

FOREVER

AN

EX

Victoria Christopher Murray

Asia

Ingrum

Dreams Deferred

Chapter 1

Whoever said that a kiss was just a kiss, had never kissed Bobby Johnson.

'Cause I'm telling you, Bobby gave the kind of kisses that curled your toes, and sent tremors to your...well, you know.

And the blessing was that Bobby Johnson had kissed me. Seven days ago. On Christmas. And, I'm telling you, I saw stars.

Now, maybe it wasn't that Bobby was all that great a kisser. Maybe it had more to do with him being the love of my life, at least until 2007 when he'd made the stupid mistake of breaking up with me and going back to his wife.

But whatever, that kiss on Christmas had stayed in my heart and on my mind. When I was awake, I thought about it and every time I closed my eyes, I dreamed about it.

Just like now.

My lips were right up against Bobby's and it was so deliciously good. So good that I started hearing bells, no, not bells, my ears were ringing.

But then...the ringing kept on and on and on, messing up my dream flow.

Dang! That was nothin' but my cell phone and now, I was pissed. Not only was my dream interrupted, but now, I was awake, too? Who would call somebody so early

on New Year's Day? Not that I knew the exact time, but if I hadn't already eaten breakfast, then it was too early for somebody to be hitting me up.

My first thought was to just let my cell ring. But my eleven-year-old daughter, Angel had spent the night with Monet, her best friend, so I had to answer...just in case.

Right before the call went to my voice mail, I grabbed my cell from the nightstand. Without even opening my eyes, I mumbled, "This had better be good."

"What's up, Asia?"

My eyes popped right open.

"Happy New Year!"

I pushed myself up, tugging the sheet along to cover my nakedness. "Uh...happy New Year to you, too, Bobby," I said to my ex, my daughter's daddy, and the Adonis of my dreams.

"I guess I woke you up."

"No." I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to look decent, though I didn't know why. It wasn't like we were Facetiming or anything. "I'm glad you called."

"Yeah, I remembered that little superstition you had about a man calling your house first on New Year's."

He remembered that?

"So, I hope that I was the first."

"You are. And now I'll be blessed for the whole year."

He chuckled. "That's what I wish for you."

Then, a moment of silence. I tried to think of something profound to say that would keep Bobby talking. But before I could come up with anything...a moan. And not

just a regular moan...a loud, long, masculine moan that stretched through time and my bedroom...and went right through my cellphone, too.

Dang! I thought, looking down at the body stretched out in my bed.

"Oh," Bobby said. "You have company. I should've known. Last night being New Year's Eve...."

"No, I don't," I said as I kicked through the tangled sheets until I was free and away from Rocco. I had on not a stitch of clothing, but I didn't care. I jumped up and jogged straight into the hallway. "That was...just the TV," I said. "Yeah, yeah, it was the TV. I had it on and must've fallen asleep."

"So you didn't go out and party the New Year in?"

"Well, uh...." I didn't want to keep all of this attention on my lie, so I said, "I'm really happy you called." Now that was the truth. Since I'd spent Christmas Day at his house with his wife, and our daughter, I hadn't stopped thinking about my ex.

"Well, I don't want to keep you. Just wanted you to know how much I care for you and how I wish you nothing but God's best."

I sighed and smiled and tingled all over.

He finished with, "And, I just wanted to wish you...."

"Happy New Year," we said together, then chuckled together, too.

"Thanks again for being my first, I mean, *the* first...."

"I know what you mean." After a pause, he added, "Asia, I've been doing a lot of thinking and in a few days, I'd like to come over...and talk."

I inhaled.

He said, "After what happened on Christmas...we really need to talk."

"Okay." My smile was so wide that my cheeks hurt. I'd been wondering how he felt about our kiss and now, I knew. That kiss had brought back all kinds of feelings and memories and wonder about why we'd even broken up.

"I'll call you, okay?"

"Yeah." What I really wanted to say was, 'Come over now,' but I'd let him lead this dance.

He clicked off and I did the same. That three minute call was like a shot of caffeine straight into my veins. What a way to begin 2014.

"Baby, what're you doing out here?"

