

Consequences

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Prologue

Cole Richards sat across the table from his son.

"Are you guys going to be home tonight? I'm bringing Samantha home with me to meet you."

Cole knew that Samantha was the woman his son had been dating for a couple of months. This would be the first time he and his wife would get to meet her. He looked over at his wife and smiled. She looked as good as she did 22 years ago when they got married. Of course constant dieting, exercise and minor cosmetic procedures helped.

He looked down at his plate of baked fish and steamed vegetables, both dressed with a sprinkling of lemon juice and pepper. No, it was no wonder that she looked the same. She was bound and determined to stop any signs that she was getting older.

He looked back across the table at his son, a young man now. Cole remembered sitting up with him at night, playing soft lullabies on his guitar between stints touring.

"We'll be around."

At eight p.m. the front door opened and he heard Randy's voice float up the stairs. His wife was already downstairs in the exercise room and Cole put down his guitar and began walking down the stairs. Midway down he had to hold onto the oak banister to keep from falling.

He stared at his son and Samantha and memories came rushing back to him, nearly causing him to buckle under the weight of them.

"Dad."

Cole tore his attention away from Samantha at the sound of concern from his son. He looked over to his wife and found her gaze uncomprehending. His gaze returned to Samantha and he saw the stricken look in her eyes. He could see the thoughts running through her mind.

Walking further down the stairs, he extended a hand. "Samantha, I'm sorry. You reminded me of someone."

She reached out and his large hand enveloped her small brown one. She didn't speak and he could see clearly that she didn't believe him. She thought it was the color of her skin that made him pause.

No. It was those damn memories. Memories of things he'd left undone and unsaid. Nightmares of what he'd done. Twenty-three years earlier he'd closed a door and left his soul behind for a career and it had finally caught up with him.

Lisa broke the silence by inviting everyone into the living room. Cole didn't take his eyes off Samantha for more than a minute and he missed the glares directed at him by his wife and son.

"So Samantha, Randy tells me that you're a school teacher." Subconsciously Cole was glad that Lisa was taking over, welcoming her into their home.

"Yes, I teach fourth grade." Even the voice was the same, smooth and velvety.

"Is your family from Memphis?"

"Yes, both my parents grew up here and moved back when they got married so my sister and I could grow up with our cousins."

The conversation continued without any input from Cole.

"My father passed away last year and my mother Ann is a high school music teacher."

Cole finally gave in to the memories.

Twenty-six years earlier:

Cole stood in the bedroom, in the dim light cast from the vanity lights of the bathroom. Ann lay in bed, her hair disheveled and dark limbs askew.

Ann was one of Cole's backup singers. He'd been struggling as a country music singer for a number of years and had finally caught a break. He and Ann had been seeing one another for almost a year before his manager called to tell him that he'd been offered a contract with a small recording label.

Ann had been excited for him and the rest of the band and last night had been one big party.

His manager Roy had pulled him aside before the party ended to talk over the specifics of the contract, pretty standard stuff with one exception. Roy told him he had to end it with Ann.

Cole hadn't realized that anyone knew about their relationship.

Roy had looked him in the eyes and told him the straight truth. "Cole, you've been working on this for what? Six or seven years?" When Cole nodded he continued. "You've got to give her up. There's no way you're going to make it big if your affair comes out. Country music, today's country music, isn't going to stand for an affair between whites and blacks."

Cole hadn't argued with Roy because he knew it was the truth. It was 1980 in Nashville and there was no way it would be accepted in the mainstream. As much as he enjoyed his time with Ann,

he'd worked too hard to get to this point to let their relationship derail his plans. It wasn't fair to him or the band.

Cole moved closer to the bed and reached down to place a kiss at the corner of Ann's mouth. His fingertips trailed over her shoulder and down her arm. Steeling himself for one last look he drew back the covers and gazed at what he considered perfection. Smooth skin and a waist that nipped in before flaring out to meet rounded hips. Full breasts that only needed a baby suckling at them to conjure up images of the Madonna.

Cole put the covers back over her and left a folded note on the nightstand. He knew she'd understand the one line statement. "You were right." She'd told him often enough that when he made it to the big times, he'd have to give her up.

Cole was sitting in his office when Randy came upstairs after having driven Samantha home.

"Dad, what in the hell was that about? You don't like Sam because she's black? Screw you."

Cole looked up at his son's reddened face. "Randy, it's not that."

"Bullshit. You didn't say more than a few words to her all night."

"Randy, I promise you that's not it."

"Then what dad?"

Cole looked into his son's eyes. "Randy, all I can tell you is that it has nothing to do with the fact that Samantha is black."

Nope, but it had all hinged on the fact that Ann was black.

Samantha never came back to the house. She didn't actually have a reason to, since Randy didn't live at home anymore. They continued seeing each other and it all went smoothly until dinner a year later.

"We're getting married."

"Honey, this is so soon, you're only 21. Why not wait a bit?" Lisa furrowed her brow and looked at Cole, willing him to speak up.

"Your mother's right Randy. What's the rush?"

"No rush, it's not happening until next year, I'm just letting you know. I asked Sam and she said yes." Cole looked at his son and wondered where his unbendable will and determination came from.

Six months into the wedding planning Randy and Sam thought it was time for the families to meet and Cole found himself upstairs, sitting on the closed toilet with his head in his hands. He didn't know how he would get through the party.

Lisa knocked rapidly on the bathroom door. "Cole, they're here honey. Come on down."

Cole stood and braced his arms on the sink. "Be right there."

His chest felt tight and he felt nauseous. He could only hope that he was having a heart attack. He waited a minute and when nothing happened he took a deep breath and opened the door.

His eyes immediately went to Ann when he entered the living room. She was as beautiful as the last time he'd seen her. Prematurely graying hair cut short and sitting on her head like a silk cap.

She turned towards him and her eyes sparkled briefly before she turned back to Lisa. Early on in their relationship her eyes had caused him to ask if there were any Asians in her family. She'd arched one perfect brow at him in question.

"You know, your eyes are slanted."

"Yes I know Cole. Slanted eyes are not the sole domain of Asians; it's also a heavy African trait."

That was the first of many lessons, even though she jokingly once told him that she was not the walking encyclopedia of all that was black.

His eyes were then drawn to the young woman next to her. He looked into eyes that were the mirror image of his own and felt lightheaded.

"Dad, this is Sam's sister Dana."

Cole automatically offered his hand only to be met with reproachful eyes.

Ann stood and leaned down to whisper something to her child before kissing her on the forehead. She then turned to Cole and smiled before hugging him.

"It's been a while Cole."

There was no recrimination in her eyes, just understanding and a trace of pain.

"Dad, why didn't you mention that Sam's mother had been one of your backup singers?"

Cole turned to face Randy, away from the glare that pierced his heart. "I didn't realize it was Ann. She had a different last name then."

"Why didn't the two of you keep up with each other, Ann? Why didn't you continue on with the band?"

Ann smiled at Randy. "The touring life wasn't for me."

Dana snorted and opened her mouth, snapping it shut at a reproving look from her mother.

Cole sat on the arm of Lisa's chair and restrained himself from asking how and when. He was certain from looking at Dana and the looks she was giving him, that he was her father. Ann hadn't mentioned being pregnant and had never contacted him. He'd walked out on her which made him hurt, but to know that she'd carried his child, made his actions that much worse.

Lisa went into the kitchen to check on dinner and Sam and Randy drug Dana with them to look at the backyard, which they had decided to use as the site of the wedding.

Cole stared at Ann. Her face filled out by the years. "Why didn't you tell me?"

For a moment the pain shone through. "What would you have done with the information, Cole? If I didn't fit in the plan then there's no way a black mistress and an out of wedlock child would."

Cole looked away from Ann's clear gaze.

"Listen, Cole. I'm not angry anymore. Maybe I should have let you know. I can't go back and undo things and I'm not sure that I would even if I could."

Cole wanted to ask her what Dana was like. How she had wound up as a music teacher? Who she'd married? Instead he stayed silent. He knew that every action had a consequence and he was finally facing his.

