

After her devastating break-up with Davion, Natasha thought she had found everything she needed in Sharif. But when Davion shows up to her wedding and proves he's not quite out of the picture yet, Natasha is torn between her past and her present, not being willing to let go of either. When things come to a head, Natasha has to make a decision, or have it made for her...

Not By a Long Shot

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A romantic silhouette of a man and a woman about to kiss, set against a bright, out-of-focus background. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

It's NOT over...

Not
By a Long Shot

JESSICA TERRY

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ISBN 978-1-60910-748-2

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

Prologue

I didn't want to ask. I didn't want to, but I had to know.

Did he come?

At a time when I was supposed to be worrying about whether my hair was being styled to my satisfaction and if I would be able to hold my stomach in after I got my dress zipped up and whether I should choose the clear or peach-colored nail polish, not to mention the man that was going to become my husband in a matter of minutes, all I could think about was whether or not my ex had actually accepted my invitation and come to my wedding.

Inviting him had been an impulse decision...kind of a spite thing, really. I was mad and throwing an invitation to my wedding to another man was just my attempted way of pissing him off. And it worked. Those dark coffee-colored eyes shot daggers at me as he slowly stooped down and picked up the pearl envelope that didn't even have his name on it and then turned it around in his large hands. Fingers that used to drive me to fits of ecstasy time and time again, to the point of where I actually convulsed and spoke in tongues, were now slowly tracing the edges of the invitation to watch me marry someone else. At the time, I didn't see anything wrong with it; hell, he didn't want me. He had dumped me after we had been together for three years, all of a sudden claiming to not be ready to commit. At least, not to the kind of relationship I wanted. I wanted to be *his* wife and have *his* babies, but he was still trying to play and be all carefree and shit. Forgive my language but it still just pisses me off whenever I think about it.

There I was, thinking I had found my soul mate and was actually starting to plan our wedding, happy as happy could be because I felt like we had *finally* reached that point in our

relationship; you know, the point where you feel content and settled and like you *know* you've found the one you're supposed to be with, and you look forward to the future with them with the eagerness of a child looking forward to Christmas day. You feel like your prayers have been answered, *finally*. I couldn't have been happier and couldn't wait to start our lives together.

Then came the text message. I'm sitting at work, going over expense reports and whatnot, when I check the messages on my BlackBerry and see this doo-doo: "WE NEED TO CHILL WITH THE MARRIAGE STUFF. MATTER OF FACT, HOW BOUT WE JUST TAKE A BREAK FROM EACH OTHER FOR A WHILE. STILL LOVE U." What?!? We need to chill with the marriage stuff? He's the one that started with all of that, not me. *He* kept saying he wanted me to be his wife and he couldn't wait for us to make it official and live in the same house and have each other's back and all that. That was *him*. Yet when it came time to actually back up all that talk, he punked out. Took the coward's route. He didn't have enough balls to tell me to my face or at the very, *very* least, call me. No, he had to send a text message like we were in high school or something to end our three year relationship. It totally blindsided me; I didn't see it coming at all. Our relationship really was a case of here one day, gone the next. And of course after he sent that text, he wouldn't answer my calls or return my messages. I just knew it had to be some kind of really sick and really convincing joke, but unfortunately, it was real. I left voicemails and emails and texts that progressed from pleading for his reconsideration to cussing him out but they all went ignored. We were over and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

It took me a while to get over it...I still craved him, missed him, yearned for him. I spent more nights crying over him than I care to admit. My sister and my friends tried to get me to come

out and try to get my mind off of him, but I wasn't feeling it. Other than going to work, I didn't leave the house. I just wanted my baby back. But he wasn't trying to hear me; it was like I had slept with his brother or something, the way he was treating me. I didn't understand it then and to be honest, I still don't. But by now, I shouldn't care. I was having my wedding; it just wasn't to him. Was he going to be there to see it, though?

"Natasha, girl, you okay?" My sister Tamar asked, pausing in the act of applying her Sunset Brown lipstick.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered absently, sneaking peeks at the door and wringing my hands nervously. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you're bouncing your knee so hard I'm afraid you're gonna hurt yourself. Nervous, huh?"

I gave a small smile. "A little, I guess." I didn't want to tell her *why* I was nervous, though. It had nothing to do with marrying Sharif; Sharif was wonderful. But he wasn't Davion. And I was about to bite my nails off wondering if he was sitting out there with all the rest of the guests listening to the soft medley of Luther Vandross.

"It's understandable. You're about to get married; it's enough to make anyone a little jumpy," Tamar said, sliding the lipstick across her thin lips. "You're handling it a lot better than I did. Remember?"

I chuckled. "Yeah, I remember. You drove us all crazy that day. I wanted to go and tell Trevor to run while he still had the chance."

Tamar balled up a tissue and threw it at me. "Whatever! That was my day and this is yours. Brides have a right to be a little crazy, what with all it takes in planning a wedding."

"If you ask me, I think both of y'all spent too much money on these things," our cousin Francine chimed in from her spot on the couch. We were in the sitting room of the Mt. Carmel AME Baptist Church with my other four bridesmaids, putting

the finishing touches on ourselves before it was going to be time to walk down the aisle. Francine had been making her little slightly-snide comments all morning, and I had done a pretty good job of ignoring her. So far, at least. “It kills me how people spend thousands of dollars on a ceremony that only lasts maybe thirty minutes. And don’t even get me started on how much the reception costs. Venues, music, catering...”

“Nobody has asked you to pay for anything, Francine,” Tamar said, her eyes still on herself in the mirror. She smoothed back the sides of her elegant updo. “Not one damn dollar came out of your pocket for any of this so I really don’t see what you’re complaining about.”

“And usually people who do the most complaining about the costs of weddings are the people who can’t afford to have the kind they really want,” I threw in casually, stroking my already-thick eyelashes with black lash-plumping mascara. I couldn’t resist the dig at her. She was getting on my nerves.

Francine’s face tightened. It was no secret that she didn’t have a whole lot of money and lived paycheck to paycheck most of the time. She had a year of college under her belt and worked at a job with a decidedly-thick glass ceiling, and seemed kind of stuck in the same place while everyone else around her was making major moves. So she tried to hide that by being annoyingly frugal, when the reality was she really couldn’t afford to be any other way.

“All *I’m* saying is,” she said, her voice clipped, “is that the focus should be on the marriage, not the wedding. Jerry and I might not have had a big fancy wedding but we’ve been happily married for five years now. I think that says something.”

“And that’s wonderful, Francine,” I said, twisting the cap back onto the tube of mascara. “Just because Sharif and I spent some money on our wedding, though, doesn’t mean we won’t

be as happily married as you are. If you didn't want to be a part of it, you didn't have to be."

"I never said that," Francine retorted, pouting.

"Then please refrain from making any more of your little negative comments about my wedding or anything relating to it. Because with the next one that comes out of your mouth, I will forget that I'm wearing a three-thousand dollar dress and severely kick your ass from here to the parking lot." I looked over at her, my eyes telling her that I was as serious as serious could be. "Kay?"

Francine pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, though she didn't bother saying anything because she knew I meant what I said. I'm sure all the times I had whipped her ass over the years were running a montage through her mind right then.

Tamar chuckled, smoothing her hands down the front of her apricot-colored silk strapless dress. She turned in the mirror, checking out her backside and admiring her toned toffee leg poking through the long slit that ran up the side. She was grinning from ear to ear and I just knew I was gonna see that dress again at some point or another. It was all good, though. I wanted my bridesmaids to look good and feel sexy during my wedding. I wasn't gonna do them like a lot of brides did their bridesmaids, sticking them in the most atrocious garments known to man while they paraded in designer originals. I had suffered through that myself on more than one occasion. I wasn't worried about them looking better than me; I was the bride and I looked *damn* good.

I wondered if Davion would be there to see it.

I hadn't even told anybody I had 'invited' my ex to my wedding. They would think I was crazy, especially given what he had done to me. I couldn't really explain it myself; I just wanted him to see that I had gotten over his trifling ass and had moved on from him, with a man who *appreciated* me and

wanted to give me the world. I couldn't ask for a better man than Sharif; he was so attentive and accommodating and successful and respectful and romantic and *everything*. Wasn't bad to look at, either. My family loved him. I loved him. And I wanted Davion to see that he wasn't the only man I could give my heart to.

Without trying to, my knee started bouncing again. I was itching to ask someone to go out and peek to see if they could see Davion out there, but I couldn't do that without having to endure the barrage of questions that was sure to come upon them finding out I had even invited him. I had done a pretty good job of not mentioning his name to anyone in the past year or so; they probably all thought he was a distant memory to me. And he probably should have been, even though it's pretty improbable to be in a relationship with somebody for three years and then just forget about them. I hadn't forgotten about Davion; not at all. I had just managed to put him out of my mind for spurts at a time during the two years since we had broken up.