Before I could even face him, Rocco was on top of me, kissing my neck with his morning breath. I used the heels of my hands to push him off.

"What's up?" he said, backing away, but only a little. "I want to start off the New Year right."

"We did that last night." As I marched back into my bedroom, I was mad that I'd run out without any clothes on. Because now, Rocco was walking right behind my au naturel glory.

Most of the time, I liked using my body to turn men on. In fact, if I had to tell the truth, that's how I made my living. My job was to maintain my size four figure, be beautiful, and I got paid for keeping rich men company. I mean, not outright paid. It wasn't like we went out and they gave me money. But after a couple of dates, the gifts started flowing: diamonds, furs, shopping sprees on Rodeo Drive, and vacations anywhere there was a beach and a Ritz Carlton.

But as far as Rocco was concerned now, the job was done. After hearing Bobby's voice, I didn't want Rocco anywhere near me. So when he wrapped his arms around my waist and pushed his full-blown nature against my butt, I wiggled away.

"What's up?" He held out his arms, beckoning me to come back. "Why you keep doing that?"

"You have to go," I said, cutting straight to the chase.

He frowned like he no longer understood English. "Go where?"

Did he really want me to answer that? I mean, it wasn't like Rocco and I had anything going on. It was just that sometime around Labor Day, I realized I didn't have a guy for the holidays.

Not that there was any kind of shortage of men in my life. I was still on the circuit and still in circulation. Plenty of athletes had my number locked in their phones. It was just that the calls were fewer. After all, no matter how much I maintained, I was thirty-five which was ancient in the pro basketball/football/baseball/track groupie arena.

Now, don't get it twisted -- I wasn't a groupie. I was more of a trophy girlfriend, who was working on becoming the trophy wife. No matter what you called it, though, it was my only ticket out of my ratchet life in Compton all those years ago. I needed to marry a rich athlete.

Once I set my mind to it, I'd met Bobby Johnson, the star of the Los Angeles Lakers. He wasn't my first choice 'cause he was already married. But he'd wooed me like I was going to be the next Mrs. Johnson.

Clearly, I was wrong. 'Cause six years ago, Bobby decided that he was happy with the wife he had, and didn't want a new one.

"So, what're you saying, Asia? You really want me to go?" I turned around, almost forgetting that Rocco was still here. And I watched the new center for the Lakers pimp-strut toward me.

Now, I had the chance to take in all of *his* naked glory and boy, was this dude fine. Forget about being ripped in the right places, Rocco was ripped in every place. Everywhere there was a muscle, it was defined. And then, that face. He was Christopher Williams (that old R&B singer from back in the day) dipped in deep, dark chocolate.

This time, when Rocco wrapped his arms around me, I was tempted to jump right back in bed and let this twenty-four year old show me what he could do. But the moment our lips touched, Bobby's lips came to my mind and again, I pushed Rocco back. "You know I would love to."

He gave me a goofy grin that said, 'Of course you would love to, who wouldn't?'

I started to burst his oversized ego bubble, but instead I said, "But Angel will be home soon."

Everything on that man deflated when I mentioned my daughter's name. "Oh," he said.

All the guys knew that I didn't date in front of my child. This wasn't the example I wanted to set for her, and not the life I wanted her to have. But, I wasn't going to be one of those do-as-I-say mothers. Angel never saw me with all these men.

Plus these days, I never let grown men around my daughter. No way, too many perverts out there and my eleven-year-old daughter, with her sixteen-year-old body, and a face that her agent at Ford Models called the young face of the new millennium, didn't

need to be around testosterone. I did everything to protect Angel Valentine Johnson, the true love of my life.

"I thought you told me that your daughter wasn't coming home 'til later," Rocco said, squinting as if he was studying me to see if I was lying.

I tilted my head. "Is that what you thought? Hmmm....," I turned around so that my back was to him. "Nope. She's coming home about --" I glanced at the clock...7:48 -- "about eight. Oh, my god!" I exclaimed as if I was just noticing the time. "You've got to go. She'll be here at any moment."