Excusing himself, Cole wandered into the kitchen and found Lisa leaning against the sink, staring out the large window that overlooked the backyard.

"You know she's yours right?" She turned around to face him, her eyes lightly rimmed with red.

"Lisa, I didn't know."

"Cole, I want Randy to be happy, but him marrying Sam means having them in our lives and I don't think I can handle that. Not with me knowing that I was the backup because you couldn't have her."

Cole moved around in front of Lisa, and gathered her in his arms. They'd spent 22 years together, through thick and thin and there was no way that he would ever hurt her.

Looking over Lisa's shoulder he stared into Ann's eyes. She'd come into the kitchen and stood in the doorway. Before he could say anything she turned and walked out of the room.

"I'll handle it Lisa, somehow."

Chapter One

Zane stood at the podium looking over the crowd and grimaced. He hated getting up in front of the group this way. He knew the assembled employees were expecting the worst, after all, their vice president always left him with the dirty work: no raises this year, we're closing another office, cut the expenses. He scanned the crowd one last time and caught sight of someone new.

Dana Randolph sat in her seat waiting impatiently for the meeting to begin. She would much rather have been back at her desk getting familiar with the organization and reviewing the project files left behind by her predecessor than sitting in another boring meeting, in a room with no windows and apparently no ventilation system.

The assembled employees seemed antsy and even though the meeting was about to start, people continued their conversations, talking about anything but business issues.

Zane's eyes were back on the new face. It wasn't often that you saw a person of color. Or was it African-American? Black? Hell, it wasn't often that you saw someone who wasn't white in the crowd.

As the meeting bore on, Dana found herself doodling in her organizer. Five more minutes to go and she'd be free and able to run to the restroom. She was so involved in her doodling that she almost missed the announcement.

"And we'd like to introduce the newest member of the management team. Dana Randolph. Dana comes to us having spent the last 2 years as a Human Resources consultant. She has a dual masters' degree in Human Resources Management and International Business. Dana, stand up so everyone can see you."

Dana rolled her eyes slightly before plastering a smile on her face. Jim Beason knew she didn't like group introductions. They'd talked it about when he called out of the blue and offered her the job, the same way they'd talked about it during those long weekend-MBA courses at Boston College.

It always amused and to some degree disheartened her to think of how many people assumed that you got anywhere in business by doing good work, versus who you knew. She certainly did excellent work, but having gone to graduate school with Jim and having made connections, was the reason that she got her foot in the door.

She stood and smiled at everyone before taking her seat again.

Zane caught the little roll of the eyes and watched as she stood and then sat down. She was gorgeous in a not very New Hampshire way. Coppery skin with wiry hair pulled back into some kind of puff, a thick frame with enough curves to remind a man that she was in fact a woman and not a little girl dressed up in her mother's clothes.

Melanie Gray was perched on the edge of Dana's desk, a carefully placed side-split showing off her thigh to everyone who passed by the doorway. Zane's eyes drifted down her leg, enjoying the trip and only moved when Melanie shifted on the desk. He raised his eyes to find Melanie and Dana looking at him: Melanie with a sexy grin and Dana with an arched eyebrow and a vacant smile.

"Zane, come in and meet Dana."

Zane walked into the room, taking note of the absence of any personal photos on her desk.

Dana looked up at the man standing in front of her desk. She supposed he was good looking, if you liked your men 6 feet tall and 250 lbs with blond hair. It was obvious that Melanie liked what she was looking at. She stood smoothing her hands down her skirt-covered thighs and smiled coyly at him.

Dana didn't like her men that way. She preferred them dipped in chocolate or caramel, with easy swaggers and full lips. When she'd moved to New Hampshire, she'd expected that any dating would be done among the few other black people in the state. She had no intention of crossing a line that two others in her family had already crossed. Sure black men could be dogs too, but at least she'd know it was because he was a dog and not because of her skin color.

Zane smiled down into Melanie's face and swept his glance over to Dana. She was ignoring both of them and typing rapidly. He blinked several times and looked back at Melanie, who was still gazing up at him. He cleared his throat and checked his watch. When Dana finally looked their way, he could see the snicker in her gray eyes.

So...tall, white and handsome didn't like being ignored. She smiled to herself and stood, extending her hand across the desk towards him.

"Zane, was it?"

Zane was slightly flustered. He was used to women throwing themselves at him. He was one of the few less-than-elderly men at the company and one of the few unmarried. Even now Melanie was gazing at him as though she'd like to take him right there on Dana's desk. He stepped to the side, putting some space between the two of them and reached for Dana's hand, engulfing it.

"Yes, Zane. It's nice to meet you Dana."

Dana pulled her hand from his grasp and settled back into her chair. "If the two of you will excuse me."

Zane could tell that what she really wanted to say was, "Get the hell out of my office." He smiled and nodded, waiting for Melanie to leave the office first.

Melanie stepped through the doorway and stuck her head back inside, colliding with Zane's chest.

"I'll give you a call about brunch, Dana."

Dana nodded and her phone rang, cutting off whatever Zane was about to say.

Chapter Two

"Zane, I'm not having lunch with you." Dana continued working, not looking at him as he stood in the doorway, having wandered into her office.

Dana felt bad turning down his unspoken invitation. Actually his fourth invitation, but she didn't want to be part of the office rumor mill. Word was out that Zane and Melanie had gone out on a few dates and had even slept together and while she and Melanie were by no means friends, Dana had no intention of becoming embroiled in office drama.

Zane continued staring at Dana, willing her to meet his eyes.

She sighed and finally looked his way, meeting his gaze. She looked away and gestured to the seat in front of her. He slumped into the seat.

"You look like you've been ridden hard and put away wet. What's with the wrinkled shirt?"

Zane's sleeves were rolled up just enough to show a smattering of dark blond hair at his wrists and forearms and his tie was askew. He folded one leg over the other and she was startled to see that his belt and socks matched. Most of the men she worked with, wore pants that were too short, or their shoes were run down or they had perpetual stains on their shirts and they were afraid to do more than wear a seasonal tie to the office.

"Would you have lunch with me if I didn't look so ruffled?"

"Why do we need to have lunch together Zane?"

"I want to go over the Jacobsen files with you. You know we're bending over backwards to keep them happy."

"Why can't we go over it here?"

"I just thought it would be nice to get out of the building, get to know each other."

"You know me as well as you need to Zane."

They'd had the exact same conversation three times prior, in the three days prior. Same request, same responses. A light teasing banter underlying the disappointment she saw on his face each time.

"Why won't you have lunch with me?"

This was new addition to the program. She raised her head from the report that she'd been reviewing and looked at him. He'd gotten a haircut recently, spiky tendrils pointed up at the ceiling, making him look young and hip.

Dana took off the glasses she'd been wearing and put them on her desk. She pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling the start of a headache.

"A better question is why you want to have lunch with me, Zane."

"I want to get to know you better." He cast his winning smile at her, a cleft appearing in his chin and she had sudden thoughts of tasting it.

Deciding to put an end to the teasing she looked down at her report. "You mean you want what you can't have. It would be a notch on your bedpost to fuck the new woman in the office and a black one to boot."

She didn't have to look up at him to know that she'd shocked him.

"Is that what you think this is about, Dana? Because I'm white I can't have a genuine interest in you?" His defense was weak, in part because she had shocked him and because what she had said was true. He wasn't used to women not falling for him. And as much as he might not want to admit it, he was curious about what it would be like to be with someone black. Would she be any different from the other women? Did she taste different, sound different, move differently? Would she do different things?

When Dana didn't respond, he left her office in silence.

Chapter Three

A month later Zane stood in line with two other company employees, waiting to go through the security checkpoint at Logan airport in Boston. They were all headed to a conference in Austin, Texas.

In the next row over, Dana stood watching her colleagues. Zane had stopped popping into her office to chat and he didn't ask her out to lunch again.

Zane felt someone watching him and turned to scan the crowd. There she was. He'd taken to privately calling her "princess" and he nodded his head at her as their eyes met. She returned his silent greeting and moved forward in her line.

