrel.

“It’s a nine millimeter Luger,” he informed her.

It took Maggie a few minutes to realize what she was holding.

Snapping the lid shut, she yapped, “Are you crazy?”

“You’re gonna need it. These people are dangerous, Sis.”

“I have a baby to consider! It’s not safe to have guns around infants.”

“Who would you rather have a gun around your boy? A goon or you?”

“What?” she could not comprehend what he was talking about.

“Those goons are strapped, trust me. You need this.”

Bobby chimed in. “I think he’s right. Moreover, Colton isn’t old enough to even get to it unless you place it in his reach. I know you’ll be careful with it.”

“You’re both crazy!”

“Maggie.” The way her bother said her name gave her pause. “Those people aren’t playing and you need to defend yourself and Colton if needed.”

A leaden feeling settled in her lower abdomen as her mind tried to come to terms with having a gun in her possession. She’d never fired one before, though she’d held it in her hands on a few occasions.

“Look. You may never have need of it as I’m there with you. But what if I’m not there and you need to defend yourself?”

“Is this what you wanted to talk to me about this morning?”

“Yes,” Tyler admitted.

“Did you have it with you all along?”

He nodded. “Tony and I picked it out.”

“Jeez! Tony is in on this?”

“Don’t look so shocked. Tony is more of a thug than you realize.”

Maggie leaned back against the seat. “You both are going to be the death of me.”

A gun. No, no absolutely no! Then the picture of that coffin and note loomed before her.

Turning her head, she glanced at the sleeping infant. His innocent face and his pink pouting lips were perfect.

Absently, she lifted the lid from the box and fingered the weapon. What would Chase do? She wondered. Gently closing the box, she sighed. Maybe Tyler was right.

* * *

The pilot shook his head. “You never told me there would be a baby involved.”

“Is that a problem?” Maggie asked.

“I got to put that on my report ma’am. I’m just the pilot, not the owner. I got to make a report every time I fly.”

“Hey, you never told me ‘bout no report,” Tyler barked.

Maggie gripped his arm and pulled him back. Arriving at the airfield, they were ready to board the small craft, when the pilot confronted them about traveling with the baby on board.

“How much more will it cost?”

“It’s not about the money ma’am,” the man replied, with a strong Brooklyn accent.

“Then what is it? It can’t be about just a report.”

“We don’t have child safety gear on the plane,” he replied, then thumbed his finger at Tyler. “His friend said party of three. I thought they were all adults.”

“Couldn’t the car seat work?” She turned to Bobby who was waiting for them to board the plane. “Could you exchange with me?”

Bobby responded with a bob of the head, “Of course.”

Turning back to the pilot, she pleaded. “Please, can’t you do this with the car seat? And I have everything I need for the baby, even a first aid kit.” The pilot fingered his chin. Maggie continued to plead with him, “Look, we’re desperate. I’ll give you two grand in cash to do this.”

Everyone fell silent for a few moments until the pilot relented. “All right. But if anything happens...”

Completing his statement, she said, “I know, I take full responsibility.”

They took off after he made sure she took the baby seat. Bobby didn’t complain as he was

getting one in return. She also gave him some money for his troubles, knowing that he was struggling father.

The plane lifted around midnight. Three hours later, it was taxiing down the runway of the Tampa International Airport.

As the craft came to a halt, memories of her childhood and later as a young adult, came crashing back. Most recent were the memories of her time with Chase and her pregnancy. She'd had a difficult nine months due to stress and almost miscarried when Herman confronted her.

Giving herself a mental slap, she debarked the aircraft and peered around to see if the car and driver Tyler had arranged was waiting. Tyler was on the phone and he sounded upset.

When he got off the phone, he leaned close. "Sorry, Sis. My buddy's car broke down. We got to take a cabbie."

"I knew you'd eventually mess up. Do you realize I have an infant and if they happen to figure out I'm not home, it would be easier to find me if I take a cab?"

"I'm sorry."

"You've got to rent a car or something. I can't risk taking a public transport. I just can't risk it, Tyler."

"OK, I'll be right back."

She watched him make his way to the exit, getting a cab to take him a few miles up the road. If she remembered correctly, the nearest car rental place was about four miles away.

While waiting for Tyler, Maggie went inside the lounge. Eager to know what was on the SD chip she turned on the tablet and inserted the card in the slot.

It was after three and the place was almost empty of travelers. Before settling her eyes on the device, she gave the lounge a thorough scrutiny. Satisfied that it was safe, she dropped her eyes to the screen and opened the disk.

There were two files, one marked HM and the other ABD. The one named HM she assumed to be Herman McMillan. When she opened it, she confirmed that she had been correct. The other file she also opened, which contained several sub files; AD, BD and BW-RSS.

Tyler was taking too long to return and her eyes were now burning from having not slept in a while. Therefore, she closed the file and switched off the tablet. Saturday was going to be a long day, as she'd need to figure out how to get close to Chase before the wedding.

As soon as she got some rest, she'd check the files and proceed from there. The thought then crossed her mind that perhaps she'd need to go to the police, depending on what she found. Then again, what if the files proved nothing?

Yawning a few times, she watched the entrance for her brother's return. An hour later, he came trotting in, a wide grin plastered on his face.

* * *

Maggie awoke to Colton's sharp cry. This was the day to make her final plans. They'd checked into a motel with a room almost as small as her bathroom back home. She figured that Antonio would perhaps check the regular hotels first if he found she was gone. These remote motels were more discreet.

The rooms afforded both privacy and easy escape should anything unexpected happen ... or in her case ... anticipated. There were about four L-shaped buildings with tiny numbered flats. They'd checked in at around five thirty, just before daybreak and were shown their rooms across the compound.

When she got to the room, Colton had awoken. She fed him and lay beside him while he went back to sleep. There were no cribs in the room, therefore she's had to use pillows on the opposite side of the bed as barrier. Tyler got the room next door and brought over his pillows for extra support.

Now he was awake again and begging for attention. Upon checking the time, it was seven fifty three. She'd slept for almost three hours. Now that the baby was awake, there was no time to rest.

Tyler came into the room. "Give him to me and get some sleep," he suggested.

"No, you haven't slept much either."

He reached down and picked Colton from the bed. "You're going to need your strength, so get some sleep. I can feed and bathe the big guy."

"Are you sure you can manage? He tends to make a fuss."

"We'll manage, won't we, Big Guy?" he tickled Colton who erupted into a fit of laughter.

“All right, but wake me if you need me.”

CHAPTER 52

After spending time on Saturday going through the files, Maggie reached the conclusion that what she found was bigger than what she could handle. There was no way she could go in without some kind of protection.

Based on what was in some of the files, she didn't know who to trust. These people had not only police in their pockets, but government officials as well.

After much contemplation, Maggie sent Tyler to get three SD cards from the closest store he could find. His mission included the purchase of a few padded envelopes, and some large manila ones. She needed some kind of security, in the event that something happened. He would also a portable mini printer and paper.

He came back with the items within twenty minutes. She printed the photos and placed in one envelope with a few printed copies of some of the files. Copying the documents to the SD cards, she dropped one into each padded envelope. The padding was to protect the chip from damage.

With her, she kept one chip with a set of printed files. Uncertain if what she was doing was correct, her hand trembled while she addressed each envelope. There were few people who she could trust, so there were not many choices. One was addressed to Detective Akoni and one to her uncle's address in New York. The other one she addressed to the Unity Baptist church mailbox.

"So you set?" Tyler inquired when she was done.

"No," she chuckled. "This is just in case something happens to us. I can't go in with these."

"Then why go through the trouble? How will you get in?"

"Herman," she sneered. "The file on Herman has no police contact, but there's enough there to arrest him for insider trading, securities fraud and bribery."

"But how will that get Antonio off your back? Can't you threaten to expose D'Morne if he doesn't let Chase go?"

“See this list of people on his payroll?” She scrolled through some thirty-seven pages in the file. “There are dozens of police officers and Federal agents in his pocket. Do you think I could threaten him, knowing he’s protected?”

She slumped her shoulders and continued. “Look, Tyler. All I need is to distract them and then get Chase out of the church where he’s getting married. I want to report Herman to the authorities. When the feds or police arrive to arrest him, I need you to go in afterwards. Have your friends make some kind of commotion after they arrest Herman and you get Chase to the back of the church where I’ll be waiting in the rental car.”

Tyler didn’t seem convinced. “Are you sure Herman ain’t got no lawmen under his thumb?”

“I don’t know, but I’d rather take that chance than with Antonio. It’s not his goons that scare me anymore, Tyler.”

“What’d you mean?”

“Do you know what a biological weapon is and what it does?”

“Like that powder thing terrorists use to hurt people?”

“Anthrax powder is a kind of biological weapon, yes. But there are other toxins, germs and viruses that we don’t know about. That is Antonio’s business... buying and selling these weapons to the highest bidder and two of those organizations are the Russian Mafia and the Russian Secret Service.”

“Damn! I thought he was some big oil baron or something.”

“That’s what we all thought, but that was a deception. He had to skip from Kuwait when they found out he was not a legitimate businessman. If he’s to operate in the United States, he needs a business that’s already established as a front.”

Tyler scratched his head. “That’s why he couldn’t do the merger the usual way?”

Maggie nodded. “He’d need to submit an audit of his business and personal assets in order to do that. He could have faked his way out, but Herman would perhaps find out about it before the wedding. He couldn’t take the chance. That’s why he is forging the merger this way.”

“Sis, this is huge. I remember you saying the one who would benefit more would be the one who kidnapped Chase, right?”

Again, she jiggled her head. “The D’Mornes did it.”

“I worry about Colton, though. I don’t want my baby in danger. I can’t take him to the church with me and I have no one to leave him with.”

“What about the PI guy?”

She frowned. “Mark? No, he’s probably on some covert assignment.”

Wracking her brain, she tried to figure what to do. One place came to mind and it’s the church her parents attended in Ybor City, but that was some distance away. The only person she could think of close by was Mickey. He was on the beach a few miles away. Mickey was her old boss, and she hoped he would not refuse to help her.

It was either ask Mickey for help, drive all the way to Ybor or take Colton with her to the church. She ran through her old cell phone and found Mickey’s number. Hoping he hadn’t changed it, she dialed from the new phone.

“Hello?” She recognized Mickey’s voice right away.

“Mickey, it’s Maggie. Remember the girl who worked...?”

“Of course, you got some bug and ran away,” he chuckled. “How are you? You know, after you left, some guy came looking for you. Were you in some kinda trouble?”

“You remember all that?”

“Of course. It isn’t everyday a guy shows in an expensive ride and Italian shoes looking for one of my waitresses.” She laughed as his voice became serious. “Are you looking for a job?”

“No, but I need your help.”

“Tell me.”

Not leaving anything out, she told him her story up to the plan she had for going to get Chase. Was she doing something foolish? All along doubts had consumed her until she saw the documents on the SD chip.

She’d been afraid that perhaps he’d refuse to get involved, especially since she hadn’t kept in touch. He told her to bring the baby and he’d watch him.

“It’s only for a few hours. I promise,” she reiterated.

“You bring the baby to me and you take care of your business. If you need an extra pair of hands to go with you, let me know. So the cops are involved with this guy, huh?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to report your father-in-law instead? Have you done so yet?”

“I’m thinking of contacting the feds since it’s their jurisdiction, but I don’t know who to trust.”

“I understand that. Tell you what, my cousin is a cop. I think he’s a standup guy. I’ll give you his number and you decide if you want him to help you. He should be able to point you in the right direction.”

“Thanks Mickey.”

“Don’t mention it.”

After she hung up with Mickey, she checked his cousin’s name against the list of officers mentioned in Antonio’s file. The name was not there. Also doing an internet search, she found that he was awarded the Medal of Valor for saving a family from a burning building two years ago.

Deciding to trust him, she gave him a call. Relating the same information to him she gave Mickey, he told her he would get in touch with someone and return her call.

Tyler paced the room while she waited for the cop to return her call. Her eyes followed him until she became dizzy.

“Stop it Tyler. Sit down, you’re driving me up the wall with your pacing.”

“Are you sure that cop can be trusted?”

“No, but I’m desperate. I can’t go in without something and I don’t want to forewarn any of Antonio’s agents or policemen. It’s best to let Herman take the fall. He deserves it anyway.”

“And what about that guy Mike?” he asked.

“You mean Mickey?” he nodded. “I don’t trust anyone a hundred percent other than you and Tony. But, since I don’t have much of a choice, I’d rather trust Mickey. I still have my doubts, but I have to do this.”

While they waited for the officer to call her, she ran a few things through her mind. By Sunday afternoon, Antonio would learn that she was not in New York. What then? That part

she hadn't thought of until now. She could not put Lola and her baby in danger.

After taking some time to think about it, she decided to wait until the morning to tell them what to do. According to her communication with Lola, they were safe. The house was secure and the car was parked as usual down the street. They would be okay for the night.

* * *

Sunday afternoon – 2 p.m.

Herman growled as he read the file the PI handed to him. Leaning back in the seat of the car, he continued to read as his hand shook at the revelation before him. Photos also confirmed what was in the report.

“What took you so long to get back to me? I hired you two weeks ago!” he barked at the private investigator.

“Sir, these people are hard to track. They have many connections and they are dangerous.”

“Kiev Lebowksi?” Herman uttered, the name jumping off the page at him.

“Yeah, that's Alexander Sierra's real name. He's a part of the Bravta, the Russian Mafia. Antonio is the liaison between them and the Russian Secret Service,” the man informed him.

“Liaison?”

“Yes. He belongs to the terrorist arm of the Bravta that trades in weapons of war. It's all there and on this,” the PI said, handing him a thumb drive.

That was it. He didn't need to read anymore to know that this wedding could not happen. He had less than two hours to call it off, or his family business would be used as a front to trade weapons to terrorists.

So, that girl had been right, they had kidnapped his son and forced him to do their bidding. All this time he was just a target and he played right into their hands.