"Dang!" he said, dashing to gather his clothes that he'd tossed around my bedroom. "Why she coming home so early?"

"Because...it's New Year's...and...we always have breakfast together on New Years."

There was a part of me that was proud that I could come up with a good lie on the fly. But really, was that a character trait or a character flaw?

When Rocco started walking toward the bathroom, I said, "Where're you going? You've got to get outta here."

"I don't even have time to take a shower?"

I shook my head.

"Well, do I have time to take a leak? A guy's gotta take a leak first thing in the morning."

Those words made my eyes roam down his body. Damn! Maybe I could tell him that I made a mistake. That Angel wouldn't be home 'til nine, or ten. Or I could tell him the truth...that she wouldn't be home 'til some time tonight.

But then...Bobby. I'd feel like I was cheating.

So, I let Rocco take his leak, then dress as slowly as any man ever did.

"Okay." Rocco slipped his suit jacket over shoulders that looked like he should've been playing football instead of basketball. "So," he said straightening out his collar, "I'm gonna see you tonight?"

"We'll see." I led him down the stairs and at the door gave him one of those long, slow, tongue kisses so that he wouldn't forget me. But as soon as he said, "Bye, call me," and stepped out of that door, I closed it and forgot him.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I dashed back up to my bedroom, grabbed my cell and clicked on my best friend's name. Noon's phone rang and rang and when her voicemail picked up, I hung up and called back. I didn't know where she was, and I didn't care whose bed she was in; I needed to talk to her.

It took four call backs before she answered with a growl, "This had better be good."

I laughed. Hadn't I just said the same thing? We were like sisters, with a bond thicker than blood.

"This is better than good," I said.

Noon moaned.

"Wake up, I have to talk to you," I whined.

"Call me later. I'm sleep."

"Well, wake up."

"I can't."

"If you hang up, you know I'm gonna call you back."

"Ugh!" she growled again. "Hold on a second."

When she said that, I figured that meant she was with her current man, Brett, and was getting out of bed to talk to me privately.

"Okay, what's up?" Noon asked with an attitude.

That was okay; she'd be all right after I told her this.

"Well, first, happy New Year!" I said with glee.

There was a pause, and then, "Chiquita, if that's why you called me, I swear...."

I didn't even hear the rest of her sentence. Did my girl just call me by the cray-cray birth name my mama had given me? My mother, who abandoned me when I was two and left me to be raised by my grandmother, had named me after a banana. I was still pissed about that, but at least I was smart enough to have changed my name legally.

I wanted to insult Noon back, call her by her birth name. But her birth name was Noon...Noon Thursday Jones, given to her by her mama who was as coo-coo for Cocoa Puffs as mine.

So since I couldn't insult her, I got right to the point. "I'm getting back with Bobby."

"Bobby who?"

"See, you wanna play. Really, I'm getting back with Bobby."

A beat, and then, "For real?"

If Noon had been sitting in the room with me, her eyes would be all wide, and she'd be on the edge of the chair waiting for the whole story. 'Cause if there was one

thing that Noon knew, it was that I wasn't overly dramatic. I accepted whatever situation came my way.

Okay, that may be a bit of an exaggeration. But for the most part, once I did all that I could and saw that I couldn't change a situation, I accepted it.

"So, when did this happen?" Noon said, all awake now.

"Can you meet me?"

"When?"

"Now. Are you with Brett?"

"Yeah, but I can hook up with you for a few hours. Where we gonna go so early on New Year's Day?"

That was a good question, but then I said, "The mall. The malls are open, so meet me at the Beverly Center. Starbucks. In the Food Court."

"The Food Court?" Noon said. "Is that the name of some new restaurant, 'cause you know, I'm not pedestrian like that."

"Pedestrian?" I laughed. "Heffa, have you forgotten that we grew up on the same street in Compton?"

"Sshh...." She lowered her voice and chuckled at the same time. "Brett thinks I'm from Kenya."

"I'm gonna tell that white boy the truth if you don't meet me in an hour."

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," she said.

We laughed before we both clicked off our phones.

Sheridan

Hart

Goodman

Bridges Burned

Chapter 2

Brock rolled off of me and I felt the release of his weight, but after shocks still rolled through my body.