Zane didn't see much of Dana during the convention, as they had different tracks they followed. He caught glimpses of her here and there, standing in a group of other attendees, smiling up at a guy who was trying hard to make a play for her.

On the last morning of the convention, he spotted her sitting alone having breakfast and headed over to her table. Zane picked up the local paper that Dana had set beside her plate and looked at the item she had circled, an ad for a service that provided aesthetic services. She'd circled the ad for a Brazilian wax and he flinched involuntarily.

She glared at him around the mouthful of eggs and snatched her paper back.

He smiled and helped himself to the fruit on her plate, ignoring her scowl. A shadow fell over the table and Zane looked up to find the man that she'd been smiling at the day before standing at the table.

Dana looked between Brian and Zane and inwardly smirked as Zane made his excuses and left the table. That should send a message loud and clear that she didn't have time for him.

Dana avoided Zane as much as she could while still getting her work done. She emailed or left voice mail messages when he was out of the office. She kept her office door closed and always had her phone headset on, pretending to be on the phone. For his part, Zane gave her space.

They were assigned to go recruit at colleges in the region and during the staff meeting when it was announced, Melanie blurted out "Good, someone who'll be able to speak to the black students." Into the silence she giggled, waving her fingers to cover up her faux pas. Jim started to speak but Dana cut him off abruptly.

"And why wouldn't you be able to speak to the black students, Melanie?"

Melanie was oblivious to the current in the room and just giggled again. "You know, you can speak their language."

Dana looked directly into Melanie's eyes, and as with every other time she'd ever spoken very clearly, properly and with dangerous enunciation asked, "What language would that be Melanie?"

Jim stood, drawing everyone's attention and dismissed the meeting, keeping Melanie behind.

Zane walked down the hallway behind Dana watching her rounded bottom move enticingly in her fitted skirt, the seam running up the back of her stockings mesmerizing him.

Dana turned into her office and called out to Zane.

He stopped in the doorway of her office and looked at her expectantly. There had been no further lunch requests, no flirting or quick glances. Just business.

"How have you been, Zane?" Dana missed their camaraderie.

"I'm well, Dana, and you?" He didn't wait for her to answer before he started speaking again.

"We had a pretty good response from the recruiting drive; I'll drop off the resumes for you to take a look at."

"Zane, sit down."

He sighed and sat stiffly in the chair facing her desk, his forearms on his thighs. "What's up, Dana?"

She took a good look at him, noting the tension in his body. "So, we can't be friends because I wouldn't go out with you?"

"Dana, you didn't give us a chance to be friends. You assumed that I was just interested in getting you into bed."

Dana cut him off, "Zane, what other reason could you have for wanting to get to know me?"

Zane left Dana's office without looking back.

Chapter Four

Summer morphed into fall and before she knew it, it was time to fly back to Memphis for her sister's wedding. At the last minute she chickened out of calling Brian, the man from the convention, and asking him to go with her. Her mother threatened to disown her if she showed up alone, with her usual attitude.

Swallowing her pride she called the only other person she thought would be willing to go.

Turning over in bed, Zane tugged the pillow tightly over his head, ignoring the incessant ringing of the phone. The ringing stopped and then started up again and he opened his eyes and glared at the clock. It was 8 am, on a Saturday morning.

"Hello" For a moment Dana was speechless. His voice was deep, groggy and incredibly sexy.

Zane was about to put the phone down when he heard Dana's voice. "Zane."

"How'd you get my number?"

She was taken aback by the question and forced out, "I looked it up online."

"Oh. What's up, Dana?"

"I have a huge favor to ask of you."

In the ensuing silence he could hear his old-fashioned alarm clock tick off the seconds.

"I'm listening."

"I uh, need a date to my sister's wedding in Memphis. My mother has forbidden me to come to the wedding without one. I'll pay for your airfare and hotel."

Zane was silent for a moment. "Why aren't you asking that guy you hooked up with at the conference?"

"We didn't "hook-up," Zane. And I only saw him once."

Zane grunted, rolling over onto his back, and staring up at the ceiling.

"Listen I understand if you don't want to go."

"I didn't say I wouldn't go, Dana, it's just a surprise. When is the wedding?"

"In three weeks, on a Saturday afternoon. We'd fly home Sunday."

"And we'd go just as friends, right?"

He could hear the frown in her voice as she responded. "Yes."

"Fine, I'll go. Anything to help a friend out."

There was no change in their relationship in the weeks leading up to the trip. Dana was surprised that Zane didn't ask her out to lunch again. She'd resigned herself to going in payment for the favor.

Zane and Dana checked into the hotel Friday night and headed down to meet her family. He left it up to Dana to answer any questions about them, but did make sure to announce that they were just friends, which earned him a glare from Dana and her father and a broad smile from her sister, Samantha.

Dana watched her sister and Randy exchange vows, just the two of them standing with the minister. They'd chosen not to have attendants and had written their own vows. Despite herself, Dana choked up at the obvious love shared between the two.

At the reception Zane watched lazily as Dana shared a dance with her father, holding herself stiffly in his arms, refusing to even speak. Her mother, Ann, made the rounds, thanking family and friends for joining them and he walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder, and she allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor.

"What are your intentions towards my daughter, Zane?"

He smiled at the question and answered honestly. "I have no intentions whatsoever towards Dana. She's not willing to allow anyone to get close enough to her to have any intentions."

Ann sighed and nodded sadly. "That's because of her father and me."

Cole dropped Dana back off at her table and she watched her mother and Zane dance through two songs. Her mother reached up and kissed him on the cheek before gliding back to her own table, as Zane returned to sit beside Dana.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothing, I just thought I'd dance with your mother."

"Yeah, but what was the kiss all about?"

"Your mother is a charming woman, Dana. She was being gracious."

Just then, "Too Hot" by Cool and the Gang started and Zane stood, holding out his hand to her. "Let's Dance, Dana."

Dana stepped into the circle of his arms, her head fitting just under his chin. He inhaled whatever spicy scent she wore, her soft hair tickling his face. They swayed together, his hands drifting down to settle above the curve of her hips, pulling her into his body.

"Thank you for coming with me, Zane. I appreciate it."

He tucked a loose tendril of her hair behind her ear, looking down into her eyes and smiled.
"You're welcome, Dana."

Upon return to New Hampshire, life settled into a quick routine, with Zane stopping in to chat with her during the day, but never again asking her out.

Chapter Five

In February, the management group headed to Florida to meet with the auditors from the corporate home office. A week of sunshine and no snow had them all giddy with excitement.

Dana sat waiting to board the plane when she spotted Zane and Melanie strolling towards her. He was carrying Melanie's bag and his own and he dropped them both on the ground unceremoniously, before sitting on the other side of Dana, away from Melanie. When Melanie headed for the restroom, Dana put her book down and looked over at him.

"Lover's quarrel?"

Zane sighed. "Melanie and I aren't lovers, Dana."

"That's not the word around the office."

"Screw the office. I've never done anything with Melanie. She might have wanted us to, but I'm smart enough not to get involved in something like that."

Dana sat upright. "Wait, you wanted to get me into bed."

"Maybe. Of course I might just have wanted to be friends with you."

Dana harrumphed and started reading again.

Zane took a look at the cover of her book and nodded. "Gaiman, he's one of my favorite authors."

Keeping silent, Dana looked over at him and nodded.

"Have you read *Smoke and Mirrors*? I've been meaning to pick that one up."

Dana reached into her carryon case and pulled the book out, handing it to him. "You can borrow it, but don't break the spine. And don't forget to give it back to me."

He grinned at her and tucked the book away. "Did you ever get that waxing done, Dana?"

She frowned at him and was about to respond when she noticed Melanie headed their way. Zane laughed at the look on her face and whispered to her.

"I'm more than willing to shave you, as often as you want. You don't have to put yourself through that torture, Princess. But, I'm not a fan of the hairless look, so I'd leave Dana's mouth was left hanging open as the gate agent began calling for general boarding and Zane stood up grabbing his bag.

A week of meetings, combined with dinner meetings, left little time for much else, though Dana did manage to slip in and have the waxing done, all the while imagining how much more pleasurable it would have been to have it tended to tenderly. By Zane no less.

