

excerpt from
Cayenne
by Janice M. Allen

Chapter 1

Michael raised the trunk and gazed at his ex-girlfriend's unconscious body. Nia was blindfolded, her wrists and ankles bloodied by the thick rope binding them. He had to play his cards just right if he intended to get her out of this alive.

“You sure nobody saw you snatch her?” Michael asked Lee as the self-proclaimed pretty boy and wannabe gangster got out of his car.

“Positive.” Lee leaned over to admire his expertly trimmed goatee in the side view mirror.

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Michael had sworn to himself that Nia wouldn't slip through his fingers ever again. He would make things right this time, make her his wife—as soon as he could free her from her captors.

“Before Angelique kills sleeping beauty,” Lee said, “I'm gonna break her off some of what all the women beg me for.” He gave a wicked sneer that set Michael's nerves on edge.

Though his fists were aching to have a long conversation with Lee's face, Michael chomped down on his anger. *Months of undercover work will go down the drain if I lose my cool. Just roll with the situation.*

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“What you’d better do is jump back in the car and meet up with your sister like she told you to,” Michael warned. “You know how antsy people can get in the middle of this kind of deal.” He glanced at his watch, wishing Lee wasn’t so lax about the process. “Keep them waiting, and they’ll get cold feet and back out. Then there won’t be a baby to sell, and word will get out that Angelique can’t deliver on her promises. She’ll be pissed if that happens.”

“Maaan, you think I’m scared of that chick?” Lee’s chest was stuck out like a rooster in a cockfight, but his voice sounded more like a hen with its neck on the chopping block. “My sister don’t run things. *I do.*”

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Truthfully, the only thing Lee ran was his mouth. None of the informants Michael had encountered in his ten years of undercover work had ever divulged as much information as Lee belched out while bragging about his power, prowess, prosperity, and plans—none of which he possessed. Angelique was the brains behind everything they did, even the plan to cash in on the child trafficking business.

Michael raised his hands in mock surrender. “I hear you loud and clear. You call the shots. So how about I look after her”—he nodded toward Nia—“until you get back?”

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Cursing under his breath, Lee motioned for Michael to remove Nia from the confines of his shiny black 2018 Lexus RX.

Bending his six-four frame down toward the open trunk, Michael gathered her in his arms, then laid her slender body across his shoulder.

“She woke up and started makin’ noises while I was on the road,” Lee said as he transferred Nia’s purse from his vehicle to a hook on the wall. “So I pulled over and put that rag on her face again.” He slammed the trunk down and gave a two-finger wave.

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When Michael opened the garage door of Angelique's secluded Bella Vista, Illinois estate, Lee sped off into the night.

Nia never flinched. Her breathing remained slow and steady as the door closed, shutting her off from the rest of the outside world.

Not knowing when Lee and Angelique would return, getting Nia out of that place was Michael's first priority. But his concerns about Nia being unconscious for three hours or more trumped that. Shifting her body so that she was cradled against his chest, Michael carried Nia to his Cadillac CTS and laid her across the back seat, propping her head and shoulders against the passenger door.

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Her natural beauty mesmerized him as always. Baby-soft caramel-colored skin was the canvas for eyebrows that framed her brown eyes like they were works of art. Thick black hair created a halo around her face. Sensuously-curved lips begged for his attention. He placed a feather-light kiss on them.

In a fairy tale, she would awaken with undying gratitude and admiration toward him. In real life, only smelling salts would revive her. And he feared that no amount of magic kisses or potions could ever make her regard him favorably again.

Michael extracted a bottle of smelling salts from the first aid kit he kept in the car. Getting in the

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driver's seat, he angled his body toward Nia and waved the bottle several inches away from her nose.

She wrenched away from the acrid smell of ammonia, her body convulsing with coughs.

He could only imagine the disorientation she felt as she slowly came to her senses. She thrashed around, trying to free her hands, take the blindfold off, and possibly make a run for it. If the tables were turned, flight would've been the first thing on his mind too.

Putting a hand to her chest, he gently held her in place. The heartbeat that was faint as he held her against his chest a moment ago now pounded against his palm like a battering ram.

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“Shhh,” he whispered.

Her head darted around to follow his hushed tone, then to take in other sounds in the space: a dog barking in a nearby yard; the hum of the furnace coming to life in the adjoining utility room; his ragged breathing slowing down as the fear of losing her to killers subsided.

Michael braced himself, knowing that once he said something she would recognize him. “I’m going to take off your blindfold.”

She gasped, cringed, and craned her head toward the sound of his voice.

He gently slid a hand under her head. Fighting the urge to massage away the tension and anxiety he

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felt in the taut muscles at the nape of her neck, he lifted her head and untied the black triangular bandana that covered her eyes and hung down to her chin. It slipped off, revealing another gag Lee had placed in her mouth.

Did it really take all this?

With the blindfold off, light spilling from the dome light directly over Nia's head caused her to squint for a split second. When she fully opened her eyes, she honed in on Michael's face. Her expression transformed from bewilderment to disgust and horror, giving voice to everything she couldn't vocalize.

Why did you do this to me?!