How did this man do it? Six years of marriage and he still had me calling out his name...every single time.

We were both on our backs, huffing and puffing, our eyes focused on the ceiling. As I laid there, I just hoped that the beat of my heart would one day steady, or else, I was going to have to stay in this bed forever.

Minutes had probably passed by the time I was able to speak. "You know what that was like?" I breathed.

"What?" Brock was as out of breath as I was.

"That was like...having room service...all night long."

He laughed and punched his fist into the air. "I'm the man!"

I propped myself up, looked down at him, and didn't say a word. All I did was stare and think that he was still the finest man I'd ever seen. And I wasn't saying that just because a part of my body was still shivering. Even absent of the afterglow of a toe-curling orgasm, Brock Eugene Goodman was fine and I loved me some him. "So, you're the man, huh?"

He grinned.

"Well, good morning, Mister Man." I rolled over to my side of the bed, but before my feet could hit the floor, Brock pulled me back.

"Where are you going?"

"Uh...where do you think? To church."

"Didn't I tell you that we were gonna rock this bed all weekend?" He gave me a side-glance. "You didn't believe me?"

I laughed. It was true; my husband had come home on Friday in a lovin' kind of mood, and he'd said exactly that. "It wasn't that I didn't believe you. I just didn't know that you meant it literally. All Friday night, all yesterday...."

"And all today," he finished for me. "We're not getting out of bed today."

"But what about church?"

"I have a feeling that God is pleased with what I'm about to do to you."

That cracked me up. "This is my gift for marrying a younger man."

"And you're my gift for living my life right."

See? This man, our marriage, nothing but perfection. "So, we're really not going to church?"

"Not today." He lifted his head up a little and glanced down at me. "And, we have to get back to it 'cause we're gonna lose a couple of hours tonight when we go out to dinner with our son and Evon...."

I didn't hear anything he said beyond 'our son.' Tingles traveled through my body once again. He'd just given me another orgasm, a mental one. All night, he'd shown me how much he loved me. Now, he was telling me the same thing, without even mentioning my name.

He loved me and he loved my children. Before he'd even put a ring on it, he'd taken my son, Christopher, and my daughter, Tori into his heart. He didn't even meet Christopher until he was sixteen, and Tori, when she was ten. But to Brock, Christopher was his son, Tori was his daughter.

Leaning forward, I kissed his nose. "Yes dinner with Christopher and Evon and their wedding plans. I hope they won't be insulted when we tell them that we want to help."

Brock shook his head. "Nope, they won't be. They're smart enough to take our money."

I laughed and then swung my legs over the side of the bed. Glancing over my shoulder, I said, "I'm going to get coffee; do you want anything?"

He gave me one of those dirty-old-man sneers.

I slapped his arm. "We just finished."

"Yeah, but I already told you what's about to go down. Are you telling me that you're not up to it?" he challenged me.

"Oh, now see," I stood and grabbed my robe from the lounge across the bedroom, "you're gonna make me come back in here and hurt you."

He laughed. "Bring it on. And, oh yeah, bring me some coffee, too."

I scampered out of the room and dashed through the cool house. Usually by now the rich aroma of brewing coffee filled the first floor of our home. My mom, one of those before-the-sun-peeked-over-the-horizon risers, always got the coffee going. But my mom had gone to San Francisco to spend a few weeks with my brother and his family. So, coffee duty was on me.

Not having my coffee ready when I rolled out of bed was only one of the things that I missed when my mom was away, but I had to admit, it was wonderful having the house to ourselves this weekend. With Christopher living on his own, and Tori back at school at Hampton University, Brock and I had traipsed through the house naked all weekend long. And, I guess we were going to spend most of today that way, too. Maybe today, we'd try to cover every single room.

I shuddered just thinking about that, but then the ringing telephone broke through my moment. I didn't even realize I'd left my cell in the kitchen, and I grabbed it from the counter.

"Sheridan?" the woman said right after I said hello.

