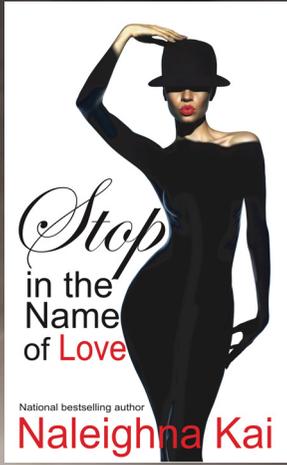
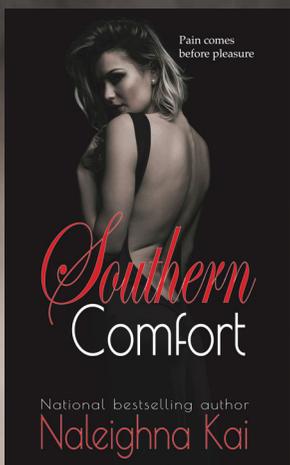
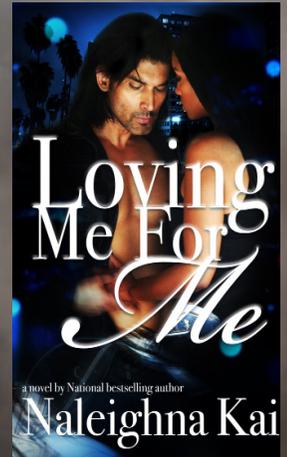
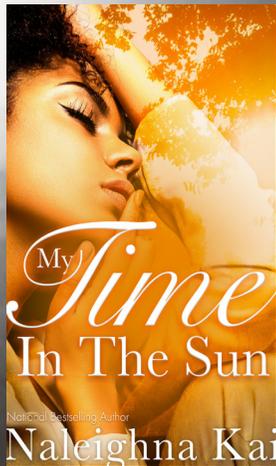
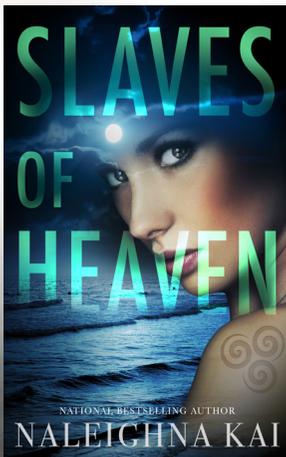
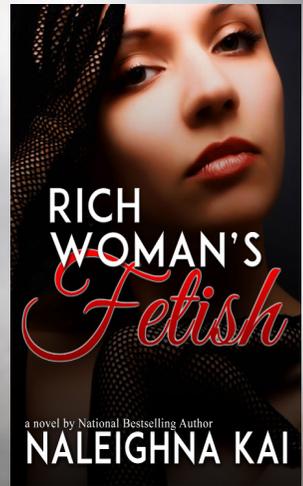
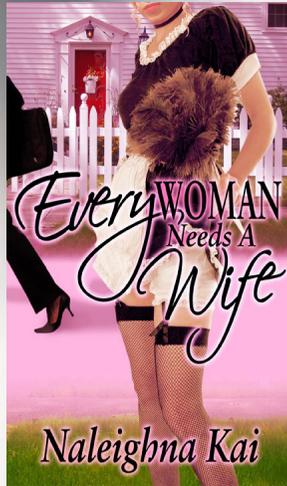


Sample Chapters



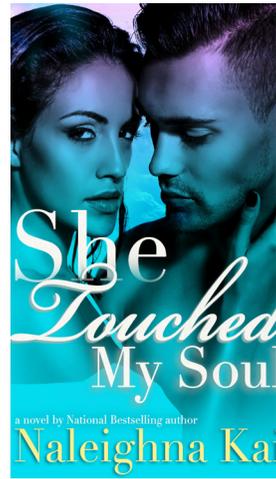
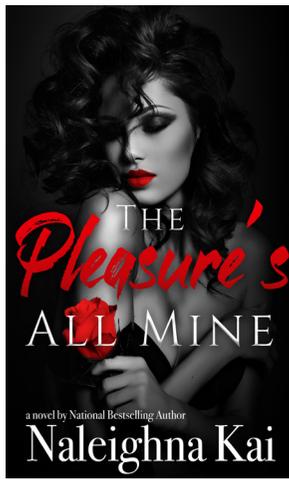
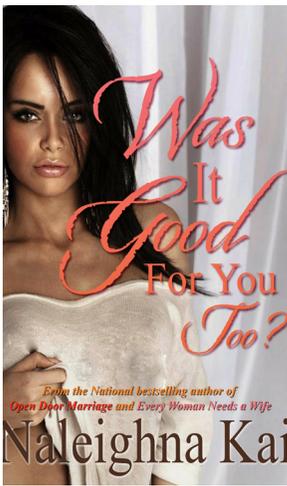


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National bestselling author, Naleighna Kai, brings a story of a wife who's fed up with everything and everyone. Shannan overhears a conversation that forces her to walk out on her husband, seven children, and a successful career to find a sense of peace that has eluded her for years. She thought fate had been kind in giving her a husband who adored her. But she soon discovered fate had pulled a fast one, as her husband's nearly impossible demands and those from his unrelenting family have pushed her to an edge where there might be no return.

Zach has screwed up—royally. With his family following his lead in not appreciating Shannan, his wife shows him that since he can't respect her presence, she'll introduce him to her absence. Determined to win back the woman who is his anchor, first, he must find a way to deal with his overbearing family and disrespectful children that doesn't cause him to lose more than he gains. While fighting to win back his wife, he's forced to face some hard truths and family secrets that might mean he'll lose Shannan forever.

I will die if I stay here ...

Shannan's entire family sat at the dinner table enjoying a meal which took her three hours to prepare, while she mowed the jungle of their front yard, seething the entire time. She stopped to empty the bag, but froze when her mother-in-law's voice carried from the open pantry window, "I had to fake a damn heart attack to make this stupid heifer get with the program."

Faked a heart attack? Wait. What?

Monique Hallerin had faked that entire one-month ordeal so Shannan would take over the daunting task of shopping, preparing, cooking, then serving Sunday dinners for fifteen people every week, only to criticize nearly everything that Shannan did. Faked it so Shannan's husband, Zach, would pick up the slack on her bills. All while her brothers-in-law and most of her children parked their lazy behinds at the dining room table every Sunday and didn't lift a finger to help. Shannan was way past tired—exhausted was a better word.

"Guests don't wash dishes," her husband said when she mentioned they could pitch in with clean up. Well, to be honest, neither did he and he hadn't been a guest since they'd said, "I do."

What she should've said on the day they were married, fifteen years ago was, "I don't," then ran past his overbearing mother and four shiftless brothers then out the church doors to freedom.

"I had to fake a damn heart attack to make this stupid heifer get with the program."

Shannan, who had seven children of her own, was now responsible for duties that her mother-in-law had done for most of her non-married life; catering to those grown ass men sitting at her dining room table at this

very moment while Shannan was outside doing something she had first asked her husband, then one of them, to do.

Rage hit Shannan full force.

She staggered away from the mower, rushed into the house, ran up the stairs and snatched up her tote. She halted at the threshold of her bedroom for a moment, extracting the small shoebox in the back of the closet. A set of credit cards, passport, birth certificate, She staggered away from the mower, rushed into the house, ran up the stairs and snatched up her tote. She halted at the threshold of her bedroom for a moment, extracting the small shoebox in the back of the closet. A set of credit cards, passport, birth certificate, social security card, and all of the hidden cash found its way into the tote. She glanced at the summer wardrobe spilling over into Zach's side and decided there wasn't anything she wanted to take. She tipped down the rear stairway into the kitchen, snatched the keys from a hook near the door to put as much distance between herself and those people as possible.

Shannan only vaguely heard the youngest of her seven children call her name. Her heart constricted as she ignored them, tears blinding her as she slid behind the wheel of an SUV that was almost a second home. Basketball. Volleyball. Football. Gymnastics. PTA. Never any breaks between or any time for her to simply breathe.

I will die if I stay here.

Those seven words came to mind, summarizing her current status. Something that first hit her when she had the argument with Zach before his family arrived ...

“My mother raised five boys on her own and never complained about having to manage a household,” he said, still keeping his focus on the circuitry in his hands.

“And she was on her own because she ran your father off,” she replied. “Let’s be real about that.”

Zachary’s face twisted into a mask of annoyance as he glared at her. “I can’t talk about this with you.”

“I’m done talking. I’m tired,” she snapped. “There’s going to come a time when I say to hell with it.”

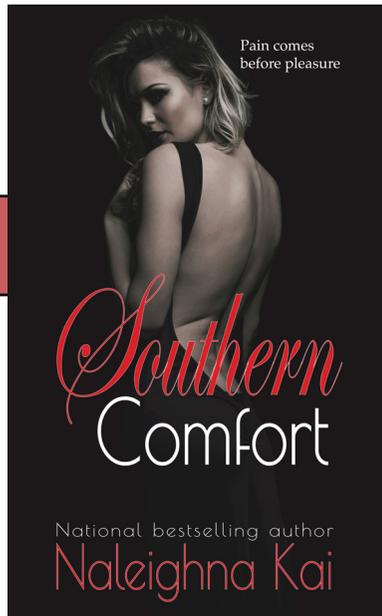
Zach paused at the end of the wooden bench, scoffing as he asked, “And where are you going to go? Who’s going to be a father to seven children?”

“They have a father,” she said, and the sorrow of her reality was heavy indeed. “I need a husband.”

I will die if I stay here.

The moment Shannan hit the expressway, she wiped her tears with the back of a trembling hand. A startling thought hit her. She could not leave her baby girl in that house.

Want more? [Click here](#) to purchase for .99 Cents or Download your copy today on Kindle Unlimited today.



The moment Joy’s estranged mother shows up on her doorstep and drops off a mysterious child, she’s forced to put her first year in college on hold. Two years later, she totally abandons her dream of becoming a civil engineer altogether, when her mother reappears with yet another child from her drug-addicted sister. Twice is enough, and the third time isn’t a charm as Joy’s outright refusal makes her an outcast from her crime-riddled family. With so much responsibility at a young age, she’s never allowed herself to dream of having an intimate relationship. Until a chance meeting ten years later at the most unlikely of places.

Ali serves as the bridge that brings his father back into the family fold, by marrying the woman they choose for him. Now, the last child is off to college and his multi-million dollar businesses are thriving, his wife reunites with the man she abandoned to fulfill her family’s wishes, freeing Ali to embark on a journey to find the love he deserves. When he lays eyes on Joy, one word comes to mind—lost. Until that moment, he didn’t realize he has a “savior complex”, but something about the elusive woman pulls at Ali’s heartstrings and makes him take a risk.

Joy and Ali are forced to navigate the murky waters of obligation, karma, and other more deadly challenges to find their way to love.

Something about him sent a delicious shiver of anticipation up Joy's spine. That shiver did a little curtsy at the base of her neck, before ending in a tingle between her thighs. The moment his intense gaze locked with hers, any misgivings she'd felt about being in this place dissipated.

Her lips parted of their own accord, as if to speak, but no sound would come. The Welcome Circle, where all the rules were laid out for the total strangers embarking on an unforgettable journey, was ending.

Ali," he said, both snatching her attention away from one of the hosts and startling her at the same time. The smooth baritone sound was as sultry as his appearance, and that was saying something.

Joy had watched people disperse into couples, groups, or even individuals, but somehow, she'd been oblivious to Ali moving across the room and now being mere inches away. The man was stunningly handsome, had piercing brown eyes, and dark silky hair with a small shock of silver right at the widow's peak. His olive skin had been kissed by the sun, lips were the most delectable she'd ever laid eyes on. She, along with several others, couldn't help but stare.

She blinked, trying to clear her thoughts and inhaled the clean, cool scent of him. So many vibrations swirled about Ali that she had a hard time choosing one to hold onto.

"Joy," she replied, extending her hand to him.

"Permission to touch you?"

She hesitated. Oh shoot. I've forgotten already." Cuddle Party Rule ... you must ask permission and receive a verbal "Yes" before you touch anyone.

Complying with the rules meant that every touch, no matter how small, required consent. Her pulse raced as if she'd run a mile at top

speed, and everything within Joy screamed that if asked, she'd give this man an absolute, "Hell yes."

"Yes," she said in a breathy whisper. "You may touch me."

Ali moved in a little closer. Slowly, he took her small hand in his. She imagined the feel of his chest against her face, the muscles that rippled underneath his linen shirt would by comparison to his arms securing her in an embrace so wonderful that a strong need rose within her. One that had been suppressed so long that she barely realized the feeling of wanting to be connected to someone. Thanks to her family, Joy was desensitized to any real emotion. Starting from the time she'd been forced to leave home at twelve to find a safe place to live.

* * *

Ali welcomed the idea that this event did not have gray areas. Everyone played by the same set of rules. "Maybe" would be voiced as a "No." The word "no" was met with a comforting phrase, "Thank you for taking care of yourself." No quipping, no explanations, no arguments, no persuasion—a simple "No" and the participant moved on.

True power lay in the person that respected the other's boundaries. One look at Joy and he became aware that boundaries and walls were relative.

"I'm not sure what to expect ..." He'd heard her say. Neither did he, but the possibilities had become intriguing. Joy had an exotic beauty, and elegance even with the pain that was so clearly etched in her eyes. He felt an overwhelming urge to see her smile.

Ali moved forward, keeping her hand securely in his.

Wounded. Betrayed. Strong. So many vibrations swirling about the woman across the room, but he zeroed in to the two that mattered most. Survivor. Resilient.

He guided her to the empty space she'd vacated on the sofa. All around them people claimed spaces on chairs, loveseats, mattresses draped in crisp sheets, comfy-looking pallets on the floor, and some indulging the tempting treats spread out on the dining room table. The atmosphere was relaxed, but still rife with anticipation.

Ali moved closer to Joy. "May I hold you?"

"Yes, you may."