His grip on the file tightened as he realized how much D'Morne played him. Chase must have suspected, that's why he was adamant about not marrying Brittany. What a fool he'd been! Herman knew that if anything happened to Chase, he'd never be able to forgive himself.

Had it not been for Antonio's complete turnaround after declaring they did not need this

deal, he'd never have suspected a thing. He was so happy to have his son back home that he almost made the biggest mistake of his life.

Closing his eyes, he cringed at the idea that he'd been made a fool of. Chase loved the nig..., he pushed the demeaning word aside and thought of her name. Maggie, yes that was her name. He'd take her any day over some Russian terrorists.

There was a lot of mending to do, and he was damn well ready to accept her if that's what it would take to make his son happy. In addition, this would give him a chance to know his grandchild.

After the day Maggie visited and his initial shock at her slapping him wore off, he realized one thing. The boy looked just like Chase. The slightly darker shade of the baby's skin did not make a difference. Seeing the child had done something to him. The child's eyes and face was like when Chase himself was a baby.

He'd wanted to call her back, but was too damn proud to. Now that this wedding would be cancelled, he would have to make a decision and fix what was broken. He resolved that he would learn to accept Maggie and love his grandson.

He picked up a large brown envelop from the floor of the car and dropped it unto the lap of the PI.

“That's your final payment.”

“Thank you sir.”

The man exited the vehicle, leaving Herman to do what he thought was the best thing. Reaching for his cell phone, he dialed Antonio's number.

“Herman, what a blessed day this is turning out to be!” Antonio's elation rang though.

“We need to talk, now,” he growled.

A few second's silence preceded Antonio's response. “Where are you? I'll come see you.”

“Good. I'm at the parking lot on Florida Avenue. I'll be waiting.”

Herman McMillan had always been an arrogant man. Sometimes his ego got in the way of rationalizing his actions. Today was one day in which he allowed his anger to replace rationale. He eased up the driver seat. A small hole, the size of which he could stuff his finger, was visible at the seam where the leather was stitched together under the seat. There, he

pushed in the thumb drive, then pressed his hands on the area until it was smooth.

For a few minutes, he stared at it, noting that it was not easily seen. Then, he snapped back the seat in place. Satisfied, he waited for Antonio to show up.

Ten minutes went by before someone rapped on his window. He rolled the glass down and stared up at his own driver.

“Sir,” the man addressed him. “Mr. D’Morne is here. He’s asking you to join him in the limo.”

Disgruntled that the man hadn’t the courtesy to join him in his own car. Herman stepped out of his car and was immediately greeted by one of Antonio’s men. The limousine occupied two parking spaces.

After bridging the spaces between the two vehicles, Antonio’s man tapped the window. The back passenger door opened and he slipped inside, followed by his escort. His eyes widened as he noted that he was sandwiched between two of D’Morne’s men while Antonio himself sat facing him, dressed in an all-white suit.

“Herman, tsk, tsk, tsk. I am disappointed in you,” D’Morne said with a slight accent, while pulling on a pair of white gloves.

Antonio nodded to one of the men who then snatched the file from Herman’s grasp. Both men on either side of him gripped his arms, holding him in place.

“What are you doing? How dare you... let go this instant!”

Antonio wagged his finger. “Herman, behave and they will play nice.”

“Look Antonio. I know about your ties to the Bravta and RSS. If you promise to leave my family alone, I will not reveal my knowledge to the Feds.”

Antonio did not reply. Instead, he reached for a small black box from within his jacket pocket. This he settled on the seat beside him before opening a small refrigerator found in most limousines. From it he removed another box, similar to the one he took from his pocket.

He opened the first box, extracting a plastic package with needle and syringe. With his teeth, he tore the wrapping and screwed the needle on to the large syringe.

“What are you doing?” Herman asked, struggling to break free from the men.

“Be quiet, I need to concentrate,” Antonio replied, his Russian accent deeper than before.

“I really hate you people, you talk too much.”

Next, he opened the second box. Herman dropped his eyes to the contents, noticing three vials of liquid. Antonio removed a vial containing a black substance. He led it up to the limousine roof light. He then picked out a vial of white fluid. Holding both vials in the same hand between forefinger and thumb he smiled.

“Do you know what I like to call these?” He asked. “I like to call them Ying and Yang. They work well together. One is useless without the other. This....” He pointed to the black substance. “This will make you sick for some time, but it won’t kill you.” He then pointed to the white one. “This alone will make you feel quite high, like a drug and then you will slowly start feeling like you want to die. But it won’t kill you. Now, both of them together... well... do the math.”

Like a doctor, Antonio pushed the needle into the soft rubber cap of the vial and halved the syringe with black substance. He did the same with the white, filling the syringe.

Both substances swirled together, but did not mix as you would expect. The two liquids remained separated even though they swirled in the vial and appeared to want to combine to become one.

Herman struggled against the grip of the two men. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Don’t worry. You won’t feel any pain, unlike your son who thinks he’s going to die. Right now, he can feel Ying working through his blood. In a few weeks he’ll be fine, so long as he keeps his promise.”

“You sonofa... You hurt my son and I will... AHHH!”

Herman’s words were cut short with a shriek as Antonio stabbed his thigh with the needle. He tried to move but the man held his thigh in place while he emptied the syringe in him.

“Your son is a lot smarter than you. He was willing to keep his mouth shut to save his son and woman. You... I don’t trust you at all.” Antonio turned to one of his men. “Go search the car.”

When the man slipped from the vehicle, Antonio leaned forward and patted Herman’s cheek. “We could have changed the world together, you and I. But now Chase and I will do that. He’ll come around eventually. You want to know how I got him to do my bidding?”

Antonio opened the fridge and pulled out two more boxes. From them he picked out the

phials with the black fluid, holding them up for Herman to see. Antonio pushed them close to Herman's face where he could clearly see a name written on each. The names Colton McMillan and Maggie Carter.

“You guessed right. I told him I'd killed his son and woman if he didn't do as I say. And I will, if he breaks this deal. He'll watch them die along with his mother and everyone close to him.”

The grip of the goon loosened and he shrugged but the strangest feeling overcame him. It was as though ice began to flow through his veins and he began to shiver. So many questions ran through Herman's mind along with his regrets.

“It's a shame it had to come to this. We could have been one happy family,” Antonio continued. “You would have appointed me to the Board of Directors and my daughter as Co-CEO along with your son. Now, you won't get to see your son get married. But no worries, I'll take care of the family business. How much is it worth, twenty-seven billion?”

Herman tried to lunge forward, but his body stiffened. He endeavored to raise his hand, wanting to wipe the smug look from Antonio's face. He could not. His body was leaden. Herman strained to speak, but his tongue congealed. A grunt and a gurgling sound emitted from him as a spasm ran through his body.

The man who Antonio sent to search the car returned. “It's clean,” he said.

“Oh, here's the antidote. You can try saving yourself.”

Antonio tossed the third flask, containing a golden fluid, on his chest. He attempted catching it, but his arms refused to move. Before he realized what was happening, strong grips hauled him from the limo. The men escorted him to his car and stuffed him in the back passenger seat.

The feeling of being frozen overwhelmed him, as he trembled out of control. This was it, he thought. I'm going to die before I get to meet my grandchild. I was a stupid fool.

The chauffeur sat unmoving in the driver seat, with his head affixed at an unusual angle. Herman wanted to tell him to get going, but he felt the cold render him speechless. His head started freezing and soon everything when went white.

BOOK 3

CHAPTER 53

1:05 p.m. Sunday – Chase and Brittany’s wedding day

It was D-day. At 4:00 p.m., Chase would be marrying Brittany D’Morne. For a moment, Maggie wondered if she was doing the right thing. Questions assailed her as the time drew close. What if Chase didn’t want to be free? What if she was fooling herself into believing she could stop this wedding?

“No, all the evidence points to something fishy as well as that coffin they sent,” she mumbled. “At least, I need to talk to Chase myself, and if he still wants to go through with it, then I’ll go back to New York and forget him.”

Now it was time to make sure the people assisting her were safe. Using the secure cell phone, Maggie dialed Lola’s number. As she waited for the woman to answer, she paced the motel room, her mind going through her plans.

In approximately three hours, Antonio D’Morne would come to know that she was not in Brentwood. That knowledge might put Lola and her baby in danger. In addition, Andrea and George were involved, and Maggie would not allow anyone to get hurt because of her.

Less than five minutes ago, she was on the phone with Detective Blaze, who she arranged to meet when she dropped Colton off at Mickey’s. Her former employer was kind to have agreed to watch Colton. It was a club, and not a place for a child. At that short notice, however, that was the best she could do.

Maggie’s plan was to get Chase away from Brittany and her father, after which she would pick up Colton from Mickey’s. One of Tyler’s friends would then drive them to a safe place a few miles south of Ybor.

For the past few days that this plan was being formulated, Maggie had doubted her younger brother's ability to assist her organize things. Now, he proved himself more than capable. Therefore, she decided to trust him with this stage of the mission.

Maggie and Chase would stay at the location Tyler arranged until they could figure out how to report Antonio without the involvement of those on his payroll. Her thoughts were interrupted by a voice on the phone.

"Hello?"

"Lola, it's Maggie. Listen, I need you to take Ryan out of the house now. Let Andrea drive you to the nearest police station and you all stay there."

"What's going on?" the woman asked.

"I'm about to head out on the road. In a little while, I'll be going to the church where Chase is getting married. Antonio and his men will come to know that you are not me. Are you getting my drift?"

"Yes, I'll go get Andrea."

"Do it now, Lola. Please don't waste time, and call me on the number I gave you as soon as you get to the police station." She softened her tone. "I'm sorry to get you involved in this."

"I told you, I'm fine. We're from the streets, we're used to this kind of thing. Don't worry, we'll be fine," Lola reassured her.

Maggie sighed. "All right, but get going now. I'll see you back in New York in a few days, hopefully."

"Maggie." Lola sounded somber. "Be careful, and good luck. If it were Bobby, I'd have done the same thing. You go get your man."

"Thanks. Now get going and you be careful too."

Maggie ended the conversation with worry lines on her face and heaviness in the pit of her stomach. She and Tyler were ready to go. Her brother removed all traces of their stay in the hotel room while she strapped Colton in the child seat.

It was time. Maggie finished settling Colton in the back of the car. She then slipped in beside him and kissed his forehead. With heart racing, she felt flushed from the adrenaline.

Taking several deep breaths, she closed her eyes and concentrated on what lied ahead.

Overcoming her nervousness was the first thing she needed to do. For that, she embraced a combative disposition. There was no time to feel scared or nervous as she was now on the offensive.

Maggie pushed Brentwood to the back of her mind, knowing that fretting over her friends would perhaps distract her. Everything had to go smoothly and having distractions would allow for slipups. Mistakes were not a part of this operation and there was no place for them now.

Tyler drove away from the motel at about one thirty. They rode in silence to their destination, which was a club on the beach. By twenty minutes to two, they were pulling up outside Mickey's Bar and Grill. The place seemed scant except for a black SUV and a silver Range Rover parked out front. This had Maggie wondering if business was closed for the day.

The bar area, which was usually open house, was now enclosed with bamboo screens. This was a new addition since Maggie was last there over a year ago. Outside, the chairs sat upside down on the tables. This confirmed her suspicions that Mickey's was not yet opened. Still, she made her way towards the bar where she heard voices coming from behind the screen.

When she neared the area, she called, "Mickey?"

"Come on in," was the reply.

Behind the bar counter was Mickey in his usual sombrero. His mustache was the same, as well as the moist eyes that he had to dab occasionally with his handkerchief. Sitting at the counter was a man in a colorful shirt with palm trees and Pina Colada patterns. Beside him was another man in a dark suit whom she assumed to be a federal agent. It made sense, the black vehicle, dark suit and of course, the badges placed on the counter for her to see.

All eyes turned to her when she entered the area with Colton on her left hip. As she neared, she noticed the man in the printed shirt seemed familiar. She could not immediately place him.

In that moment that the man in suit connected eyes with hers, she became aware of the devastating evidence on Herman. The SD card containing this information was folded in a sheet of paper, and neatly wedged in her front jeans pocket. That, however, was her last resort. In her hand were the printed files relating to the corporate fraud.

Her mind went back a few hours while she went through the folder on the SD disk belonging to Herman. On a hunch she'd decided to do some research to find out what the procedure was for reporting a white collar crime to the feds. It seemed there was a process, which would involve more than three hours.

Frustrated, she'd tapped the screen of the tablet that had the files opened. Then something happened. Another file appeared, one that she had not seen before. When she examined it, she realized it was a hidden file. Her frustrated finger had tapped the 'show hidden files' tab.

Now that she was in front of the FBI agent and the detective, her anxiety returned. What she found in those hidden files were more than business crimes, they could see Herman facing serious criminal charges.

"Maggie, there you are!" Mickey grinned. "Come, let me see the little fella." He looked at the man in the printed shirt. "This is Maggie Carter. She only worked with me a short time, but she was a hard worker. Worked double shifts."

"Hi Mickey, how are you?" Maggie greeted. "Hello," she addressed the other men.

"Nice to meet you Maggie," palm tree shirt said, holding out his hand. She placed her hand in his and he gave it a firm shake.

"Hi," the dark suit greeted.

"Weren't you saving to go to med school or something?" Mickey asked.

She nodded. "As you can see, there was a change in plans."

"It's not too late, is it?" her former employer asked. "You're a bright girl, you should fulfil that dream of yours. Now, give the baby to me and talk with these gentlemen."

Mickey moved from behind the bar and came to stand beside Maggie. Colton gave him a wild stare before pressing his face into his mother's shoulder.

"Come here little man. Come to Uncle Mickey."

Colton's response was a squeal. Maggie was concerned that Colton would not allow Mickey to hold him, but when she was about to cajole him, she was amazed that his squeal was one of delight. He was playing hide and seek with Mickey by burying his face in her shoulder, and then peeking at Mickey who was partially hiding his face with his hands.