Dana settled into her first class seat on the red-eye flight back to Boston. She placed her book into the empty seat next to her and raised the armrest separating the seats, stretching out. She tugged the oversized blanket around her shoulders.

Her comfort didn't last long as she felt guilty enjoying the luxury of first class with an empty seat next to her. She spoke to the flight attendant and three minutes later a startled Zane dropped into the seat next to her.

She watched as he took a blanket from the cabin steward and reclined his seat. He murmured "Thank you" and closed his eyes.

Dana pulled out her phone, slipped her headphones on and dozed off.

At her light snoring, Zane maneuvered so that he was facing her as she slept. Her bottom lip hung open temptingly. She turned in her sleep and the phone fell to the floor. He bent and retrieved it, glancing at the playlist as he went to slip it into the seatback pocket in front of her.

He grinned as he noticed the titles of the "songs." She'd been listening to a podcast called "Open Source Sex." He slipped the headphones from around her neck and when she stirred and opened her eyes, he told her to go back to sleep.

"I can't sleep. Mind if I borrow your music?"

She nodded and lifted her head, giving him access to the headphones. Zane sat in silence, listening to the sex educator on the podcast talk about sex topics and read erotic stories. He grew hard as the words rolled over him in the dark.

A thought niggled at the back of Dana's sleepy mind; there was something she needed to do. She'd almost given up subconsciously working it out when it hit her. The podcasts!

She sat up suddenly and looked over at Zane, his eyes were closed and in the darkness she could just make out movement under his blanket. His back was to the aisle and she was sure that only she could see the furtive motions. She wanted to wake him but was embarrassed to let him know that she'd seen him. While she quibbled with herself, he opened his eyes, staring straight at her, his hand never ceasing movement.

Zane knew the moment that she realized what he was doing. He watched from below his lashes as she bit her bottom lip and vacillated between watching the blanket and looking at his face. When he opened his eyes, her eyes flew to his and he smiled softly, the smile turning to a grimace of pleasure as he released into the blanket.

Dana felt helpless to turn away from what should have been a private moment for him. She watched as his grimace smoothed away from his face and her eyes fell on the blanket, where a widening patch of dampness was visible.

"Good choice of music, Dana."

She blinked rapidly, trying to come up with an explanation and failed. He didn't break their eye contact as he regrouped and zipped up his pants. His fingers trailed through the stickiness as he folded the blanket, making sure the wet spot was hidden away.

When Dana didn't look away, he took a chance and brought his still wet finger up to her mouth, depositing a pearlescent drop of his seed onto her bottom lip. The drop hung precariously for a moment as she remained still. Just when he thought it would drop onto the leather seat, she darted out her tongue and saved it. Zane brought his hand up to cradle her cheek and ran his thumb over her bottom lip, tugging it down, the brown giving way to pink.

Zane moved closer, intent on kissing her, when a passenger from the coach section of the plane bumped into his back, on the way to the first class lavatory. The jostle broke the tension and she turned her head away, moving out of reach of his touch.

Dana sat fuming. She couldn't believe that she'd let Zane smear semen on her lips after jerking off. Or that she liked the salty, slightly smoky taste of him in her mouth.

After the passenger made his way back to coach, Zane looked back at Dana. He could see the walls in her eyes and he sighed.

"You'd feel better if you told me why you're fighting this so much Dana."

"Zane I just don't want to do this with you."

"Liar."

"Zane..."

"Dana, you just tasted me. You could have let it fall to the floor, or moved away when I moved to caress your lip, but you didn't. You sat there and watched me."

Dana couldn't argue the points and went for the truth.

Zane listened impassively as she told him about her father and mother.

"Dana, I agree your father was an ass."

She nodded and he smiled.

"But so was your mother."

"What?" She glared at him but he didn't back down.

"He shouldn't have left her that way, but she shouldn't have kept you a secret from him either Dana. She did what was easiest and safest for her. How did she know he wouldn't have welcomed you?"

"Because he walked out on her."

"I know and I said, he was an ass. She still should have given him the chance to do right by you. The problem between your parents belonged to them, not to you. Sometimes you have to fight for what you want, rather than running from it because it seems hard or because someone else won't like it. Honestly, they didn't stay together because they didn't want to."

"What are you saying? She should have run after him, throwing herself at him like she couldn't live without him?" Dana hissed with a barely controlled fury.

"I'm not saying that you should debase yourself or do whatever it takes Dana. But damn, you've got to at least let the other person know what it is that you really want. Your father's consequence for leaving her was that he did not know about you and the consequence for your mother just walking away, was not knowing if they could have made it. I'm just pointing out that no one is blameless in this. Except you."

Dana turned, leaning her shoulder against the window, staring out at the twinkling lights of the city below. She stayed that way for the duration of the flight, eventually falling asleep.

When the plane landed, she found that Zane had returned to his seat in Coach, taking with him the soiled blanket. She stroked the spot on her lip with her tongue, remembering his taste. She gathered her belongings and almost sprinted off the plane when the doors opened.

From his seat in back, Zane watched Dana make a run for it, not blaming her one bit.

Dana caught glimpses of Zane as he strode along the hallways of the office and they sat in on the same meetings, but had no other interaction.

Chapter Six

In April, Zane was out of the office for two months working on the project to open a new office in Toronto. Time flew by and summer arrived, bringing with it a heat wave, thunderstorms and hail.

Dana saw Zane briefly at various celebrations thrown by coworkers. He'd begun dating someone from the Boston office and Dana had the chance to meet her at a cookout. A tall beautiful blonde and as much as Dana wanted to dislike her, she couldn't. The woman was incredibly sweet and they shared a lot of the same interests. They spent half the night talking about places they'd each visited and wanted to visit in the future.

Dana went on a few dates with the friend of a college friend. James was so wrapped up in being black that it was clear that was all he was. When she turned the subject to any of her interests, he was quick to point out how those were things that black people didn't do or like: Travel "those people don't want us in their country"; Vietnamese, Thai or Korean foods "Hell no, let those crazy ass white people eat that stuff, I'll stick to fried rice." At one point he mentioned that she'd look better with straight hair and it was only the thought of how upset her mother would be at visiting her in prison that she refrained from stabbing him with her salad fork. And that was all on the first date.

Their second date didn't go any better.

James picked her up at her home before their whale watching tour to the Isle of Shoals. Upon entering her home, he whistled "Looks like those white folks are paying you good" He couldn't leave it at that of course "You know you probably making less than anybody else."

Dana grimaced as she grabbed her coat. James had an annoying habit of slipping into street vernacular, as though it somehow made him all the more black.

As she returned to the living room, James stood in front of a photo taken at her sister's wedding of the bride and groom and both sides of the family. From the way he was working his mouth she just knew that something ignorant was going to come out.

"Who is this?"

"My sister and her husband and their families"

He grunted. "Your sister decided to lay down with the devil huh? This is what's wrong with the black family today, the women tiptoeing out with other men, not supporting the black man."

Dana took off her coat and slipped into a bit of street lingo of her own.

"Negro, you need to get on up out of my house. Now"

She finally figured out that James was just cheap. Anything that might cost him any money was met with scorn and derision. She did wonder how someone could make it through college without having their interests and boundaries expanded but ultimately decided that James would have to be someone else's project.

Chapter Seven

In late August Dana pulled into her assigned parking space and had to double-check that she was in the right spot since there was a motorcycle in the spot immediately behind her own. Where Zane would normally park.

During the course of the day she strolled by Zane's office and spied a motorcycle helmet sitting on his desk.

"Dana?"

She turned with a start. "You scared me, do you always go around sneaking up behind people?" She knew she was making no sense but figured when caught, deflect attention.

He arched a brow and pointedly ignored the obvious -- that she was standing in his doorway, looking into his office.

"When did you start riding a motorcycle?"

"I've been riding since I was 16."

"I didn't know that."

He bit back the response that she'd never gotten to know much about him and motioned for her to step aside so that he could enter the office. She stood fidgeting for a moment as he sat down at his desk before moving further into the office and sitting down.