Ali shifted so that Joy was now curled into him. He relished the feel of her lush, sensuous body relaxed in mild supplication as though the art of seduction had seeped from her pores. The timbre of her voice had softened when he introduced himself. That vibration of acceptance resonating all over her body as she said the word he'd longed to hear drip from her lips—Yes.

Ali knew then and there—Joy would be his. Completely.

"Why are you here?" she whispered.

Ali locked gazes with Joy as he confessed, "I came ... for you."

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Elise Payne’s life had been shredded to bits when her wealthy ex-husband takes everything and leaves her with heartbreak and an empty bank account. After a tragic family event, the walls are closing in and she has one chance to turn things. Unfortunately, that opportunity nearly slips through her fingers when she’s pulled over for speeding. Having hit rock bottom has left her a little jaded about life, but this handsome stranger might have more in store for her than a simple warning.

Roman Montgomery is smitten by the mix of “Ms. Speedy’s” strength, quick wit, and vulnerability. When he returns to the station, he can’t get the gorgeous woman out of his mind. Though it’s against the police force’s policy, he’s ready to break the rules to see her one more time.

An unexpected encounter becomes something neither one of them will ever forget. But there’s a reason Elise has sworn off love, and when her ex lands on her doorstep again, he’s certain to make the kind of waves that might make Roman run for cover.

“When did policemen start looking like *that*?” Elise Payne gasped, putting a tighter grip on the steering wheel.

She had been pulled over for speeding but she couldn’t believe that someone as breathtaking as Officer Friendly had stepped out of the cruiser. The man had expressive, dark brown eyes and smooth golden features—a proud nose and sensuously curved lips—carved into a ruggedly handsome face that was damn pleasant to look at along with a muscular body that was nothing but pleasure to watch. Elise normally enjoyed milk chocolate, but maybe it was time to give vanilla bean some consideration.

The fact that this delay would probably make her miss the train slipped her mind as she became totally smitten by the most handsome male since Jesus turned water into wine. She could picture those gorgeous lips doing wicked, forbidden things to her—the kind of things that made a woman start speaking in tongues, the kind of things that made a woman leave religion at the altar and dive headfirst into temptation, skinny dip in an overdose of sin, and—

“License, insurance, and registration, ma’am.”

Her fantasy circled the bowl and flushed right down the drain with those words. She let out a long, slow breath and said, “May I take my hands off the steering wheel?”

He nodded, grimacing as he did so.

Elise inched her hand into her satchel and produced a license, then leaned toward the glove compartment and froze at the thoughts whipping through her mind. *Registration, no problem. Insurance, huuuuuge problem. Expired. Five hundred dollars.*

She tried to keep the despair from showing on her face as she slid the documents to him. Elise watched his every move as he snailed a walk back to his cruiser.

Seriously? Can't you go any faster?!

Several minutes ticked by before he returned. She quickly put her hands on the wheel before he made it all the way to the driver side window.

This time, he sighed with impatience. "It's safe to take your hands off the wheel, Ms. Payne. I'm a Burnham officer. It's the Chicago police who are trigger-happy."

Elise remained completely silent. Maybe if she zipped her lips, he would give her the ticket and let her be on her damn way.

"Do you realize you were going 77 in a 45?" he asked.

"Actually, I thought it was just 65, but 77 it is," she shot back.

He paused for a moment, his right eyebrow lifting. Elise saw a sudden slight uplift at the corners of his lips. There was a fullness that made them the most kissable pair she'd seen in a long time. What was it about this man's lips that invited her to give him a second and third look? What was it about those dark brown eyes that held a sparkle of mischief, but a smidgen of pain behind them? And how was that so easy for her to recognize?

"*Why* were you going so fast?" he asked.

"Because I was trying to catch that train *riiiiight* there," she replied, gesturing to the silver and orange commuter whizzing past them on a black bridge overhead. Her heart sank. All hopes of landing that new position were gone.

"There'll be another one coming along."

The train disappeared from their view, and she returned her focus to him. "Not in enough time to make it downtown for my first day." She slumped in the leather seat and whispered, "And this one had a chance to go permanent."

The officer looked down at her, as though summing things up, summing *her* up. "Well, I'm not going to ticket you for speeding."

Her grateful gaze locked on him.

"Or for the fact that you weren't wearing a seatbelt."

She opened her mouth to protest that she had only slipped it off because he had taken so long, but shut it and nodded her thanks.

“Or for the fact that your insurance expired last week.”

“Thank you, Officer Montgomery,” she murmured as he slid the items back to her. Their hands touched briefly, and a jolt of electricity whipped through her. She looked up in time to see his shocked expression. *Ah, he felt it too.*

At that moment, however, the only electricity she needed to worry about was ComEd. Her lights and power were about to become a distant memory if she didn’t dance into their office with something more than a handful of “give me” and a mouthful of “much obliged.”

“This picture,” Officer Montgomery said, gesturing to a photo of her with her sister where they both wore black hats--derbies or dobbs as her grandmother called them. The smiles were from a happier time when they went to a mystery dinner and played detective. They were the only ones to solve the murder that evening and were awarded those special hats by the event hosts. Strangely enough, her ex had been mean enough to take those with him, knowing how much they meant to her.

She explained this to the officer and a sadness came over those dark brown eyes before he tipped his hat. “So sorry to hear that. You have a nice day, ma’am. And leave a little earlier next time.”

When he walked back to the cruiser, Elise laid her forehead on the steering wheel. Tears she had been holding back for months finally had their reign. The energy to forge on, to get up and dust herself had never abandoned her—but everything happening at once had finally taken its toll.

Elise moaned as the tears increased. Her entire life was at a standstill and most wasn’t of her own making. All of her money was gone. Every single dime she had had been used to keep her twin sister alive, only to lose that beautiful soul to kidney and liver failure last month.

No sooner than she could breathe again without razor blades tearing into her lungs from that loss, did her rich ex-husband swoop down with a team of lawyers and manage to steal her baby boy while she was distracted with grief and the fallout of her family’s displeasure at what she’d done to keep her sister alive as long as she could. Yet, she had

gathered up whatever resources she could, fought with everything she had, only to lose her son anyway.

Another blow, another setback, another harsh, bitter loss. The last being the one which left her so out of sorts—at least financially. The fact that Ameritech’s merger put her and 5,000 other people on the unemployment line was a wakeup call that blared in her ears every day.

Elise sniffled and blindly reached into her satchel for a tissue. She couldn’t even drive downtown and park because what she had left in the bank had been shelled out to pay mortgage, a few groceries, and get a train pass to carry her through the month. She didn’t complain because at some point, she’d catch her breath and a break—both at the same time.

Fighting for the life of her sister was something Elise would never regret. But the aftermath to her finances and the never-ending strain between her and the family was putting her closer to the edge of emotional bankruptcy.

A tap on the window startled her.

Elise absently patted her tears away with the tissue.

“Ma’am, is everything all right?” Officer Montgomery questioned.

She rolled down the window. “Your kindness was the nicest thing that’s happened to me in a long time.” She looked up toward the empty bridge. “Thank you. But the next train comes in two hours. By then, the agency will call someone else to take the spot I was going for.”

The officer scanned the area. Only a few cars zipped by them. “Traffic isn’t bad right now. You could make it downtown in about thirty minutes and still get there on time.”

“I could but ...” Elise hesitated then abruptly added, “I can’t ...” She couldn’t voice the words—she had everything, down to the last penny budgeted—and parking downtown was an arm, a leg and a couple of someone else’s toes.

Officer Montgomery placed a hand over hers. “I’m really sorry.”

His touch was wonderful. She centered her self-control with a quickness. “What’s done is done. Recently my life has been hit with

more curve balls than a dodge ball tournament. So I'm going home to regroup. I'll be fine." Her voice wavered on the last sentence, but she took a deep breath, tossed her hair over her shoulder, and held her head high. Seconds later, she turned the key in the ignition to start the car. "Take care."

Officer Montgomery reached for her hand again. "No, you're not," he ordered. "You will park your car in that lot just ahead. Then you'll get into my car and I'll get you to work on time." He stepped back and finished, "That's what you're going to do."

She looked at him, her tears blurring her vision. "That's what I'm going to do?"

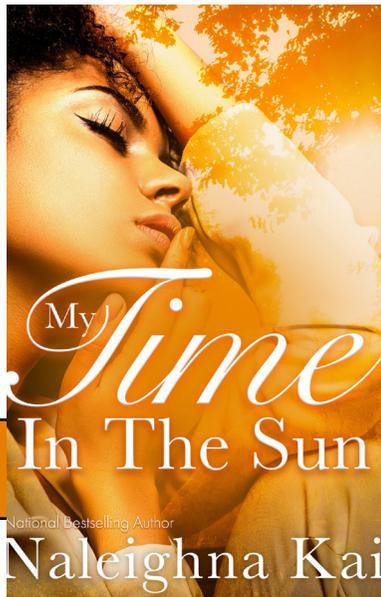
He nodded.

Elise took a moment before whispering, "All right, then."

Officer Montgomery headed for his squad car again and added, "I'll be right behind you."

This time, she did smile ... a little.

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Kari’s perfect life comes to a screeching halt during Sunday morning service when her husband’s enemy stands and tells the entire congregation, “Our first lady was a prostitute. A fourteen-year-old prostitute at that. Not exactly the kind of woman we want our little girls to imitate ...”

Kari Baltimore barely survived a horrific experience when she was forced to take drastic measures to protect an innocent child. Years later, she’s put the past behind her, owns a successful business, and is married to a wonderful man who loves her like no other. All the sordid secrets that she’s managed to keep hidden, even from her husband, resurfaces with a vengeance when Terrence Henderson, a man who is hellbent on having the church for his own sordid reasons, shares her past with everyone and causes a rift that is not easily mended.

Tony Baltimore’s plans for the saints to “take the church to the streets” has been met with staunch opposition by the board, deacons, and members who believe that staying on the “safe side” of Chicago’s police brutality and gang problems suits them just fine. When Terrence uses strong family ties to the church to publicly disgrace Kari as a sure-fire way to take over, a media firestorm ensues, and heated membership split soon follows. Tony makes strategic moves to protect his wife from anyone and everyone coming against her—including members who are so “heavenly” minded that they’re no earthly good. When the smoke clears, no one will ever be the same.

Memphis, Tennessee

“I cut him until I felt better.”

The words, in their chilly delivery, caused an icy silence to descend on the police interview room.

Seconds ticked by before a blonde officer whispered, “Everyone, out.”

Three hours ago, two uniformed men were the first to arrive on the scene at a penthouse in the heart of downtown Memphis, where a man named “Daddy” housed a stable of teens that serviced clients with an array of wicked tastes.

Those officers gave Kari a lingering look and threw a glare at the blonde before trudging toward the steel door. When it closed behind them, a ring of finality lingered in the dimly lit room that would only be matched by that of prison bars clanging shut, separating Kari from the outside world. Yes, that was what she had to look forward to because ...

I cut him until I felt better.

Flashes of his blood spreading on the faded carpet and his screams for mercy echoed in the corners of her memory. All it took was the appearance of another innocent to incite her to do the one thing that would stop her suffering and that of others. She stood at the edge of the bed and witnessed his gasp of surprise, eyes widened in shock. He mirrored the horror she felt over an action she’d taken to protect one who could not protect herself. After two years within Daddy’s clutches, sixteen-year-old Kari Mason had done whatever it took to ensure that her nightmare would finally end, and someone else’s would never begin.

“Tell me what happened,” the officer commanded, sliding a half-filled notepad to the other side of the metal table. Then she went to a console and switched off the speaker that allowed those on the opposite side of the mirrored glass to listen in.

“Don’t I need a lawyer?” Kari asked in a bland tone that spoke to the fact that she was beyond feeling much of anything, including remorse. Shock, maybe, but not an ounce of remorse.

The blonde took hold of Kari’s upper arm, holding it firmly but not roughly, guiding her to a chair with its back to the glass. The floral scent of the woman’s perfume permeated the air, bringing a warmth that the starkness of the grey walls couldn’t provide.

“Sit,” she commanded, nodding toward the seat, blue eyes flashing with some type of unfamiliar emotion; thin pink lips pressed into a hard line. “Tell me what happened.”

Kari closed her eyes for a moment, summoning any ounce of strength she had left. Most of it had abandoned her the moment she saw Daddy for the monster he was. The same moment she realized she had left the safety of her parents’ household and traveled nine hundred miles with a predator who had every intention of using her until she died. And the girls all died at some point. She stopped counting after the first nineteen.

“I disobeyed him,” Kari admitted. “And this time he was going to send me to the slicer.”

“The slicer?”

“A john who specialized in killing a girl ...” Kari swallowed around the lump in her throat. “One piece at a time.”

The blonde grimaced, tried to keep her expression neutral, but when her anxious gaze flickered toward the glass, Kari could tell she was familiar with that type of crime.

“I told Daddy I couldn’t do it anymore. The men. So many of them. Every day,” she whispered in a weary voice that she barely recognized as her own. “I was tired. So, so, tired.”

The tears came and she was surprised that she had any left to shed. Kari turned her face to the woman sitting across from her; a woman who had given her name but it still escaped Kari whenever she tried to

remember. So, she was just “the blonde” for now. “I was tired of not knowing what new thing they’d do to me. I was tired of men beating me, hurting me, doing all manner of whatever to me. Like I didn’t matter. Like I was never somebody’s something.”

Kari wiped her tears with the back of a trembling hand. A hollow place within her soul had absorbed everything worth mentioning. Had felt that way for a long time. “The slicer would have ended all of that for me. And I accepted that. But it wouldn’t have helped the new girl Daddy brought in.”

The blonde’s gaze narrowed and she shifted that much closer. “What was so different about her?”

“She’s the youngest one,” Kari replied, lowering her gaze to the remnants of her half-eaten meal as the image of the raven-haired child with expressive dark-brown eyes came to mind. “She couldn’t be more than ... six. Seven.”