Since I didn't recognize the voice, I said, "Who's speaking?" before I committed myself. Not that I was hiding from anyone. All of our bills were paid, no one in the family was running from the police. But, if someone was calling my house, they needed to identify themselves first. "This is Harmony."

Her image came right to my mind. The voluptuous woman who'd come to my home on Christmas and just about ruined our Christmas brunch. Not that it was her fault. I didn't know her, and she didn't know me.

But, she'd shown up at Christmas with my ex-husband, Quentin. And that had been a shocker. I couldn't get over the fact that Quentin had come to my home with a woman that he introduced as his fiancée. Not that I didn't want happiness for Quentin, but with a woman?

The man was gay!

At least, that's what he told me when he walked out of our seventeen-year marriage, back in 2004 leaving me and crushing my heart into a million emotional pieces.

But he'd come here on Christmas professing that he was no longer gay. Well, he didn't exactly say that. That was my guess since he was talking about marrying this much younger woman as soon as this upcoming June.

"Sheridan?" she called my name.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harmony. I'm just surprised...."

"I'm sure you are. I'm probably the last person you expected to hear from."

"That's true," and then, I paused, stopping myself from asking, 'What in the world do you want?'

"I hate to bother you so early on a Sunday," Harmony said.

"That's fine, we're awake."

"Good." I heard her relief-filled exhale. "I've been thinking about calling you for the last few weeks, I just kept changing my mind. But today, I decided to just do it."

"Okay?" That word had come out like a question, instead of a statement, but that was because truly, I just wanted her to get to the point.

"I'm hoping...I would like...Sheridan can we get together for lunch? There are some things...I would just like for us to talk."

There was not one thing that Harmony and I had to talk about. And then, I put that thought in reverse. There was something -- Quentin Hart.

Yeah, we could talk about Quentin because I had some questions myself. I'd tried to get my questions answered at Christmas. All through our brunch, I'd asked her

if she'd known that Quentin was gay, I'd asked if Quentin had really changed, I'd asked if she really expected to have children with this man? But from my mother to my children, everyone had jumped all over me, saying that what was going on with Quentin was none of my business. And so none of my questions had been answered.

But if it was just me and Harmony, maybe I'd be able to find out the whole truth. Because my gut told me something was going on.

When I hesitated, she hurried to say, "I mean, I know you probably think it's crazy, the fiancée calling the ex-wife, and it's probably a dumb idea because we don't even know each other. You must think I'm foolish. You know what, I'm sorry to disturb you and...."

"No," I inserted, stopping her jabbering. "It's fine. I would love to get together with you."

"Oh, thank you!" she said as if she'd been holding her breath. "Thank you so much."

"When do you want to do it?"

"I was thinking the sooner the better, if that's all right with you."

I wanted to tell her to come right over now, but the problem was my husband was here. And he'd already told me his plans for today.

"Can I call you back tonight or tomorrow? I have to find out my work schedule for the week."

"Sure," I said and then with just a few more words, we said goodbye. I dropped the phone back into the receiver and stood there, leaning on the counter, thinking about

every word she'd said. She'd given me no clue about what she wanted, but that didn't matter. I had enough questions for the both of us.

After our fiasco at Christmas, everyone asked me why did I care about Quentin? It wasn't that I cared about him. It was just that for the life of me, I couldn't understand. Even after all of these years, I couldn't wrap my mind around when, after all those years of a wonderful marriage, he'd told me that while he loved me, he'd fallen in love with Jett Jennings, one of our friends.

With one of my best uppercuts I'd learned from my kickboxing classes, I'd knocked him down, and then kicked him out that same day. Then, I went to work to heal my heart and I met Brock during that time. So, I was good. My life was great and I was fine.

There was just that one nagging, lagging question that had been in my mind since the moment Quentin had looked me in the eye and told me he was gay -- did I do anything to make my husband switch teams?

And then, just when I was beginning to finally dismiss my question as ridiculous, Quentin shows up with a woman that he wants to marry. Now, I couldn't stop asking myself what part did I play in Quentin being gay?

I know, I know...that question was stupid, absurd, preposterous. But that question was in my heart and everyone knows that the heart isn't always smart.