Zane gave her a questioning look "Is there something I can do for you, Dana?"

She smiled "Nope. Did I ever mention that my father rode a motorcycle? I was the only one in the family who would go riding with him."

Zane leaned back in his seat and nodded, a slight curve to his lips.

"Sarah must love riding with you. I noticed you have a touring bike, how far do you go on rides?"

"Ah, Sarah doesn't like motorcycle riding so she doesn't go with me. She worries."

"But it's usually the four wheeled cages that are dangerous, not the motorcyclist."

He grinned at her ranting.

Dana glanced at the clock on his desk and rose. "I guess I should get going, I have a conference call at two."

She walked towards the door and turned back to him, almost shyly. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"The memories of my father."

Friday evening Dana was puttering around the house, the windows open, the ceiling fan lazily stirring the air and her dinner in the oven.

She opened the door to an unexpected knock to find Zane standing there.

"Zane, what are you doing here?"

He smiled lazily. "I thought you might like to go for a ride."

He could swear that she squealed in delight before racing to the kitchen to turn off the oven.

"Let me go change. Where are we going?"

Zane walked into her living room, stopping in front of a table holding various family pictures. Dana dressed as a ballerina, a prom picture, her college graduation, a photo of the family from her sister's wedding and tucked in the corner of a frame, a photo of the two of them from their one and only dance at the wedding.

She called out impatiently "Are you still here? You didn't leave me did you?"

He slid the picture into his jacket pocket. "I'm still here and I thought we could take a ride down to the ice cream stand."

"Is it homemade ice-cream or some mass produced stuff?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's made on the premises."

"Did you ask Sarah if it was okay if I rode with you?"

"She'll be fine with it, Dana. I told you, she doesn't ride and doesn't like me riding. Besides, I wouldn't ask her if you could ride in my car with me so I don't see why this would be any different."

"Zane. Riding with someone is incredibly intimate. I wouldn't let some other woman ride on the seat I usually rode on. Not all pressed up against my lover."

"Well, I guess I could leave you here and go for a ride by myself."

She came out of the bedroom wearing jeans, low-heeled boots, gloves and a jacket made of denier fabric. She was also carrying a helmet.

"Is that a motorcycle jacket? And boots? You have your own helmet?"

She laughed at him. "I told you I went riding with my father. Let's go."

Outside, Zane zipped up his jacket, slid his helmet on and slipped on his gloves. Dana smiled and nodded as he threw one long leg over the bike and started the bike. She slid into place behind him, her knees pressed firmly against his hips.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you going to hold on?"

"I hadn't planned on it." She flipped the visor on her helmet down and nodded at him.

Zane put the bike in gear and pulled out of her driveway. Dana tucked herself behind him, allowing him to bear the brunt of the wind they were riding into and smiled to herself. Before long they were pulling into the parking lot of the ice cream stand.

As usual on summer nights in New England, there were kids running around in their wet bathing suits, men in shorts and women in sundresses, peering up at the list of flavors, debating whether dinner was sufficiently long enough ago to justify ordering a fried clam roll with their ice cream.

Standing in the long line, her hair compacted from wearing the helmet, she scanned the list of flavors.

"Mmm, they have cotton candy flavor. That's what I'm getting. How about you?"

Zane pretended to scan the list, but kept his eyes on the woman in front of him. "Probably butter almond."

Dana turned to him and frowned before turning back to the board. "Ooh, they also have peppermint stick. Are you sure you wouldn't like to try that?"

"I'm positive that I want butter almond."

"How about a scoop of each?"

Zane shook his head no.

The customers in front of them moved and Dana moved up to the window. The order taker had to ask her what she wanted twice as her eyes were glued to the man to her right who was taking possession of his peppermint stick cone.

Zane nudged her out of the way and placed their orders "A baby butter almond in a sugar cone and a baby cotton candy in a sugar cone." He handed over the \$7.50 and moved to the side to wait.

When their order was up, Zane grabbed both cones and a supply of paper towels and handed Dana her cone. They sat on one of the picnic tables set up and watched cars pull in and families spill out.

"How is the cotton candy?"

"I should have gotten the peppermint stick."

He laughed at her dejected tone. "Cotton candy not as good as you thought it would be?"

"Oh no, it's good, but that peppermint stick looked good too. I think I saw chunks of actual peppermint sticks in it."

"You can try it next week, princess."

He watched a smile spread across her face and light up her eyes. "Is that smile because of next week's bike ride or next week's ice cream?"

"Both."

She licked a spot of ice cream from her lower lip and he had to force himself not to lean in and stroke it away with his thumb.

Chapter Eight

As promised, the next Friday, and over the remainder of the summer, she and Zane went out every Friday night for ice cream. He found out of the way places that made their own ice cream and winding roads that afforded a beautiful view of rural New Hampshire. Often he let her talk him into ordering a flavor that she wanted to try and they would switch cones halfway through.

He coaxed her into talking about her childhood and learned that she loved her large extended family of cousins, uncles, aunts and held special delight in recalling the large Sunday dinners shared with the family after church.

He found out that she preferred cartoons to most anything else on television and that when he made her laugh, the deepest dimples he'd ever seen would appear in her cheeks.

Zane stopped by her office before leaving work for the day one day in late September. "We won't be able to take our ride tonight."

She frowned at him and bit her lip. "Oh."

He chuckled. "You hide your disappointment so well."

"Hot date with Sarah?" She'd looked forward to these Friday night rides and was annoyed that his love life was intruding on them.

"Nope. Family stuff."

She looked up from the report she was scanning. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. What do you have planned for the weekend?"

"Nothing much, a little light housekeeping since my ice cream buddy is blowing me off." She didn't mention that she probably needed to hit the gym since weekly ice cream tended to pack on the pounds.

"If you don't have any plans, would you like to join me? My family is having an end of summer bash up on the big lake. We'll all stay over the weekend and there is plenty of room for you to join us."

"I can't just show up at a family function."

"They won't mind at all, everyone is welcome: friends, family, friends of the family. You'll have a good time, I promise. If not, the next ice cream is on me."

She smiled, mulling it over. "Will Sarah be joining us?"

"I don't think so. So, pick you up at seven?"

"Zane, I don't know."

He walked out of her office. "Seven it is. Oh, pack something to wear to church on Sunday."

She watched as he stopped and spoke with Jim in the hallway before walking out of her sight.

Zane pulled into her drive at 6:45, past experience telling him that outside of the office she was always about 15 minutes late.

"Come in," she yelled when he knocked on the door. "I'm just about ready. I promise."

"Yeah yeah yeah, princess."

She emerged from the bedroom carrying a leather weekend bag. "Are you certain that your family won't mind?"

"Positive."

She kept him entertained on the ride up Route 16 by trying to convince him that King of the Hill was the best show to ever be shown on television.

They pulled into the cobblestone driveway and Dana whistled appreciatively. The house was constructed of stone and washed gray clapboard siding with banks of windows overlooking Lake Winnepesaukee.

"Come on, princess, I'm starving."

"I told you we should have stopped at that dairy bar."

"Uncle Zane, I missed you."

Dana looked down at the tow headed toddler who was hugging Zane's legs and looking up at him in hero-worship. Zane picked the child up and kissed him on the forehead.

"Are you supposed to be out front without an adult, Alec?"

"No, he's not, but you know that we can't keep him away from his uncle Zane."

A feminine version of Zane with an extended belly moved towards them. Zane hugged her and planted a kiss on her nose before turning to introduce them.

"Karyn and Alec, this is Dana. Dana, this is my sister and nephew."

Dana reached out to shake hands with Karyn and tried to maneuver herself so as not to hurt the pregnant woman. Karyn grinned at her. "It's no use trying to avoid it, I scare teenage boys in the grocery store when they see it."

Zane started walking towards the backyard and Dana was suddenly aware of the screams and laughter emanating from that area. As they walked she felt rather than saw, Karyn sizing her up.

"Zane and I are just friends."

Karyn laughed. "I didn't say anything."

"I know, but you were looking at me and I thought I should explain."