Surprised, Maggie stared at both Mickey and Colton as they continued to play. After a

few minutes, Mickey removed him from her arms with no fuss at all. She watched Mickey take the baby to the back office located to the right of the bar counter.

“Please, have a seat Miss Carter,” the dark suit invited.

“Thank you.”

“I’m Agent Charles.” He picked up the badge and held it up for her to see.

“I’m Detective Frank Blaze, we spoke on the phone earlier,” the one in the printed shirt said, showing his badge as well.

“Now, Maggie we understand you want to report a crime. Why didn’t you just call it in? Are you being threatened?” Agent Charles asked.

Maggie’s heart skipped a beat at the question. Yes, she was being threatened, but if she told them about Antonio, what would happen next? Could this Federal Agent be trusted? Could the detective be trusted? Informing them about the threat from Antonio D’Morne was not a risk she was willing to take while the lives of her son and fiancé were involved.

“I know Herman hates me, but he has not made a direct threat. I am being careful, that’s all.”

“Herman?”

“Yes, Herman McMillan.”

“I see.” Charles nodded. “So what have you got?”

Maggie handed him the envelope with printed files and the SD card with the files containing the corporate fraud documents. Charles scanned the printouts, then turned the card over in his hand.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, slipping from his seat and exiting the area.

True to his word, he was back with a tablet in which he inserted the chip. He took a few minutes to observe the documents before directing his gaze at Maggie.

“How did you obtain these documents?”

“My fiancé entrusted me with the key to a safe where he kept them,” she replied.

“And how did he come by them?”

“He used to work at MacCorp.”

“Alright, I’ll take these with me. Thanks for the report,” he said, pocketing the chip and making the files neat.

“Wait, aren’t you going to arrest Herman?”

Agent Charles connected his brown eyes with hers. “He will be arrested, after we complete our investigation.”

“I need him arrested today, like right now.” Her voice squeaked.

There was no time for investigations. Maggie wanted that when the agent saw the files he would go arrest Herman. She knew the procedure, but she’d hoped that with the depth of the information, they would act quickly. What was she missing?

“What’s going on Miss Carter?”

“I was hoping you’d arrest him today. That would delay the wedding so I could get Chase away from them.”

“Chase? Isn’t that Herman’s son, the one we detained last year for running an illegal casino on his yacht?”

“Yes,” she croaked.

Her throat felt constricted, as her plans seemed to be going down the drain. A bad feeling settled in the pit of her stomach thinking that she may have to hand over Antonio’s file. She didn’t even have time to check the agent’s name against the list.

“I heard he was getting married... wait ... you’re the girl he followed to New York? I thought it was fishy he returned all on a sudden and was marrying the woman who turned him in for running the illegal gambling on the boat.”

Maggie blinked, as she thought she did not hear correctly. “What? It was Brittany who reported him?”

That seemed strange. Why would Brittany report Chase for the casino? Was that the reason she was not on the boat last year? Nothing was making sense to her. Maggie pushed the yacht incident aside to concentrate on the current situation.

Detective Blaze who had been silently listening, now exclaimed. “Now I know where I’ve seen you. You were among the employees that I interviewed last year. You were out of uniform.”

“You were on the boat?” the Fed inquired.

“I was a server, that’s where I met Chase,” was her reply. She gave the agent a pleading look. “Please help me. You have to help me stop that wedding.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I’ll have to take these in, make a report, get a warrant and confiscate his office files and computer before I can arrest him.”

“Why?” she was beginning to become irritated by all the red tape Charles was describing.

“That’s the way it’s done, Miss Carter. I have seen too many criminals go free with just a technicality. This” He indicated the files. “This is just the beginning. We will have to determine if they can be entered as evidence. His lawyer may argue that they were obtained illegally. We have to do this by the book.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“If he had committed a heinous crime, something like murder... or if he threatened you ... we’d take him in today. But white collar crimes have to be properly investigated first.”

This was it then. All she wanted was for them to take Herman in for questioning. He had the most powerful lawyers in the city. She knew he would have been able to defend himself. But with the evidence on the other chip, it was highly unlikely he’d get out of that.

Although she knew Herman hated her for being black, she had no desire to see him go to prison. At the time, she thought he was responsible for Chase’s disappearance, she was willing to fight him to get Chase home.

This was a different matter. This was her son’s grandfather, not some random stranger. The stakes were high. However, getting Chase out of this trap was more important. She dug into her pocket and brought out the second SD card.

“Maybe this will do the trick. I didn’t want to have to be the one to hand it over, but I am desperate.”

Agent Charles took the chip. “I need to ask you something Miss Carter. Is there something you aren’t telling us?”

“What do you mean?”

“People don’t ask Federal Agents for help to stop a wedding. You could just walk in there and do your thing. Why do you need a distraction to get Chase out? Has he been held against

his will?”

Maggie stared into the man’s eyes, her palms becoming clammy. Should she tell him about Chase? Could she trust him? Before she could make up her mind, Detective Blaze’s phone rang. The conversation halted as he answered.

“Yeah, I’m near the waterfront. What’s happening?” The detective paused as he listened to the person on the other end. “Are you sure? All right, I’m on my way,” he said before hanging up and turning to Maggie. “Miss Carter, you may have got your wish after all.”

“What’s going on?” Agent Charles asked.

“They found a body. They believe it’s Herman McMillan.”

Maggie felt faint as trepidation impugned her. A sickening feeling settled in her stomach at the thought of her father-in-law dead. Did he have another heart attack? Irene and Chase would be devastated.

“Maybe I should go with you. I know this is your jurisdiction, but you never know, I might be needed,” Agent Charles told Detective Blaze.

“Let’s go,” Blaze replied to his friend. “Miss Carter, we may need to ask you a few questions. So please don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m heading to the church,” she replied, getting off the stool. “I have to.”

“All right, but please, don’t say anything about what you just heard. Let’s go Charles.”

CHAPTER 54

Chase kicked the foot of the chair, causing it to topple. The wooden chair hit the carpeted floor with a muted thud. Frustrated with the result of weeks of investigation, he ran a hand through his raven hair.

Today was the day he promised to marry Brittany and he was in the dressing room of the church. A few doors down the long passage, Brittany was getting ready. This should have been his marriage to Maggie, not with the woman he detested.

His plans were now severely hampered due to the lack of information on the man bringing about all the chaos in his life. All he knew about Kiev Lebowksi aka Alexander Sierras, was that the man was involved in the Russian Mafia. Other than the fact that he was the head of the organization for which Antonio belonged, there was nothing else. There was nothing on his family... nothing.

A hand clamped on his shoulder and he turned his head to look into the eyes of his friend. Mark had worry lines creasing his forehead, his eyes sympathetic.

“Don’t worry, we still have an hour to go,” Mark said.

“What can we do in an hour? I thought for sure that we’d have something more to work with. We can’t get rid of Antonio without getting rid of this Kiev.”

“Listen Chase, I think we have enough to hand in to the feds. We can get rid of Antonio with the crimes he’s committed here in the US, not to mention the threat to you and your family.”

Chase knew what Mark said made sense. Nevertheless, the Feds would take a while to investigate and in that time, Kiev could cause a lot of damage. He was hoping to have some tight information on the man so the FBI could handle him first.

In addition, Chase was convinced that the man was not in America, although he had ties there. There was no telling how many associates this man had.

“You think Maggie is okay?” he asked after a few moments of thought.

“I have something to tell you, and don’t be mad,” Mark replied.

“I don’t think anything you tell me now will make me feel worse than I already feel,” Chase muttered.

Mark gripped both his shoulders, willing Chase to look him directly in the eyes. “I kinda set some things in motion when you told me to give Maggie the key to the church mailbox.”

Chase frowned as his heart skipped a few beats. “What are you talking about?”

“I told her she needed to save you and I think... no... I know she’s here in Tampa right now, with a plan to stop this farce of a wedding.”

“What!”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but....”

Chase grabbed Mark’s jacket lapel, cutting him off. “How could you put her in more danger than she already is? Do you know how hard it was for me to just walk away? They were watching, listening to every word I said to her, I couldn’t even say goodbye, not even a kiss.”

His voice cracked as his breathing became strenuous. The pain of the past few weeks had intensified and now his chest felt as though it was on fire. The muscles tightened, cutting off the air supply. Chase gripped his chest as he tried to catch his breath.

His knees started to buckle and he could hear Mark’s voice as though it was distant. Waves of nausea assaulted him as his chest constricted even more.

Is this my last day? Will I ever see Maggie and my son again?

“Chase, what’s happening?” Mark’s voice wreaked of anxiety, while trying to hold him up. “I’m calling the ambulance. Man, I told you to get checked by a doctor.”

Chase tried to speak, but his tongue was heavy. Dizziness beset him while sweat glistened on his forehead. With strength borne of his determination to survive, Chase grasped Mark’s wrist.

“No,” he wheezed, barely getting the word out.

“Are you kidding me?” Mark almost shouted.

Chase stood still for a moment, then inhaled a timely breath. Gradually the pain subsided that he was able to breathe normally and speak.

“I’m fine,” he panted. “Now tell me about Maggie.”

“Are you sure you’re fine? That thing they injected you with is slowly killing you, man.”

Chase shook his head. “No, it won’t kill me. The second serum is the deadly one... the white one.”

“But it is making you sick and you’re getting worse by the minute!”

“Mark tell me, where are Maggie and my son?”

“I’m not sure exactly where they are, but I believe she left New York the night before last.”

“How could you do this? You know the threat to my family and you still brought her into this? Does she know what these people have done to me and what they have threatened to do with her and Colton?”

“I haven’t told her anything, other than she needs to save you.”

“Maggie is mad at me. I hurt her, why would she come?”

“Well, she did as I instructed. Moreover, she was wearing the ring you ordered before you left. She knows something is fishy.”

His eyes flicked to Mark’s, many things running through his mind. *Maggie is wearing the ring? That meant she spoke with the jeweler. Oh yes, the pick uptime had passed. Mr. Surahji would have called.*

His heart ached for the woman he swore he would love always. They weren’t yet married, but he never once felt that she was not his wife. It was the most difficult thing he had to do when he walked away. However, if hurting her meant keeping her safe, then he’d have done it again.

Chase was puzzled. It was amazing to him that she was willing to risk her life for him after what he did. She must know the danger of her actions after receiving that coffin. As far as he’d thought, Maggie would never wish to have anything to do with him after that morning. Obviously, he was wrong. At the time, walking away was the price he was willing to pay to keep them safe. Antonio D’Morne was a dangerous man, but it seemed that Kiev was even more of a threat.

Not knowing Kiev Lebowski’s whereabouts terrified Chase. What if they knew Maggie

was in Tampa? His sacrifice to keep them safe would be in vain. They'd threatened to kill both her and his son if he didn't walk away. He didn't even say goodbye. He couldn't even kiss his son that morning.

His mind flicked back and forth, remembering his ordeal and coming back to Maggie's safety. Panicking at the idea that Maggie and his son could get hurt if they showed up, he grabbed Mark's arm, pleading with him.

"You've got to find her, make her stay away!"

"Take it easy, Chase. We won't let anything happen to her."

Staggering back, he thought of that morning. The small dual-purpose chip they'd attached behind his ear blasted an alarm, awakening him from sleep. When he opened his eyes, Maggie's beautiful face was turned to him and he was tempted to ravage her pout pink lips. He'd ached to touch her, make love to her after so long without her. Their last lovemaking still lingered and he'd grown hard just thinking about it.

"We know you're awake McMillan, your pulse signal is betraying you," the voice blared. The sound was so loud it was as though Antonio was in the room. D'Morne continued, "Remember, you can't do anything without us knowing. Now get your things. The only reason we let you return is so when you leave her, she will be so broken, she will not follow you."

He'd eased himself from the bed and rushed to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Leaning against the bathroom sink, he tried to still his arousal as well as his anger towards Antonio.

"I can't just leave her without an explanation," he hissed.

"What will you tell her that won't hurt her? Tell her you found another woman, or tell her you're leaving to be with my daughter."

"You sonofabitch!"

"Your choice, but I expect you to be at the airport by seven thirty."

"You won't get away with this, you evil...."

"Take it easy, Chase. Remember, the serum reacts with your adrenaline. The more upset you become, the worse you will feel. Also, if you recall, I have two sets of Ying and Yang waiting for your precious son and that pretty little girlfriend of yours."

He'd silently complied to their wishes, hurting the woman he loved more than life. He hoped that someday she would understand when she learned the truth. But that morning, as he packed and resolved to keep them safe, the idea that these bastards would carry out their threat, hardened him enough to be able to walk away.

The morning came back like yesterday. Her screams, as he drove away that morning, haunted his dreams at night. She'd hugged him from behind and begged him to stay, professing the love he knew she had for him. It had broken him, driving away from her. He'd wanted to tell her that he didn't want to leave her. D'Morne had warned him that he should not hint to her anything was wrong.

After driving away, he stopped the car a couple of blocks down the road and allowed himself to vent. Expelling his anger by pummeling the steering wheel resulted in a dent in it. But his anger only gave way to the pain that lingered until this moment.

His mind drifted to six weeks ago in Kaena Point, Oahu Island. Where he laid was cold and damp. The smell of the earthen floor drifted into his nostrils, filling his lungs. The chill seeped through his skin, bringing with it goosebumps. They'd removed his suit and hung it up by the wall of the old farmhouse. Now he lay in his underwear, his body limp.

Earlier that day, he was supposed to meet Denzel. He'd come out of the hotel and walked to the taxi stand a couple of meters away to catch a cab to his meeting. A car pulled up beside him and before he knew it, a needle jammed into his arm. Within seconds, he was feeling the effects of an anesthetic. Next thing he remembered was waking up on the floor of the old farmhouse, clad only in his boxers and undershirt.