Davion didn't even really say anything when I threw that invitation at him. He just kept turning it around in his hands and looking at me with those incredibly sexy bedroom eyes of his, looking like he wanted to say something but never coming out with it. I just stood there with my arms folded, staring at him, facing off, *daring* him to come out his mouth with something negative or derogatory, and praying for an opening to remind him that it could be him and I getting married if he hadn't been so incredibly selfish, instead of me and Sharif. But he never said a word. We just stood there looking at each other for what seemed like forever before he eventually croaked out a "Congratulations" and backed away from me. I felt a small victory in that, though it was fleeting. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but I knew he wouldn't tell me if I asked. And if

he did, I was afraid he would say something I wasn't quite prepared to hear. Something along the lines of...that he didn't *care* that I was getting married to someone else. I didn't want to hear that 'cause I *wanted* him to care. I wanted it to eat him *up* inside that he had let this voluptuous piece of caramel goodness go!

I was so deep in my thoughts that I jumped when Tamar put her hand on my shoulder. "Whoa, you really are jumpy. Girl, calm down. Not too long from now, you're gonna be pronounced Mrs. Sharif Williams," she encouraged, her other hand joining the first on my shoulders in a comforting massage. "You got a good man out there."

"Yeah." My voice was hoarse. I cleared it hard and touched my throat with my hand. "Yeah, he is. Um, can I get some water?"

"Francine, get her some water," Tamar ordered quickly.

After Francine got me a cool bottle of Dasani and I chugged most of it down, I tried to compose myself. I was gonna drive myself crazy worrying about something I really shouldn't be worrying about. I needed to focus on Sharif, the man that was about to become my husband. We had spent too much time (and money) preparing for this day for me to be spending so much time focusing on another man. It was disrespectful and I needed to check myself. I could almost guarantee that Sharif wasn't somewhere thinking about one of his exes; his mind was on me. Mine should be on him. *Forget* Davion!

Pretty soon, Daddy poked his head in and smiled when he saw me sitting there all dolled up. "It's time, baby. You ready?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He stepped inside the room tentatively, his dark eyes sweeping the room quickly to make sure everybody was decent before he came all the way in. His large frame filled the room as he beamed at me with pride, sitting there in my Vera Wang

dress, looking as beautiful as I was ever going to look. I usually went for the casual-sexy look but today I had on full makeup and my jet-black hair had been roller set and then pinned up into a sexy, slightly tousled updo. All I had to do was pull out a few hairpins and I would be ready to party at the reception, after I changed into my second dress (something my mother had insisted was necessary). Daddy, whose idea of dressing up was throwing on a sports jacket with his good jeans, was all decked out in a three-piece black tuxedo, with hunter green accents. Our main colors were ivory and hunter green but I threw in the apricot in my bridesmaid's dresses for a splash of brightness.

"You look beautiful, princess," he gushed, coming over to stand behind me. He looked at me in the mirror as he placed his thick hands on my shoulders as Tamar had done. We grinned at each other's reflections.

"Thanks, Daddy. Have you seen Sharif?"

"Yes, and the boy is a nervous wreck." Daddy chuckled. "We had a little talk."

"You didn't threaten him, did you?" Tamar asked, only partially joking. Everybody knew how protective Daddy was of my sister and I and he didn't take *any* man mistreating us in any kind of way. When Davion had dumped me the way he did, it took four of my uncles to keep him from making a beeline over to Davion's place and blowing his head off with his shotgun.

"No, I didn't threaten him."

"You didn't? That's not fair! You told Trevor you'd kill him if he did me wrong two minutes before they started playing the wedding march!" Tamar exclaimed.

"That's because I thought I saw him looking at one of your bridesmaid's posterior a little too hard. Lucky for him I was mistaken or else that wedding never would've happened."

Tamar just shook her head but didn't bother saying anything, since she knew he wasn't kidding in the least. That's

just how Daddy was; he didn't play when it came to us and everybody knew it.

"But I didn't need to threaten Sharif," Daddy said, returning his gaze to me. "I can tell how much he loves you and most importantly, how much he respects and adores you. He's gonna make a good husband to you, princess."

"I hope so. Hopefully I can be a good wife to him, too."

"I'm sure you will."

I took a deep breath and gave myself one last look in the mirror before standing up. My primping time was done; I looked as good as I was going to look at that point. My heavy-lidded, thick-lashed milky brown eyes looked at my golden caramel skin in my strapless beaded gown, my makeup more perfectly done than it would probably be any other day after that, and my Lauren London-dimples were constantly digging into my cheeks. I was nervous and anxious, for a variety of reasons, and I couldn't wait to get out there and get this show on the road.

"Where's Mama?" I asked.

"You know she can't be in here with you without bursting into tears," Daddy said. "All she'll do is fuss over you and whine about how she's losing her youngest baby."

Tamar chuckled. "Yeah, she did the same thing at my wedding. She was a mess the whole time the usher was walking her down the aisle, I heard."

"Oh yeah!" Francine remembered, standing from her seat on the couch. "We were trying not to laugh but it was pretty funny. Touching, but funny."

"Well, I guess it's a good thing she's not in here, then," I said, picking up my bouquet of peach and ivory roses and baby's breath. "She came in earlier and managed to stay for a little while before she started to break down, so I'm good with that."

Daddy chuckled.

Tamar, after grabbing her own smaller bouquet, came over and tucked in a wayward lock of my hair. “You ready, little sister?”

Taking another deep breath, I nodded, putting my bouquet in a death grip. “Yep. Let’s do this.”

We all filed out of the sitting room and got in our formation, just the way we had practiced (many times) the night before. My wedding planner, Sheila, was running around crazed, making sure the photographer and videographer were where they were supposed to be and the right music was playing on cue and that the ring bearer actually had the ring and that no one walked down the aisle too close to the person in front of them. She was stressing me out just looking at her. Homegirl looked like she was going to need a vacation after this.

I gripped Daddy’s arm as I waited for our turn to head down the aisle. We stood behind the double doors, waiting for our cue in the song I had chosen, “It’s You” by Terrell Carter, before the doors swung open. I could feel the butterflies multiplying by the second in my stomach as I nervously tapped my foot.

“You okay, princess?” Daddy whispered, looking down at me.

I nodded, giving him a tight smile. “Just a little nervous.”

He patted my hand. “Try to relax. Just keep your eyes on Sharif. You two are going to have a wonderful life together.”

“I sure hope so,” I whispered back, really hoping that what he was saying was true.

At the song’s climax, the big wooden doors swung open and I was greeted by a church full of people all standing and smiling in my direction. We had invited over two hundred people and just about everybody had shown up, from what it looked like. I heard Sheila hissing at me to start walking as she crouched behind the tall potted plant by the door like she was 007, so I

put one foot in front of the other and headed towards holy matrimony...

Sharif looked so handsome...when I looked into his eyes at the altar, I knew I was making the right decision. This man loved me so much and the smile never left his face as we were exchanging vows and listening to the pastor give a mini-sermon on the seriousness and sanctity of marriage. I gazed up at him, admiring his smooth peanut butter skin, those thick eyebrows and deep-set eyes, and the ever-moist lips that were surrounded by a neatly-trimmed goatee. His good looks were somewhat boyish but still very masculine, and his eyes twinkled whenever he smiled. I thought he was adorable but still extremely sexy, and he handled his business. That's the main thing that had attracted me to him. He took care of the ones he loved and he wanted to take care of me for the rest of my life. Yeah, I was making the right decision.

After we were pronounced man and wife, Sharif pulled me into his arms and kissed me like my Daddy wasn't there while everyone cheered us with thunderous applause. I got along great with his family, and my whole family *loved* Sharif, and was so glad that I had finally gotten you-know-who out of my system. I had never gotten so much encouragement for anything in my *life* as I got when Sharif and I got together. They'd probably skin me alive if I ever said anything about leaving him!

After our kiss, I reached up to wipe my lipstick from his lips as I grinned at him with glistening eyes. I could see his eyes were a little shiny, too, as he mouthed "I love you" to me and took my hand in his. I beamed as we turned towards our loved ones, basking in the feeling for a moment before we started to head up the aisle. My eyes wandered around all of the well-

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dressed people in the large sanctuary, and then my heart dropped.

He had showed up.

Davion had slipped inside at some point during the ceremony and was standing in one of the far back corners, where he was least likely to be seen. Why I noticed him, I don't know. He had enough sense to know he wouldn't be welcome so he tried to be inconspicuous, but I was tripping over the fact that he had shown up *at all*. Maybe he didn't really believe I would go through with it. Maybe he had planned on making a scene after finally realizing he wanted to marry me after all, but I quickly dismissed that notion. That wasn't Davion's style; he was too cool for that.