Karyn stopped her by touching her arm. "Before we meet the clan you should know that Zane has never brought a woman home with him. Not even as a teenager. He dated lots but as he put it, he was just dating to find out what he wanted."

Dana searched for something to say as Karyn began moving forward again. They rounded the post to a sweeping view of the lake and chairs and chaise lounges set up around a fire, teenagers gathered in one corner laughing, small children running around, darting between the groups of adults.

Zane was standing in a group of men, laughing but broke away when he saw her, passing his nephew off to an older man in the group.

"I want you to meet my parents."

"Zane, I don't know if this was a good idea."

"Why not?"

"I don't want people to get the wrong idea. Karyn said you've never brought someone home, I don't want them to think..."

Zane stared at her. "They won't get the wrong idea, princess. Come on."

They made the rounds and Zane introduced her to his parents and they stood talking and eventually his brother showed up with his partner and the cousins meandered over and soon Dana figured that she'd met his entire family.

During the course of the evening she'd had babies thrust into her arms, been corralled into playing volleyball and had eaten more food than she should have.

The evening wound to a close with some family members heading home, some camping out in various parts of the house and Dana was shown to a spare bedroom and settled down for the night.

"Psst. Dana, wake up" Zane tried to avoid waking anyone else up but clearly Dana slept the sleep of the dead. He crouched next to the bed, staring at her. Just then, she let out the most unladylike snore he'd ever heard and he laughed aloud.

Her eyes flickered open and she stared at him blankly. "Why are you in my room?" She yawned and rolled over with her back to him.

"Come with me, princess."

"Come where? What time is it? Why aren't you wearing a shirt?"

"It's 12:30 a.m., I don't wear a shirt to bed and we're going outside for a bit."

"No."

"Oh, princess. You are a difficult one to woo."

"Woo me when it's daytime, Zane."

He stood with his hands on his hips.

"Either you get up and come with me, or I'm getting into bed with you."

He thought she was daring him with her silence, until she snored softly. He smiled and placed the box on her pillow and leaned forward to kiss the corner of her mouth. "Happy Birthday, princess."

Zane's father was waiting in the hallway outside the bedroom and smiled at his son. Before he could say anything, Zane stopped him.

"We weren't doing anything. She's still asleep."

His father folded his arms and waited.

"I was just dropping off a gift, today is her birthday."

His father straightened from the wall. "Son, take a walk with me."

Dana woke to blue eyes staring into her face. Blue eyes in a face covered with maple syrup.

"Alec!" Karyn whispered furiously. "Leave Dana alone."

Dana stretched and smiled. "It's okay, Karyn, I'm awake."

"I'm so sorry. He's too fast for me to keep up."

Alec climbed into bed and Dana cringed thinking about the syrup staining the sheets. "Uncle Zane with you?"

She cut her eyes to Karyn, blushing. "No, Uncle Zane is not here."

"What's this?" Alec had picked up a small wrapped box and was turning it over. "Pretty."

His mother stepped in and scooped him up. "Alright, time for you to wash your face and leave Dana to open her present."

"Present for me?"

His mother shook her head. "No, the present is for Dana. A bath is for you."

Dana turned the box over in her hands, before carefully removing the wrapping paper.

"Hi"

She hadn't noticed Zane standing in the doorway watching her.

"Hi yourself." She motioned towards the box in her hand. "What is this for?"

He moved into the room, closed the door and leaned against it. "Your birthday."

"How did you know?"

"Why wouldn't I know, Dana?" He walked across the room and crouched in front of her. "Open it."

"Zane, I can't accept this. What about Sarah? You shouldn't have."

"Dana, stop fighting this. Sarah and I aren't seeing each other any longer."

"When did that happen?"

"When I took you out to ride the first time."

"But, Zane"

He took the box from her hand and opened it. Nestled against a black silk background was a thin, stiff gold bangle bracelet with a dragonfly charm. The dragonfly had streaks of color along the

body and wings made from crushed gems. He took it out of the box and slid it over her wrist, his thumb stroking her skin.

"Zane, you shouldn't have."

"Shh."

"Do you like it?"

"Of course. I love dragonflies."

"We've never kissed, Dana."

She whispered, "I know."

"May I?"

Dana nodded.

"You have to say it, Dana. I've waited too long for this."

She looked down and Zane tipped her chin up with his finger. "Tell me, princess."

"Yes, I want to kiss you."

Zane stroked his thumbs along her jawbone and up over her cheeks. He kept his eyes open as he moved closer. He brushed his lips against her mouth and placed a kiss in the corner of her mouth. Her eyes fluttered closed and he placed a soft kiss on each eyelid. He pulled down her lower lip with his thumb, mesmerized by the pink flesh.

He slid his tongue over her lips before sliding inside to glide over her teeth. He pressed his tongue against her teeth until she acquiesced and opened her mouth. His tongue slid inside, sliding against her tongue, tasting her. He tugged her lip into his mouth, suckling lightly until she moaned. He pulled his mouth away, leaving her mouth bruised and swollen and leaned his forehead against her own.

"Dana, is this what you want?"

"Do I want what?"

He opened his eyes, staring into hers. "This, this relationship. Do you want me?"

"I don't know...I thought you were still with Sarah and we were friends."

"What are you so afraid of? I'm not your father and you're not your mother."

He growled in frustration and took her mouth again, his need overriding his intention to take it easy. His tongue plundered and his teeth nipped, calling forth moans from her throat.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I want this."

"Do you want me?"

"Yes, I want you."

"Why?"

She opened her eyes. "I trust you. I feel safe with you. I enjoy spending time with you" She smiled "I'm in lust with you."

Someone knocked on the door in passing and called out "Breakfast is ready."

"I suppose I should get up."

Zane rose from his position on the floor and her eyes followed the length of his muscular legs. As he walked out the door he turned to look at her. "I'm willing to settle for lust. But only for now, Dana."

Chapter Nine

Dana got up and showered, sliding into a sundress and made her way into the kitchen. A buffet was set up and she filled a plate with fruit and oatmeal.

"Is that all you're having, Dana?" Zane's mother looked on in concern.

"I'm still stuffed from last night and we go for ice cream every Friday, I need to lose some weight."

Karyn walked into the kitchen with her hand pressed against her back. "My water broke."

Everyone sprang into action. Her husband Geoff raced for the overnight bag, her mother called Geoff's parents to let them know that they were headed for the hospital, her father went to pull the car around to the front and Zane called the teenage girl who often babysat when the family was at the lake.

Zane hung up the phone and turned to Dana. "You can ride with me, Dana."

Dana frowned "I can't go to the hospital with you, this is a private family moment."

His mother patted her shoulder, "Dana, it's not worth fighting with him on this, we want you to join us. Besides, you and this child will share the same birthday, you may as well be there for the birth."

The family spread out in the small waiting room, every eye trained on the door each time someone walked past.

"That's a beautiful bracelet, Dana." His mother looked over the top of her eyeglasses and then back down at the blanket she was knitting.

She blushed. "Thank you."

Zane stood and stretched and glimpsed a trail of silken hair on his stomach as his shirt pulled out of his cargo shorts.

Geoff entered the room, beaming. "It's a girl. 9 pounds, 6 ounces, full head of hair and a temper."

His brothers-in-law hugged him and his mother wiped away tears. A nurse tapped Geoff on the shoulder to let him know that mother and child were ready for visitors.

Zane slid into the seat next to Dana as both sets of parents went off to coo over the family. He threaded his fingers with hers and rubbed his thumb against her palm.

They sat in silence until the parents joined them and it was their turn. Karyn was sitting up in bed, Geoff perched on the bed next to her, holding his daughter. Zane still held her hand and

tugged her towards the child. She was perfect, her eyes wide open, looking at the faces above her.

"She's gorgeous. What's her name?" She reached out and stroked her finger against the baby's silken scalp.

"Hannah Rose."

The baby yawned and closed her eyes and Zane and Dana left the parents staring down at their child.