Before he fully awakened, he heard voices. In the haze, he pried his eyes open, where he made out the tip of a black boot as it approached. He could see through his fog, the person crouching. Their hand worked by filling a syringe with black fluid.

"Chase, can you hear me?" the voice, which sounded familiar, asked. "Blink once if you can hear my voice."

The blink was like a slow motion as his lids were heavy and his mind had slowed.

"This is Antonio, I'm sure you know that by now. I'm about to inject you, so don't scream." The man gave a sarcastic laugh.

Chase felt the needle stab his upper arm. As Antonio emptied the syringe, he felt every

ounce of the serum as it traveled along his veins and into his bloodstream. He compared the feeling to hot soup running in his blood vessels. He'd drifted back to sleep and when he awoke, he was alone.

Something was wrong. When he tried to get up, his body was immobile. His mind was clear as the light that flowed through a broken window on the wooden wall of the building. After some time, footsteps approached and the black boot came to stand a few inches away from his nose.

Antonio crouched as he did before. "Chase. You now belong to me. That poison you've been injected with won't kill you, but, if I should inject you with his," Antonio paused and waved a vial with white substance in front of his eyes. "If injected with this, your death will be instantaneous."

"Why?" Chase formed the words with his mouth as he found his voice was nonexistent.

"Because I need you to marry my daughter as per the original plan. Oh, you want to know why?"

Antonio rose and walked a few paces. Chase made out an old table with a three legged chair. Antonio rested his but against the table and folded his arms.

"I need your money and your business. Let's not beat around the bush anymore now, shall we? You already know I am no oil mine in Kuwait. Let's make a deal."

Someone Chase hadn't seen before approached Antonio and handed him a tablet. Antonio returned to where he lay unmoving and stooped, fixing the device before his eyes. Chase stared at the screen. On it were video clips of Maggie and Colton.

"Don't worry," Antonio said. "We haven't placed any camera's in your house... yet. But we can, if you aren't convinced how easily we can get to them." Antonio swiped his finger across the screen and brought up another video. "That's not a recording," he said. "We are actually watching your house as we speak."

To prove what he said was true, he dialed a number on his cell phone and spoke to someone. "Ring the doorbell."

A man in a back suit appeared on screen as though coming from behind the camera. He walked up the driveway and rang the doorbell.

"Ask for some random name," Antonio instructed. "Speak loud enough so I can hear

you.”

“Yes Sir,” the man on screen replied.

Momentarily, the door opened and Maggie stood there. Chase’s heart leaped. He wanted to get up but his body felt leaden. He wanted to scream but his voice refused to work.

Maggie! He silently screamed.

“Is Sheryl home?” the man in the dark suit asked Maggie.

“I’m sorry, there is no one here by that name.”

“Is this Brentwood Avenue or Brentwood Close?” He asked.

Maggie smiled and Chase’s heart fluttered. “Brentwood Close is three blocks away.”

“Thank you ma’am.”

Maggie waited until he was halfway down the drive before closing the door. Chase could hear the faint cry of Colton in the background. A shooting pain pierced his chest that he could not breathe, just for a few seconds.

His body felt as though his life force was drifting from him. Chase blinked, trying to keep focus. The tip of Antonio’s boot was six inches away from his face that he could see his reflection in the black shiny leather. The man was still crouching, looking down at him. Chase raised his eyes to meet D’Morne’s dark ones.

“You walk away and they will be safe,” Antonio warned. “No sappy goodbyes, you hear me? You make a clean break without saying a word. We’re watching you. You try anything and you will watch them die, along with your mother and precious friends.”

A movement snapped him back to the present. Mark was pacing while talking on his cell phone. Chase shook his head.

Things had not gone according to his plans. It seemed that in a few minutes he would be lying to everyone waiting in the church when he vowed to love and honor Brittany. Most of all, he’d be lying to himself. A knock at the door brought Chase from his reverie once more.

“Yes?”

The door pushed open and a man popped his head inside. “Chase McMillan?”

“Yes,” he answered.

The door widened and the man, dressed in a printed shirt with palm trees and cocktails walked in. He looked familiar that Chase tried to place him. Right behind him was another man, in a dark suit, who Chase recognized immediately. He was the Federal Agent responsible for confiscating his yacht a year ago.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m Detective Blaze. We tried to reach your mother but have been unsuccessful, do you know where she is?”

“No, but she should be here soon. Mother likes to be fashionably late. Is there something the matter, Detective?”

Chase wondered if perhaps Irene reported their father to the police before arranging the board meeting. This would have been premature and not at all what they’d discussed.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news concerning your father,” Blaze said.

“Is he in jail? I know he’s done some things, but couldn’t you have waited until tomorrow to do it?”

The Detective gave him a sympathetic look. “He’s not in jail. I don’t know how else to say this, but the bodies of your father and his driver were both found in his car about an hour ago.”

“What do you mean *found*?”

“We’d like you to come down to the morgue to identify the bodies.”

CHAPTER 55

Maggie left Mickey's feeling as though she was going to throw up. Her stomach churned and nausea threatened to choke her. Glad that Tyler was driving, she tried to still the queasiness in her stomach. The closer she got to the church the greater her need to spill her gut that she was tempted several times to have Tyler pull over so she could let it rip.

"Sis, you don't look so good," Tyler noted, glancing her way.

"I feel just the way I look," she replied. "I can't believe Herman's dead. Chase and Irene will be crushed."

"What do you think happened?" he asked.

Another wave of nausea washed over her. She had to take a few deep breaths before her stomach would settle. It took a minute or two before she could answer.

"I don't know. He had a heart attack the day Colton was born."

"A lot has happened since I've been back," Tyler remarked. "Gosh, this is way too intense, man."

Maggie had to agree. Since the day Chase got on the plane to Hawaii, things changed drastically, for the worse. First, he disappeared without a word, then showed up in the middle of the night. The most devastating thing was when Chase left.

Since then, she found the courage to fight for her family, the man she loved. When she discovered that perhaps Chase had been intimidated into agreeing to this marriage merger, her life had taken a dangerous turn. Not only was she and her son in danger from these lunatics, so were her friends and relatives.

"It's been a rough few weeks," she replied in a soft voice. "I wonder if I'm doing the right thing."

Tyler reached over and squeezed her hand. "You can't give up now. Let's get your old man out of this mess!"

"Yeah, you're right."

The car slowed. “We are almost at the church. What we gonna do when we get there?” he asked

“Let’s park up the street and wait for word from the detective. I don’t want to go in too soon.”

Tyler appeared doubtful.

“What’s the matter, Tyler?”

“Are you sure the cop will call you?”

“He said he needed to ask me some questions. I suppose that’s procedure. I was reporting the man for a crime,” she told him. “Let’s wait for a while and if by a quarter to four we don’t hear from him, I’m going in.”

Tyler parked the car several meters away from the church. From where they were, Maggie could make out a number of men in dark suits standing at the door. This was unusual, especially for a Catholic church. The look on their faces alone told her that they were guards.

Tyler echoed her thoughts. “They got bouncers all over the place.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised.”

“Lookie here,” Tyler exclaimed. “Cops.”

A patrol vehicle, the car she’d seen parked in front of Mickey’s and a black SUV pulled up in front of the church. Maggie assumed the SUV was the same as the one she’d seen earlier. She knew the silver car was the same due to a slight dent on the hood.

Her assumptions were correct. Blaze alit the silver car, while the FBI agent exited the SUV and three uniformed officers came out of the patrol car. One of the three police officers followed Blaze and Agent Charles into the church, while the other two remained outside.

The lawmen paused at the door to and spoke with a couple of the guards. She’d even joked to Tyler that they looked like bouncers at a night club. As the officers and Federal Agent spoke to them, their discomfort was visible.

“Shall we follow them in, Sis?”

Maggie shook her head. “Things are different now that Herman is dead. Let’s see what happens.”

With some amount of anxiety, Maggie bit her bottom lip and kept her eyes glued to the

entrance of the church. If they found a body they thought to be Herman, they'd want to confirm by having the family identify it. That much she knew.

Both she and Tyler waited with apprehension to see what would happen. Approximately ten minutes later, the lawmen stepped through the doors. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of Chase. He looked forlorn, thin and pale. Without thinking, Maggie unlocked the door and was about to step out of the car when Tyler grabbed her hand.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She tried to pull away. "I have to go to him. Do you see how sad he is?"

"Yeah," Tyler replied. "But you can't go out there. We'll follow them to the station."

"Morgue, they'll need to identify the body."

"All right," Tyler replied. "Let's head to City Morgue."

As Tyler moved the vehicle forward, a hissing sound, followed by metal on pavement followed.

"Gosh, I think we have a flat," he groaned.

That did not please Maggie. "No, not now!"

Tyler shut the engine off and exited the car, skipping around to the trunk. He pulled out the spare along with the jack and crowbar, then he came to inspect the right front tire. Maggie joined him, while keeping an eye on the front of the church.

The police left with Chase, and Maggie was anxious that by the time Tyler got the tire fixed, it would be too late. Though he worked quickly, releasing the lugs and nuts, she felt it wasn't fast enough.

"Hurry up Tyler," she urged.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Sis. Don't rush me," he complained.

Deftly he pulled off the flat and replaced it with the spare. Just as he positioned the new tire, a limousine pulled up outside the entrance to the church. One of the guards bounded down the steps and opened the back passenger door.

A tall man in a white suit with dark slicked back hair stepped out of the vehicle. Maggie assumed him to be Antonio D'Morne. A second later, Brittany exited, dressed in white satin and lace. Headdress made of sparkling jewels held her veil in place.

As though sensing her, both Antonio and Brittany looked in her direction and her heart jumped. For a moment, the space closed between Maggie and her adversaries as they locked gaze. There was no doubt that they recognized her, even though she was about a hundred yards away.

“What’s taking so long?” she nudged her brother.

“I’m almost done,” he replied.

“Hurry, they’ve spotted us.”

Tyler snickered, “So what’re they going to do out in the open? Be patient, I’m almost done.”

Tyler completed tightening the lugs, but before he could remove the jack from under the car, Brittany stepped in their direction.

“Shit, Brittany is heading towards us,” Maggie hissed, picking up the tools Tyler had used. “Should I just confront her?”

“Do you want to talk to that woman. What’re you going to say to her?”

“Are you done? I don’t like the look on her face. Something is wrong,” Maggie replied.

“I’m done.” Tyler picked up the jack while Maggie opened the trunk and dropped the tools in. “I’ll get the flat,” Tyler said.

“Leave it, she’s almost upon us. Let’s go Tyler, I don’t trust her.”

Maggie took her eyes off the other woman for a second and was slipping into the front passenger door when something hit the backscreen of the car, shattering the glass to pieces.

Tyler was still outside of the car when the first shot was fired. Maggie’s eyes widened with terror that he may get hurt.

“Da fu--?” Tyler cursed, getting behind the wheel. “That *byatch* just fired upon us!”

She was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when sound such as metal on metal rang out. With it came a shatter as the side view mirror on Maggie’s side shattered. As Tyler fumbled with the key, Maggie crouched. Finally he got the engine started and began to pull away.

“Put on your seat belt,” Tyler remained her.

Before Maggie could latch her belt, another car passed close by that Tyler had to brake.

He was about to pull away when a loud clank echoed from behind and the car jolted. The vehicle moved slowly as one of the tires at the back was busted

“Sis, you need to fire back. Where’s the piece I gave you?”

Maggie’s heart ran at an erratic pace and her mind had gone numb. What the hell was Brittany doing? Did she really fire a gun at her, or was Maggie in some dream?

“Where’s the gun?” Tyler asked, trying his best to move the car along. “AHH!” He yelped after a dull thwack. “I’m hit.”

His foot slammed the break and they both lurched forward at the sudden impact.

Blood oozed from Tyler’s upper arm as he gripped his shoulder, grimacing in pain. Seeing the blood caused Maggie to further panic, as glass shattered from the rear of the vehicle. Maggie assumed it was a back light. As she stared at the blood on her brother’s arm, her own blood drained from her face.

“You’re bleeding!” she screamed. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine, it’s just a flesh wound,” Tyler reassured her. Nevertheless, Maggie’s eyes bulged as she stared at the gash in his flesh.

“Y-y-you’re bleeding,” she repeated, her voice quivering. “Blood!”

“Maggie!” Tyler’s tone was sharp.

“Huh?” her eyes snapped to his.

“Listen to me. Get your weapon and start defending yourself.”

Maggie’s bag with the weapon was on the back seat. She chanced a glance through the open back screen and saw that Brittany had halved the distance. Wedging herself in the space between the passenger and driver seat, she reached for the bag, dragging it forward.

Thwank! Another bullet hit metal. With trembling hands, Maggie unzipped the bag and pulled out the box. By this, it seemed that Tyler tore his shirttail and wrapped the wound. He pressed the gas and the car lurched forward when there was a loud bang and the vehicle jerked once more. For a few seconds they could hear the rims scrape the pavement before the car slowed to snail’s pace.

“Both back tires are now busted,” Tyler announced.

The car joggled once again, before another bullet hit metal as Tyler opened the glove

compartment and pulled a weapon similar to the one he gave her. The car came to a standstill as the second third lost air. She peeped over the backrest and saw that three men were advancing as well as Brittany.

“Check the magazine,” Tyler coached.

Maggie did as instructed. Noting that all the bullets were in place, she replaced the magazine in its chamber. More shots rang out as the men also started firing. The gun slipped through Maggie’s trembling fingers as she tried to hold it. Tyler turned in his seat until he was facing the back. Something zinged through the car, shattering the windshield.

Tyler aimed his weapon at the approaching figures, squeezing the trigger.

“Now aim and fire.” He drilled as he let off another round.

“I can’t!” her hand was trembling.

“You can do this,” Tyler shouted above the din of gunfire. “Think of your son and Chase.”