I averted my eyes as Sharif and I headed up the long rose petal-covered center aisle, smiling at my beaming family and friends, trying to keep my eyes out of that back corner. No one would see him back there and I half expected him to be gone like some kind of extremely fine mirage or apparition when I ventured to peek over, but nope, he was still there. And the look in his eyes straight jarred me; they were sad, they were hurt, and they were regretful, a combination I hadn't seen on him before, and it did something strange to my insides. For a good three seconds, I couldn't tear my eyes away from his. And I didn't want to.

As my brand new husband led me out of the double doors, my hand clutched in his and held near his chest, it hit me like a ton of bricks; my ex and I were not over. Not at all.

CHAPTER 1

Three months later

I rolled off of my man and signed in exhausted satisfaction. My skin was glistening with sweat and still tingling from what just went down, and I looked over and flashed him a goofy grin, silently sending him the message that he had done his job and done it well.

“That...” I panted, still slightly out of breath, “*Awesome.*”

“Glad you liked it,” he chuckled. “You already know I’m lovin’ what you do.” He looked me right in my eyes. “And I love *you.*”

My smile faded a little bit as I looked back at him. He was dead serious. “I know.”

He reached over and pulled me closer to him, and I reveled in the feeling of his hard body next to mine. My hands immediately started roaming over his milk chocolate chest. “You know you’re always gonna be mine, right?”

I didn’t bother answering because I knew it wasn’t a question; it was a declaration. I just moaned as another wave of arousal flooded over my body and started running my tongue over Davion’s chest.

I knew I was wrong. I knew it. I knew I had no business lusting after my ex as I sat next to my new husband at our wedding reception. But I couldn’t seem to help it. Davion had always been able to do that to me and I guess he still could.

He wanted me and I *wanted* him to want me, and him wanting me made me want him back. I really and truly did love Sharif, but for the life of me I couldn't get my mind off of Davion.

This is how everything went down: after the wedding, everyone went on to the reception and everything was going just fine. I was sincerely trying to put Davion and that look that he had in his eyes (and the fact that he had even shown up) out of my mind and just enjoy the time with my family, celebrating my marriage to Sharif. I was doing a pretty good job, too, until Francine brought me my phone after I had gotten a text message. (Yes, I know...it's crazy to be worrying about my phone during a time like that but I'm a little weird about that kind of stuff. I didn't like to be away from my BlackBerry for too long so I had designated Francine as my official phone-keeper and told her to bring it to me whenever it vibrated.) My eyes had gotten as big as platters when I saw the text from Davion, asking me to come outside and talk to him. I debated about this for a few long minutes; I mean, really, how trifling would that be? I was the bride, for pete's sake, and I'm sneaking outside to talk to my ex, who my husband didn't even know I invited? That would be just wrong.

So why did I do it anyway?

I don't know, but I did. I snuck out while Sharif was clowning with his frat brothers and everyone else was on the dance floor doing the Cupid Shuffle and trotted around the outside of the hotel where the reception was being held, holding my long reception dress up to keep it off the damp pavement. Davion was waiting in his truck, and he flashed his lights when he saw me. Looking around me, I quickly headed over to his Suburban and dived inside, slamming the door.

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We just sat looking at each other for a minute before I remembered I didn't have a whole lot of time. "What are you doing here, Davion?"

"I had to see it for myself," he responded, his deep voice automatically sending shivers down my spine. I tried to ignore it.

"What, you didn't think I was going to go through with it or something?"

"Honestly, no, I didn't."

"I don't know why not," I huffed, folding my arms. "Just because *you* didn't know a good thing when you had it doesn't mean Sharif doesn't. He staked his claim like a *real* man does."

"Oh, so I'm not a real man?" Davion challenged, pointing to his chest. "I showed up to this wedding knowing *nobody* in your family likes me and there was a very high possibility I could've gotten my ass kicked. You don't know how it felt sitting back there watching you marry another man."

I cut my eyes at him, refusing to feel any sympathy for him. He could've been in Sharif's place but he didn't want to be. I felt my anger at how he ended things between us coming back. "And how is that?"

"It hurt."

I glanced at him, surprised, but quickly looked away. Davion wasn't a man to show weakness so him admitting *anything* had hurt him was a pretty big deal. My insides were feeling funny again and I tried to hold on to the anger. "Well that's just too bad, isn't it, Davion? Because you had your chance and you blew it. So don't expect me to feel sorry for you."

"You're still pissed," he observed.

"Of *course* I'm still pissed! Do you know how you dogged me??" I exclaimed, temporarily letting go of my cool façade.

“That hurt like you wouldn’t believe, Davion! It makes my blood boil whenever I think about it!”

“So you’re not over me,” he said smoothly, leaning on the center console towards me. His bedroom eyes were fixated on mine. “You still care, otherwise it wouldn’t still bother you.”

He got me with that one and he knew it. I *did* still care about Davion and if I was honest with myself, I *wasn’t* completely over him or what he did to me. But there was no way I was about to admit to that so I just defiantly crossed my arms and looked out of the window, wondering if anyone had noticed I was gone yet.

“I’m not over you, either.”

I closed my eyes briefly but didn’t respond. My knee started bouncing.

“I still love you, Natasha.”

I remained silent. It was too late for this; I was married to Sharif; had been his wife for a good hour and a half now. There was no more room for Davion in my life anymore.

Neither of us said anything for a few moments. “Natasha.”

“What?” I snapped, whipping my head around to look at him.

Before I could even think about doing anything about it, his lips were on mine. Those thick lips that I used to love so much stroked my lips with a frustrating familiarity, and I couldn’t do anything but kiss him back. My hand made one feeble attempt to push him away before it lazily slid up his shoulder to caress the back of his head as we kissed each other deeply for the first time in a couple of years, but we each knew how the other liked to be kissed as if we had just done it yesterday. I felt Davion’s hand on my waist, gripping possessively, as the kiss continued on for way too many minutes.

Temporarily forgetting about everything else, I allowed myself a moan or three as Davion’s lips slid down to my neck,

his hand coming up to grip my right breast before hastily moving aside my halter dress and placing his lips on my chocolate chip. I bit my lip as my head mashed against the headrest; this was sooo wrong...but it felt SOOO good!

Davion savored my breast like he missed it, and I was enjoying him getting reacquainted with my most sensitive body part. My chest arched forward slightly as I held his head to my chest, practically growling in sinful satisfaction, before I realized what I was doing and who I was doing it with. My eyes popped open and I pushed my forbidden ex away from me.

"I don't know what I was thinking," I hastened, snapping down the vanity mirror to check my face and my hair. I readjusted my dress and glanced nervously out the window, thanking the Lord for tinted windows. "I am *so* wrong for this!"

"Natasha-"

"I have to get out of here!" I clawed for the door handle but couldn't seem to get it open. "Unlock the door, Davion!"

"Come see me tonight."

"Are you out of your mind?? Sharif and I are leaving for our honeymoon tonight!"

"When you get back then," Davion persisted, a flash of annoyance coming across his eyes at the mention of my husband's name. "I need to see you."

"For what? You tryin' to get some booty? I'm sure you can find somebody else for that 'cause it's not happenin' with me," I spat, trying to recapture some of my earlier anger.

Davion shook his head. "That's not it at all."

"I think it is and you're about a year too late. Unlock the door."

"It's never too late. You know you and I were made for each other. Yes, I was stupid for letting you go the way I did, but I guess I expected you to wait for me to come back around. I didn't think you were going to go and marry another man on

me. I honestly thought you were bluffing when you gave me that invitation.”

“Well I wasn’t. Sharif is a good man who loves me more than he loves himself. Can *you* say that? No.”

“I *can* say that he doesn’t love you like *I* do. *No one* can do that. And I’m not about to let you get away from me again.”

“Oh really? I don’t see where you have a choice here. The wedding is done.”

“But you and I aren’t. If you can look me into my eyes and tell me honestly that you don’t want to be with me anymore, you can get out and I’ll drive away from here and you won’t hear from me again.” He looked me right in my eyes. “Can you?”

Damn him. I opened my mouth to immediately tell him that I didn’t want anything else to do with him, but the words wouldn’t come. I hated that he was so sure of himself and even more so, that he was right.

“When do you get back from your honeymoon?” he asked softly. At least he didn’t rub the fact that he had been right in my face.

“In a week,” I croaked. So my voice *did* work! Where had it been a minute ago? Why was I suddenly unable to lie?

“I want to see you when you get back.”

When I looked over at him, the look in his eyes was so tender that I could do nothing but nod. Only then did he unlock the door so I could get out, which I did quickly. Thankfully no one was in the parking lot, and I hightailed it back into the ballroom and back to my reception, hoping no one had become too suspicious.