It was early afternoon when they headed back to the house and relieved the babysitter. Zane paid her and then let Alec know that he had a baby sister. Dana searched through the refrigerator and whipped together omelets for a late lunch. The three sat down at the table, with Alec telling them about his day and eventually the rest of the family filtered in. Geoff took his son to see his mother and new sister. The house settled into quiet as everyone grabbed something to eat and wandered off.

Zane turned from the sink where he was cleaning the dirty dishes, "Take a walk with me?"

Dana nodded and grabbed a light sweater to throw over her shoulders. They walked along the stone path that circled the perimeter of the yard, the drone of motorboats on the lake in the distance.

They came to a hammock strung up in a clearing, secluded from the house by a stand of trees, but overlooking the water. Zane kicked off his shoes and sat down, steadying himself before lying back. He held out his hand and Dana took it, followed his lead and kicked off her shoes, tucked herself against his side.

"Thank you for coming up with me."

"Thank you for inviting me."

Her hand rested on his chest and she watched it rise and fall with each breath he took.

"Your family is very accepting."

She watched his mouth curve upwards.

"Karyn said that you've never brought anyone home before. Why is that?"

"I hadn't found the right person to bring home."

He opened his eyes and watched her digest his words before rolling to his side, facing her. "Dana, I know you thought from the beginning that I wanted to sleep with you. And you were not wrong, because if I'm honest, you are beautiful and I still want to sleep with you." He smoothed his fingers over her face.

"The difference is that now I know you, and I want to keep learning about you, I want to be here with you, every year. I want to watch Alec and Hannah Rose grow up and add our own children to the family." He leaned forward and brushed his nose against her cheek before whispering against her lips, "I love you and I'm willing to wait until you admit that you love me."

"Why, why me and not Sarah or someone else?"

"Because Sarah doesn't try to sweet talk me into trying new ice cream flavors just so she can have some. Because you are funny, intelligent, good with children, responsible, love my motorcycle, sweet, kind, beautiful, sexy." With each word he placed a kiss along her neck, ending up at her lips. "Because someone else doesn't make me want to give them my heart."

He placed his mouth over hers and she immediately allowed him entrance, her tongue sliding out to meet his as she turned on her side facing him.

He slid his mouth over her cheek and lapped at her earlobe. "Let me show you how good we can be together, princess."

She sighed against his chest, "Why do you call me that?"

He pulled his head back and looked at her incredulously. "Dana, you are so far above me that I don't know why some dashing prince hasn't scooped you up and galloped off into the sunset with you."

"Fairy tales don't interest me, Zane. I suspect that once you've turned the page from 'The End' that the prince and princess discover they don't have much in common."

Zane stroked her side, his hand migrating to her back, drawing imaginary lines up and down her spine through the fabric of her dress.

"Why haven't you tried to make love to me?"

With the hand on her back he tugged her closer until she could feel the evidence of his arousal. "I decided that I didn't want a taste of something that I couldn't have every day, and I don't want you to regret it and run. I want you to want me as much as I want you. I'm willing to wait."

Dana thrilled at the feel of him, long and thick against her stomach, and pressed closer. She lapped at the skin at his throat, her tongue drawing intricate patterns upon his skin.

"Are you trying to drive me crazy, princess? If you keep that up, there's a good chance that we'll be adding a child to this family in about nine months."

His words sparked something primal within her and the thought of taking his seed within her, creating a baby with him, was powerful and erotic. She knew that if they created a child together, it wouldn't be a mishap or an accident. It wouldn't be because they'd failed to use protection, but because they had wanted to do so.

"You seem pretty damn sure of yourself."

He used both hands to pull her against him and rocked back and forth. "Shouldn't I be?"

In the falling dusk, he teased her with kisses and fully clothed thrusts until she came for him, her body humming at his touch and her cry muffled against his chest.

Hand in hand they walked back to the house, lights blazing inside as more family stopped by for dinner. They took their places and joined the conversation, his touch often light against her shoulder, back and neck.

His parents looked at one another and smiled.

At the end of the night he walked her to her bedroom and left her with a kiss on her nose.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, the family rushed around, getting ready for church. Geoff and Alec were off to the hospital to collect Karyn and Hannah Rose. Zane's mother rode with them as they followed his brother and his partner.

"Is your father not joining us for church, Zane?"

"He left early."

The church, seemingly lifted directly from a postcard of bucolic New England village squares was packed with locals and summer people.

Dana's eyes widened as Zane's father rose from the pulpit and approached the podium wearing his collar. She poked Zane in the side. "Your father is a pastor? Why didn't you tell me?" She blushed and whispered furiously "We made out in the garden, Zane!"

He shushed her and earned a glare. "Yes, he's a pastor, but he's also human. And he knows how I feel about you."

Zane's father began speaking on marriage and love. He stressed that the love seen in Hollywood and on television was not something to emulate. That instead of listening to love songs on the radio that everyone would do well to read the Song of Solomon.

He cautioned those who were engaged or thinking about marriage:

"When the happy couple takes their vows and promises to love one another for better or worse, they are thinking that if a flood comes and destroys their home, that they will still have love. If one of them is ill, the other will be the tender nurse. But in reality, 'for worse' is not the catastrophes. It's the little things that wear you down, the bad habits and the taking one another for granted. 'For worse' is not a flood or an illness. It is the dirty socks on the floor, the working late and the times we avoid talking about an issue in hopes that it will go away. That is what you must be ready to handle."

Zane reached for her hand and held it tight.

After church, the family sat down to an early dinner with everyone fawning over mother and child. After dinner, Zane and Dana packed up to head for home.

She thanked his parents for their hospitality and hugged everyone goodbye, with his mother suggesting that they come up as often as possible.

Zane kissed his parents, hugged Alec and his sister and picked Hannah Rose up, smiling down into her face before kissing her forehead.

The drive to southern New Hampshire was quiet and when Zane pulled into her driveway she sat in the car for a moment, unsure how to proceed.

"What now, Zane?"

He looked at her and lazily smiled. "Right now - I'm going to carry your bag to the door, kiss you goodnight and go home. Tomorrow -- I'd like to take you to dinner and we'll go from there."

She nodded. Zane walked her to her front door, waited while she unlocked the door, dropped the bag just inside the door and made her stand at the door while he checked the house to make sure no one was waiting inside for her. He came back, pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she melted in his arms. He then pulled himself away and opened the door to leave.

"Would you like to stay for a while?"

Without turning around to face her, he answered, "I can't. The only thing keeping me from being inside you right now is that I need you to love me, Dana."

Dana unpacked, ran a load of laundry and returned calls from her mother and sister before going to bed.

At work the next day, she sat in endless meetings and pondered where her heart was leading her. She locked her office door and called her best friend from college.

"Wait, did you just say that you're involved with a white man?"

Denise knew her family history and knew of Dana's previous protestations that she would never date anyone other than a black man, even if it meant being a spinster.

Grudgingly Dana responded, "Yes. His name is Zane."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I mean, why. What's wrong, you been reading too many headlines talking about 70% of all black women never marrying or the dearth of available, non down-low black men who have never been incarcerated?"

"No!" She was angry on Zane's behalf, as though he was only good enough to date as a last resort.

Denise laughed. "Well, that's good to know, girl. I was worried there for a minute but I can see from your emphatic defense of Zane that you are indeed going into this with your heart."

"Yeah but I don't know why."

"What draws you to him?"

"He's smart, successful, funny, loves his family, works hard, fine, sexy, has beautiful hands and girl you should see his thighs."

Denise laughed and shook her head on the other end of the line. "Everything sounds in order. So what is the problem?"

"I don't know. What if it goes wrong?"

"Sweetie, it could go wrong with Raheem from down the block. Hell, to hear you tell it, it went wrong with James before you'd even had a second date. If it goes wrong, it goes wrong because it wasn't meant to be, not because it was predisposed to go wrong because he's white and you're white."

Dana growled and Denise laughed and apologized "Okay, that was wrong of me." Denise didn't buy into Dana only claiming the black half of who she was and they'd had long drawn out conversations about what Denise called "the artificial construct of race."

Dana said goodbye before Denise could launch into a discussion on socio-economic factors and discrimination.