She closed her eyes and pointed the Luger in the same direction as her brother.

“Open your eyes and aim at your target!”

With her palms sweaty and her heart thumping heavily, she zoomed her focus on the woman coming towards them. Brittany had her left hand stretched forward pointing a silver gun, while the right hand held up the hem of her gown. Her veil was flying behind her and Maggie could see the hatred in her eyes.

She did as her brother instructed, but it missed. Brittany was now about twenty meters and so were the men. Both she and Tyler fired at the same time and one of the men cried out, holding up his thigh.

Squeezing the trigger again, she gritted her teeth as she pictured the coffin they sent her, threatening her son. Then everything went in slow motion. Brittany’s right side twisted, and she staggered. The other woman’s eyes widened as she straightened and stared at her shoulder. Maggie saw blood discharge from Brittany’s shoulder and her own hand started shaking.

Oh God, I shot someone. Please forgive me.

“Maggie what are you doing? Get a hold of yourself!” her brother ordered.

The delay in Brittany’s approach was temporary. The woman started advancing once

more and Maggie let off another shot. It missed.

As she was about to squeeze the trigger again a welcomed sound gave her hope. The deafening sound of sirens drowned out the noise of the gunfire. The men's advancement halted, but Brittany was still coming forward.

Several police units appeared from the direction where Maggie's vehicle was facing. Behind them was a black SUV. The sight of the police did not deter Brittany.

Brittany was a few feet away from their vehicle when a man shouted, "Police, drop your weapon!"

Maggie continued to watch as Brittany turned, facing the police patrol. She thought Brittany was going to fire on the squad, however, she slowly lowered her hand. Several police officers ran forward, their weapons aimed. They closed in on her, disarmed and cuffed her.

While the police took Brittany to one of the squad cars, Detective Blaze came towards their vehicle.

"Are you all right?"

"How did you get back so fast?" Maggie asked, grateful for their presence. "Where is Chase?"

"We got a call that there was a showdown, so we figured that you were in trouble. Chase is headed to the morgue and will meet us at the police station when he's done."

Maggie smiled at Detective Blaze. "Thanks for coming back Detective. I don't know what we would have done otherwise."

"I see you helped yourselves. Do you have a permit for those?"

"They're our uncle's, and he has a permit," Tyler informed him.

"You both need to come with me," Blaze said, opening the front passenger door. "Come on, let's go."

"Please, Detective, you saw what was happening. How can you arrest us?" Maggie protested.

Detective Blaze ignored her plea, ushering them both to his car and ordering them to stay seated in the back. Meanwhile, Antonio's guards were rounded up and cuffed.

"This is your fault," Maggie scolded Tyler in a low tone.

He frowned, “How is this my fault?”

“If you hadn’t insisted on me having that gun, we wouldn’t be heading to jail.”

“If I hadn’t insisted, we’d both be dead,” he growled through clenched teeth.

“Augh!”

CHAPTER 56

“Is it bad?” Detective Blaze poked his head through the rear window and inquired of Tyler’s wound. “Should I take you to the hospital?”

“No, it’s just a graze,” Tyler replied, touching the bloody spot on his arm. “But Detective, are we under arrest?”

“Come to think of it, I should arrest you two. What the hell did you think you were doing? Why didn’t you call for help?” the detective directed his gaze on Maggie.

She bit down her bottom lip and grimaced. “I’m sorry Detective, we were just defending ourselves.”

“I know that, but you should have called. If the unit hadn’t received a call about the situation, things could definitely have gotten worse.”

“Who called it in, Detective?” Maggie asked.

“The best man.”

That must have been Mark, she figured. She didn’t see Chase anywhere and wondered where he was. Brittany was taken away in a squad car, so the wedding would likely be called off. At least, she’d accomplished something.

Maggie fingered her jeans pocket with the evidence on Antonio. If it turned out that Detective Blaze could be trusted, she’d hand it over. How would she know if he was trustworthy? She had no idea how to figure it out. The thought occurred to her that if Brittany was set free easily, then someone in his department was under D’Morne’s thumb. She’d wait and see what happened.

Detective Blaze drove them to the police station where he ushered both of them into an interview room. Maggie felt caged. Pulling one of the chairs at the long metal table, she quietly sat and waited for her fate. Tyler also pulled a chair and sat beside her. Scanning room, she noted water cooler to one corner and to her far left a two-sided mirror. After commanding them to stay put, Detective Blaze left the room.

“This remind me of going to jail. Do you think we’re in trouble?” Tyler asked, looking worried.

“I don’t know. Let’s wait and see,” she replied.

Shortly after, a female officer came in with a first aid kit. The officer set the kit on the metal table and introduced herself, though her nametag was visible.

“I’m Lieutenant Mathis, I’ll be taking a look at the wound.”

Maggie was concerned for Tyler. Although he didn’t seem badly hurt, he was obviously in pain. They should have gone to the hospital, but she knew he wanted to come to the station in the event that Chase was there.

“You should have let him take you to the hospital,” Maggie told him.

Tyler smiled and shook his head, “It’s nothing Sis, I’ve been through worse.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Just a little.”

Lieutenant Mathis looked keenly at him. “Are you sure it doesn’t hurt? I can get you something for the pain if you like.”

“That would be good, thanks,” he replied.

“Let me see it. If it’s bad, I’ll take you to the hospital myself,” Officer Mathis said.

Tyler removed the cloth bandage, revealing an open wound about three inches long. It was on the soft pad of his upper arm and it had stopped bleeding.

“It’s not so bad. I’ll apply some antiseptic and bandage,” she said in a gentle manner. “This is going to sting a little.”

“AHH!” Tyler yowled as the antiseptic touched his raw flesh.

“Cry baby,” Maggie teased, while the lieutenant tried to suppress her smile.

After the wound was cleansed, the officer applied an antibiotic cream before bandaging it. By the time the officer was done administering to Tyler, he seemed much better. Lieutenant Mathis left the room and returned a moment later with some aspirin and a bottle of water for Tyler.

“You need to change the bandage daily. Clean the area and apply an antibiotic cream,” the

lieutenant suggested.

Before the officer could offer other suggestions, an alarm blared through the building. At first, Maggie thought it was a fire alarm but something about it seemed different.

“You stay here, I’ve got to go,” the officer said, drawing her weapon.

Officer Mathis paused at the door, pressed her back against the wall and opened the door a crack. Training her weapon, she went out quickly, closing the door behind her.

When she’d gone out, Maggie remarked, “That’s no fire alarm.”

“Something must be going down.”

Maggie was worried that the D’Morne’s were making a desperate attempt to escape. Now that the police had Brittany and three of their men, they might be trying something to get them out. Where was Chase? Was he safe?

“Where are you going?” Tyler questioned when she got to her feet and headed for the door.

“What if they harm Chase?”

Tyler came to stand beside her, grabbing her arm. “Sis, you don’t even know if he’s here. That detective said to stay put.”

She shrugged him off. “Chase is here, I can feel it. Now you stay here.”

“No...!”

“Yes,” she insisted. “You’re already hurt on my behalf. I couldn’t stand if something else happened to you. I need to see Chase. Now stay put.”

“You’re crazy.”

She slipped through the door and ended up in a passage lined with several doors much like the one she came through. She was making her way to her left when a door behind her opened and she turned. Her eyes widened as she saw Chase standing there, his mouth open.

“Chase!”

“Maggie!”

They both said each other’s name at the same time and as though on autopilot, they ran to each other. About an arm’s breadth away, Maggie braked. Without thinking, she grabbed his

arm, pulling him into the nearest room.

As he reached for her, she stepped away. “Are you okay?” she asked, searching his face, noticing his pallor and the beads of sweat on his forehead. His cheeks were a bit sunken and his cerulean blue eyes somewhat weak.

However, before he could reply, she doubled her fist and landed it on his chin. Chase reeled back, hitting his ass against a metal table.

“How could you!”

Chase fingered his chin. “I suppose I deserved that,” he moaned.

Maggie went at him again. Grabbing the collar of his tuxedo, she pulled him to his feet. With all the pent up anger and frustration, she pushed him up against the wall.

CHAPTER 57

Agent Charles followed his detective friend to the police station. In his gut, he felt that something wasn't right. The day Herman McMillan was reported for several crimes, he was found dead. The autopsy was not yet complete, but the FBI agent was almost certain the results would return a homicide.

He was getting a cup of coffee when the security alarm went off. It wasn't his jurisdiction and he knew the officers in the department could handle a rowdy criminal.

Before the alarm went off he'd been in the technical room. That's where he headed to have his coffee in peace. As he entered, the officer behind a set of monitors, showing the inside of the interview rooms, looked up. Before he could take the first sip of his coffee, Detective Blaze rushed in, his face betraying his shock.

"What happened? Don't tell me a felon escape lockup with you here," he joked.

The detective started pacing, raking his hand through his hair. "What the hell just happened under my watch?"

"What are you gabbing about?" Charles asked, sipping from his cup.

"Are these people psycho or what?" Blaze blurted out. "Only terrorists do such things, man."

Charles placed the cup on one of the desks. "What's going on? What are you talking about now?"

"That girl and the men we rounded out took some damn pill, right there in front of my men. They just pulled out the pill and popped them in their mouths. They started foaming and collapsed, all of them!"

"Jesus Christ!"

"What's that?" the officer monitoring the interview rooms asked, pointing to one of the screens.

Still reeling from what Detective Blaze just revealed, Charles turned to the officer and

squinted at the monitor. On it were two people who seemed to be in a scuffle. Upon close inspection, he saw that they were Maggie and Chase.

“Turn on the microphone in that room,” he ordered.

The officer looked at his superior, Blaze, who nodded his consent. The sound came on shortly and all eyes glued to see what was transpiring between the two. However, most of all, they wanted to hear what was being said.

“What was it, blackmail? Did you commit some crime that you couldn’t tell me about?” Maggie asked. She had pushed Chase up against the wall.

Chase shook his head in answer to her question.

“Then what could have been so horrendous that you had to do as they asked? Why, Chase? What did they have on you? You tell me now or I swear to God, I’ll kill you myself!”

“Maggie, do you think I’d hurt you just to save myself from blackmail?”

For a few seconds their eyes locked as she searched for the truth. She saw the pleading in his eyes, she heard it in his voice.

“Then what was it, Chase? Did you really want to marry Brittany? Did you? Answer me damn it,” her voice raised a notch as her wrath surfaced.

“They threatened to kill you and my son!” Chase’s voice cracked as a sob escaped him. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

There was silence for about a minute and then Maggie staggered back, releasing his collar. Her face went white as she stared at him dumbfounded.

Chase continued, his voice becoming subdued. “They had you followed. They were keeping close watch on your every move. They also said they’d kill my mother and friends if I even hinted to you what was happening.” His palm covered his face and he sank to a chair. “How could I let that happen? I couldn’t see you or my son hurt, Maggie.”

Chase reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial, holding it up for her to see. “You see this? It’s half of the poison. They injected me with this and threatened to inject the other half when the deal was over. But that didn’t bother me. They have two sets of these things with yours and Colton’s name on them.”

“Jesus Christ!” Charles exclaimed. “What the hell is going on? Who the hell are these people? I’m calling this in,” he said.

“Wait,” Blaze said. “Let’s listen some more first and then we decide what to do.”

They returned their attention to interview room number three.

“Oh God!” Maggie breathed, leaning against the table. Her knees felt weak. “That’s why they sent the coffin?”

“It was for my benefit in case I got weak, to remind me of my promise.”

Maggie held her head in both hands. Her disbelief apparent. A head ache threatened as her temples started to pound. Dropping herself in one of the chairs, she stared into space.

“That night I returned home, they had attached a chip to my ear, to listen to everything I said to you. At least they kept their promise not to bug the house....”

“They bugged my phone,” she informed him.

“I’m sorry Maggie,” Chase said, his voice thick.

Easing from the chair, she looked around, realizing where they were. “Shit, where are we? Oh no. We’ve got to get out of here. These people have a lot of police and even FBI agents on their payroll. We are not safe here,” she said, grabbing his wrist.

“I’m tired Maggie,” Chase replied, refusing to get up from the chair. His voice was weak. Sweat ran down his face like a faucet, which he tried mopping up with his sleeves. “I can’t run or move. I don’t think I can ma...,” his voice trailed off and his lids drooped. “Mag....” Chase voice came out as a whisper, before he slumped and toppled from the chair.

“Chase!” She was kneeling beside him in a flash. Maggie gripped his shoulders and shook him. “Chase? Help me!” she shouted.

Agent Charles and Detective Blaze moved at the same time and were running down the hall in no time. When they burst through door of interview room number three, Maggie had Chase’s head cradled on her lap.

* * *

“Chase,” Maggie sobbed, her shoulders rocked while tears blinded her. “No, you can’t leave me after all this!”

Chase’s body was convulsing and he was gasping for air. Sweat was pouring through his

skin and running down his face. His hair was so wet that it pressed to his scalp. His skin tone had gone ashen and his body felt lifeless in her arms.

“Chase... Cha...” Her sobs became cries of agony as pain tore through her. With trembling hands, she caressed his cheek. Her breathing was shallow and short.

Maggie was not certain for how long she sat there. When strong hands gripped her, she tried to wrangle from their grasps. A few people were lifting Chase and placing him on a gurney. She could not tell who they were.

Her eyes glazed over for a moment as she watched their mouths moved but heard no sound. The hand that gripped her let her go, as they took Chase through the door on the stretcher. Rushing after them, she knew she shouted his name, but she heard not her own voice.

As she lunged towards the people taking Chase away, someone grabbed her arm and pulled her back. She turned to see her brother’s questioning stare.

“I have to go!” she screeched. “Chase is hurt.”

“I’ll drive you there, someone said from behind.”

When Maggie looked around, it was Agent Charles. He started through the main door of the police station and Maggie followed. Tyler also fell into step beside her.