The blonde stiffened. A vein throbbed at her ivory temple, making Kari question if unburdening her soul to an officer of the law was a smart thing. Someone had to tell the story, right? Especially since the chance that she wouldn’t be alive became a greater reality the longer she remained in this room.

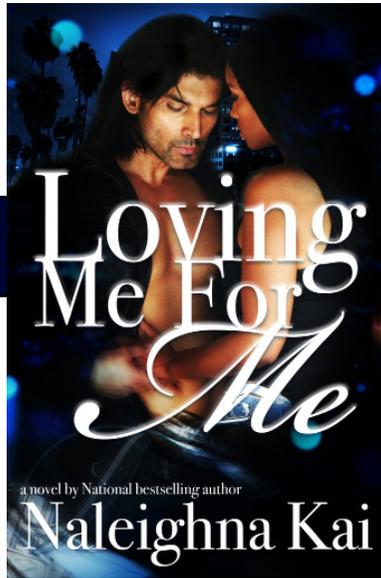
“I was fourteen when I fell in love with Daddy,” Kari confessed, clasping her hands to stop the trembling that began the moment his image came to mind. “He wasn’t anything like this in Chicago. He worked in the lunchroom at school. He was ... nice. Kinder to me than my parents had been. I didn’t know what he was. I didn’t know men like him existed.” She inhaled and let it out slowly as seconds ticked by and she was no closer to calm than when they first escorted her into the station and past the bustling activity from officers, victims, and criminals alike. “But that child ... I ... I ... ”

Kari looked away, putting her focus on the glass. She’d seen enough cop shows to know that even though the speaker had been turned off, an audience of people were probably looking in hoping the blonde would pull some information that would make their case an easy one. But what did it matter? Her real life had ended the moment she slipped into the

passenger seat of Daddy's Mercedes two years ago for what she thought would be a new adventure that would take her away from her strict mother and even stricter Bible-thumping father. She'd been so certain that the man in the driver's seat loved her more than he loved the other girls she'd seen him with over those few semesters. She'd felt so special then. He went by the name of Marquis Golden at that time. Only when they'd landed in a cheap motel in Memphis did the beginnings of a never-ending nightmare start.

"I'm your Daddy now," was said in a tone that was so cold it sent shivers up her spine. The punishment he inflicted was far worse than anything her real daddy had ever done.

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Will this May-December romance survive her tragic past, his traditional family, and those who would rather see them dead than in love?

Though Devesh's culture and status along with a secret Reign planned to take to her grave has kept them apart for nearly five years; a chance meeting brings them face-to-face once again. This time, Devesh, a wealthy Californian bachelor, is determined to be with Reign despite his family's wishes. The couple has more at stake, forcing them to confront their deepest fears, overcome unforeseen obstacles, and challenge the media as well as enemies who are closer to home.

Devesh finds ingenious ways for them to manage their rocky relationship terrain since Reign's heartbreaking life has left her with the kind of trust issues that resurface along with a few "reckless exes." He soon puts everyone on notice that he believes love is 'til death do us part—even if Devesh has to send someone to an early grave to protect her.

Reign stumbled backward. “What?! You expect me to uproot from everything I have in Chicago and move to—”

“California. With me,” Devesh chimed in.

Reign lifted her chin and glared at him. “Now I know you’ve lost touch with reality,” she countered. “No way am I giving up a stable job, a house that’s nearly paid for, and my family.”

“What family?” he demanded. “Your only family is Jay, and he’s a grown man.”

“And how will it look for me to marry a man who’s the same age as my son?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” he shot back, trying to keep his anger in check. “This is about the children, Reign. Our children. The children you kept from me for five whole years. They don’t care how old we are. We are their parents.”

She looked away, closing her eyes as though summoning some type of strength before opening them again.

“Parents who will make decisions together,” he continued, noticing her gaze had shifted from his eyes to his lips. “Eat together, grow together, and give them a stable home. We’ll be a family. More family than they’ll have in Chicago.”

“A family that does not accept me—or them.”

“They will,” he said, taking her in his arms again, relishing the feel of her next to him.

“Your people are not that evolved and you know it.”

“This isn’t about them. It’s about us.”

Reign shook her head, tried to push him away. Devesh stood his ground. Finally, her shoulders relaxed and all of the fight

seemed to ease out of her body. She allowed him to lead her to the bed, and when she sat down beside him, he pulled her closer.

His eyes returned to her mouth, and he rested there for several moments before finally reaching out and cupping her face in his hands.

Speaking of us,” she began, placing a hand on his chest to stop any further movement. “How much of myself am I supposed to sacrifice for this belief of yours? This idea of marital bliss you’re offering?”

“What do you mean?” he said, almost insulted by the disdain in her tone.

“I’m a woman,” she replied. “I have needs. I’ve been dating a guy for several months now, and I just told him I’m ready to take things to the next level. I was supposed to be with him, fully commit, when I return to Chicago.”

Something akin to jealousy flared in Devesh’s heart. So there was someone else? Why didn’t he think to ask? And why had she only mentioned it now?

“The only kind of marriage that would work for me is an open one,” she admitted.

Where did that come from? Devesh had no words to respond to those hurtful terms. She hadn’t considered—not even once—that he could be all the things she’d need?

“That way, it’s a marriage in name only,” she said, driving a stake through his heart. “And we both still have options.”

“Open ... marriage?” The two damning words practically stuck in his throat.

“That way both of us can find happiness at some point,” she offered.

Devesh stared into her eyes, saw the determination within and realized he could argue the point and lose her altogether or he could concede and that would give him time to win her trust and her heart. Because evidently, she didn’t love him as much as he loved her. “These are your terms?”

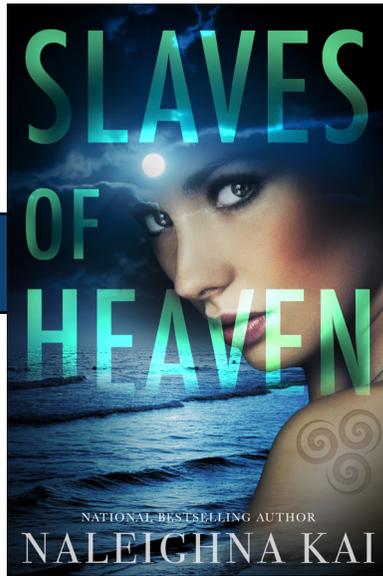
“Yes. Open marriage. Eight years in bondage.”

“Bondage,” he spat.

“Marriage has never been fair to women,” she confessed, glaring at him. “Ever. I have married friends, and I was on the receiving end of hearing all the crap they put up with. Why would I sign up for that program when the only one who benefits is the man? She cooks, cleans, takes care of the kids, runs the household and still has to work a 9-to-5, and he wears the crown of head of household? All so I won’t have an empty bed or get a little pickle tickle now and then? No, thank you.”

Devesh realized this relationship was going to require more work than he thought.

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“I love the Octavia Butler vibe of Slaves of Heaven. The storyline is distinctly Naleighna Kai and uniquely original.”—Crystal Hubbard, National Bestselling Author

“Using a historical climate as a backdrop, Slaves of Heaven takes the reader on a journey of love, conflict, jealousy and power—who has it, who wants it, and why people give it away. This wonderfully written story explores the intricate and complex nuances of relationships and the sacrifices of launching a movement that elevates women in a society from that of subservient and insignificant to leadership and power. Slaves of Heaven spans across several time periods telling the journey of women, pulling the reader in like an undercurrent submerging you in a world of suspense, intrigue, and mind-blowing revelations.”—Priscilla Jackson

“This book is different from anything I have ever read before, and I am an avid reader of all genres. This story that explores the depth of race, gender, religion, and societal expectations; as well as those who attempt to keep an underclass of people in poverty in order to maintain control.”
—Debra Mitchell, Black Women with Opinions & Attitudes

Vicksburg, Mississippi
March 1955

“If we have to kill all of the men to take the women, so be it,” Gabriel whispered to Jeremiah, as a guard secured the doors of Room 1.

Gabriel’s gaze swept the length of the place, and he made a mental count of the men and women in attendance. The uninvited men far outnumbered his own, and that presented a major problem. “Are all the guards armed?” he asked Jeremiah.

“We’re not killing anyone.”

“You will if it becomes necessary,” Gabriel shot back.

“It won’t come to that. I promise,” Jeremiah said in a low tone that belied the anxiety Gabriel saw flickering in his dark brown eyes.

Gabriel glanced at the nearly three hundred women and tried to gauge who would go along with the plans for The Heaven Project—the same plans that had almost landed him in a not-so-shallow grave a year prior. Even his supporters had serious concerns with his attempt to cultivate a strong class of women and create a society ruled by them. All he needed was thirty women. Only thirty.

Jeremiah shifted uneasily. He grabbed Gabriel by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “What possessed you to bring so many women in at one time? And why didn’t you choose women who were strong enough to come alone? All it will take is one man to rile them up—*just one*—and this is over.” Jeremiah’s hands fell by his side as he turned to the audience, whose faces were showing signs of curiosity mixed

with a heavy dose of apprehension. None were more anxious than the men stationed throughout the building to protect Gabriel, Jean, and each other. “You promised us women—good women—but the risk has become almost too great.”

“You and your men have been loyal to my plan,” Gabriel countered smoothly. They had walked away from their lives, and most even from their wives, to construct the compound that would house everyone who chose to embrace Gabriel’s dream of building a world of their own. “You deserve to have women who will do whatever it takes to become prosperous,” he continued. “Resourceful women who will survive what we will have to put them through.”

Gabriel’s wife, Jean, had handpicked women from across the United States who were strong, beautiful, and smart, despite their lack of formal education. She made sure they were of child-bearing age and either young widows, ladies of the night, or women who had landed in frightfully unhappy marriages. Gabriel expected that those whom society shunned or ignored would be ripe for an opportunity that would make them wealthy and—even more important—that would make them feel safe and valued. If not, the sacrifices he had made for The Heaven Project so far had been for nothing.

“What I tell them tonight,” Gabriel added, “might be the most lethal thing some of them will ever hear.”

Jeremiah flinched, folding his arms across his massive chest, his thin lips set into a disapproving line.

Gabriel waited for his right-hand man to absorb those words, while mentally revising his speech. He had to give enough information to completely draw in thirty of the women, but not so much that anyone left behind could lead law enforcement to them once they left. Gabriel looked over Jeremiah’s shoulder at the woman he loved more than life itself and said, “Killing the ones who refuse my offer tonight might be the only way to know our people will be safe. You will not be pleased, but at least you’ll be alive.”

Jeremiah shook his head wearily and stepped away, weaving his way through the throngs of people.

Gabriel walked to the dark wood podium, and a hushed silence fell over the group. He glared at a few of the uninvited men who had taken seats that were meant for his special guests. "Let the women sit down." His words and tone caused an avalanche of movement, curses, and protests. But within seconds, all of the women were in their rightful place, and about one hundred men were standing along the brick walls. Gabriel's men instinctively planted themselves next to those who were the most physically threatening.

Williams Hall had been secretly constructed for this gathering. The people had been ushered through a huge foyer and into Room 1. A closed door in the corner led to two more rooms, each smaller than the last. Finally, an anteroom opened into a wooded area behind the hall. Buses, painted to look like a traveling music revue, sat ready to whisk them all away to an undisclosed location when the time came.

Jeremiah came back to Gabriel, who was taking in the flurry of activity outside the small window. "I sent the men out for more provisions. They're loading them on the buses as we speak."

"And the other two rooms are ready?"

Jeremiah nodded, his nut-brown face peppered in perspiration. "We'll play it smooth, Gabriel. If we have to pull out with just a handful of women or none at all, that's what we'll do."

Making this frantic effort to take these beautiful women away was going to be met with serious, if not deadly, opposition by the men who considered them their property. But he gave Jeremiah's broad back a reassuring pat and said, "This shouldn't take long."

"Thirty minutes and we need to be on the road," Jeremiah warned as he marched away.

Gabriel took a moment to mull that over, then turned from the window to face the audience and said, "I have called you here tonight to offer you an opportunity that will change your life." He took a good look at the women in attendance. "You have studied the history and economic materials with my wife for several months, so you know the basic tenets of my plans."

The men shifted uncomfortably as Gabriel spoke about things their women had been privy to, but they had not.

“You have even learned about the evils of The Negro Project.”

“What’s your problem with it?” Ben asked, getting to his feet, his freckled face pulled into a scowl. “The poorer Negroes are breeding like weeds. Why shouldn’t they be limited?”

“Breeding like weeds?” Gabriel repeated the burly man’s statement. “Wasn’t that the plan all along? More babies so there would be more workers, more slaves, more of our women to rape. Now that we have served our purpose, given our life’s blood to this country—building cities, inventing things that have increased their wealth—they have no use for us.” His gaze swept over as many of the women as possible. “So they come up with a Birth Control Project to get rid of the undesirables within their own people, and then throw Margaret Sanger’s Negro Project on us to do the same.”

In Gabriel’s estimation, everyone should have been alarmed when their leaders, doctors, nurses and elite were too uninformed to realize The Negro Project’s sinister design. The plan all along was to wipe out Negroes and the underclass of Whites by sterilizing the women and killing the undesirables off slowly.

Gabriel waited a moment to let his words sink in. He would not let tonight become a rehashing of old arguments about the plight of his people. “Ladies, in the time you spent with my wife, you learned things that support what I will say tonight. And it must have been compelling information, or you wouldn’t be here.”

He made his way down from the podium. “This society continually refuses to acknowledge our rights as human beings. And we shouldn’t have to beg anyone to recognize our humanity.” Gabriel walked to Jean. As he spoke, he allowed his fingertips to glide over the smooth honey skin of her bare arms—a caress so gentle in its delivery, so sensual in its light touch, that some of the women released a soft collective sigh. “I submit that *all* of us do not need to be integrated into *their* society. I have a better way...a way that will bring us wealth and power that has been unheard of before this day.”

“But don’t we want them to accept us?” one man shouted from the back of the room.