So meeting Harmony...maybe talking to her would help me. If I could get my questions answered, I'd be able to move on. I'd never look back at Quentin or our life together.

Forget about the coffee! I scurried back into the bedroom to tell Brock.

"No!"

"What?"

"No," Brock repeated, even after I'd asked him for clarification. Then, he continued, "I mean it, Sheridan, don't do it."

Okay, there were a couple of things wrong with the way this scenario was playing out here. I was a grown woman. A grown black woman who made her own decisions. No one had the right to tell me what to do. And the look on my face sent that message to my husband. Or maybe it was the way I'd crossed my arms, twisted my lips and glared down at him in the bed with a, 'Come again?' stance.

That had to be why Brock softened his voice. "I just don't think it's a good idea. Think about it. Your ex's fiancée wants to get together with you. What good can come of this?"

Was Brock kidding? So much could come out of this. Like finally having answers.

"It's not like we're going to be planning death and destruction," I said. "Harmony said she just wanted to talk."

"About what?"

I shrugged. "Maybe she thinks I can give her some ideas about her wedding. Maybe she wants to know Quentin's favorite song for their first dance."

The long hard stare that Brock gave me said so much, so clearly. He might as well have just called me a liar.

"Look," I said, "I don't know what she wants. But what's the harm in finding out?"

"You don't need to find out anything. You need to stay out of their business."

"She didn't say anything about discussing their business."

"Sheridan...."

"Okay, so let's say she does want to discuss their business. Maybe she just has the same kinds of questions I had at Christmas."

"And how are you gonna help her when you have the same questions?"

I didn't say anything because that was a good point.

He said, "You'll just be two women sitting there asking each other questions. It won't even be a conversation. Just a bunch of questions going back and forth."

Imaging me and Harmony, sitting at some Starbucks, asking each other questions and never getting an answer was kind of funny. And even though I was a little miffed at Brock trying to tell me what to do, I smiled. Just a little.

My smile was enough to make him toss the covers aside and push himself off the bed. "Baby, please don't do this."

My eyes roamed over the terrain of his naked body as he strolled toward me.

"We have a fantastic life. Let's not bring OPD into it."

OPD. Brock's acronym for Other People's Drama.

"Please," he said again.

When he wrapped his arms around me, I sighed. When he pressed soft moist lips against me, I dropped my arms to my side. And when he said, "Please," again, I agreed.

After all, how could I say no to a fine, butt-naked, begging man who had his body pressed up against mine? It was a no-brainer. And as Brock kissed me, I thought, Harmony, who?

Kendall

Stewart

Tables Turned

Chapter 3

I shot straight up in bed!

Still panting, still trying to catch my breath. My eyes focused through the darkness and then, I clicked on the lamp. I took a long sweeping glance through my bedroom.

There was no one there.

But there had to be. It felt so real.

My heart was pounding as I slowly eased out of my bed. Even though I lived at the beach, I never turned on the heat at night. So right away, the cool March air rushed me, wrapped around my bare legs, and crept all the way up to my butt since all I wore was one of my old UCLA T-Shirts.

Feeling the chill didn't stop me, though. I tiptoed through my bedroom, then peeked into the hall. I moved through the entire cottage, clicking on all the lights along the way. I even turned on the light for the deck outside, lighting up the midnight black on the beach.

Now that my house was illuminated as if it were high-noon, I could see for sure, there was nothing. No one.

D'Angelo was not in my house.

I leaned against the windowed-wall that faced the beach. I could've sworn that he was here. D'Angelo was right in that bed with me. Really, he was. I could still feel his hands, and his tongue and his....

"Stop it!" I scolded myself.

It had to be all of that rich food that I'd tasted at *Rendezvous* today. From the collard greens quiche to the chocolate mint eclairs, that chef, Adolphe Baptiste, was the real deal, but he had not done my body good. It had to be his fault that I couldn't sleep, or rather, that I couldn't sleep without dreaming.

By the time I went into the kitchen and set my old-fashioned teapot atop the stove, I had completely convinced myself that dreaming about D'Angelo was all because of Adolphe Baptiste.