An ambulance was pulling out as they exited the building. Everything seemed to have happened too quickly that she was unsure how she ended up where she was. It was as though she’d blacked out. The last thing she remembered was seeing Chase crumble to the floor.

CHAPTER 58

Blaze patrolled the lounge near the intensive care unit where Chase was admitted. First the girl and the guards tried to commit suicide and now Chase McMillan. Did he try to kill himself as well? What was going on?

“Are you the detective in charge?” someone interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see a man in white coat, with a stethoscope around his neck.

“Yes Doctor,” he responded.

“I’m Doctor Henley, who attended the four patients brought in earlier.”

Detective Blaze listened as the doctor described what seemed to be one of the most bizarre cases of suicide he’d ever heard. The lawman was aghast at the length to which these people went through to keep from being caught.

“There was nothing we could do to save them,” the doctor informed him. “That pill they took contained several fast acting toxins and some kind of acid. We have sent the intestinal samples to the lab for testing.”

“What about Chase McMillan, did he take the same thing?”

“Not that we can see. There was nothing to indicate that he did. But,” the physician paused. “His blood workup showed that he’s infected with a toxin of some sort. We have not yet identified its origin. The pathologist is working closely with the toxicologist in this case.”

“Thank you Doctor. Can I see him now?”

“Yes, but he’s very weak. It seems he has not been eating or sleeping well.”

Doctor Henley was about to walk away when Blaze remembered something. When he’d reached the interview room where Maggie huddled with Chase, the vial had been lying on the floor. It must have slipped from Chase’s hand when he fell.

Extracting the small glass container from his pants pocket, he held it out. “Maybe this could help.”

“What is it?” Doctor Henley asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Before Mr. McMillan collapsed he was telling his fiancé that he had been injected with some poison from this container. Maybe you could run the test on this as well.”

“I’ll send it to the lab right away,” Doctor said, taking the vial and inspecting it closely before walking away.

Blaze found Maggie pacing outside Chase’s hospital room door. Her face lit up when she saw him and she rushed forward, as though expecting him to give her some good news.

“Did you see the doctor, Detective? What did he say?” she sounded anxious, but he could see she was trying to be strong.

“I gave him the vial I found in the interview room. Maggie, Chase is in bad shape from whatever they injected him with. Now are you going to tell me the truth?”

She turned away and he could tell she was struggling to tell him whatever what on her mind. She’d mentioned that the D’Mornes had law enforcement officials on their payroll and he needed to know who they were in order to start investigating. If any of his colleagues were involved with this obvious terrorist, he would need to arrest them.

“I heard what you said about police and FBI being involved. If that is true, we need to start our own internal investigations as well. It’s best you start trusting me.” He tried to reassure her. “We’ll keep you and your son safe. Haven’t I proven you can trust me by having Mickey bring your son here?”

Detective Blaze was losing his patience, but he knew she was scared. With all that happened during the last few hours, who wouldn’t be? The hospital was now surrounded with police personnel.

Mickey was sitting on the bench a few paces away with the sleeping infant. Beside him was Tyler with his head in his hand. Tyler’s wound was dressed and stitched by a nurse and everything was chaotic.

Blaze was confused. Never in his twenty years on the force had he witnessed what he did today. He’d heard of FBI stories from his longtime friend Agent Charles. They’d gone to high school together and majored in criminal justice in college.

But when it came time to choose between the police and FBI, Charles chose the FBI and went into intensive training for a few years. His combat and shootings skills made him

graduate at the top of his batch. They remained friends throughout the years and sometimes traded information on cases.

Still, with all the top-secret cases his friend Charles said he'd covered, this one was one of the most inexplicable to date. Even the unshakable Charles was shocked at the events.

His mind came back to the woman before him. "Maggie, I can't help you if you don't tell me what you know."

Before she could answer, his phone buzzed in his shirt pocket. He picked it out and turned away, answering, "Blaze here." He paused a few second before exclaiming, "What?"

Agent Charles's voice came across on the phone. "He's been under investigation for three years, this Kiev Lebowski. However, it seems these people are always one step ahead of us. The federal investigator on the case was found dead in his car, much the way McMillan was found."

"Are you kidding me? How come you didn't know about this case?" Blaze asked.

"Apparently it was kept under wraps as the Director was certain that there was a leak somewhere. He was right."

"How did you find this out?"

"After hearing what Miss Carter said, I called headquarters and spoke with the Director."

Blaze was further taken aback. "Charles, what are we going to do?"

"He's gathering a special team that he's asked me to head up. Look, don't let Chase and Maggie out of your sight. As far as we know, Antonio D'Morne has already disappeared and is perhaps heading out of the country. Still, he may have people at the hospital or within your unit."

"Yes, I figured that much."

CHAPTER 59

Maggie could wait no longer. While Detective Blaze was on the phone, she managed to slip inside the room where Chase lay on the bed. Her heart started beating heavily as she pulled up the chair and sat. Saline dripped from the solution bag hanging overhead. Her eyes followed the drips as they disappeared through the tube attached to his wrist.

Gently, she picked up his hand and brought it to her cheek. His fingertips were cold to her skin. Tears stung her eyes as she stared at his piteous figure.

“What have they done to you?” she whispered, kissing his palm before caressing it with her cheek.

“Hmm,” a murmur came from Chase before his eyes fluttered open. “Maggie.” His voice was hoarse and tears welled in his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh Chase,” she cried.

“Maggie, please forgive me. Please forgive me,” he pleaded as the tears ran down the corner of his eyes. “I should have been stronger, but I didn’t know what to do.”

“Shh, get some rest, we’ll talk about that later.”

Chase raised himself up and pulled her into his arms. His body was still weak, Maggie could feel it, but he held to her as tightly as he could. They both clung to each other, the sobs rocking their bodies.

Slobbering and bawling, they hardly heard the door open. It was a woman’s voice, which broke them apart.

“Maggie?”

Maggie broke away from Chase’s embrace. Wiping her tears with the back of her hand, she turned her head to see who called her name. Irene stood there, her long blond hair out of its usual coiffeur, falling carelessly about her shoulders. Her eyes were red rimmed and her mascara smeared.

“Irene.” Maggie stood as Irene came close to the bed.

It was apparent that the woman was not doing well. Maggie pulled her mother in law into her arms. They held each other in a comforting embrace until Chase's voice called their attention.

"Mom, are you all right?"

They pulled apart and Maggie indicated that Irene sit in the chair. The older woman seemed lost. Her usually cool exterior now shattered. Her crow's feet deepened and her hands trembled.

"All I wanted to do was fix what was broken. I never wanted him dead." Irene's voice was vacant. "How could he leave me alone after thirty five years? What am I to do now?"

"Mother." Chase took his mother's hand between both of his.

Maggie rested a hand on Irene's shoulder. Irene reached a hand up and patted hers. All three fell silent for a moment. In that that time, there was an unspoken message passed between the three of them.

Chase was an only child and his father was now dead. Maggie understood that he would have to stay in Florida to run the company. Irene was in no shape to do it now. Perhaps in a few months when the pain of grief wasn't as fresh, she'd be able to take up the reins.

Foremost on Maggie's mind was whether Chase would recover from whatever they'd given him. Lurking at the back of her mind was also the fear that the authorities would not apprehend Antonio D'Morne.

Leaving Chase with his mother to allow them some time alone, Maggie thought this was the best time to check on her son. In addition, he hadn't seen his father in a couple of months. The doctor had said that whatever was in Chase's blood did not seem contagious. However, they needed to be certain before giving a definitive answer. Still, she wanted to be careful.

When she exited the room, she found several militant looking men milling around. They were not dressed in uniform, but the look on their faces told Maggie that they were law enforcement.

Colton was happily playing with Tyler and Mickey until he looked up and saw her. Squealing and trying to wiggle from their grasp he made it known that his attention was now focused on her.

"Maggie," someone stepped up beside her. It was Agent Charles. "Can we talk? Five

minutes.”

“Can it wait a few minutes, please? I mean, my son hasn’t seen his father in over two months. Please give me some time and I will tell you anything you need to hear.”

“Okay, I’ll be waiting.”

She took Colton and asked Tyler to follow her. Mickey told her he needed to return to the club, as it was time to open.

“Thanks. This meant a lot to me,” she said, hugging her former boss.

“Don’t mention it. Everything will work out just fine and if you ever need me, call.”

She watched him walk past the nurses’ station and headed towards the elevators. She then turned to the room and pushed the door with Tyler behind her.

“Dada!” Colton started wiggling from her arm as soon as he set eyes on Chase. “Dada!”

Chase’s eyes widened and his eyes glistened as more tears welled in his eyes. Stretching his arms out, he started weeping once more. Maggie allowed Colton to be engulfed in his father’s embrace.

The baby squealed in delight as his father plastered wet kisses on his face and head. Irene was also crying, as she too began kissing the baby.

When Chase had calmed himself and wiped his eyes in the sleeves of the hospital gown, he raised his eyes and settled them on Tyler.

“This is my brother Tyler,” she introduced. “This is Chase and his mother Irene.”

Tyler stepped forward and first took Irene’s hand. “Nice to meet you ma’am.”

“Finally I meet Maggie’s brother,” Irene smiled. “Welcome to the family.”

Tyler smiled brightly. “Thank you, ma’am.” He then turned to Chase and gripped his hand. “Please to meet you Brother-in-law.”

“Good to meet you... Brother-in-law,” Chase returned. “Thanks for taking care of Maggie and my son.”

“She my big sister, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Maggie interrupted the moment. “Agent Charles needs to speak with me. I’ll be right back.”

“Maggie.” Chase’s voice echoed his concern. “Are you sure about this?”

“I think it’s time to trust someone and I feel that he is the guy.”

“Okay,” he replied.

Tyler turned to her. “You want me to come with you, Sis?”

“No, you stay here and take care of Irene, Chase and Colton.”

CHAPTER 60

Antonio D’Morne gritted his teeth as he listened to Kiev Lebowski on the other end of the phone. Kiev was his superior, but what he was telling him to do was not a part of Antonio’s plans. He’d come to America to carry out a task and he would see it to the end. That was the way of the Bravta.

While he listened to his leader, he paced the dusty floor of an abandoned factory about twenty miles away from the church. As soon as the police had arrived at the scene, he ordered his driver to take him there. This was temporary hideout where he would await the return of his men and daughter from the police station.

Antonio was formulating his next move. As soon as Brittany and his men were free, they’d proceed with the wedding. He knew Chase and Irene would protest, but he was hoping that Herman’s demise would persuade them.

“Возвращение в Россию и перегруппироваться (*Return to Russia and regroup*),” Kiev said. “Мы сделаем новый план (*We will make a new plan*).”

Antonio closed his eyes and grounded his teeth together. It seemed that his leader was becoming soft. Why would he leave America when he was so close to achieving their goals?

“При всем уважении, Киев, я не могу оставить. Моя дочь находится в заключении. Я должен остаться, по крайней мере, пока она не свободна (*With all due respect, Kiev, I cannot leave. My daughter is in custody. I must stay at least until she is free*).”

“What about our contacts with the police and FBI? Have someone release her and return at once.”

“It’s not that easy. A new team has been watching me for some time. I got rid of the agent on the case, but their director is relentless. He has someone else he’s put in charge.”

Kiev’s voice raised that Antonio had to move the phone away from his ears. “How could you let that happen? What have...?”

The voice of his leader came to an abrupt end. “Kiev, what happened?”

There was no response as the line returned empty. He tried dialing the number to his leader, but could not get through. He pocketed the phone and walked to a broken window in the abandoned factory.

“Boss!”

The urgency in the voice caused him to turn. Hash, one of his American operatives approached with a grim look on his face.

“What is it?”

“I’m sorry Boss, I could not save the men that the police detained.” Hash bowed his head. “They have all taken the oath of silence.”

“What do you mean *all*? What about my daughter... what of Brittany?”

The man kept his head down. “She has also taken the oath, I’m sorry, Boss.”

Antonio turned back to the broken window, doubling his fist at his side. He could not leave the United States of America, not now. Now it was no longer a mission for the cause. It had become personal. Chase McMillan and his concubine would pay with their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

“Kill Chase and his mother,” he instructed, his tone deathly calm.

“Yes Boss.”

“Spear the child and its mother. Bring them to me alive. Do not harm a hair on the child’s head.”

Hash shuffled. “What are you planning Boss.”

“Just do as instructed without question.”

“Yes, Boss.”

He heard the man’s footsteps as he began to walk away. “Get the best team together, no matter the cost,” he further instructed and Antonio heard the footsteps halt. “A million dollars to the one who brings me the woman alive.”

“Yes, Boss,” Hash replied before his footsteps faded.

He would personally teach her a lesson, which would make her wish she’d never been born. Then he would raise her son as his own. What sweeter revenge there was for the death of

his only child? He would make Colton into the most dangerous provocateur in the organization, giving him the best training and education. He would be raised to carry out the most heinous deeds for the Bravta.

Maybe he'd keep Maggie alive to witness it all. She was black, but a sexy woman who could warm his bed. She would make a good mistress. He'd never been with a woman like her, but he heard that black women were quite sexual.

Approximately six thousand miles away...

“How did you get in here?” Kiev asked the man in the green mask.

Leaning back in his leather bound chair, he'd been on the phone with Antonio. Then without notice, the line went dead. Trying to call back was of no use. He was just about ready to leave his study when he raised his eyes and perceived a figure standing a few feet away.

The man stepped forward. Kiev slowly lowered his hand, reaching under the desk for the weapon he usually kept there. It was empty. The gun was usually kept in place under the surface of the desk by magnet.

The study was on the third floor of his mansion and it overlooked the expansive lawn below. To the right of the desk was the window and to his left, the door. The mask intruder stood directly in front of him. Kiev estimated the distance between himself and the door as well as the space between him and the window.

The distance between the desk and window was about half that of where he sat and the doorway. By the time he could make up his mind which way to go, a flash of light appeared through the window before a red dot present on his chest. Before he could assimilate what was happening, about a dozen red dots appeared.