Gabriel had expected a few murmurs of dissent from those who were complacent about the status quo. He moved out in the aisle, and his eyes locked on the man. “People who felt they had every right to enslave us will never, *ever*, truly accept us.”

Jean gave him an encouraging smile, as murmurs of curiosity filtered through the room. His men were keeping a watchful eye on the attendees, likely making mental notes of the women they wanted as permanent mates.

Gabriel allowed his gaze to travel along the line of men standing against the outer walls. He froze when his eyes fell upon Luke Graham. *How on earth did that spineless man hear about the meeting?* He frantically scanned the rest of the room and released a sigh of relief. *Well, at least he left his hellcat wife at home.* Lucille alone could present more trouble than everyone in the place combined.

He pulled himself from his thoughts and said, “We have believed in their power for too long and have forgotten our own. We must focus on doing what we can for ourselves to gain respect not just here in the United States, but also within the international community.”

After a long, drawn-out silence, Gabriel exhaled. He continued his pace until he was again in front of his wife. “Our women,” he said, his eyes settling on one woman after the next, “are more powerful than we know. Overall, the White man *and* we, as Negro men, have failed to recognize what a precious resource they are.” He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to his wife’s temple. He lingered for several moments then pulled away to take in the approving smiles of the women nearby before continuing his journey up the second aisle.

“The White man has totally controlled and disrespected his woman, but he has always been fascinated by *our* women. He took what he wanted from her—her body, her maternal force, her inner strength—and used it to help build his own world.”

A short, stout man interrupted, “Yeah, but look at what they done to

our *men*. Torture. Castratin'. Hangin'." His ham of a fist shook in the air. "And what about what they did to that boy Emmett Till?"

A roar of support went up from the crowd, and Gabriel held up his hand to quiet them. "They take such actions because they are afraid of the Negro male of what would happen if they final tired of the injustice and rise up," Gabriel said as he made his way back to Jean. "But," he gently touched his wife's face, "they are in no way threatened by our women. And it is not because they believe they are weak." He pivoted to face everyone. "They want our women—adore them. But in some ways, they want to control them with the same mental noose they have over their own."

He sauntered up the middle aisle and looked over his shoulder at Jean. A flash of approval glimmered in her soft brown eyes. He tore his gaze from the lips curved upward in a satisfied smile, then looked at the other women in the room and saw the desire and jealousy in their eyes. Practically seducing his wife in front of the women was sure to strike a chord of longing and make them want the very thing that he and Jean had—wealth, respect, and most of all, love.

"Women, you are the key to our salvation."

Husbands and boyfriends began to cast uneasy glances at their mates and other women nearby. The majority of the women sat up straighter, despite the men's efforts to distract them with questions. Gabriel moved to the front of the room and gave penetrating eye-to-eye contact with as many of his intended guests as he could.

"I propose a plan that is so dynamic in its simplicity that not only will we gain the 'forty acres and a mule' that we were promised, but our women will acquire power and wealth in such a subtle way that no one will ever be the wiser."

The women exchanged confused glances. Gabriel saw that it was time to separate the wheat from the tares—the wanted from the unwanted.

"Women, this plan will mean going off to another place where you will be treated with respect and kindness."

A clamor arose as countless female voices posed the same question at once. "What about our children?"

“Your children will remain with you,” he answered. “Whether you choose my plan or not.”

After a volley of responses, Gabriel went on with a statement that was certain to rile up his unwanted guests. “Men, how you have been taught to perceive women must change. Those sitting right next to you will have power, and we, as men, will support them in their efforts.”

“You have lost your fool mind,” Martin Carter growled, jumping to his feet. “Come on, Bertha.” He yanked on his wife’s arm to get her moving. She went, though her expression showed that she clearly wanted to stay.

Gabriel did not attempt to stop them. If she wasn’t strong enough to break with her husband on her own, she would not have the strength to withstand the rigors that women in The Heaven Project would have to endure.

The couple was soon followed by several others, the men practically dragging their women caveman-style as they stormed out of the room and back into the foyer. Only one managed to tear herself away and return to her seat. Gabriel wondered if more would do the same.

Most of the women stayed behind and Gabriel instructed the guards to bar re-entry to any man who had to be forcibly separated from his mate and any woman who was too weak to stand up to her man.

Gabriel again addressed the audience, “For those who are ready, we will now move to Room 2.”

At first, the room grew strangely silent. Jean and Gabriel said nothing for a few seconds, giving each woman a chance to make the heavy decision in a short time.

One irate husband cursed Gabriel and everyone within listening range. His petite, mocha-skinned wife, unsettled by her husband’s actions, rushed to stand near Jean. They linked hands and Gabriel gave the brave woman a reassuring smile. She answered with an adoring one of her own.

And so it began.

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In this national bestseller, a chance encounter lands Dallas, an NBA star, back in the arms of Alicia, the woman of his dreams. A woman he hasn't seen in years. A woman he soon discovers just so happens to be his fiancée's aunt. But Dallas' fiancée, isn't ready to give him up, so Tori makes him a shocking offer – go through with the wedding, and she'll still allow him to be with the one woman he now can't seem to do without. Dallas will get a family, something her aunt can't give him and

Tori will get the lavish lifestyle she craves. And Alicia will get the love she's longed for all her life. Everyone will get a little of what they want . . . and maybe a whole lot of what they don't.

The details of the trio's love life play out in the tabloids and on talk shows, making Dallas the center of an NBA scandal. And eventually, the doors slam shut on this open door marriage and to end the chaos, Dallas is forced to make a choice. By the time all is said and done, secrets are revealed, passions will be extinguished, and everyone's lives will change forever.

"Needless to say, Naleighna Kai delivered in a major way. I love that she continues to take risks with stories that revolve around relationships, and we can always expect shocking and uniquely written storylines with unexpected twists and turns. And the one thing we are guaranteed from this author is a darn good read. In addition to that, I'm happy to announce that the readers voted and Open Door Marriage is... Reader's Choice Approved."

—Brenda Hampton, National Bestselling Author

THANKSGIVING - CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
NOVEMBER 22—7:23 P.M.

“You slept with my aunt?”

The words still didn't register, even though this had to be Tori's fifth time saying them. She glared at her fiancé, still desperately trying to come to terms with the information her mother had blasted to everyone at the packed Thanksgiving dinner table.

“Seriously? How is that even humanly possible when you didn't know the woman four hours ago?” Tori shouted.

“Tori, I-let me explain,” Dallas stammered.

Twelve pairs of eyes were now focused on the not-quite-blissful couple standing at the bottom of the stairs just off from the dining room.

“But not here. Let's go somewhere and talk. It's not what you think.”

“What did you do?” Tori snapped, glaring up at Dallas. “Trip over the sheets, and your penis somehow landed in a woman nearly twice my age?”

The drumstick in Uncle Bill's hand paused in midair on its journey to his wide mouth. Cousin Tiny's fleshy hand flew to her overexposed bosom and came to rest somewhere above her heart. Even Tori's father's frozen expression of alarm would have been Three Stooges comical if the situation weren't so tragic.

Aunt Yoli was the first to recover. “Did they just say what I think they said?”

In unison, everyone nodded.

“Girl, shut the front door and run out the back!”

A few bursts of nervous laughter sprang up around the table, but they were not nearly enough to chase away the unease that had flooded the room when Tori stepped into the house. She'd gone to drop off Aunt Rose's drunk self at home. Tori hadn't even been in the house good when her mother, Bernice, blurted out that she'd caught Alicia and Dallas together. Alone. In bed. In the nude. Tori had picked up from there and summed it up in one sweep. "You slept with my aunt ..."

"Nothing happened, Tori," Dallas said, his voice shaky. "I didn't sleep with her."

"So, my mama is lying?" Tori asked.

Dallas shifted uneasily.

"Hell no. I know what I saw," Bernice snapped. She had moved from the dining room table to the end of the staircase, right next to her daughter, poised as if she was ready to go to battle. "Both of you were in bed butt-ass naked." She jabbed a finger in her sister-in-law's direction. Alicia hadn't moved from her spot at the top of the staircase. Probably, because she knew what was best for her. "She was butt-naked. And he was nut-naked," Bernice yelled. "Wasn't an inch of space between them." She flickered a gaze at Dallas. "Look at him. You can tell he just got dressed!"

Tori closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm the emotions that warred within her.

"See, I told you Alicia wasn't worth a damn," Bernice, crowed with savage satisfaction. "And looks like Mr. NBA ain't much better. You thought he was all that and a side order of fries."

Dallas Avery was the NBA's most valuable player, and a man most women would give their right and left ovary to call their own. But Most Eligible Bachelor or not, he had set Tori's bitch meter into overdrive. Even with his chiseled, handsome face, towering muscular frame and million dollar bank accounts, he was now worth next to nothing in her eyes. Too bad her aching heart didn't get that memo.

Tori didn't know if she was more enraged or hurt that her mother had been all too willing to drive this stake through her own daughter's heart in order to publicly disgrace Alicia.

“Tori, we need to talk about this,” Dallas repeated before adding, “in private.”

Bernice wore a satisfied smirk as she glared openly up at Alicia, who just kept staring stoically at them from the second floor landing. “The angel of the family has fallen,” Bernice said.

“Hey, Bernice,” Bill taunted with a hearty chuckle. “Bet you won’t say that when Alicia comes downstairs. You know she’s gonna put a hurting on you.”

“You mean put another hurting on her,” Aunt Yoli added, doubling over with laughter.

Tori wanted to scream. Her life was unraveling in front of her and her family was cracking jokes.

Instinctively, Bernice inched away from the staircase and back toward the dining room table. Her hands went up to the small scar on her neck, probably remembering that a year ago on this very same holiday, Alicia had ended a vicious blow-for-blow fight with a knife at Bernice’s throat. Almost gave the woman a “Sicilian Smile”—an ear-to-ear slice across the throat.

Dallas reached for Tori’s hand. “It’s not what it seems.”

She snatched away, parted her lips to give him what was left of her mind, but Cousin Tiny chimed in first. “Alicia had every right to take Bernice to the floor last year for that foul mess she said! I would’ve pulled out my own can of whoop ass behind that one.”

Tiny’s husband, Thomas nodded his watermelon-sized head.

The rest of the family finally sprang to life, also chiming in at once to defend Alicia, the one woman everyone could count on in a time of need, to lend an ear when it was called for and to dry a tear when no one else bothered to care. That she would do something as low as sleep with her niece’s soon-to-be husband was unthinkable. So the family sidestepped that issue for as long as they could, finding it more comfortable to speak on the reason no one had expected Alicia home for Thanksgiving—especially since none of them had heard from her for an entire year.

Dallas maneuvered so he was in front of Tori. “Nothing. Happened.”

“If Bernice had said that bull to me,” Bill responded, still trying to

tackle the last of the drumstick, “an ass whipping would’ve been the least of her problems.” He beckoned toward the last slice of sweet potato pie at the other end of the table. “That has my name written all over it.”

“Bernice is lying,” Martha said. “Alicia’s still got looks and all, but that young stud wouldn’t pick her over Tori.” She shot an appreciative glance toward Dallas, then leaned to her right and whispered loudly in Yoli’s direction, “But, girl, he is finer than frog’s hair.”

Yoli gave him a lusty once-over. “I’d give him some my damn self. He’s the type of man who can make a woman put a for sale sign on one thigh and an open for business sign on the other. Yes, Lawd!”

Tori tried her best to tune out her family. She didn’t have the stamina to deal with them right now. “How could you do this? You’re my fiancé.”

“You’re Tori’s fiancé?” Alicia finally spoke out. She eased down the stairs, looking first to Tori then to Dallas. Her panic-stricken expression gave Tori pause. Could her aunt really have not known?

Alicia turned back to her niece. “Oh, my, God, Tori. I had no idea. I’m so, so sorry.” She didn’t give Tori time to reply as she brushed past Dallas, slipped into the nearest pair of shoes—her brother’s—and ran out of the front door, oblivious to the fact that she barely had on enough clothing to protect her from the chill in the room, let alone the sub-zero temps of a Chicago winter.

The whole crowd gasped in disbelief as Dallas grabbed his leather coat from the foyer closet. “She can’t go out there with nothing on,” he said as he stepped into his Timberlands. “I’ll be right back.”

Tori was ready to spit fire. “Are you kidding me?” she screamed as he quickly laced up his shoes, then darted toward the door. “You’re going after my aunt? My aunt!” she yelled, following him. “My heart is bleeding all over the carpet and you’re going after her!”

The front door slammed and Tori stood frozen, unable to believe what happened in the last ten minutes. Bernice’s voice snapped Tori out of her trance. “Girl, I taught you better than that,” Bernice yelled, gesturing to the door. “You’d better go get your man!”

Tori snatched up a coat and scarf and braced herself against the frigid gust of wind that slapped her as she left the house. She trekked across

the snow and barely reached Dallas before he pulled off. Banging on the glass, she demanded, “Where the hell are you going?”

Dallas lowered the window. “She’s out there unprotected. None of this is her fault.”

“So now you’re speaking up for her, too?” Tori screeched, pummeling him through the opening. “What kind of bullshit is that?”

Dallas flinched at her vicious tone and reached out to keep her hands from doing any more damage. “I’m going to say two things,” he replied in that businesslike tone that had landed him several million-dollar endorsement deals. “I’m sorry that your mother lied to you, but nothing happened.” His gaze swept the area, probably searching for the woman who was the center of the chaos. “And I’d be less of a man than you already think I am if I let that woman walk around in this weather without a coat.”

Tori gave his words a moment’s consideration. Causing a scene wouldn’t stop him from doing what he felt he had to do, so she made a dash for the passenger side. “I’m coming with you.”

They caught up with Alicia at the end of Harper Avenue, where she made a left and was now struggling up the path a block away from the main thoroughfare. She was shaking uncontrollably from the cold and from the sobs that wracked her body.

“Get in, Alicia,” Dallas commanded, trailing the distraught woman as she stumbled along the icy sidewalk in shoes that were three sizes too big.