That made perfect sense to me, though it didn't quite explain all the other nights when I hadn't eaten at *Rendezvous* and D'Angelo still stalked my sleep. D'Angelo Stewart, the man who shared my last name since he was the brother of my ex-husband. D'Angelo Stewart, a Compton legend, who'd long ago traded the streets of Compton for militia missions on the battlefields of Iraq. D'Angelo Stewart, the bad boy who had strolled, with all of that swagger, right back into my life on Christmas Day.

It was when we'd stood in the kitchen alone, cleaning up after our Christmas dinner that D'Angelo and I had really talked for the first time in years....

"See, don't you wish you got out of this house a couple of hours ago?" I said as I passed him a dish that I'd just rinsed off.

With the dishtowel I'd given him, he dried. "Nope. I'm willing to work for that dinner that you and your dad just shared with me. I haven't celebrated Christmas like this in years. So, thanks for having me."

"You don't have to keep saying that. We were glad to see you again. And anyway, I should be thanking you for helping me clean up all of this stuff. Dad's gonna have food for days."

"No doubt about that," D'Angelo said, as he looked over at the containers that we'd just stacked on the counter filled with left-overs. "But what's up with washing dishes? I didn't know they made homes without dishwashers anymore."

I laughed. "When this house was built, there weren't any dishwashers."

"Yeah, but didn't a dishwasher just automatically pop up into every home back in the eighties?"

"Not for Edwin Leigh." I chuckled. "You know I would've had a dishwasher installed in here for him years ago, but he just doesn't believe that a machine can clean a glass as well as a good old dishrag."

"Your dad may have a point there." D'Angelo paused. "Are you sure he's good? I mean, he looked kind of tired."

I nodded slowly, thinking the same thing myself. My dad had just been diagnosed with breast cancer, so every time he grimaced, or sighed, or even yawned, my radar shot up. But I wasn't about to share that with D'Angelo. Anything that my father wanted anyone to know, he'd have to tell himself. "Dad's cool. Like you said, just tired. He'll lie down for a little while and then be back up again, probably ready for another piece of pie."

"Cool." D'Angelo nodded as I passed another plate to him. "So, it's a good thing that I stayed behind then. Or else, you would've been doing this all by yourself."

I laughed. "And, I could've handled it."

"I bet you could." His voice was softer when he said, "Seems like you can handle anything. Seems like you've had to handle a lot."

I knew where he was going with this. It was a complicated story worthy of being on the big screen. I'd been married to D'Angelo's brother, and then one day I came home from a business trip and found his brother, my husband, in bed with my sister. It had been so traumatic and tragic and I was sure D'Angelo wanted to hear every detail.

We'd cleaned all the dishes; now it was time for us to tackle the pots and pans. But I pushed aside the dishcloth and turned to my ex brother-in-law. For a moment, I had to pause. The way D'Angelo's hooded eyes looked down at me...I held my sigh inside. Instead, I said, "I know you're curious about what happened with me and Anthony. What do you want to know?"

He shrugged. "Whatever you want to tell me."

"Not much to tell. I found Anthony and Sabrina in bed together...."

"That's foul," he said.

"And Anthony and I divorced because of that."

"Just like that? No other drama? He didn't try to get back with you?"

"He tried, he lost. I filed the papers, I divorced him."

D'Angelo nodded slowly. "But you and Sabrina have worked it out. Chillin' together like nothing's happened."

"Don't let us all being in the same room without anyone getting cut fool you. Today was the first time I'd seen them in six years," I told D'Angelo.

"You're kidding? I didn't know that. Well then, I'm sorry I ran them off."

Turning back to the sink and away from his direct glance, I said, "It's not your fault that they decided not to stay." That was all I was going to say about Anthony and Sabrina walking out before our big Christmas dinner under the guise that Sabrina, who was pregnant, wasn't feeling well.