Tamar found me as soon as I crept back in. “Girl, where have you been?? Someone told me that they saw Davion during the ceremony. Did you know he was going to come?”

“No, I didn’t,” I answered. That was true. Thankfully she hadn’t asked me if I had actually invited him.

Tamar sucked her teeth. “I can’t believe he would have the nerve to show his face around here after how he treated you! It’s just disrespectful. It’s a good thing Sharif doesn’t know about it.”

Don’t I know it, I thought to myself. But I had to go into girlfriend mode and act pissed off myself so she wouldn’t think that I had wanted him to come or had been glad to see him in the least. “I know, right! Well, he’s gone now. I just saw him drive off.”

“What in the world was he *doing* here? How could he think it was okay for him to show up at your *wedding*?”

I swallowed, hoping she didn’t notice the look of guilt that flashed across my face before I could stop it. *He thought it would be okay because I gave him an invitation*, I answered silently. “Girl, he probably just showed up to try to throw me off. Probably didn’t really think I’d go through with it. But I took care of it.”

“I just hate that you had to leave your own wedding reception to deal with him. You should’ve told me; I would’ve handled him for you. I bet you tried something with you, didn’t he?” she asked with narrowed eyes.

I sucked my teeth and shook my head in mock disgust, ignoring the flush that came over my body as I remembered Davion’s lips against mine. “Yeah, girl, you know he did. But I handled it.” *If ‘handling it’ means kissing him back.*

“Trifling,” Tamar said of Davion, shaking her head. But I knew it applied to me, too, even though she didn’t know it. I was actually making out with my ex during my own wedding reception, and had actually agreed to see him again when I returned from my honeymoon! And the *really* sick thing was, a big part of me was actually looking forward to it!

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“Go on over there to your husband; he’s been looking for you,” Tamar instructed, pointing at Sharif across the room. He had taken his suit jacket off and looked so casually fine, leaning against the wall with his long legs crossed at the ankles, sipping on some champagne. I could see his eyes roam around the room, and then light up when they landed on me finally. He smiled at me and pushed himself from off the wall, headed in my direction. He had eyes only for me. How could I hurt him like this?

I decided I couldn’t. I loved Sharif too much to break his heart. But it was pretty obvious I wasn’t over Davion.

I had some thinking to do. And I had a week to do it in.

All the while during my honeymoon in Barbados with Sharif, my mind kept wandering back to Davion. As good a time as I was having with my husband on that beautiful island, I couldn’t give him my undivided attention for thinking about my ex and that kiss he had laid on me in his truck. The passion that Davion and I had always had for one another was still there; that kiss had been so hot and filled with raw desire that my body clenched with longing whenever I thought about it. And don’t even get me started on how it felt when he put those lips of his on my breasts. Oh my *god*. I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like for him to be on top of me and inside of me again, even while I was making love to Sharif. I really tried to stop that and focus on the wonderful man I was with, but I just couldn’t help it.

With every day that passed, I knew it was one day closer to when I was supposed to go back home and deal with Davion. I still hadn’t completely made up my mind; every time I thought that I had, I second-guessed it and ended up right back where I

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started. Of course I knew that I should just stay away from Davion. I was Sharif's wife; it was just the right and sensible thing to do.

But, as I'm sure you've probably guessed by now, I didn't do the right and sensible thing.

Sharif and I got back from our honeymoon in Barbados on Sunday evening. I was in Davion's bed on Monday afternoon.

I hadn't told anyone about my rekindling feelings for Davion. Not even Tamar, who was my sister as well as my best friend. I had been telling her my business before I even knew how to spell the word, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her this. There was no way she would approve of it, even knowing how much I had loved Davion back in the day and how much it had hurt me when he dumped me like he did. She knew how much I had wanted to marry that man. I had been all about Davion and it wasn't easy getting over him; I had cried on her shoulder many, many nights about it, whining about how the man I loved more than peanut butter itself had left me high and dry. I honestly didn't think I'd *ever* get over it. Even when I met Sharif, it took me a little while to warm up to him because my mind was still on my ex. But over time, with not seeing Davion and Sharif making such an effort to make me forget about him, I had managed to pick myself up and focus on someone else for a change. And I had been doing just fine until Davion decided to call my bluff and actually show up to my wedding.

Again, I knew I was dead wrong for messing around with Davion while I was married to Sharif, especially since Sharif was so good to me and had been since the day I met him. There was no excuse and I wasn't going to try to make any. As far as I was concerned, though, I needed to expunge Davion completely

out of my system so I could focus fully on Sharif, and I figured going ahead and seeing him on a somewhat constant basis was the way to do that. I was sure I'd get tired of him eventually and then I'd be done with him. Besides, Davion and I never had any real closure; you had to finish one chapter before you could really start on another, right? Yeah, it was a little late, but that was my reasoning.

So after I finally rolled out of Davion's bed, I went back to work for a couple of hours. I owned my own event planning business and thankfully my two assistants had already gone for the day so I had the office space that I had rented out all to myself. I sat in my waiting room, which was softly decorated in cream and light blue, and thought about what I had just done. But before I got too deep into how I had just committed adultery and would probably burn in hell for it, I shook it off and chose to focus on how good it had felt to be in that man's arms again. His lovemaking skills had only improved over the couple of years since we had broken up and I actually blushed when I remembered how loudly he had me screaming earlier.

I allowed myself a half hour to reminisce and daydream before I actually went into my office and got some work done, knowing I had a couple of events rapidly approaching that I still needed to tie up some loose ends on. After making a few phone calls, doing some research and returning some emails, I decided to call it a day and headed on home to my husband.

As soon as I walked through the front door of our condo, I could smell the spicy gumbo wafting from the kitchen. My stomach growled on cue as I placed my purse and satchel on Sharif's La-z-boy and strutted into the kitchen.

"Hey sweetie," I greeted, removing my suit jacket and placing it on the back of one of the dining chairs.

Sharif turned and grinned at me over his shoulder, wiping his hands on the dish towel that was slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, baby. I was wondering when you were gonna make it home.” He turned back to the pot on the stove.

“Yeah, I had a lot to do today,” I said, glad he wasn’t looking at me right then. I didn’t think I had gotten to where I could lie right to his face. “That gumbo smells amazing; I’m so hungry I might just eat that whole pot myself.”

Sharif chuckled. “You know I know what you like.” He dipped a spoon into the pot and blew on the contents, turning back towards me. “Here, taste.”

I went over and opened my mouth to the spoon of steaming gumbo he held out to me, smiling after I swallowed. “Excellent, as always. You know I’ve always said there was something sexy about a man that can cook.”

Sharif winked at me before putting the spoon down and reaching over to pull me to him. He leaned down and kissed my lips tenderly, his hands caressing my back.

“I missed you today,” he said in a low voice, resting his forehead on mine.

“I missed you, too,” I replied, wrapping my arms around his waist. Thankfully I didn’t have to lie about that. I would never be a lie how much I loved Sharif.

He leaned down and kissed me again, this time deeper and little more forcefully, and I indulged for a minute before I made myself pull back when I felt Sharif’s hands slide down to my booty and start gathering my skirt up.

“Hold up, partna. I need to go take a shower right quick; I feel Little Sharif getting excited down there,” I teased, glancing towards his crotch.

Sharif grinned and gave me a playful pinch. “You know ain’t nothin’ little about *either* Sharif, woman!”

I laughed, pushing away from him. “Yeah, yeah, you men and your sticks. I got you.” He laughed as I headed out of the

kitchen before turning around and saying, “And trust me, I *know* there’s nothing little about Little Sharif, baby!”

He just shook his head, still chuckling at me as I headed towards our bedroom.

As soon as I was out of Sharif’s sight, I let out a long breath. I was already wondering how long I was going to be able to keep this whole thing up.

Sharif and I had already settled into somewhat of a routine; since he worked from home most of the time, he would have dinner waiting for me when I got home. I would take a quick shower, we would have dinner, cuddle on the couch or the bed as we watched the news, then Sharif would usually rub my feet or something for a while before we made love and then went to sleep. It was all good now but I was wondering if and when it was going to get too redundant and predictable, and boring. I never wanted to feel bored with Sharif.

I was *never* bored with Davion.

I think part of my dilemma was that Sharif and Davion were so different. Sharif was very clean cut, polished, polite, and well-educated. He was far from a punk, but he was always the one who wanted to keep the peace and didn’t really like conflict. While he had a very silly side to him, he was what some people would consider a nerd, having always excelled in school and preferring cultural events to sporting ones. People just seemed to gravitate towards Sharif; there were very few people who didn’t like him. I know my family fell in love with him immediately, probably before I did. Davion, on the other hand, was a little more rugged. He finished school but only out of an obligation he felt towards his grandmother who raised him, not because he really felt the need to go. While Sharif was definitely white-collar, Davion was equally as blue-collar. He didn’t mind getting dirty or stepping to someone who he felt was getting into his space or disrespecting him. He had grown

up on the rough streets of Philly; Sharif was straight out of the suburbs of a small town in Georgia.