Alicia covered her mouth as though to keep in the words that threatened to spill out. She continued forward, wavering while trying to balance in the oversized loafers on snow that came up to her calves on unshoveled parts of the sidewalk.

“Don’t make me get out of the car,” Dallas said through his teeth.

Alicia ignored the threat, forcing the car to continue following her until she made it to a glass bus shelter on Stony Island Avenue. She swept the snow away from the steel bench, crawled on it, then tucked her legs up under her as though preparing to spend the night.

Dallas was out of the car and by her side in the time it took to blink.

He whipped off his leather coat, placed it about Alicia's shoulders, then held out his hand to her. It took a moment for her to take it, but finally she stood. Together, they took two steps, then, she crumbled down onto the snow.

"Ouch!" she shrieked. "My ankle."

It took Dallas only a moment to lift her into his arms, then navigate carefully over the slick pavement. He placed her gently, almost lovingly, in the back seat of his rented Benz. Using the sleeve of his shirt, he wiped her tears away.

Tori felt like she was having an out-of-body experience. The way Dallas looked at Alicia. The way he held her. It tore at Tori's gut. "Dallas, what is going on?" Tori asked once he was back in the driver's seat. "How the hell have you connected with her in such a way that you feel obligated to ease her pain and not mine?" The anger was still there, but Tori tried to push it aside, because right now, she needed clarity.

Dallas carefully pulled onto the street and aimed the car back in the direction of the place they'd just left. "We'll talk about this when we get back to the house."

"No!" Alicia cried out, gripping the edge of the driver's seat and causing Dallas to punch the brakes. "I can't go back there. Not right now."

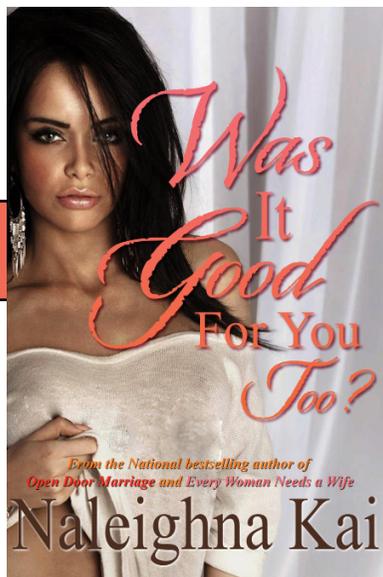
Dallas locked gazes with her in the rear view mirror. "Where do you want me to take you?"

"I don't know. Anywhere but there," she whispered, slumping back down in the seat. "Anywhere but home." Alicia's shoulders shook with an effort to hold herself together, and Dallas' expression softened.

The whole scenario made Tori's heart constrict as though someone had put a vise grip on the very thing that kept her alive.

She had only been gone for three hours. What the hell had happened between Dallas and her aunt?

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In this national bestseller, Tailan and Delvin complicated their lives by bringing another woman into the relationship to bear his children. Once the surrogate was two months along, she turned the tables by issuing a heartbreaking ultimatum. When threatened with losing the family he'd always wanted, Delvin felt he had no choice but to marry the surrogate and send his high school sweetheart packing, even though he loved her more than life itself.

Now seven years later on a Midwest book tour, fate has given Delvin four days to right old wrongs, and he'll use everything in his power to win Tailan back. Unfortunately, Tailan is harboring a secret that she's kept not only from him but from the entire world. Delvin's determination to have her will give him two choices—either share Tailan with another man or walk away from the strongest love he's ever known.

My husband has given me permission to sleep with you.”

Delvin’s left eyebrow shot up. A second later he was closing the front door behind Tailan as he said, “How generous of him to finally be fair about things. Especially since he’s the only one who’s taken advantage of this strange marriage of yours.”

“It’s not about being fair,” she said, her soft brown eyes filled with concern. “He only wants to make sure you’re out of my system. For good.”

Delvin pushed himself off the door and stood mere inches from her. “I’ll never be out of your system,” he said, his tone defiant. His finger stroked across her chin, pressed a gentle kiss to her lips eliciting an all too common response—a shiver of pleasure and anticipation. “I was your first love. I was supposed to be your husband. No matter what came between us, you still belong to me.”

Tailan gasped as she stepped back. “I belong with him.”

Delvin’s lips lifted at the corners. He pressed closer, letting her feel the massive erection growing in his jeans.

Tailan tried to break free but only succeeded in creating the most shivering friction down below. “Delvin, don’t make this so difficult for me,” she said in a breathy whisper. “I understand your reasons for marrying our surrogate. She threatened to terminate our child, and that

was way past cruel.” Tailan’s eyes glazed with unshed tears. “But the fact is . . . we could have had other children. And only now—seven years later—are you realizing what you truly wanted . . . was me.”

The tip of his tongue swiped across her lips. Tailan nearly pulled it into her mouth.

“I will forever be haunted by that mistake,” he whispered. “I paid for it with an unhappy life, but I want you to realize that your husband will always come second.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” she replied and finally freed herself from his grasp. She lowered onto the leather sofa and said, “I never have to wonder who loved me more; the man who was hurting over the recent death of his wife, but still found a small corner of his heart for me. Or the man who threw me away.”

A vein throbbed at Delvin’s temple. His mind fired up with several scenarios. The need for her was overwhelming. His skin was ready to scream, his erection was on the verge of busting the zipper of his jeans. Delvin witnessed the flash of desire in her eyes and saw a way to get what his body was dying for. He dropped to his knees, slowly inched up the flimsy skirt and pressed his lips to her thigh, while cupping her buttocks within his massive hands. Tailan let out a low, breathy moan, all while trying to put some distance between them. He kept her locked in place as he parted her thighs . . .

She took a deep breath and pushed him away.

“What kind of game are you playing, Tai?” he said through his teeth.

“There’s a condition,” she said.

“Condition?” Delvin repeated. “A condition for what?”

“For being with you.”

He released her, standing so their gazes met.

Tailan grimaced before she spit out, “Amir wants to watch.”

Delvin’s erection did a complete nose dive. He peered at her, taking in the solemn expression. “What. Did. You. Say?”

“Amir’s one stipulation to my having you as a lover, is that he gets to watch us making love.”

“Oh, so I did hear it right,” he snapped, glaring at her. “What kind of sick, twisted—”

“Not sick. He’s seeking to prove a point.”

Delvin knew that she still loved him, wanted him. And this relationship of hers—a polyamorous marriage—gave him the perfect avenue to make her totally his again. And then, the moment he had her back, he wasn’t going to share his woman with anyone.

“Suppose I don’t want to play his foolish game?”

“Your loss,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone that caused him to bristle. “Because unlike you, I have a marriage that provides everything I need. Including the option to take a lover. You,” she said in a voice that was husky with promise. “You would be my first ... and you’ll be my only.”

“Your only?” he shot back, giving her a sly smile. “Count on it. And when your husband hears you screaming my name, he’ll know it, too.”

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Gina Wright escapes a hellacious life by doing the unthinkable—selling the use of her womb to the highest bidder among rich, childless couples from more affluent areas of Chicago. She even accommodates their “special” requests ranging from participating in forbidden fetishes to more complicated liaisons. Gina uses them to amass a fortune, then sets out to fulfill her own dream, one that is shattered in an instant when a freakish accident steals a gift she has always taken for granted.

Years later, Gina learns that one of her surrogate daughters has been forced into the illicit world of drugs and prostitution. When the police and FBI turn a blind eye, Gina risks the anger of her former sponsors and lovers to have their children search for the younger sister they know nothing about. One daughter turns to a criminal mastermind to help locate the teen; another puts her career in jeopardy when she seeks justice in her own deadly way. The search puts a dangerous spin on their already chaotic lives as the women learn more about trust and love and how to depend on each other to do the impossible.

A persistent knock roused Gina out of bed. She slid out of a Palladian stone bed, slipped on a paisley silk robe, and froze the moment she pulled open the door.

Michelle Bhandari gave Gina a critical onceover, then moved forward, forcing Gina to step aside whether she wanted the woman to enter or not. That sharp gaze swept across the suede semi-circle sofa, the intricately carved glasswork on the coffee table, the multitude of books on the glass shelves, the artwork which displayed varying stages of motherhood, then to the photographs sitting along the mantel above a marble fireplace. Approval came alive in those dark brown eyes, which finally focused on the young woman standing in the center of the room.

Before Michelle could open her mouth and explain her presence in the Hyde Park apartment, Gina simply said, "I'm not coming back." She could not look Michelle in the eye while leaning on the threshold as though it would hold her up under the enormous weight she felt. "Michelle, I ... he ... we ... I let him ..."

"I know."

A teary-eyed gaze focused on Michelle. "I thought I had better control than that."

Michelle shrugged and chuckled. "Sweetheart, I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did."

Gina wiped her tears and glared at the woman across the room. "So it's all one big game to you."

And all this time, Gina had cared, had held back on giving herself to Sanjay because she loved Michelle too. She admired her style, her confidence. Wanted her approval as much as she desired Alana's, that first woman she gave a child whose husband had grown a little too attached.

Alana and Michelle had insisted she take good care of herself, and

Gina had begun to emulate those two classy women in several aspects of her life. She embraced the fact that she had choices—when it came to education, when it came to her life, when it came to who she allowed in her bed. The only downsides to the surrogacy were visits to the doctor—and needles of any kind, but Michelle went with her each time, just as Alana had done. There had been a great deal of comfort in that.

“You don’t think I know what drives him? I love him even with all of his flaws.”

“I don’t like the fact that he feels that I belong to him that way,” Gina admitted. “He said that I’m his woman, but I can’t be that to him. You’re his wife.”

Michelle covered the few feet separating them and tilted Gina’s chin so that they were eye to eye. “When you’re in his bed, in his arms, you are his—for that moment. Play that game with him. It’s all about control or giving the illusion of control. The real game is in making a man want you more than you want him.”

Gina remained silent, taking that in, as it sounded similar to what Mama Bessie had once said before dying and leaving a sixteen-year-old Gina to fend for herself in a world that wasn’t too kind to females in the first place.

“There are many types of love, Gina. He *loves* you, but he’s *in love* with me.”

Gina shook her head as though unable to digest what Michelle was trying to tell her.

“I don’t take it personally that he wants you. You’re beautiful, you’re determined, you’re sensual. And he likes that. But you’re here for the moment.” She paused, giving Gina a pointed look. “And I’m in it for the long haul. Whether you give in to him or not, he *always* comes back to me. And truthfully, he’s more satisfied now than he’s ever been. I like it that way. For everything he’s done for me, I want him to be happy.”

Michelle walked over to the fireplace, lifted the black and white picture of Mama Bessie, and looked at it a long while before moving on to the ones of Raymond and Faith Wright, then Mayre. Gina watched the woman's gaze fall on the two baby pictures on the mantel of the Meister child and the Bhandari girl.

"Now I have a child, a husband who loves me, and a top position at a firm that's raking in billions. There are a lot of women who would kill to be in my shoes. If my only sacrifice is that he needs to indulge in a little ... unorthodox sex—his ... fetish, then baby, like my mama used to say, 'That ain't no major. Put your big girl panties on and deal with it.'"

"But you both took vows," Gina protested, searching Michelle's face for a moment and finding nothing close to concern. "It was different when we were making love to produce a child. That was almost Biblical. You know, the surrogacy thing."

Michelle ran a hand through that signature shoulder-length hair. "The thing you're not getting, Gina, is that I gave him permission to have you. We're all adults here. Nothing is being done behind my back." When Gina did not move or acknowledge the statement, she continued, "The baby needs you. She cries for you. Sanjay needs you. He hasn't said a single word since you walked out. He's afraid that he hurt you in some way."

Gina shook her head vigorously. "I can't go back. I love him, and it's just not right."

"It's as right as we make it," Michelle countered smoothly. "He told me that he loves you."

Gina whipped her head toward Michelle, her gaze searching Michelle's face for any sign of ... what? Deception? But Gina knew she had no reason to lie about something as serious as that.

"And for what you've given us, I can totally understand that." Michelle walked toward the window and parted the sheers to look

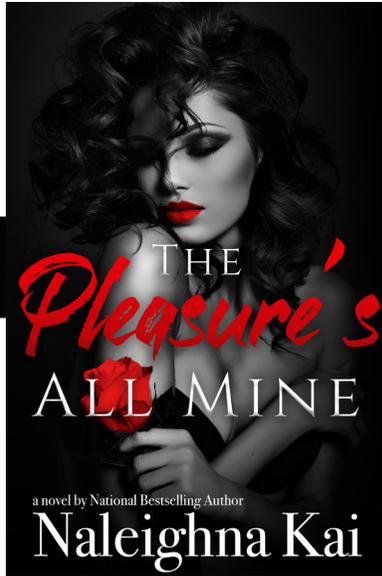
out at the deep green waters of Lake Michigan. “Sanjay gave up his family because he loved me. They disowned him because he wanted a Black woman. He was heir to a textile fortune in India, and he gave that up when he married me instead of the woman he was supposed to marry. He struck out on his own to start that chain of restaurants and became successful on his own. But what I admire is that he didn’t hold me hostage to his dreams.” She gently pressed her fingertips to the window as though touching her husband’s face. “At first he worked two, sometimes three jobs to put me through college, then law school so I could live my dream and he could fulfill his own. For that, I will always love him. Always.”

Michelle left the window and went to the fireplace, lifted the baby picture of her daughter, then traced the outline of the gummy smile. “I love his passion, his drive. It’s exciting; you can feel it rolling off him—it’s like he’s made of it. And I’ve never had a man who worships the color of my skin, worships my very essence as though I was a goddess.” She looked over her shoulder at Gina. “You understand what I’m saying?”

Gina nodded. It was exactly how Sanjay made her feel—as though everything about her mattered. As if there were no color barriers.