He knew immediately who these people were. They were the Federal Security Bureau. This was the military arm of the FSB responsible for eliminating terrorists. He'd been on their list for some time, but he'd always managed to elude them.

His fate was now inevitable and his only escape from the torture chamber was taking the oath of silence. But as he reached into the breast pocket of his shirt, something stung his neck.

Absently, his hand came up and touched the spot where he felt a dart. Within seconds, he was fading into the subconscious. There was no escape, his days were now numbered.

CHAPTER 60

Hash gathered four men and gave instructions to the other seven to keep a close watch on the 'Boss'. He could tell that the men were anxious after hearing that their colleagues took the oath.

"Keep a close watch on any one entering," he ordered the men. "Defend the Boss with your lives if you have to."

"Yes Hash," the men chorused.

Taking one of the vehicles, he allowed one of the three to drive. When he was almost a mile away from the old factory, he commanded the driver to stop the vehicle.

"Come with me," he told the three in the back.

Without question, the men followed him a few meters away from the car.

"What's going on?" one of the man asked.

"We die with our brothers for the cause. Either that, or we get caught. You choose."

"But the Boss said..." one of the men started to say.

"The Boss is using his emotions. His daughter is dead and so are our brothers. Do you know what will happen next?" He asked. They looked at him questioningly. "The FBI and police will be looking for us. There is a manhunt for the Boss as we speak."

"We can't go to jail, or we will be deported."

Another one added, "We will be tortured if we are to return to Russia as prisoners."

"Then we must die the honorable way," Hash encouraged.

They looked at each other for a moment and trustingly extracted their capsules from their jacket pockets. Without a moment's hesitation, they swallowed the pills. Hash watched as each of the men swallowed their capsule. Within seconds, they were foaming at the mouth and toppling to the ground.

These men were trained to take what they commonly call the *oath of silence*. They knew that if caught, they would be questioned about the organization. In some cases, they'd be given

a truth serum to extract information they would not willingly give. If arrested in America, it was likely they would be deported to Russia where they would be tortured and imprisoned. A suicide death was better than the alternative.

Hash turned his back away from seeing their deaths. Trotting back to the car, he slipped into the passenger seat. As soon as the driver saw him, he looked questioningly his way. In a flash, Hash opened his palm and brought down the ridge of his hand on the man's neck. The driver slumped over the wheel.

CHAPTER 62

Maggie took the SD card from her pocket, unfolding the secure wrapping. She then pushed the card across the cafeteria table towards Agent Charles. Both Charles and Blaze looked at her inquiringly.

“It has all the information you will need to take down Antonio and his daughter,” she told

them.

Blaze sympathetic look concerned Maggie. “You haven’t heard, have you?” he asked.

“Heard what?” she probed, now curious.

“Brittany and the others committed suicide,” he communicated to her.

Maggie felt the blood drain from her head. Death was not something she dealt with easily. Deep down she was regretting not making more effort to get to know Herman and now, four people decided to take their own lives.

“Why would they do that?” Her voice cracked.

“It’s their way. It’s called the *oath of silence*.” It was Agent Charles who answered.

“Does Chase know about this?”

“No, not yet,” Charles responded. “But the most important thing now is to get you guys to a safe house. Our intelligence reveals a plot of revenge. Brittany was Antonio’s only child and he will blame her death on the McMillans, but most of all you.”

Maggie was not surprised that Antonio wanted revenge. These people were not capable of taking responsibility for their own actions. They believed in their cause and nothing should stand in the way, irrespective of whom they hurt in the process.

When she left the cafeteria and returned to Chase’s room, she was deeply concerned about the safety of those around her. Antonio D’Morne was capable of anything, including hurting innocent people.

The room was heavily guarded to prevent anyone from entering the area without a security check. Maggie had imagined Antonio pretending to be a doctor and going in to give Chase the second half of the poison.

Shaking her head, she reminded herself that this was not the movies and Agent Charles knew what he was doing. Outside the room on the bench, Irene played with Colton, while Tyler was having a conversation with one of the police personnel.

Maggie slipped into Chase’s room before the baby could see her. Chase’s eyes were closed as though he was sleeping. Her stomach fluttered as she stared at the man she thought she’d spend the rest of her life with. Now, that was uncertain.

What Chase did had her torn in two. She loved him for sacrificing himself to save them.

Nevertheless, could she live with a man who so willingly gave himself to another, regardless of the circumstances? He was willing to break her heart and never see his son again. She found it hard to forgive that.

One may ask why she risked her life to save him. Love doesn't need a reason, all it needs is motivation. As she looked at him, she knew she'd do it again.

“Will you just stand there and stare at me?”

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice. “You're awake.”

His eyes fluttered open. “Maggie,” he said, reaching out a hand to her. She stepped closer to the bed and gripped the hand. “I know what you must be feeling.”

“What do you mean?” she queried, not meeting his eyes.

“You're probably wondering if there wasn't anything I could have done to prevent all this. What if I'd taken the chance and say no to Antonio? What if, I'd told you everything that night and refuse to go?”

“Chase,” her voice came out gravelly. “I'm sorry, it's just so much to take in right now.”

“Maggie, there's nothing for you to be sorry for. You risked your own life to come get me.” Tears welled in his eyes and he blinked them away. “That morning I...,” his voice became gruff and he cleared his throat. “I'm still haunted by it.”

“I don't even want to feel that way again, Chase. I felt as though someone ripped my insides out with an ax.”

“I know,” he whispered. “So where do we go from here?”

“I don't know. I need to know that this is over and my son is safe.”

Chase held her hand tightly. “You haven't forgiven me, have you?”

“I know it's not your fault and you were doing what you thought was best. I know you did this to protect us... I just have this pain...,” she paused to inhale a quavering breath as her eyes stung. “The pain feels too fresh.”

“Why did you come to Florida?”

“Because I love you. I realized something wasn't right and I just couldn't let it be.” Maggie wiped away tears that had started to stream down her cheeks.

“I miss you,” Chase whispered.

They stared into each other’s eyes for a minute. The pull of current between them was as strong as it had been before this fiasco with Antonio. The heavy drumming of her heart and the way her skin flushed from his touch was the same as before. She just didn’t trust that he wouldn’t sacrifice himself again for whatever reason.

“How do you expect me to be happy if you give up your life to save mine?” she asked. “Did you expect that I would live happily with you marrying Brittany? What if he’d succeeded in killing you, do you think I’d be able to live after that?”

“Maggie.”

“Don’t you ever fight these battles on your own again, or I swear I’ll kill you myself!”

With her last word, she found herself being pulled down towards him. As she hit the mattress and was partially sprawled across his body, his arms circled her, holding her close.

CHAPTER 63

Taking off his right shoe, Hash unscrewed the heel and pulled from it a cell phone, which he switched on. Looking quickly around, he began to type a message: *Agent #576*.

He kept the phone on, which he pushed inside the driver's jacket. He then pulled on a pair of latex gloves, pulled the driver's gun, curled the man's hand around the barrel and pressed his finger on the trigger.

The sound of the gun going off brought the driver out of his unconscious state. The man seemed confused as he realized what was happening. They struggled as the driver tried to snatch his hand away. Too late. The shot lodged in Hash's thigh.

While the man was still trying to make sense of what was happening in the car. Hash pulled his own gun and shot the man in the chest. Removing the gloves, he ditched them under the driver seat.

The wound was oozing red, but from his training, he knew it was only a superficial. In the glove compartment of the vehicle was a half flask of scotch. He pulled the bottle and poured some of the liquor onto the wound. After that, he removed his jacket and tore a piece of his shirt, which he used to bind the wound.

Until the FBI detained Antonio D'Morne, Hash needed to remain undercover as one of D'Morne's men. D'Morne's reach far exceeded law enforcement. Even if they arrested Antonio, it was imperative that everyone believe that the traitor was dead. There was no way he should know that Hash was not one of them or his life could be in constant danger even after the operation ended.

His next move was to get from the car and make the call to D'Morne. The cell phone issued by the Bravta could only make calls to each other and to Antonio. Any attempt to call any other numbers would send an immediate alert the a computer monitored by one of Antonio's men. He dialed Antonio's number.

As soon as the boss answered, he groaned as though in pain. "Boss, I need backup. The men... *pant... groan...*," he paused.

“What’s going on Hash?” Antonio’s voice was hard.

“Josef, he shot me!”

“What are you talking about?” Antonio’s accent was thick.

“Anton wanted to take a whizz and we stopped the car. Boris and Vadim followed him out. When they didn’t return in time I went to check and the all took the acid. I came back to the car to see Josef on a phone that’s not one of ours. When I inquired about it, he pulled the gun and we wrestled. He got me in the leg.”

“Where is he?”

“I’m sorry Boss, I had to take him out.”

“Where are you now?”

Hash gave him the location and waited. More than likely, Antonio won’t come himself, but send a few of the others. Hash waited and hoped that his real colleagues would arrive in time. The FBI director had assured him that when he made contact, they would be ready to move in. With the federal issued cell phone on, they would know his location.

Antonio sent six men to relieve Hash and proceed with the mission. Something wasn’t right and he was angry that one of his men was a traitor. He would sure get to the truth, but for now, he needed to know that his enemies were taken care of.

His phone rang after the men departed. The number was an international number he did not recognize. Perhaps Kiev was trying to reach him. He had to convince the man that what he was doing was right.

“Hello,” he answered, expecting to hear Kiev.

“Antonio, return to Russia and leave the Americans alone.”

The voice of the arch leader brought some dread to Antonio. Kiev was the captain of the weapons of war arm of the organization, his immediate superior. The man now on the phone was the commandant, the chief of the Bravta.

This was to be feared. His influence reached far and wide and he could have Antonio killed with just a simple snap of his fingers. The fact that he took the time to call himself, meant he was handing him an olive branch, which was actually a warning in disguise.

“They killed my daughter,” Antonio informed him.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Antonio, taking the oath isn’t murder.”

“If they hadn’t interfered, she would have had to resort to that, my Commander.”

“Who taught you to accuse others of your own mistakes? That’s not the way of the Bravta. We know when we’ve lost and we know when we have erred. Now, you return to Russia and take command the weapons division, or you’re on your own. I will pull all ties in America.”

“But Sir, Kiev....”

“Kiev has been captured by the authorities. Soon he will be dead,” the man on the line said. “You are needed here.”

Before Antonio could protest further, the phone signaled that the call had ended. Pounding a fist on the dusty old table resulted in a crash, as it broke into fragments. Dust kicked up on the dirty floor like a puff of gray smoke.

His immediate superior was arrested. How did the RIA get him? Did the commander in chief turn him in? So many questions needed answers, but the bitter taste of revenge was overwhelming. He could not return until he saw those responsible for his daughter’s death pay for their deeds.

Meanwhile a few miles away, the FBI and police were in hot pursuit of two vehicles belonging to the men Antonio sent to relieve Hash. As quickly as the car chase began, it ended. The Feds moved quickly blocking of the vehicles and apprehending the men before they could take their oath of silence.

The terrorists were searched and their capsules taken away. They were then cuffed and sent to the Tampa FBI detention center.

A mile away, Hash dragged the driver from behind the wheel and turned the vehicle around. He must return to Antonio and allow himself to be arrested with the crew. That way Antonio would not suspect him.

He was halfway there when he met upon the FBI and police. This was good. Stepping on the gas, the wheels of the vehicle screeched at it passed by the law enforcement officials. Soon, a cavalry was chasing him. He didn’t go too fast, but just stayed ahead of them, leading them to the warehouse. When he was outside the building he braked, blocking the gate and

hopping from the car. While dragging his feet towards the building he dialed Antonio's number.

"Boss, you've got to get outta here, now!"

"Hash, what happened?"

"Boss, that bastard Josef gave away our location. You've got to move Boss. They're almost..." he trailed off as the SWAT team surrounded him with Agent Charles leading the posse.

"I'll take this one," Charles said to one of his men.

The Feds surrounded the building, while some moved stealthily inside. Charles cuffed and took Hash to one of the SWAT cars.

"Don't go anywhere," he warned with a grin, before turning to the warehouse building.

Hash leaned back and closed his eyes. He hoped that Antonio would not take the darn pill like the rest of his men. The one they'd given him was sitting in his jacket breast pocket in the car at the gate.

Two years he spent undercover as one of Antonio's men after being recruited from off the streets as a common criminal. Agent Jax Morgan spoke five languages and graduated in the top ten percent of his class.

For this assignment, he lived on the streets as a thug for close to six months. The FBI created the perfect background, making him a deportee from Russia after serving a sentence for kidnapping and setting a bomb in a public park. Antonio thought he was the cream of the crop with his off the chain combat skills and marksmanship.

CHAPTER 64

Chase's arms closed around Maggie and she felt his frailness against her. She stood at the small window overlooking the hospital grounds and he was standing behind her, holding her close.

The physicians could not determine the drug used to inject Chase and that was cause for concern. If they had no idea what was in his system, they could not treat it, nor could they say how long until it ran its course.

It was past midnight and the floor was quiet. Outside the small hospital room was the security patrol assigned by the FBI. Another dispatch had accompanied Irene, Tyler and Colton to the McMillan Mansion. Irene also declared before leaving, that she had hired a private security company to stand guard at the house as well.

Maggie had been reluctant to let Colton go with her, but his grandmother insisted that he needed to sleep in a proper bed and be taken care of the way he deserved. Irene was right. The mansion had enough staff to help her if needed. Colton was just a baby and he did not deserve to be dragged around the way she had been doing. He needed to be in a secure environment and the hospital was not the ideal place at the moment.

“What are you thinking?” Chase whispered against her hair.

Resting her head back, she closed her eyes with a sigh. “I was just wondering, what would have happened if...” She didn't complete her answer.

“If what?” he urged.

“If we hadn't met.”