I loved the dichotomy of these men and that both of them had something the other didn't. One thing they did have in common was that they both made me feel like the only woman alive when I was with them; and they were both great in bed. Sharif was more explorative and experimental while Davion was more aggressive and intense. I loved both of their styles, though I wished I didn't. It was hard to decide which one I liked better therefore hard to give either of them up. Of course, it wasn't all about the between-the-sheets action; there were a lot more things that went into my current situation. I honestly loved them both, though for different reasons. With Sharif, I knew I had a husband for life that would do whatever he needed to do to take care of me and run our household; with Davion, he just made me feel so safe and protected, and even if we had to struggle a little bit he would make sure no harm came to me.

As I took my shower, I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like now if I had married Davion as we had originally planned. Would we even still be together? Would he have changed after actually becoming my husband? I had no way of knowing, but that didn't mean I couldn't wonder about it. Sharif and I had only been married for a short time and I had loved every day of it, but there was always that 'what if?' question. That's the problem with leaving things unfinished.

After my shower, Sharif and I ate dinner and cleaned up the kitchen together before cuddling on the couch and watching the news. Sharif began kissing me again and this time I let Little Sharif come out and play for a while. As we made love on the couch, my mind automatically started comparing what Sharif was doing to what Davion had done hours earlier. Once Sharif, who was holding me close to him as he moved on top of me, made me scream out like some kind of banshee and had me

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digging my nails into him so hard I thought I was going to draw blood, I decided it didn't matter. Sharif could *definitely* put it down!

Besides, I was certain this affair with Davion wouldn't last long. I mean, look at what I had at home!

CHAPTER 2

After a couple more weeks of creeping with Davion, I was itching to tell *someone* about everything. This was not the type of thing that needed to be bottled up inside of me and not shared with anyone. I was still confused as to exactly what I wanted to do, and was no closer to cutting Davion off than I had been a few weeks prior. More than how he was rocking my world, I was sincerely enjoying his company. We had always had a good time together and we still did. Our rapport was just so effortless and easy; we were definitely homie-lover-friends. That kind of thing was hard to give up. And there was no way (at least, none that I could see at the time), of going from what we had to just strictly platonic homies. We would always be attracted to each other. I had a feeling it would have to be all or nothing and I wasn't quite ready to accept that yet.

But while I ached to get everything off my chest to someone, I knew I couldn't. I was extremely close to my family and as much as they loved Sharif, I knew there was no way they would be at all tolerant of me having an affair with my ex who so callously dumped me, especially when I hadn't even been married a year yet. They didn't even know I was still in contact with Davion, let alone sleeping with him. I had a couple of homegirls but I didn't really feel they would get it, either...I was kind of wishing for that confidant that would empathize, even though they wouldn't really agree with it. Hell, I would even like someone to just straight say "Go for yours, girl!" even though I knew I didn't need any more encouragement to continue committing adultery. I just wanted *somebody* else on my side.

So for the time being, I had to keep this whole thing with Davion to myself.

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As much as I loved Sharif, and I really, truly did, there was no way I was going to be able to fully give myself to him until I got Davion completely out of my system. That's the way I saw it; that was my rationalization. And it was enough to keep me lying to my husband and going back to Davion on a regular basis.

Like the day I was at work and Sharif called me wanting to meet for lunch. We hadn't seen much of each other in the past few days because I had a wedding and an architectural firm's anniversary celebration that had been taking up a lot of my time, and Sharif had been kind of trying to squeeze himself in where he could into my schedule. I wasn't purposefully not spending any time with him; that's kind of just the way the ball bounced. Sometimes my schedule got very hectic and there just wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. I owned the business and long hours just came with the territory. Sharif understood that and never gave me any real grief about it, but I know there were times when he missed me and just wanted a little attention.

So when he called me that morning suggesting me meet up for lunch in the next couple of hours, I wanted to say yes because I knew we hadn't been spending enough time together and didn't want us to get too used to spending SO much time away from each other, but I was supposed to be meeting Davion at the same time Sharif wanted to meet. What are the odds, huh?

"I'm sorry baby, but I can't today," I said regretfully, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear as I typed on my computer keyboard. "I'm swamped today and will probably just skip lunch. I'll have to see you later on when I get home." It wasn't *really* a lie; I most likely wouldn't be eating any lunch.

"Okay," Sharif said, the disappointment in his voice evident. "I understand you have to work but I miss you, baby; it feels like you aren't home much lately. I just want to spend some time with my wife, that's all."

I felt guilty. The right thing to do would be to cancel on Davion and go meet my husband, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I figured I would be going home to Sharif later so really, everybody won in the end. But I hated hearing Sharif sound like that; it was another one of those times when I really questioned what the hell it was I was doing. I had this man that loved me more than I thought any man ever would and I was messing around on him with a man who I *knew* I didn't need to be with. But as much as my mind knew it was wrong, my body craved Davion something serious.

"I know, and I'm sorry, baby," I said sincerely. "But I have to meet this new client. You know how it goes."

"Yeah," Sharif grunted.

"I'll make it up to you tonight," I tried to assure him. Guilt cloaked me like my Daddy's bathrobe, and I was willing to say just about anything to get Sharif to stop sounding like he was. "I'll try to get home as early as I can and we'll spend some serious time together. I still have a couple of nighties you haven't seen yet," I teased.

"Really?" Sharif's voice perked up. "So you've been holding out on me, huh?"

I chuckled. "Well, I couldn't hit you with everything at once, could I?"

"All right, these better be some damn good nighties," Sharif said, the smile apparent in his voice. I was relieved that he was cheering up some and hoped it would sustain until I got home later on that night. It wouldn't be a problem for me to put in a little work to reassure my husband; I loved him, after all.

A couple of hours later, I headed over to meet Davion. He lived a good thirty minutes from my office and maybe forty-five

from where I lived, so I wasn't too worried about anyone really catching me in the act. And I wasn't acting funny or suspicious so no one had any reason to be suspicious of me. I just went to Davion's at our appointed times, had my fun, and went on about my business. There was no constantly looking over my shoulder or jumping out of my skin every time my phone rang or someone said something even remotely relating to infidelity. There was no defensiveness on my part; again, no one knew that I was still in contact with Davion so they had no reason to think that I would be seeing him now. Tamar knew he had shown up at the wedding, but as far as she was concerned, I had told him off that night and hadn't seen or heard from him since. And I was fine with her thinking that. I certainly didn't need people wondering where I was going every time I stepped out of their sight.

Davion had given me a garage door opener for his garage, which I kept underneath my seat in my car. I pressed the button and eased my silver Mercedes in next to his black Suburban, staying in my car until the garage door slid back to the ground.

I grabbed my purse out of the passenger seat and opened the door. Davion was already standing in the door leading to the kitchen, his shirt off and a day's worth of stubble on his face. I thought he looked absolutely yummy and my eyes tightened in appreciation.

"Not trying to waste any time, huh?" I teased, the sound of my heels echoing across the garage as I strode towards him.

"You know I rarely wear a shirt when I'm at the house," Davion responded, pushing himself off the doorjamb he was leaning on as I approached. His eyes roamed over my outfit, lingering on my legs. He had always loved my legs, especially my thick and toned thighs. Always said he loved how they felt when they were wrapped around him.

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As soon as I was in the house, Davion grabbed me, removed my purse from my shoulder and tossed it across the room before grabbing the back of my neck and slobbering me down. He backed me up against the door and kissed me like he missed me, his hand quickly going up my skirt. Before I knew it, both of my legs were off the ground after he had hoisted me up, my back braced against the door as he fumbled to get himself inside of me, panting eagerly against my lips as he whispered how glad he was to see me. I went with the flow, even though usually I made sure to remove all of my clothes before we got busy so as not to get them wrinkled. But I could tell Davion was in one of his animalistic, urgent kinds of moods and just wanted to get down to *business*. And I was cool with it as long as he put that condom on, which he did. So I was good.

Davion sexed me in various places across his kitchen and living room before we finally stopped to rest, collapsing on his couch. It was the same couch he had back when we were together and there was no telling the amount of times we had broken that baby in. It was a little worn but still in pretty good condition.

“How long can you stay?” Davion asked me after a while. His hand slid up and down my arm as I laid on top of him. My clothes were strewn across his living room, finally coming off after the second or third round.

Not even bothering to look at my watch, I responded, “Not too much longer. I have some more things to do before I go home.”