Michelle replaced the picture and picked up the one of the Meister’s child. “The very thing you’re striving for in your life is something I already have. There’s nothing I can’t do, nothing I can’t be, no place I can’t pick up and go on a moment’s notice.” She turned to face the younger woman. “And that’s power, Gina. That’s being in control of your life. You make choices; you bend and flex sometimes, and it all comes down to what you want in the end. What are you willing to give to get what you want?”

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Raven Armand's son and agent are hell-bent on finding the perfect man for her-even if she kills them. The two unlikely matchmakers' brilliant plan is to pair her up with Pierce Randall, a music industry mogul and the only man who's ever piqued her interest. Just when it looks as if their plan is working, Raven risks everything for a one-night rendezvous at the Castle to discover where her fantasies will take her. Unfortunately, it could turn out to be the costliest experience of her life.

Meanwhile, Pierce has his hands full putting out fires as fast as his shady business partner starts them. He hasn't been looking for love, but it finds him packaged in a voluptuous and fiery woman unlike any he's ever known. It doesn't bother him that Raven was tricked into meeting him, but when she lays down her relationship rules, then disappears on a mysterious trip she won't explain, Pierce realizes Ms. Right might be all wrong.

Will sexual curiosity cost Raven the love of a lifetime?

“Trust me. She’ll never know we had anything to do with it.”

As much as she loved Eric Ripley, his wicked little smile didn’t sit well with her. For the fifteenth time since Ava Davidson had walked through the door of the lakefront condo in Chicago, she shifted in the dining room chair, wondering how to dodge whatever bullet he was aiming her way.

“Come on, Aunt Avie. How could Mom believe we’d hook her up with a dude in New York City?”

“I just don’t have a good feeling about it.” Ava maneuvered her fleshy frame around the smoke-tinted glass table and into the spacious, well-organized kitchen to get a few more spoonfuls of the delicious chili that Eric had made in hopes it would sweeten the deal. “Let Raven find her own man.”

“That’s the problem. She won’t even look! If we leave it up to her, she’ll never find anyone.” Frustration was evident in Eric’s voice and in the downward turn of his lips. He paused before adding, “That’s why she has all those funny little toys.”

Ava almost choked on her chili. “How do you know about her... toys?”

“Man of the house, the one who flips the mattresses, remember?”

“You can never let her know that you know about those... things.”

He grimaced at her worried expression. “I’ve kept them a secret all this time, haven’t I, Aunt Avie?”

Eric wasn’t really Ava’s nephew, but a seventeen-year-old client who, just the week before, had made waves in his hometown of Chicago when he’d hit the New York Times bestsellers list—the youngest male in the fantasy/sci-fi genre to attain that honor. The woman in question, Raven Ripley, known to her readers as Raven Armand, was also one of Ava’s literary clients. The possibility of being caught in the middle of

two clients made Eric's request for help in his romantic plans for his mother unsettling—yet intriguing.

As his agent, Ava should have known something besides chili was cooking when Eric invited her to dinner. He would have told her about a new novel or a new deal over the phone. The boy could be downright tenacious when it came to matching up his mom with Mr. Somebody. But then again, that was one of the reasons she loved him.

Eric had been trying unsuccessfully to find his mother a husband since he was twelve. Raven was attractive, spirited, and solidly single, but that didn't seem to matter to Eric. He wanted her to be happy and well cared for after he went off to college. Eric simply didn't want to believe that Raven was perfectly content to spend the rest of her years single, with her fictional male characters—and her...toys—as the perfect mates.

What Eric didn't know was that Raven had a particular inclination that sometimes sent men sprinting for the first available exit whenever she mentioned that she wanted something other than a “traditional” relationship. That, more than anything, explained her single state. But Ava knew Raven certainly couldn't clue the youngster in on that point, as it was sure to prompt questions that even Raven herself couldn't answer. How could Ava get Eric to realize that more and more women today were perfectly all right without snaring Mr. Right, Mr. Wrong, Mr. One-Night-Stand, Mr. Heavy-Handed, Mr. I-Just-Can't-Get-a-Break, or Mr. Perfect-at-the-Beginning, Fizzled-at-the-End? After nosing out another set-up attempt from Eric and Ava, Raven had made things crystal clear. “I want to keep my options open. And marriage is outdated anyway. If—or when—I need a man, fornication will work out entirely too well, thank you!”

Ava, who had been happily married for twelve years to her best friend and high school sweetheart, wasn't so sure. She respected Raven's choice, even though she didn't understand her preference. Nevertheless, on several occasions she had succumbed to Eric's pleas for help, hoping to have the pleasure of finding the perfect man and telling Raven, “I told you so.”

Eric was determined and brilliant, had a 4.0 grade point average, and

was devilishly handsome with wavy, jet-black hair, caramel skin, and the softest brown eyes she had ever seen. As Ava brought the spoon to her mouth, she grimaced, thinking, *And the boy could cook!* Her traitorous stomach had led her straight into trouble.

Eric's lips began to turn up just a bit at the corners. "I know for a fact that Pierce Randall will work out much better than the others." He nodded confidently, as though trying to convince himself. "She admires him."

"Is that all?" Ava relaxed. "Eric," she said, patting one of his long, tapered hands, "admiration is like a cute, cuddly kitten; love is like a full-grown tiger."

He was silent for a moment. Then something in his expression crumbled. Eric closed his eyes, then pursed his lips as though trying not to cry. He opened them, releasing a long, sad sigh. "But he's the first one."

"First what?"

"The first man I've ever heard her say she respects."

Ava chuckled, breaking open a piece of jalapeño cornbread. "She's never even met the man."

"She didn't have to." He moved over to the chair beside hers, brown eyes dancing with excitement. "She saw him a couple of times on that reality television show. You know, the one about finding a new music group? He was one of the producers. Sometimes he'd pop in to see how the contestants were shaping up."

Oh, Lord! "Being on television doesn't make for husband material!"

"It's not because he was on television. It was how he carried himself. I think he'd be perfect."

"You don't count," she said, resisting the urge for another bowl of chili. She'd loosened her belt after the first one; unzipped her pants a little for the second. She'd have to take them off if she went back for thirds—probably not a good idea, given the present company.

"He's really cool people."

Ava froze, another spoonful midway to her mouth. "That's why you took that internship in New York."

Eric's smile could've thawed frozen vegetables. "Yep. I got to see the man up close and personal, as the sports guys say." He leaned forward, resting his chin on a denim-clad arm.

Thinking about what trouble Eric must have gone through to research the man he thought his mother should date cracked Ava's resolve. She placed the spoon gently inside the bowl and pushed it away. "We've been wrong about men before."

"I'm sure about this one, Aunt Avie. He is the perfect candidate. He has integrity, good taste, and intelligence—all the things she's tried to instill in me."

It was a damn good argument, and he knew it. Pierce Randall was the perfect candidate. Ava knew of him from some of her former clients in the music industry. He had a reputation as someone with a quiet strength and determination; a good match for Raven. And because the man was also seasoned and world-savvy, he might not be frightened off by Raven's other...interests. Hell, he might even like to watch!

Ava slumped in her chair, hand resting on her uncomfortably full stomach. "She won't like it."

"She'll thank us later."

"I don't like that us word either."

His hearty laugh warmed her heart. "I can't do it without you. You're a lawyer. You know how to...manipulate people."

Ouch! "That was low, even for you, Eric. Some thanks we got the last time we were busted—she sent you to live with me."

"Only for two weeks," he said, grabbing an apple from the basket in the center of the table. "And we had a great time, didn't we?" He grinned sheepishly and tossed the apple in the air, catching it expertly. "I didn't know you could skateboard like that." He put the apple down, slid off his chair, grabbed her hand, and went down on one knee. "Pleeeeeease, Aunt Avie," he begged, and smothered her delicate hand with little kisses.

"Oh, get up!" She shooed him away. "Your mom is a lost cause."

"With you, there's no such thing as a lost cause." Eric's mischievous grin unsettled her. "Who was the first lawyer to successfully win a case

where a wife sued her husband for custody of his mistress?”

“That’s not how it really went down.”

In that case, the wife caught the husband cheating and asked for the mistress to come live with them, to earn her keep the honest way—on her feet helping the wife instead of on her back servicing the husband. In the lawsuit, the wife had not only requested that she gain “custody” of her husband’s mistress, but since he had brought her into their lives, she also asked for maintenance payments from her husband, not just for her immediately family, but also for the mistress.

“But you won.”

“No, I didn’t.”

One eyebrow shot up. “The mistress is still living with the wife and the husband, right? And the husband’s still paying for both of them?”

Ava opened her mouth to reply and then thought better of it. Good point. *Spencer vs. Spencer* had made headlines across the country. She had won, but had almost lost one of her best friends in the process. Since then she had sworn off interfering in her clients’ love lives again.

Eric nudged her playfully. “I’m sure about this one, Aunt Avie,” he said again. “This one last time, and I’ll give up.” Eric’s gaze never left hers; his eyes sparkled with their usual boyish charm. And really, who could resist that smile?

Ava’s eyes narrowed to slits.

Eric threw his hands up in mock surrender. “I promise.” His smile said otherwise as he moved in for the kill. “Just help me one last time, Tee Tee Avie, and we won’t have to do it again. We can’t lose.”

Okay, so the gloves were off. The name he’d called her at age two always melted her heart. She was unable to keep the corners of her mouth from turning up. Still she said nothing.

“I want to make sure she’s all right. I want to walk her down the aisle before I die...”

Ava closed her eyes against a sudden crush of pain. Playing the death card? He had never done that before. There was no stronger plea than that, given his condition. Damn!

“You’re just like her,” she said in a pained whisper, trying to keep the

tears from filling her eyes. “Don’t know when to give up.”

“That’s a compliment, isn’t it?”

His infectious excitement won over logic and reasoning. She smiled warmly. What could it hurt? “Okay. One last time.”

Eric rubbed his hands together like a chef preparing to serve his best five-course meal. “All right, here’s the plan...”

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Michael “Magic” Arrington’s sudden fame and startling climb up the music charts skyrocketed him into the world of Hollywood glitz and glamour. While all was exciting and wonderful at the beginning, the shady undertakings of the music business caused his life to take a downward spiral, ultimately separating him from his family and his hold on reality. Then he met Maya.

Maya Gervais has completely distanced herself from her past, even going as far as changing her identity to protect her from the one man who wants her dead. She is a civic-minded lawyer who champions for clients who are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. So trusting someone enough to fall in love was never a consideration, especially since it could cost her much more than she was willing to give.

After the two have a chance meeting at a concert, a daring escape leads to an exploration of pain and pleasure that sets them both on the path to healing and an unlikely romance. However, the path to blissful happiness is never an easy one, as they both have their own demons to confront, including Michael’s jealous manager and Maya’s reluctance to deal with things she would rather forget.

She Touched My Soul is a gripping, engaging novel of loss, love, and everything in between.

Michael banged on the keyboard, the sour chord bringing everyone to an abrupt halt. “Come on, people. Get it together. What’s wrong with y’all today?”

Three background singers huffed and folded their arms across their buxom chests. One by one, the band laid down their instruments, shooting furious glares his way.

Hairs on the back of Michael’s neck stood at military attention. The air crackled with anger. Something was off. Way off. “Break time, people. Let’s take five.”

“How about ten?” Monique shot back. “Somebody here”—she cocked her head at Michael—“needs it more than others.”

A grumble of consent followed.

“All right, ten it is,” Michael conceded on a weary note.

No one moved an inch. He scanned the range of expressions. His band, his singers, his concert—but they were waiting for him to leave? He grumbled to no one and to everyone, “Ain’t that a—”

“I thought you didn’t use that word,” Monique challenged. Tracy nudged her to a reluctant silence.

Michael slid off of the leather stool and escaped the stage. Fuming and annoyed, he made quick work of the stairs. With a stiff nod to the engineers, he passed the sound booth and kept it moving. The glass lobby doors leading to the street couldn’t open fast enough.

Outside, Michael turned his face up to the sun gracing the clear sky. Rain seemed likely earlier, but the clouds had passed, leaving the promise of a beautiful summer night to come. Eyes closed, he

let the warm rays flow over him like a tropical waterfall, pushing all thoughts of unhappiness to the back of his mind.

A light breeze brought the faint sounds of the band going over a number. It was a bit off-beat, which meant they were clowning because he wasn't there. Maybe it would all come together tonight when they performed onstage for the Chicago crowd.

"Back to work," he grumbled. That signaled his feet to move but didn't necessarily get his mind in gear. Michael trudged toward the lobby of the Park West and came to a sudden stop. A woman stood near the entrance with her eyes closed. He watched the gentle swaying of her body—the rhythm, the flow. She moved in time to the music. Actually the mystery lady did a better job of staying on beat than his band. That thought split his face with a smile.

Something made him walk in her direction. Navy stilettos made her stand about three inches shy of his height. Straight hair fell sensually past her shoulders. Simple makeup highlighted her honey crème skin. The casual navy pantsuit and form-fitting white blouse shouted corporate woman instead of groupie. Michael's eagle eyes detected killer curves beneath the outfit. She was sexy and voluptuous—all woman. A man holding her would know that he was wrapped around a package of dynamite.

A little voice within him whispered don't waste this chance. "The concert's at eight," he ventured.

Soft brown eyes opened, narrowing as she peered up at him. "I know," she answered and shut them again.

"Then why are you here so early?" he asked as her eyes danced under her closed lids.

She glared at him. He braced himself for another two-word comeback.

"Don't read anything into it. I just wanted a good seat," she said, surprising him. A bit of cleavage came into view when she folded her arms across her full breasts, but he quickly refocused on her face when she added, "I didn't want to spend the evening looking at the back of someone's head."

Michael took a look at his watch, then back at her. "You must really like the artist to go through so much trouble."

He felt another cold breeze pulse from her as she nodded toward a

promotional poster of Michael “Magic” Arrington, then looked directly at him and said, “I don’t like the artist. I like his music—sometimes.”

“Ouch.” His family jewels felt that vice grip. He glanced around, noticing they were still alone, but his gaze couldn’t help finding its way back to the woman.