I wasn't going to tell D'Angelo that I knew the real deal. I'd overheard my ex and my sister talking as they hid away in our old bedroom. Really, I guess it was more like I was eavesdropping, but whatever, Anthony had not been happy that Sabrina had contacted D'Angelo and invited him to our dinner. Anthony hated his brother; for some reason, he blamed D'Angelo for their parents' death, and Anthony told Sabrina that he would never sit down and

break any kind of bread with him. So, they'd left and to be honest, that made my Christmas better -- with just me, my dad, and D'Angelo.

He said, "We come from quite a dysfunctional family. My brother hates me for something I didn't do and you hate my brother and your sister for something they did do."

I shook my head. "You've got it all wrong," I said. "I don't hate them at all. In fact," I paused and thought about what I was going to say, "I've forgiven them."

He looked at me for a long moment. "Well, then, I guess you're ready to move on," he said.

"Yup, already have," I said as I scrubbed one of the pans.

"Good, then that must mean that you're free to go to the movies tonight." When I tilted my head and looked at him like I didn't understand what he was saying, he explained, "You know there are a couple of movies that open on Christmas Day; we can catch any one that you want to see."

When I'd given D'Angelo that look, it wasn't because I didn't know what he meant. It was just that I could not remember the last time that someone had asked me to go anywhere. And, I told him what I would've told anyone who asked me out. "Thanks, but no thanks," I said.

D'Angelo leaned back like he was shocked. I guess my answer was probably a surprise. How many women ever said no to this man who looked like Denzel, if he'd been a jock. I had no doubt, women were lined up, ready and willing to do D'Angelo's bidding. "Whoa," he said. "I guess my brother and your sister did some job on you."

Why did it have to be all that? Why couldn't it just be that I didn't want to go out with him? I guess for a man like D'Angelo, who wore his bad-boy-sexy like it was a cologne, the concept that a woman didn't want to be with him was difficult to grasp.

But I wasn't going to go there with him, so, I just shook my head. "It's not Sabrina and Anthony. I told you, I've forgiven them. Plus if the truth is told, Sabrina is much better for Anthony than I ever was."

"Ah...you're a progressive woman." He chuckled a bit. "But that still doesn't explain you saying no to me. You know, that doesn't happen much."

I twisted my lips trying to hold back my smile, though that didn't work. "I can imagine. But I said no because I was never meant to be a wife."

"Did I ask you to marry me?"

I laughed. "No, but...."

"Oh! I see what you're saying. Once a man goes out with you, he'll be so enthralled that he'll rush you to City Hall and by morning you'll be a wife."

I snatched the dishtowel from his hand, swatted his arm with it, then handed the towel back to him. "That's not what I'm saying. I just know that a date could lead to dating could lead to something more."

"And you don't want the something more?"

"Exactly!" I said. "As much as Anthony and Sabrina were dirty for what they did, I should've never married your brother. He was in love with me, and I loved his business acumen. He wanted romantic dinners, and I wanted long planning meetings. He wanted a family and a future with me, and I wanted to open five spas and build an empire with him." I shook my head. "To be honest, he wanted it to work, and I didn't."

"Wow. It takes a grown up to admit that."

I shrugged. "But don't get it twisted, they were still foul! They should've at least waited for me to figure all of this out."

He laughed. "So what happened to the house?"

"In Malibu? Anthony got it in the divorce, but I just heard today that they sold it."

"Man! I know how much you loved that place."

"I did. You found us the perfect home," I said, thinking back to that time. Anthony and I had just married and D'Angelo had his hand in all kinds of ventures, including real estate. The house had been a surprise when Anthony had told him in passing that my fantasy home was anywhere on the beach in Malibu.

"Well, maybe I can do that for you again," he said.

"Really?" I chuckled.

He nodded. "And if I do, will you go out with me, then?"....

The whistle from my teapot brought me back from Christmas, brought me back to the present and the new beach cottage that D'Angelo had found for me just a few weeks ago. I jumped up, but now that the water was boiling, I didn't need any tea. I was ready to go back to bed.

This time when I walked through my home that I loved, I turned out all the lights, and then, I climbed back into my bed. It wouldn't take me long to fall asleep. Sleeping wasn't the problem. It was what went on in my subconscious after I was asleep.

But that was okay. It was only a dream. A dream that meant absolutely nothing to me.

Nothing at all.