Davion grunted, knowing that I would be going home to Sharif. He didn’t like that I was married to another man and didn’t like to talk about it. One time he had even mentioned the possibility of me leaving Sharif and marrying him like we had been planning to do before he dumped me, but I quickly shot that idea down. There was no way I was going to dump Sharif

for Davion. He could just forget about that. Thankfully, he hadn't mentioned it again.

"I'm glad you could make it over," he said after a few moments. "Been looking forward to seeing you all day."

I smiled, lifting my head to look up at him. "I bet you say that to all the mistresses."

Davion frowned. "That's not funny, Natasha."

"Oh, calm down. It was just a joke."

"I don't think of you as a mistress."

"You're right. I guess I would only be a mistress if you were the one who was married."

Davion's frown deepened. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Is it the truth or is it not?"

"You know how I feel about you, Natasha. You're not just some chick off the street. I actually love you."

"None of that changes the fact that I'm married to another man," I said, waving my left hand in his face so he could see my ring. "You seem to keep wanting to forget that."

"You won't let me," he grunted, looking away.

"No, I won't. Us sleeping together doesn't change that fact, or the fact that I love Sharif."

I felt Davion's body stiffen underneath me. He hated hearing me say that, but it was my way of keeping him in check and keeping things in perspective for him. As much as I was enjoying what we were doing together, I didn't want him getting the wrong idea that it meant we were going to be sharing in any kind of happily-ever-after. It just wasn't going to happen. I had feelings for Davion and part of me even still loved him, but what we had was now mainly just physical.

"Dare I ask why you're here naked on top of me if you *love* him so much?" Davion growled mockingly.

Heat flushed my body as I felt myself getting angry, but I tried to stay calm. This was something of a sore spot between us and had been the cause of a few heated arguments, but I wasn't trying to go there today. I knew part of the reason Davion tried to pick these kinds of fights with me was so that I would be too upset to go home and make love to Sharif later on. And once or twice, it had worked, though of course I never told him that. But I wasn't letting him get away with that this time, especially after I had all but promised Sharif we would be getting it on when I got home.

"How many times are we going to talk about this?" I asked, forcing patience.

"It was just a question."

"Do we have to talk about this? Again?"

"Are you having trouble answering me?"

"Davion..."

"I'm just saying. You're always talking about how much you love your *husband*, yet every time I call you wanting to see you, you never turn me down. Why is that?"

I sighed and pushed myself off of him, looking around for my clothes. "It's obviously time for me to go."

Davion grabbed me as I stood up and pulled me back down onto his lap. He laid his head on my shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you mad. But you know I want you to be here with me, more than just on your lunch hours or whenever else you can get away. I want you back, Natasha."

I looked at him only briefly before turning away, shaking my head. There was a time when I would have loved to have heard Davion say those words to me, but now, I didn't want to hear it. There was no need to make things any more confusing than they already were.

"You know where I stand on that," I said, still looking away.

“Natasha-”

“Davion, you know what? We need to make an agreement that when I come over here, we’re not going to talk about Sharif, my marriage, or anything pertaining to it. Because it’s not going to do anything but ruin my mood and then I’m going to just stop coming altogether. Can we do that?”

Davion just kind of glared at me, but then he just pursed his thick lips and nodded, even though I think he knew I wasn’t ready to stop going over there any more than he was ready for me to. “All right. Whatever you say.”

“Good.” I leaned down and kissed him, caressing the side of his face. Before too long, we were back at it, doing what I had gone over there for.

I left about an hour later. On my way back to my office, I thought about the questions Davion had asked me, about why I kept seeing him when I was always saying how much I loved Sharif and rubbing my marriage in his face. It was a valid question; one I always avoided because I didn’t really know the answer. Or rather, I did know the answer but knew it wasn’t a good one. Yes, I loved Sharif with all my heart. But I clearly was not over Davion. Things had been left unfinished between us, and I wanted to finish them so I could move on. It could be said that I should have taken care of all that before I accepted Sharif’s marriage proposal, but I couldn’t focus on that. I had tried to just forget about Davion, do the whole ‘out of sight, out of mind’ thing, but that obviously didn’t work. Maybe if he hadn’t shown up at my wedding, I’d be home free right now. But then again, had I not invited him, he probably wouldn’t have shown up in the first place. And none of this would be happening.

But, in my defense, me giving Davion that wedding invitation was not in an intent to actually *invite* him; it was simply to let him know that he had he had blown it and I was

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now with someone else who was willing to give me all the things he wouldn't. That was all. But I guess I never actually considered what would happen if he actually showed up. It didn't think it through that far 'cause I thought he would just blow it off like he blew our relationship off.

But he didn't. And now I was stuck.

Choosing not to think about it any further that day, I headed on back to the office to check my messages and have a brief meeting with my assistants before heading out to check out the progress on a couple of venues for upcoming events. It was a little hard keeping my mind focused but I had to push my personal drama to the side for the time being; I could not afford to let my business fail on top of everything else.

I finally made it home a few hours later. My feet were killing me and I just wanted to take a warm bath and get in the bed. But when I saw the candles lit all over place and heard my favorite Maxwell CD playing, I remembered that I was supposed to be putting it on Sharif tonight. Making love to my husband was hardly a chore, but I just had no energy for it. I wondered if there was a way I could get him to put it off for another night, until he walked in from the bedroom in those black silk pajamas that I loved so much, the shirt open to reveal that smooth, beautiful chest of his. His face lit up when he saw me standing there. I knew there was no way I could, or would, get out of it.

Sharif walked over to me with his arms open and a smile on his face, and grabbed me up in a tight bear hug. He buried his face in the crook of my neck, murmuring about how glad he was to see me. I couldn't help but smile as my hands roamed over the silky material covering his back. Somewhere I would summon enough energy to make my husband happy. He deserved it.

Sharif moaned as he kissed me, his large hands coming up to cup either side of my face. He kissed me so lovingly; the complete opposite of the lustful way Davion had kissed me when he saw me earlier. I felt Sharif's fingers in my hair as he slowly backed me towards the couch. He slowly undressed me as he kissed me all over, taking his time to appreciate all of this caramel lusciousness. I closed my eyes as I enjoyed what he was doing to me, forgetting about my earlier fatigue. Sharif had a way of making me forget about everything else. He always gave me his complete attention.

"Are you hungry, baby?" he asked, his tongue in my bellybutton.

I grunted, biting my lip. "What do you have?"

"Salmon..." Kiss. "Pasta salad." Kiss. "I got some strawberry ice cream; you know you like that." Kiss. "Want some?"

Moaning, I writhed underneath him. "I want some, all right. But I'm not talking about no damn ice cream. Come here." I reached down and pulled him up by the sides of his shirt until he was flush on top of me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, savoring the taste of him and enjoying how he felt on top of me. My legs squeezed around his waist, and I sighed as Sharif ran his hands down my body. Yeah, this wouldn't be hard at all.

"Take me to the bed," I requested in a hushed whisper, my lips against his.

"Whatever my wife wants..." Sharif replied with a devilish smirk, pushing himself off of me. Our bodies were only separated for a couple of seconds before he reached down and picked me up with ease, carrying me into our bedroom where he made some beautiful love to me for the next hour or so. I arched my back as Sharif brought me to orgasm number two with his

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head between my legs. My man knew he could work it like the best of them!

Afterwards, we just laid in bed with Sharif's arms around me. My eyes were having a really hard time staying open.

"We don't spend enough time together, baby," Sharif said softly. "I know you're busy at work but we need to make more time for each other. I don't even want us to get used to being away from each other for too long. You get what I'm saying?"

I nodded, snuggling closer to him. "Yeah, I do. And you're right. I'm going to try to do better."

"Good." He kissed my sweaty hair and held me tighter.

I closed my eyes and nestled my head against his damp chest, knowing I really meant what I was saying but wondering how I was actually going to make it happen. But I felt guilty knowing I could spend more time with Sharif and I wasn't, and I knew I had to do something about that.

CHAPTER 3

“So how is married life going? You tired of it yet?” Tamar teased me when we were out to lunch a couple of weeks later.

I chuckled as I spread my white cloth napkin across my lap. “Not at all. Sharif makes me love it.”

“Aww! That is so sweet. A little corny, but sweet, nonetheless.”

“Shut up.”

Tamar chuckled. “No, but for real, Sharif is a good man so I’m not surprised you’re still on cloud nine after almost six months.”

“Yeah,” I commented simply, burying my face in my menu. I didn’t want to risk saying anything that would make Tamar suspicious. She seemed to have some kind of sixth sense for when she thought you were hiding something.