A slow smile crossed her luscious lips. “Anyway, traffic was much better than expected, so here I am.” She looked away again, swaying to the sounds coming from the band.

Plenty of women would give the world to have a conversation with him, but not this one. What a refreshing change. The others just responded to his muscular build, dark smoky eyes, thin mustache and goatee, along with the over-the-top, bad-boy image the press had given him. They salivated like he was pure Southern milk chocolate that promised to melt in a woman’s mouth—and a few other places.

Ms. Mystery seemed to possess a quiet grace and strong personality—a rare combination. Her voice was soothing, sexy, and could make a man think of silk-covered thighs, breasts that he could sink into, and steamy nights that started with passionate kisses and didn’t end before a few mind-blowing orgasms.

He sensed she was closing him out again and that didn’t sit well with him. “Why don’t you come in and have a seat.”

“I can wait,” she countered.

“I’d feel better if you weren’t out here alone,” Michael insisted.

She looked him square in the eye. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can.” His gaze shot down to her high heels and he grinned.

A light frown creased her smooth brow. “Are you sure it won’t be a problem?”

“Tonight I practically own the joint,” he said, giving her a megawatt smile.

“Can I get a side order of arrogance to go with that ego?” she teased.

Michael laughed. When a sly smile streaked her face, he asked, “What’s your name?”

“Maya Gervais.”

He knew it would be beautiful, something lyrical. Her name was perfect just like the rest of her. He extended his hand. “I’m Michael. Michael Arrington.”

Maya’s whole body stiffened as she recoiled from him.

Was she actually afraid of him?

Michael was at once shocked and fascinated.

* * *

Maya’s spell slowly weaved around him like the silky strands of a spider’s web. All of his senses came to life around her. He took in the scent of her floral perfume; could almost taste the sweet, sensuous timbre of her voice. But what lured him in the most was how she managed to keep a slight distance between them, no matter how many times he inched closer.

She raised her head when they made it inside the lobby, and their gazes locked. Her focus quickly shifted to the lobby doors, where a small dog outside was trying to mark its territory on a streetlamp. The animal missed and hit the impatient owner instead.

Maya really understood his music, which made him ask, “What do you think of the new album?”

She turned from the scolding episode of the dog and its owner. “Do you want the truth or a version that will keep your ego intact?”

His expression neutral, Michael said, “I’ll take the truth for five hundred dollars, Alex.”

“It sounds unfinished,” she said on a serious note. “There’s no solid theme. It’s all over the place and seems thrown together, like you didn’t have the time to make it work.”

He winced, but realized she was spot on. “Shades of Light” had come from deep inside himself. The love and life he had outside of the studio had made it so easy to vibe while laying the tracks for his first album. Shortly afterward, Asia Murillo, a leading R&B singer and the woman he was slated to marry, became pregnant with his son. With more money

than he would ever need, songs in the top twenty, and Asia at his side, Michael thought he held the world in his hands. But by the time he started on his second album, he soon learned that he held only a few grains of sand, which easily slipped through his fingers. When he lost Asia and his son, his music suffered and the songs on his new album didn't have the same power.

"I guess this new album was supposed to say 'this is me,'" Michael said, extending his hand to Maya. "But I'm still trying to find out who I really am."

Maya nodded in quiet understanding, finally relenting and allowing him to escort her through the lobby. "Your first album was off the meter. Every song but one was a hit in my book."

Michael scratched his head as he tried to figure out the exception to her rule.

She smiled at his sour expression. "The remake of 'Storms'. I didn't care for the original so you get a pass on that one."

"Oh, so now you're trying to show a man a little sympathy," he teased.

Maya laughed a sweet, welcoming sound as they maneuvered past a waiting area. "Your original songs were raw and had a lot of emotion."

"And the new album?"

She sighed, grimacing as she said, "I thought hearing it live would help me appreciate it more."

"You're killing my ego here," he confessed dryly.

Maya glanced up and smirked. "I thought you artistic types had a tough skin."

"Erykah Badu said it best." He popped his collar and stroked his goatee for effect. "I'm sensitive about my shee-it."

"Ah, yes," she chuckled. "Ms. Badu. Now there's a creative genius." Maya looked over at him, one eyebrow raised. "I thought you were going to join her in being one of the artists bringing real soul music back. But you did your song 'Been Around' a total disservice by having that lame rapper-slash-producer-slash-clothes designer-slash-actor freestyling in it."

"He wasn't lame," Michael defended, leaning his back against the glass door.

“What?” Her warm chocolate eyes flared with irritation. “Do you realize how blatantly disrespectful he is to women? Which, I might add, he did on your song, on your album, on your turf.” She favored him with a steely glare. “And I didn’t think that was what you were about.”

Michael remained eerily silent. Honesty was a lost commodity in this business. People only said what they thought he wanted to hear. But this woman had spoken to the crumbling integrity of his soul and was fast becoming addictive. Here she was a stranger to him, but she was unraveling him and infusing him with new direction without even knowing it.

“After I finished that song, they remixed the track and sent it straight to press,” he said. “Trust me, it won’t happen again.”

As the band started playing again, Maya peered around nervously as if suddenly remembering where they were. He allowed her a moment to relax as he surveyed his surroundings. He had every material thing he could want. Yet, he still felt so alone. He glanced at Maya and a tiny shift happened inside him.

“We need to finish this talk after the concert,” he said, pulling her attention away from the flutter of activity. “Have dinner with me.”

“Yo, boss,” a burly man called out from the door to the concert hall. “Hey man, we thought you got lost.”

Michael glanced at Maya. “No, it’s more like I’ve been found.” Her eyes questioned him silently but he continued. “I was just having a serious discussion with the lady.”

“Sorry,” the other man said in a voice that was soft in spite of his stature. “Didn’t know you were into something.”

“Keys, Maya. Maya, this is Keys, one of my band members,” Michael introduced.

“What’s up?” Keys kept the door propped open with his body and gave her a simple wave.

“Nothing much,” Maya answered and Michael sensed her withdrawing yet again. She pulled her hand away from his, her posture charm school perfect.

Keys slipped back inside as Michael turned to Maya. “Come inside. I’ll make sure the only head you see is mine.”

Maya gasped, her hand splaying over her chest.

“Look at your dirty little mind,” he teased giving her an ear-to-ear grin. “I meant a front row seat—that’s all.”

She took a moment, as though trying to find a convincing argument to the contrary. Then her shoulders dropped, and after several moments she accepted his hand again. The twining of their fingers was nothing short of electric.

* * *

Maya marveled at how Michael transformed as they maneuvered to the stage and he seated her up front. She felt he had re-booted and his focus had shifted to all business. The band members and background singers peered down at her—the only person in the audience—and passed knowing looks between them, obviously thinking groupie.

Michael must have sensed their thoughts, too. He flashed a warning glance at them and it became apparent that his first order of business was going to be ensuring that she felt respected and safe. She observed how he eyed the soundmen checking her out and how he quickly moved her to a table not too far away from the stage.

Why that tickled her, she had no idea, but it felt strangely comforting.

After giving Maya a reassuring nod, Michael hopped on stage and made a beeline to his keyboard. “Sorry about what went down earlier, people,” he announced. “I’ve been a little off-key.”

The band smiled and nodded their approval as he signaled for rehearsal to resume. “‘Send My Love,’ from the top. And-a-one—”

They worked in brief spurts on all the numbers for the evening and the session ended with a short prayer. Maya remained in her seat in the audience, bowing her head. When the amen’s were said, she looked up to see Michael staring in her direction. Her lids dipped a little concealing his thoughts. The band left the stage and ambled toward the exit which led to what she believed to be the dressing room. Michael, however, made a clear march in her direction.

Her breathing became slightly stilted.

He joined her at the table. “Now, back to my original question,” he said. “Dinner. How about it?”

“I made a quick trip to White Castle before I came,” she admitted after a brief spell.

Michael tilted his head in her direction. “If that’s true, then that’s not the only trip you’ll be making tonight,” he said with a hearty chuckle.

“That is such an urban myth,” Maya countered with a haughty lift of her chin.

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know about all that. The one rule we have on the tour bus is no sliders. It’s too cramped for that kind of nuclear fallout.”

As prissy as she may be, that analogy shattered her defenses. Maya couldn’t help but laugh, and joined her.

“So, what kind of food are we in for tonight?” he asked, relaxing in a chair while the staff swept through the area with decorations in hand.

Maya cleared her throat and smoothly avoided eye contact, taking in the activity around them.

That only pulled Michael in closer. “A little wine, a little bread. A man’s got to eat, right?”

She returned his smile with a disarming one of her own. “Oh, I’m not stopping you. There’s like ... a kajillion restaurants in Chicago.”

He slumped down a little. “Seriously? That’s how you’re going to play me?”

“What do you have a taste for?” she asked, her gaze fixed on the empty stage.

“Something hot, spicy, and very tasty. Something—”

“Mexican?” she supplied, batting her eyelashes innocently.

Maya took in the mischievous calculations in his eyes while he tried to think up a different approach.

“Okay, do you know any good spots this side of the border?” he asked.

“Don Pablo’s Mexican Kitchen.” Her eyebrow winged up, covertly accepting his challenge. “I’m sure you’ll find something hot on the menu to your liking.”

“Indeed,” he replied.

This man was trouble, bad news, a scandal, and a woman’s greatest regret, all rolled into one. Everything about him was sexy, sensual, warm, and dangerously alluring. No wonder his band gave her the groupie stink eye earlier. Right now she could no more resist him than any other woman with a beating pulse. But she had to. Maya couldn’t afford to be associated with someone like him. Her life, and the life of the clients she swore to protect, depended on it.

Michael caressed her hand and for a brief moment, she froze. As he peered at her cautiously, she avoided his gaze. He gently stroked her delicate fingers again and she found his touch reassuring.

* * *

Standing in the wings to the left of the stage, Michael scanned the crowd. The Park West was packed, bursting with excitement. Security lined the corners to keep the more enthusiastic fans from interrupting the performance. Chicago had been good to Michael the first time around, but he had to wonder how they would accept the new music. If Maya was any indication, it was going to be one hell of a night.

He couldn’t stop thinking about her, or rather, her reaction to him. She was an enigma all her own. Was it his touch that frightened her? Why did her eyes hold such pain? How could he feel so strongly about a woman he had just met?

“Hey man,” Bryan said with a pat on Michael’s shoulder. “Everything’s all set.”

“That’s cool.” He wiped sweat from his brow. “Why is it so warm in here?” Although the air conditioner had worked fine during rehearsal, they were now experiencing what some folks called people heat. He removed his denim jacket, revealing a white T-shirt stretched over a powerfully built chest.

Maya was standing right up front, scanning the people on the stage. He shifted his stance to catch her eye. When their gazes locked, he nodded. She nodded back and twirled her index finger as if to say, “Enough already. Let’s get this party started.”

He couldn't help but chuckle.

The lights went down and his heart rate increased. The band broke into the intro, the background singers swayed, and the crowd responded by clapping to the beat.

Michael took a long, slow breath, bowing his head for a quick moment to give the Creator his due. After a moment, the lights slowly came up. When he stepped onto the stage, the crowd greeted him wildly, getting to their feet and waving their hands about.

Sliding onto the leather stool in front of the keyboard, he pulled the mic toward his mouth. "Hello, Chicago!"

The audience ignited.

He readjusted the mic, tickling the keys just a little as he peered out into the excited crowd. "Awwwww, I can't hear you, Chicago!"

This time they screamed his name.

"Now that's what I came to hear." He swiveled, facing them while grooving to the familiar rhythm. He smiled down at Maya and winked. "Are you ready for a good time?"

She smirked as the crowd bellowed an enthusiastic, "Yeah!"

Michael played a few bars of an old school classic and relished the shocked faces of his band and singers. The Ohio Players' "Sweet Sticky Thing" was sure to turn up the heat. The moment the bass, lead guitar, and synthesizer caught up, it was on. Arms waved, heads bobbed, and bodies gyrated.

"I'd like to get a hold of your sweet, sticky thing," one woman yelled out.

He tossed a sly wink in her direction, hoping the fans didn't get too out of hand. He almost had his pants ripped off him one time in New York. The women there had tried to cart him off—while he was still in them.

Michael went into a keyboard instrumental and more women rushed the stage. Someone fell against Maya. He wanted to jump from the stage and rescue her. But then he noticed that although she didn't look pleased, she didn't look afraid, either. Maybe she feared only a man's touch.

Sending a rehearsed keyboard signal, the band played softly so he could talk to the crowd. "It feels good to be here in The Chi-Town."

The audience yelled their agreement.

He looked out and asked, “Everybody feeling good?”

The responses were nothing short of ecstatic.

Michael tickled a certain few chords as a cue for Bryan to look his way. Michael nodded in Maya’s direction. Bryan quickly made his way down to the front row. Maya hesitated for a brief moment before following him to the side of the stage. Bryan gave Michael a two-finger salute as Michael signaled to the band to bring the music back up. He pointed his microphone toward the crowd and they sang out the lyrics to the song.

After a few minutes, he raised his hand to quiet the band and singers again. They brought it down slowly and came to a complete stop. Michael smiled slyly at the fans, expertly wetting his lips before starting the verse of a song from his first album.

The crowd went wild! Then the band came in on cue.

When he segued into “Shades of Light,” Maya smiled, lids closed, her hips swaying in invitation.

The song spoke of how he longed for love, and Michael poured his heart into it. This one’s for you, baby.

Members of the band threw him both questioning and scathing looks as he transitioned into yet another song they had never rehearsed. He clapped out the rhythm, his eyes darting to the percussionist. “Come on, man. Get with it,” Michael whispered.

Something was coursing through him tonight. A synergy that begged to be shared. Michael had hand-picked these musicians and vocalists specifically because they knew how to be one with the music. He smiled when they switched gears and began crooning the background with a fire that stirred the soul. Soon the congas came in with a smooth African-Latin beat. Tapping out the chords again, he turned to the audience and said, “Y’all, we’ve got something good for you tonight!”