Chase spun her around to face him, searching her eyes. “What are you talking about? Are you regretting us being together?”

“No, of course not! I was just wondering if this would have happened... this poison inside you...,” her voice cracked as a sob escaped her.

Maggie's eyes burned with unshed tears. She fought to keep her control in front of Chase.

What he needed now was for her to be strong, but she could not help but feel the hopelessness that he may never recover from this. What if he spent the rest of his life with this toxin inside of him? What if it eventually killed him?

“Hush, no use wondering about what if, Babe. I’m going to be fine and it’s not contagious.”

“Are you sure?”

Chase nodded. “The pathologist said that whatever was inside me is not viral or bacterial. The toxicologist believes it’s a chemical substance and they are trying to determine the exact properties.”

“How long will it take?”

“I don’t know, but do you think Antonio would give me something contagious knowing I was to marry his daughter?”

She had to agree he had a point. Antonio would not give him something that would ultimately affect his own daughter. Twining her arms around his neck, she tipped and pressed her lips to his.

The electrifying sensation was swift and strong. Chase pulled her up against him, deepening the kiss by parting her lips and plunging his tongue into her mouth. Their tongues entwined, creating a voltaic charge.

A shudder ran through her at the passage of current through her body. She could feel Chase’s erect member through his hospital gown pressing into her.

He broke to kiss to whisper against her lips. “I missed you.”

“I miss you too,” she whispered back.

As their lips found each other again, Chase’s hand snaked its way beneath her t-shirt and found a breast. Plucking her mound from her bra, he gave it a gentle squeeze. Maggie groaned softly before stepping back.

“What are you doing? Someone may come in.”

“Not if we are quick about it. I want you so badly.”

“I want you too.” Her voice croaked as a frog seemed to lodge there. “I have an idea. Get under the covers.”

While Chase got back in the bed, she went and peered through the glass panel on the door. The place was quiet, as two of the law enforcement men were standing not far off. Unless there was an emergency they would not enter the room. She switched the light off and peeled off her jeans, then slid under the covers with Chase.

“Now, what are *you* doing?” he chuckled.

“If someone comes in, pretend you’re asleep,” she suggested. “Now make it quick, I feel like I’m going to burst open.”

Peeling off her underwear, she turned her back and snuggled her backside up to him. Without further delay their bodies joined, him taking her from behind. Together, their rhythmic dance commenced.

Their soft moans and gentle groans filled the silence. Chase’s lips kissed the nape of her neck as his body moved along with hers. His hand never left her firm peaks as his fingers brushed their tips.

When Maggie felt the bubble inside her about to burst, she sank her face in the pillow to muffle her scream. Not long after, she felt Chase grip her tightly, his growl rumbled from deep within his chest. Stiffening, he buried his face in her hair and freed his long awaited release.

Ten minutes later, the snores replaced the soft sounds of passion. Maggie’s last thought before she drifted into sleep was wondering if she was already asleep and when she awoke if Chase would be gone.

CHAPTER 65

Maggie stretched and reached a hand out. There was nothing there. Cracking one eye open, she tried to still the sudden thumping of her heart and the sinking feeling in her stomach. Chase was not in the bed beside her and the dread she had experienced a few weeks ago came crashing back.

Dragging off the sheet, she sprang from the hospital bed and started pulling on her jeans. As she zipped, someone pushed the door.

“Where are you going?” Chase asked, looking at her strangely. “It’s barely light out.”

“Where have you been, why didn’t you wake me?” she asked, her voice sharp.

Chase looked at her in confusion. “What’s the matter?”

Maggie shrugged, feeling like an idiot. “Nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

“I just panicked, that’s all. I found you gone and....”

“Oh, honey,” Chase crooned, pulling her in his arms. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry for doing this to you. Please forgive me.”

They cleaved to each other for a while until the door opening brought their attention to someone entering the room. At first, Maggie thought it might be the doctor or a nurse, but when she stepped away from Chase, she saw it was Agent Charles.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you both should know that we got D’Morne,” he informed them.

“That easily?” Chase widened his eyes.

“We think he got careless because he wanted to avenge his daughter’s death. He had a private flight waiting for him, he could have skipped town easily. But we had his daughter’s body at the morgue. I don’t think he was thinking clearly.”

“But Brittany committing suicide was not our fault,” Maggie chimed in.

“He blames you for interfering.”

“He said that?” Chase asked.

“Not directly to me. We had a man inside.”

Chase sat on the bed and pulled Maggie down beside him, indicating that the federal agent take the chair. “So the FBI had been tracking these people all along?”

“Yes,” Charles nodded. “Three years.”

Chase shook his head in disbelief. “I wasted so much time. I just couldn’t do anything since he had so many people who worked for him in the police department and even some of your men.”

“We’re investigating the list of officers and feds whose names are mentioned and the guilty ones will be prosecuted.”

Maggie gripped Chase’s hand, but directed her question to the lawman. “Is it over? Do you think his boss, this Kiev fellow will do something?”

“Kiev Lebowski has been apprehended by the Russian Intelligence Agency. We believe he was turned in by his own people.”

“How is that possible, wasn’t he the head of the organization?” she asked.

“No, he was just the head of the weapons of war branch.”

This time it was Chase who asked. “What now?”

“Once we’ve gathered enough evidence, the case will be brought before a federal judge. Depending on his plea, it may go to trial.” Charles looked gravely at Chase. “Now, I want to confirm something. Did Antonio D’Morne kidnap you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to need you to make a statement later.”

Even though the FBI agent assured them that they were now safe and that there was no possibility that Antonio would be granted bail, Maggie still felt ill at ease.

Chase made his statement to the FBI later that afternoon, in his hospital room. He told them about his suspicions about Brittany when his father announced their engagement a year ago without his consent. Brittany was too eager to marry him though he refused to commit to

her. In addition, her shady behavior triggered his curiosity into investigating her, that's how he found out about their background.

“You know that Brittany was the one who reported you to the feds, right?” Charles informed Chase at the end of his statement.

Chase forehead puckered as he stared the man. “What?”

“I think perhaps she was trying to use it and the plan fell through. I can't think of a motive why she would do so if she was planning to marry you in the first place.”

“Who knows what these people are thinking at any given point. They are crazy,” Chase snickered.

* * *

Chase left the hospital the following day. The toxicologist told them he was close to finding out the components in the serum with which Antonio injected Chase. This gave them something to look forward to while they waited to hear what would happen with the case.

Irene took them to the McMillan residence where only two police officers remained for safeguard. The private security that Irene hired was still there and she promised to keep them until they were certain that Antonio was safely behind bars or deported back to Russia.

Herman's funeral was a few days later, a solemn occasion for many reasons. For Maggie, their last conversation was prominent in her mind. Her one regret was that she didn't try hard enough to forge a compromise on behalf of her son. Herman made it hard to be civil, but she should have tried harder.

CHAPTER 66

One year later...

It was a cloudless day in June. With sweaty palms and stomach churning, Maggie tried to still her nerves. The day reminded her of another day nine months earlier when she walked into the Florida courtroom and gave testimony against Antonio D'Morne.

She had been equally nervous about facing D'Morne, but putting the ordeal behind her was what gave her the courage. She had been quite ill that morning, having caught a bug a few days before. She'd entered the courtroom with a bitter taste in her mouth and nausea rising to her throat.

The man had looked at her with venom in his eyes. His face had been set and there was no remorse evident in him. Maggie kept her eyes on her attorney, as Chase was not allowed inside while she testified. It was a closed trial with no media or onlookers allowed inside.

Due to her testifying prior to Chase, she was allowed to sit in the courtroom for Chase's testimony. As she listened to him tell how Antonio threatened his family, her blood boiled hotly in her veins. The urge to punch the man was powerful, that she had to call upon divine strength not to have an outburst in the courtroom.

The photo of the coffin along with the vial, which contained the substance used to inject Chase, entered into evidence. Chase had also secretly recorded several conversations with himself, Brittany and Antonio, those also revealed a lot about the man Antonio.

The evidence was strong, which included voice notes of intimidation, along with many other documents to prove his guilt.

The trial lasted seven weeks, with testimonies from other sources for crimes D'Morne committed while on US soil. Antonio was sentenced to life in a federal prison without the possibility of parole.

During the trial, the prosecutor questioned Antonio about the serum used to inject Chase. After some coercion by his own attorney, he gave them the information along with how to find

the antidote hidden in his condominium.

Maggie shook her head from the memories. Today, the sun came out with a slight breeze. The flowers were in bloom and the sky clear. As the car pulled up outside the large building, she felt cold sweat drizzle down her back.

Someone opened the car door and held out their hand to her. It was her brother. She placed her hand in his and allowed him to escort her up the steps. The empty church gawked at her as she stared at the place.

Chase was waiting for her, but she had to come here first. If not for anything else, but to put the past behind her. The memories of Chase leaving her up to the moment Brittany tried to kill her, had taken their toll. Today was the start of something new and she needed closure.

Many new beginnings had happened in the year since the incident and Maggie needed to close this chapter.

Chase had recovered from the toxin in his blood and taken up the reigns as President of MacCorp. The deal with Denzel finally went through and George was head of the company in New York. After much discussion, with Irene almost threatening her, she moved to Tampa, into Chase's family home.

“Come Sis, everyone is waiting,” Tyler urged. “Let's go.”

She left the church, resolving to rid her mind of the sound of gunshots. One reason she came there today was because this was where Irene attended and in the year she'd moved back to Florida, she hadn't been able to bring herself to go there.

Tyler drove to her destination. It was past five thirty and she should be there by six. As she neared the beach, she marveled at the beauty of the sun, casting its orange glow over the city. The closer she got the more nervous she became.

As soon as Tyler parked, both Irene and her uncle greeted her. Irene smoothed her hair while Tony took her arm.

“You look lovely, my dear,” Tony whispered.

“Thank you,” she beamed.

“What took you so long?” Irene asked Tyler.

“It was Maggie, she insisted that I stop by the church.”

Irene seemed surprised. “Whatever for?”

Maggie turned to Irene. “Closure. I need that.”

“Did you get it?”

“I think I’m getting there.”

With a smile, Irene hugged her. “Everything will be fine, my dear. It’s over now.”

“It’s getting late, let’s go,” Tony pressed.

Veering off to the right, Irene led to Maggie a private area under a small tent. Once there she checked her appearance. Though she was nervous and had been sweating earlier, the sea breeze now cooled her. Less than ten minutes later, Tony came to fetch her.

“Ready?” he asked. Maggie nodded. “Let’s go,” Tony said.

As Maggie took her uncle’s arm and walked through a band of palm trees, she felt strange. Just a mile up the beach, she used to work as a waitress. In two years, she faced more danger than she had in a lifetime. Two years ago, she was planning on college. Now her life was on a different track altogether.

As she waddled forward with a quiver in her belly, she inhaled a steadying breathe. This was it. She was walking towards her destiny, to marry the man she loved.

The cool sea breeze swept her veil. Her long white dress left a trail along the sandy path. Closing her eyes and inhaling, allowed her uncle to lead her to her to Chase.

The cry of a baby caused her to pause and turned to the sound. On both sides of her were rows of chairs set on the grassy patch. Maggie scanned the seats on her right and saw Andrea holding a three-month-old baby girl in her arms. Beside her was George, fumbling with the bottle, before handing it to his girlfriend.

The baby stopped crying as soon as the nipple hit her lips. Maggie smiled and continued down the sandy aisle, lain with rose petals towards Chase. Standing at the bamboo gazebo, his electric blue eyes perused her as she approached. Heat scorched her cheeks at the smoldering look in his eyes.

If it were up o Maggie, she would have married in the church she just visited. Chase had advised her against it, so she gave in. Maggie thought that getting married in that same church where Brittany tried to kill her would help them both get over the ordeal. It was like facing

your worst fear and using it to create something beautiful. To her, it would have been symbolic of the strength of their union.

Through the months leading up to this moment, she found strength in her relationship. A new trust and bond was created. She now knew she didn't need to marry in the church to prove that their relationship could withstand anything. When Chase took her hand and repeated his vows, those terrible memories started to become... just memories. This was the symbol of the strength of their love.

By the end of the ceremony just as the pastor announced them husband and wife, the baby started crying again. Maggie turned to see Colton trying to soothe her while Andrea rocked her.

"You may kiss your bride," the pastor declared.

"Kiss has to wait," Maggie whispered, her lips a breath away from his. "Our baby girl needs attention."

"She's making me jealous," he joked.

Laughing, she went to fetch the baby. Colene's sparkling blue eyes stared up at her as Maggie took her from Andrea. Chase picked up Colton and led the family back down the aisle as rice and confetti showered them.

Maggie kissed the baby's forehead, remembering just how she was conceived. This was the result of that night in the hospital room. When she found out she was pregnant, she had been both elated and fearful. The fear that what Chase had in his blood would affect the baby caused her to have a difficult pregnancy. What made it more difficult was the stress of the trial. The day she testified against Antonio was the day she discovered she was pregnant. It had been a bittersweet moment.

Back to the present. When they reached the end of the row of palm trees, Chase paused, leaning towards her. Their lips sealed in their first kiss as a married couple.

"I love you, Mrs. McMillan," he murmured after breaking the kiss.

With her heart fluttering like a butterfly trying to find its wings, she replied. "I love you."

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. D. has been a fiction and non-fiction writer for many years, creating compelling stories, web content, articles and poetry.

She lives on the island paradise of Jamaica, where she spends most of her days creating fictional words. She has always known that she would be a writer. C. D. spent her adulthood dreaming of being a novelist while working a 9 to 5 job. With determination, she quit her job and started working at home full-time as a freelancer/ghostwriter. In 2016 resigned freelancing, dedicating her time to pursuing her dreams of being a published author.

She is a lover of animals, and has two dogs, a cat and several goats. There are four things C. D. cannot live without: cheesecake, chocolate, good ice-cream and coffee.



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