We were eating at the Marietta Diner, and as usual, it was pretty busy. I was glad to be spending some time with my big sister, especially since I hadn’t seen her in a couple of weeks, but I had been dreading these kinds of questions about how my marriage was going. I wasn’t lying when I said I wasn’t tired of being married, but it wasn’t all peaches and roses like Tamar was probably sitting across from me thinking it was. Sharif was wonderful, of course, but I was still conflicted about Davion. Honestly, I thought this little fascination that I had with him would have been over with by now. We had been having an affair for almost six months and I was still as smitten with him as I had been in the beginning of it. My attraction and desire for him was still at a high and it was really throwing me for a loop. I know that we had been in a serious relationship and were planning to be married not too terribly long ago, but still. With the way he did me, I was surprised I wasn’t harboring any

residual anger towards him. We really hadn't talked about what happened to our relationship since my wedding night, when we were in his truck. It's almost like it didn't matter anymore now that we were sleeping together again, and that's not the way it was supposed to be. He wasn't getting any kind of punishment or consequence for the way he treated me; he got to do his own thing and still call me whenever he felt like it, without having to worry about any kind of commitment. And I continued to comply to this willingly. Hell, he had it made; I was the one who was in emotional hell.

I sometimes feebly continued to search for some other justification for what I was doing, but of course I was coming up short. There wasn't any, and I knew that as well as anybody else. I was really surprised at how weak I was for Davion; it was like I was just completely powerless and unable to tell him no. What was this hold he had over me? I wish I knew...maybe if I knew that, I would know how to break it and just concentrate on my husband.

After a few minutes of talking about random happenings at Tamar's real estate office, I decided to pose a hypothetical question to my sister. I really, really wanted to confide in her, but I had to see some inclination that she would have some empathy for me.

"Hey," I asked, after the waiter had taken our orders and walked off, "You've been married how long now? Eight years, right?"

"Yep. It'll be nine in a couple of months."

"You haven't, um...you know...had an affair or anything, have you?"

"Girl, no!" Tamar exclaimed, looking at me with an incredulous frown on her face. "Why would you ask me that?"

"I was just wondering; calm down," I instructed. "It's not like I would judge you if you did. But I hardly know *any*

married couples where at least one person hasn't stepped out at least once."

"Well, *I* haven't," Tamar stated firmly. She took a sip of her water and set the glass down on the table a little harder than necessary.

"Has Trevor?"

"Are you *trying* to make me slap you?"

"You've never *thought* about it?" I persisted, eyeing her.

"Never," Tamar answered, looking me right in my eyes. "Why would I even bother getting married if I was going to go sleep with somebody else?"

I forced myself to keep looking into her eyes, even though I wanted to divert them elsewhere out of guilt.

"I really have no respect for people who cheat on their spouses," Tamar continued. "Marriage is supposed to be sacred, but people just refuse to resist temptation. And they kill me trying to say 'they couldn't help it' or 'it was some power bigger than them' or some other nonsense, like the classic 'It just happened'. People cheat because they choose to cheat, period."

"Okay, okay. It was just a question," I scoffed nervously, finally taking my eyes off her and leaning back in my seat. I was hoping my face had a neutral expression so she wouldn't start asking me why I was asking such questions. I wasn't sure I would be able to lie to her if she asked me if I had cheated on Sharif.

Thankfully, though, she didn't. The subject was dropped but I could tell I had hit something of a sore spot with her, and I wondered where it was coming from. Had Trevor cheated on her? That certainly would explain her hostility on the subject. I decided to leave it alone for the time being.

If I didn't know it before, I knew then that I had to keep my affair to myself. If I couldn't tell Tamar, I couldn't tell anyone.

“What do you think about the space?” Arianna asked me as we casually strolled around the large ballroom of the Wyndham Hotel. She was trying to decide on a spot for her wedding reception and this was the fifth space we had looked at. I was so ready for her to just make a decision already, but of course I couldn’t say that.

“I think it would work really well,” I said, my eyes scanning the walls and floor space. “There looks to be enough space in here to accommodate your 150 guests, and the dance floor could be put over there,” I said, pointing. I walked over to a space near the far wall and paused, spreading my hands wide. “The live band could be here...”

“Oh, I meant to tell you. We decided to just have a DJ. Roger thought a live band would be too loud.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. This was the tenth time they had changed their minds about this one issue. And don’t even get me started on everything else they had been indecisive about, from the table linens to the music they would play when she walked down the aisle to whether to have the reception dinner be family or buffet style. It was making my job a million times harder because I was the one who had to constantly go back to the vendors and let them know the bride had changed her mind yet again.

“That’s fine, Arianna,” I forced out, “But we’re fast approaching the point where these kinds of decisions won’t be able to be changed. You’ll have to make final decisions as to what it is you and Roger want and stick to them.”

“I know...it’s just that this is my big day, you know...I want everything to be right.”

“I understand,” I said, making a note of her latest change on my legal pad. “Planning a wedding can be very tedious; that’s what I’m here for. You just have to take the time to really decide what your vision is for your wedding and what it is you

want beforehand. Some things just aren't as easy to switch back and forth, like the flowers."

Arianna looked away guiltily, knowing she had changed her mind on her flowers so many times that my favorite florist that I usually worked with threatened to quit if she changed her mind again, which was a first.

I stepped over and placed my arm around the girl, who was only twenty-three and didn't seem any more ready to be married than she was ready to decide on her wedding décor. She and her fiancé Roger still looked like teenagers and seemed to be very naïve, but it wasn't my job to be their counselor. They hired me to plan and coordinate their wedding (or rather, their parents did), so that's all I really concerned myself with.

"I'm sorry for being such a pain, Mrs. Williams," Arianna said sheepishly, looking up at me. Her pale skin with a splash of freckles was reddened slightly.

"You're not a pain, Arianna," I tried to comfort her, even though I was kind of lying. She was a little bit of a pain, what with all the seemingly endless phone calls to ask me some of the most inane questions, stuff she could have very well asked her mother or her maid of honor or whoever; like if I thought she should wear a low or high heel with her dress, if she should cut her bangs, or if she should request that all of the wait staff at the reception be the same nationality. I mean, really.

"I just hope Roger and I are as happy as you and Mr. Williams are," Arianna said wistfully. "I bet you two have the perfect marriage, huh? I'm still loving that ring he gave you," she praised, looking down at my princess-cut diamond for the twentieth time that day.

I smiled tightly. "Well, no marriage is perfect, Arianna. And we're still essentially newlyweds ourselves. Relationships take work, on both parts."

“That’s what everyone keeps saying,” Arianna replied with a slight edge in her voice, beginning to wander around the spacious ballroom. “Roger and I have been together since the seventh grade. I love him but I can’t help but wonder sometimes what it would be like to be with someone else, just once, before we get married and are stuck together for life. I mean, what do you think? Roger was my first and will be my last, but I don’t know if I want him to be my *only*. I should get to experience someone else at least once, right? That’s not really cheating, is it?”

Boy, I was *really* not the one that needed to be giving advice on this subject. Of course there was no way that I was going to tell her about my affair with Davion. Arianna had met Sharif at my office once and thought he was just the cat’s meow. She would probably fire me and have me blackballed if she knew I was cheating on him.

I cleared my throat and said, “Um, Arianna, I can’t tell you what to do. But if you love Roger enough to accept his proposal and agree to be his wife, then you should love him enough to be with him and only him.” I know, I know...I was really one to talk. But hell, it’s still true, whether I’m actually taking the advice or not.

“I guess,” she admitted somewhat grudgingly.

“If you’re having doubts or desires to be with someone else, you should be honest with Roger and talk to him about it before the wedding,” I advised, praying God didn’t strike me down right there for being a complete and total hypocrite. “Just get everything out in the open now. Don’t wait until after you’ve said ‘I do’ and wish you had done something sooner.”

“You’re right,” she said, her face brightening. “Maybe if I let him go and get some from someone else, we can both get this out of our systems before the wedding day.”

“Oh...has Roger said he wanted to *experience* someone else, too?”

“No. At least, not to me. But we’ve only been with each other; I’m sure he wouldn’t mind the opportunity to go out and be with someone else if I said he could.”

“Well, that’s not really what I meant...”

“But you’re right, though...if we’re going to do anything like that, we need to do it now. Then after we’re married, we can just concentrate on each other.”

“I see.” I didn’t want to say anything else. She was missing my entire point and I was already tired of this conversation. Mostly because I knew I had no business giving any kind of advice on marriage when I was quite possibly ruining mine for no good reason.

And she would learn soon enough that it just was not that easy. What if she went out, met somebody, got some, and ended up loving it? What if she decided that her side piece was better in bed than Roger? Then what? I thought about asking her all of this but decided that she needed to learn her own lessons. Hopefully she and Roger would be getting some kind of counseling before the wedding and they could talk about all this stuff out in the open with each other and someone else who was actually qualified to be giving them advice; most likely someone who was being faithful to their spouse.