The roar from the crowd was encouraging.

His gaze connected with the bassist, whose head was bobbing as he fell in line. The lead guitar didn’t need a signal as she strummed to blend in with everyone else. Next, the horn section lifted their instruments and lit it up. The audience clapped, enthused by the change. Michael eased

back from the keyboard while a few overly zealous fans reached for him.

Then the brilliance of his band, the electricity of the moment, and the thoughts of one special woman merged together. Michael brought the mic to his lips, and with a sultry primal tenor sang, “I want you. The right way. I want you ...”

The eruption from the crowd almost drowned him out. He stretched his hands in Maya’s direction, tilted his head back, and rendered the Marvin Gaye classic with all the soul and power he had inside. “But I want you to want me, too ...”

* * *

Maya adored Marvin Gaye. That man’s singing could put moisture in the driest panties. Anyone who tried to imitate the vocal perfection of her beloved artist was an instant enemy. Yet, here she was standing on the side of the stage, listening to Michael Arrington pound out a rendition of a Marvin signature track in a way that had her desperate to hear more.

Helplessly, she let the lyrics, the rhythm, and the tenor of his voice flow over her. Lost in the magic of the moment, she closed her eyes and drifted into a place pure and perfect, blocking out everything else.

Suddenly large but gentle hands closed around hers. Startled, her eyes opened. Her gaze locked on Michael. For whatever reason, all anxiousness slipped away.

He swayed with her, only touching her hands. Here in the middle of a packed concert, dancing in the wings like they were the only two people in the world.

Then he eased toward the stage, extending his hand to her. “Trust me, Maya.”

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, he cautiously brought her into his arms, flowing with her as they whirled out onto the stage. The intensity of the music and their movements held their own raw power. And for a moment he held her close, his face in the sweet curve of her shoulder. Maya shivered from the contact, but good God, did it feel wonderful.

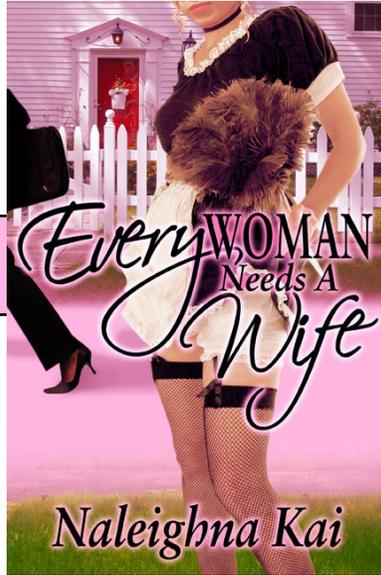
The sensation was pure harmony. Pure inspiration. Pure rhythm. Only them.

* * *

The concert ended with several standing ovations and calls for an encore. Michael bid Chicago farewell, promising to return soon. Maya smiled as he gathered the flowers and gifts thrown onto the stage. Bryan was right there to relieve him of those treasures. From what she knew of Michael, he always donated the endearments to the nearest women's shelter or rape counseling center. There was a quiet rumor that he also supplied a check to accompany those impromptu gifts.

She suspected the generous gesture had something to do with his past. In a magazine interview she'd read a few years back, Michael revealed that when his mother escaped

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“I could kill both of you,” she said softly. “I’d probably go to jail, but I certainly won’t feel guilty...”

Brandi Spencer turned the key in the ignition, still trying to come up with a good opening line as she braced herself to walk in on her husband and his mistress. Killing them would be too quick and painless. She wanted them to suffer.

Settling into the black leather seat, she tried something else. “Heifer, what the hell do you think you’re doing with my husband?” No, too common and too weak. She’d have to use something a bit stronger than heifer.

“Vernon, do you think I’m stupid? Did you think I wouldn’t find out?” That was lame and overused. She had let this thing ride for six months before deciding to confront him.

“Since I’m paying for half of this affair, what’s in it for me?”

That might work!

Fingers of doubt sent a chill through her; she knew Vernon would have every excuse in the book.

The fading sunlight cast a subdued glow into the car. Leaning back in the cool seat, she realized that asking for a divorce while the woman he’d been sneaking around with for the past six months was looking on wouldn’t leave him any breathing room. And she didn’t mind one bit if he choked on what she was about to serve up. If she could find the courage. She reached into her purse, grabbed her equipment, and placed it in her bra, tucking it out of sight.

Brown and yellow leaves danced in the chilly October wind as Brandi left the security of her car and inched her way toward what could be a total liberation or her worst nightmare. Doing the unthinkable tugged at her mind, but common sense kicked in. How long would the pleasure from killing them last? She had to find a better way.

Walking up the cobblestone path, she gazed at the house her accountant said Vernon had paid for out of their business account. Taking a long, slow breath, she knocked on the wooden door.

Moments later, a tall, blonde with deep-set blue eyes and a curvaceous figure some women would give an ovary to have, appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a sheer red robe and not much else.

Gathering her strength, Brandi abandoned her rehearsed lines. “Good evening, Tanya. I’d like to speak with you and my husband,”

she said, breezing past the mistress into a spacious, tastefully furnished living room.

“Husband? Wait a minute,” the woman shrieked, grabbing for Brandi, who shimmied just out of reach. “You must have the wrong house. Your husband’s not here.”

“Oh, yes he is,” Brandi shot back, outrage fast replacing fear as she stood facing Vernon — a man whose charisma, handsome face, and tall, muscular build had put moisture in the driest panties. “That man right there on your sofa is actually married . . . to me.” Brandi flashed her wedding ring in the woman’s face before venturing further into the room. The table had been set with a candlelight dinner for two. The scent of grilled steak, mashed potatoes, and apple cobbler mingled with the fresh citrus smell of the house. Somehow, Brandi didn’t think that the cozy little dinner would grace Tanya’s lips—or Vernon’s.

A quick glance at the mistress showed a flash of pink coloring the woman’s high cheekbones before her sensuous red lips tightened into a hard line. She was strikingly pretty, with a heart-shaped face and classically pert nose. She looked as though she belonged on the pages of *Cosmo* or *Vogue* rather than hidden away in a bungalow on the south side of Chicago.

Vernon, dressed in a casual suit that complemented his warm brown skin, short-cropped hair, and piercing dark brown eyes, had been lounging comfortably on a plush maroon sofa in the living room when Brandi stormed in. He had one leg thrown over the arm, a glass of cognac in one hand and a remote control in the other. He quickly switched off the television, leaving only the faint sound of music drifting in from the dining room. His eyes widened to the size of saucers and his thin mustache twitched just before his jaw dropped. He jumped up, spilling the warm amber liquid onto the cream carpet. His mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, looking like a fish waiting for the first available hook. The action seemed to swallow every other sound in the room.

Unable to conceal a satisfied smile, Brandi used the calmest voice she could manage. “I want her to come live with us.”

This time, Tanya’s jaw dropped. Her face went from slightly tan to white as chalk in mere seconds. But the mistress recovered a lot faster than Vernon, whose mouth still hadn’t closed. Brandi’s lips lengthened into something between a sneer and a smirk.

“We’re going to end the deception you’ve got going and save some money, too. As your wife, and the person who’s footing the bill for this affair, I don’t think this is an unreasonable request.” Brandi leaned in close enough to catch a whiff of his earthy cologne. “The nerve of you to charge her upkeep to the business. You wanted to get caught.”

“Baby, I’m just waiting on Jeremy and Craig, I—”

Brandi put up a single hand before whirling to face the woman who had entered her marriage like a bad odor on a windy day. Tanya stared back at her as though she had lost her mind. Brandi was beginning to question her own sanity, but watching her oh-so-handsome husband lose his cool had its own rewards.

Finally, Vernon backed slowly away, almost stumbling over the glass end table, putting some distance between him and his pissed-off wife. “You’ve got a lot of balls showing up here.”

“That’s right,” Brandi shot back keeping in step with him. “I have my own pair, and right now I’m holding yours, too, my brother.”

“Where are the girls?” he demanded, finally getting his bearings.

Tanya’s shock finally gave way to anger as she folded her slender arms across her full breasts, glaring at Vernon. “Wife? You, you didn’t say anything about a living wife! You said she died in childbirth and—”

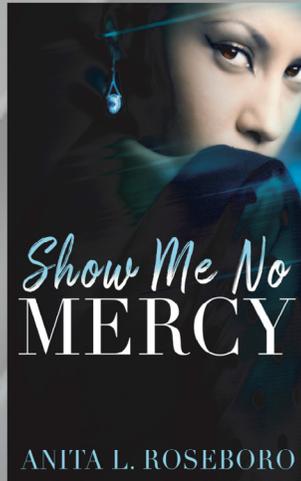
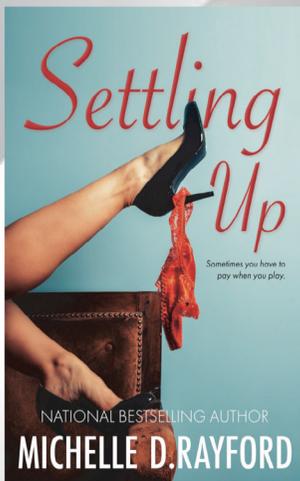
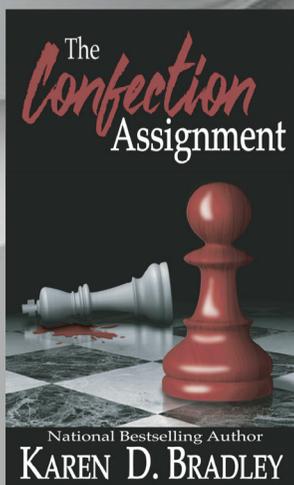
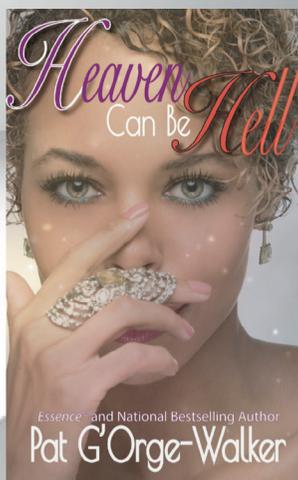
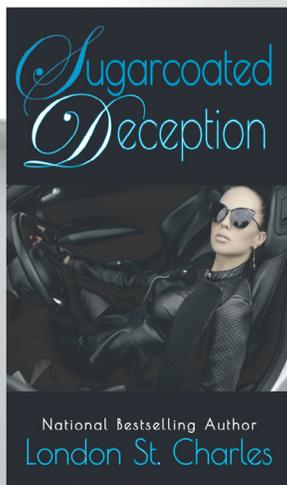
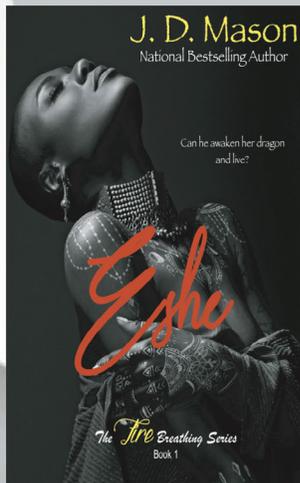
The rush of words came to an abrupt halt as Brandi interrupted, with a bitter chuckle, “Yeah, right about now I think he wishes that was true.”

The temperature in the room rose ten degrees. Brandi smiled sweetly, watching Vernon creep away and slump back onto the sofa. His eyes darted around the room as he grimaced, mumbling something she couldn’t quite catch.

“Mr. Smooth himself, speechless? Definitely a first,” Brandi taunted, following him, then leaning in, lowering her voice to a breathy whisper. “But what can you say, Mr. Spencer? The marriage license is burning a hole in my purse as we speak.” She grinned. “I’d like to see you work a lie around this one.” And the man could tell them, too. He could lie well enough to make a hooker pay premium price for what she got free every day. Brandi had fallen for a few lines in her lifetime, sweeping the smallest ones to the side to keep peace in her home. Those days were over.

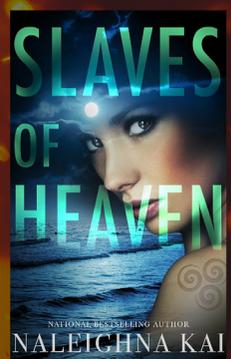
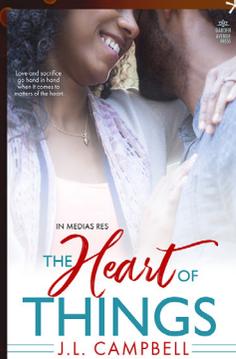
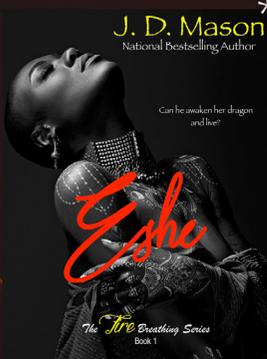
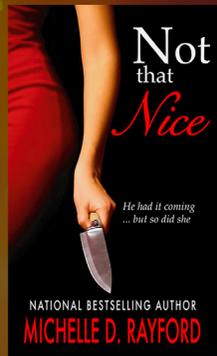
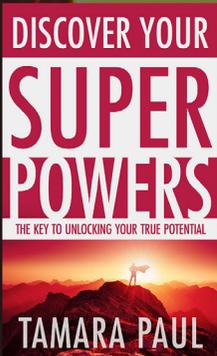
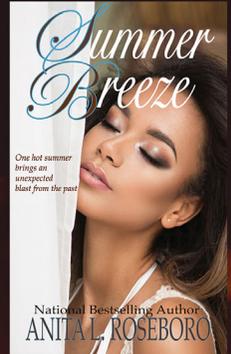
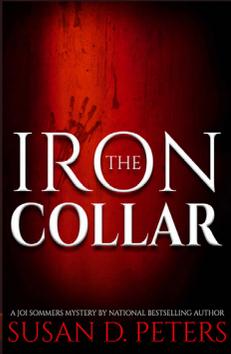
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