I had been hoping that my little fling with Davion would have only lasted a few romps, but it hasn’t. It’s been months and Sharif still had no clue, and I cringed when thinking about him finding out. Would he leave me? Call me every kind of slut and whore in the book and kick me out? Would he confront Davion? Sharif was pretty level headed and didn’t lose his cool too much but I can’t imagine he would take something like that in stride.

Not By a Long Shot

After my time with Arianna, I had an overwhelming urge to be with my husband. I called him on the way out to my car but it went to voicemail; he was probably on a deadline or something because he almost always took my calls. I left him a voicemail telling him how much I missed him and couldn't wait to see him later on, and headed back to the office. I had a couple more appointments before the day was over with and I toyed with the idea of cancelling them and just going home, but I knew I couldn't do that. I had to meet with a couple of vendors for Arianna's wedding, as well as a couple of other events I was coordinating. There were times when I loved what I do, but on days like today, I wished I wasn't so darn busy.

I was meeting with the woman who was going to be providing the linens for Arianna's wedding to make sure that she had ordered the correct color for the table linens and everything (because of course Arianna had changed her mind about this three times already) and while I was there, I got a text from Davion. He wanted me to come by there before I went home. I ignored the message and put my BlackBerry back in its case in my purse, giving my full attention to the Linen Lady, as she called herself. When I felt my phone vibrating a minute later, I knew it was Davion again. My phone vibrated continuously the entire time I was there, but it wasn't until I was done with my meeting and in my car that I finally answered him back.

I'M NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO MAKE IT, I texted him back. Not a minute later, he was calling me.

"What you mean, you can't make it?" he asked without preamble.

"Just what I said. I have a lot to do today and then I'm going home. I'm tired, Davion."

"You can take a nap over here. Since when do you turn me down?"

See, this is what I had been afraid of. Davion seemed to have it in his head that he could call me whenever and I would come running. I couldn't really be mad at him for that, though, because that's pretty much how it had been. But I was starting to think I needed to fall back from him some, especially after my conversation with Arianna earlier. How was I going to be telling someone else they should be honest with their husbands and be with only them when I wasn't even doing it myself? It wasn't right, and the guilt was beginning to be too much for me. Sharif was too good of a man for me to be treating him this way. If I wasn't over Davion, I never should have accepted Sharif's marriage proposal. But I did, and now I had to deal with it.

"Davion, look...I think you and I should ease up. You're getting entirely too much of my attention and I want to concentrate more on my husband. This wasn't supposed to go on this long."

"Your marriage?"

"This *affair*," I snapped. "You know what I'm talking about. I hope you didn't think this thing between you and I was going to go on forever."

"Not forever; just until you realized that I'm the one you need to be with."

"You seem to keep forgetting that you had me and you let me go. I'm *married*, Davion. I know you don't care about that but I do."

"Do you? Then why were you in my bed not even a full day after you got back from your honeymoon?"

That was like a kick in the gut, and Davion knew it. I was pissed off, but mostly at myself because what he said was true.

"I'm hanging up now," I said, deciding to not even try to defend myself.

Not By a Long Shot

“Natasha! Look, I’m sorry. Can you just come over here for a little while? We don’t have to do anything; I just want to talk to you. Don’t throw away what we have, baby. You know I love you.”

“What, Davion? What do we have? Sex? A few good laughs? That’s all we can ever be, Davion; I’m married to someone else, someone I have no intentions of divorcing. This thing with you and I is just a fun joyride to a dead end and you know it. You knew it when it started.”

“I don’t look at it like that. Who said you and I only had to be about sex? I can get sex from anybody, Natasha. How many times do I have to tell you that *I love you*? I can’t say that about any other woman.”

“If you loved me so much, Davion, then we would be married now instead of just cut buddies. But I think this is just a case of you wanting something you’re not supposed to have. You apparently thought I would be single forever and you could go and do your thing for as long as you wanted to do it and I would be sitting around waiting for you when you were done. I just messed your plans all up by falling in love with someone else, huh?”

“Natasha...”

“I’m going home to my husband, Davion. Go and find somebody else.”

“I don’t want anybody else. I want you.”

“Well that’s too bad, isn’t it? I said no. Now *bye*.” I ended the call and tossed the phone onto my passenger seat.

I felt energized and exhilarated. I decided that I needed to give a sincere effort into making my marriage to Sharif work, and I couldn’t do that when I was messing around with Davion. That’s not to say that it would just be a piece of cake not seeing Davion anymore, but it certainly could be done. I just had to

Jessica Terry

keep my eye on the bigger picture, which was the life together that Sharif and I wanted with each other.

After deciding I would attempt to make dinner that night, I picked up a few groceries when I was done with everything and headed home, sincerely excited about seeing Sharif. I was very anxious to prove to myself and to Davion that Sharif was really all the man I needed.

Surprisingly, though, Sharif wasn't home when I got there. I tried to give him a call as I was removing the groceries from the bags, but I got his voicemail again. I didn't trip as I left him another message, letting him know I was home, and proceeded to make the one dish I could make decently, which was spaghetti. Weak, I know, but thankfully Sharif didn't marry me for my cooking skills.

I took a quick shower while the pasta was cooking and when I came out, Sharif still wasn't home. Starting to get worried just a little bit, I quickly went over to my BlackBerry for any missed calls or maybe a text message letting me know where he was, but the only thing I had that wasn't business related was a couple of texts from Davion, pleading with me to reconsider my earlier decision to end things between us. I ignored them and tried calling Sharif again. When it rolled over to voicemail yet again, I hung up and started to call his parents when I heard a key in the door.

"Hey baby!" Sharif greeted me, coming through the door with some dry cleaning over his arm and his briefcase in his hand.

"Sharif, where have you been??" I shrieked, dropping my phone onto one of the armchairs and rushing over to him. I threw my arms around his waist, almost knocking him over, and

buried my face in his chest. I hadn't even realized how worried I had been about him until he showed up and I felt the incredible sense of relief.

"Whoa, whoa, baby what's wrong?" Sharif asked, trying to pull back from me so he could look into my face. He laid the dry cleaning over the armchair I had flung my phone onto and dropped his briefcase. Holding my face in his hands, he looked into my eyes, concerned. "Are you all right?"

"Are *you*? I've been trying to call you and you never answered, and then you weren't here when I got home and there was no note or anything and I couldn't get in touch with you, and I had no idea where you were."

"Natasha, baby, calm down," he instructed, pulling me into his arms and smoothing down my hair. "I'm sorry for making you worry. I had to go across town for a meeting and run some errands and I forgot my phone here. It's probably still in the bedroom tangled up in the bed sheets somewhere from when we talked this morning."

I sniffed, suddenly realizing that there were tears in my eyes, relieved that there was such a simple explanation. I hugged him again. "I'm glad you're home."

"I'm glad to be home. I hated not being able to talk to you today but I didn't have time to make it back home to get the phone. Do you forgive me?"

I looked up at him and smiled. "Of course, baby. It was an honest mistake."

He winked at me and wiped my tears with the pads of his thumbs before leaning down and kissing my lips. Then he sniffed the air. "Are you cooking?"

That's when I realized the food I had left cooking on the stove. "Oh no!" I exclaimed, rushing into the kitchen with Sharif on my heels. I had been so worried about Sharif that I had forgotten all about the dinner I was making. The pasta was

overcooked and the meat sauce was partially burnt, which didn't do much to help my current state of mind. "Damn it!"

"Baby, don't worry about it. I appreciate you doing this," Sharif said, turning off the burners on the stove and moving the pots to the sink.

"You don't understand...I wanted to do something special for you..."

"You're still my wife, right?" Sharif asked, turning to look at me.

I paused briefly, as if it was some kind of trick question. "Of course."

"Then I'm good. Come here."

I trudged over to him and he took my face in his hands, leaning down to kiss me deeply. I placed my hands on his waist and returned his kiss, glad that my husband was home.

Sharif offered to take me out to dinner but I declined, not having the energy to get dressed and go out anywhere. I was physically and emotionally tired, what with a full day of running around town, dealing with Davion and worrying about Sharif. Instead, we just made some sandwiches and ate them in bed, before making love. It was something I wanted to do, something I *needed* to do, to reaffirm something to myself. Being with my husband wasn't any kind of forced upon obligation; I wanted to be here. I *chose* to be here. I had to get into the habit of reminding myself of that for when the temptation of being with Davion again arose, as I knew it would sooner or later. He wasn't going to give up that easily.

After her devastating break-up with Davion, Natasha thought she had found everything she needed in Sharif. But when Davion shows up to her wedding and proves he's not quite out of the picture yet, Natasha is torn between her past and her present, not being willing to let go of either. When things come to a head, Natasha has to make a decision, or have it made for her...

Not By a Long Shot

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