Denise hung up the phone on her end and turned to her partner, Serafeim. She gazed upon his olive skin and dark curling hair and smiled.

"Who was that?"

"Dana. She's dating someone white." She grinned and waited.

He raised up on one elbow, naked from the chest down, a sheet covering his waist and legs. "Not Ms. "Ain't nothing as beautiful as black love" Dana?"

"One and the same." She whipped the towel from around his hips and ran her hand down his flattened stomach. "Where were we?"

Chapter Eleven

Dana arrived home at 5:30 and jumped in the shower. Zane was picking her up at 7 and she wanted to be ready, though she knew it would be more along the lines of almost ready.

At 6:45 he knocked on the door and his breath was taken away when she opened it. Her brown skin was beautifully accented by the wine colored wrap dress she wore. The dress clung in all the right places and Zane moved inside and pulled her to him. He buried his face in her hair and held her, tipping her head up, he kissed her sweetly.

"You look gorgeous, tonight."

Dana looked him over and smiled. "Thank you. You don't look so bad yourself." That was an understatement. Zane wore a blue dress shirt that matched his eyes, camel colored dress pants that outlined his thighs and smelled wonderful.

He escorted her to the car with a hand at the small of her back, opened her door and then slid behind the wheel. "I made reservations at a place on the water in Hampton. I hope that's okay."

Dana nodded.

The car quietly slid along the roads and Dana rolled down her window, the sweet night air filling the car. Before long, they arrived at the restaurant, situated on a pier.

They sat out on the deck, the scent of saltwater heavy in the air and the crash of waves a soothing backdrop.

Over salad, he recounted stories about his childhood. When he didn't think she was looking he stared at her in awe. Somehow, he hadn't realized how stunning she was. The light from the candles cast a warming glow over her skin, the small gold hoops in her ears reflected the light as well.

"You're staring. Do I have spinach in my teeth?"

"No. You are stunning."

She blushed and excused herself from the table. She could feel Zane's eyes follow her across the restaurant.

After dinner, they moved inside where a jazz quartet was playing. A small dance floor had been cleared and a few couples were up swaying to the music. Zane held out his hand and led her to the dance floor, wrapping her in his arms. Her head tucked beneath his chin and they moved together as one.

After three dances, Dana's high-heeled shoes were killing her and they headed north. She reached for Zane's hand and cradled it in her lap, before closing her eyes. Once again, Zane dropped her off with nothing more than a kiss before leaving.

Chapter Twelve

Over the next two weeks, they had dinner once at his place, once at hers and twice at restaurants. She asked Zane not to plan anything for the upcoming weekend and he drove her crazy trying to guess what she was planning.

Friday afternoon, they left work early and Dana picked Zane up and they headed down Route 16 and then up Route 1 heading into Maine.

"York Wild Animal Kingdom!" That was his fifth guess so far.

"No."

"Flo's hot dog stand?"

"Nope." Though they did stop at Flo's for hot dogs.

They passed through Kennebunk, York, Portland. They stopped at the map store to take a picture of Zane in front of the huge globe outside. She made a u-turn to get back to an ice-cream stand that was visible from the road and still open that late in the season.

When they pulled into Camden, Zane's eyes lit up. "Are we going on a windjammer tour?"

She grinned at him. "Aww, you guessed!"

Dana opened the trunk and Zane grabbed both bags. They walked a block to the pier and Zane dropped both bags, standing in awe staring at the massive schooners pulled into port.

He turned to Dana, "How did you know?"

"I called Karyn and asked what she thought you'd like."

Zane wrapped her in his arms and hugged her tightly, "Thank you."

The captain greeted them and welcomed them aboard. There were 12 other people on board, in addition to the ship's crew. A quick orientation, review of safety procedures and the itinerary for the next two days and they were assigned to their private cabins.

Zane turned to Dana with a questioning look.

"I didn't think you'd mind sharing a room."

Zane didn't point out that it also meant sharing the double bed.

They stowed their clothing and joined the rest of the group on deck as the dinner bell rang. Zane stood behind Dana and wrapped his arms around her waist. After a simple but filling dinner of haddock and vegetables they joined in conversations around them.

Zane yawned and they stood and bid everyone a goodnight. The ship would sail early the next morning and he wanted to be up at the crack of dawn. They entered the cabin and Zane stood looking out the porthole. Dana grabbed a small bag and headed to the head. She washed up and changed into pajama pants and a t-shirt before heading back to the cabin.

Zane turned as she entered the room and smiled at her kitten pajama pants.

"Don't say a word, Zane." She picked up her book and slid into bed.

Zane grabbed his doppel bag and headed to the head. Zane returned and stowed his bag, removing his shirt and pants. Clad only in his boxers, he climbed into bed next to her.

"There's a book for you in my bag."

"I don't think I'll be able to read tonight. I'm too excited."

Dana put down her book, reached up and turned off the light above the bed.

"Goodnight, Zane."

Dana saw Zane's teeth flash in the darkness before he pulled her towards him, cradling her head against his chest.

"Goodnight, princess."

When Dana woke at 6 am, she was in the cabin alone. She took a quick shower and made it up onto the deck just in time to see a shirtless Zane help hoist the mainsail. She made her way to the galley and pitched in, peeling and slicing potatoes for the hash.

After breakfast, she retrieved her book and settled in the sun, her bare legs pressed against the warm wooden deck.

Zane dropped down next to her and bumped his shoulder against hers. She lowered her book and her gaze settled on his legs. Covered with dark blonde hair, they seemed to stretch for miles.

"Did you see the dolphins?" A pod of dolphins had raced along side the ship earlier and Zane had snapped several photos.

"I did, yes."

In the distance they could see brilliant reds and golds of the trees along the Maine coast as the ship smoothly cut through the water. The sails flapped in the breeze and Zane stretched happily.

"I'm a lucky man."

The ship pulled into port in a small town and Zane and Dana disembarked and explored the seaside village. They returned to the ship with the rest of the passengers a few hours later, having purchased souvenirs and explored the town on foot. Onboard, a guest pulled out a guitar and began playing as the ship moved back into open water.

Dana inhaled the sweet ocean air and stretched. From her position she watched Zane help set out the evening meal. He was completely at ease and sure of himself. He looked over to Dana and winked, a smile lighting up his face. His skin was lightly tanned from the two days spent out on the water and laugh lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes as he laughed at something she couldn't hear.

After dinner, the guitarist began strumming softly and Zane pulled Dana to sit between his legs, his arms wrapped around her and her head tucked beneath his chin. Fat droplets of rain splattered the deck, at first, a drop here and there, and suddenly everyone was gathering their belongings and heading to the cabins below.

Dana slipped away to the shower. She managed to shave her legs and wash her hair before someone knocked on the door to see if they could get in next.

Zane was lying in bed on top of the sheets and blanket when she returned to the room. He moved over to let her in and she settled into bed beneath the covers. Zane didn't take his eyes off her.

"You're staring."

"You're wearing glasses."

She looked at him over the tops of her glasses and shrugged her shoulders. "My eyes need a break from the contact lenses."

"I'm surprised you haven't had corrective laser surgery."

"No way, no how. No one is getting near my eyes with lasers, phasers, scalpels, none of it. I'm fine with contacts and glasses."

"You know, Karyn had it done. It's perfectly safe. They've been doing it for years in Canada."

"And they will have to be doing it for another 50 years so I can see the long term effects before I even consider it."

Zane grinned, slid out of bed and grabbed his bag. "I'm going to take a shower."

By the time Zane returned to the cabin, Dana had slid into his spot in bed. He stood looking down at her as she pretended to read her book.

"Move over, princess."

"What if I want to sleep on this side?"

Zane didn't move. "Not going to happen. It's my side of the bed."

"But you have more room over here. I'm pressed up against the wall on that side." She wasn't. The bed had plenty of room for the two of them.

"Tough luck, princess. I'm larger than you are, and I have to be able to fight off any pirates who board the ship in the middle of the night."

She rolled her eyes.

"It's true. I'd give my life willingly, to protect you."

She grumbled as she moved over and he climbed into bed. He reached up and turned off the overhead lamp, leaving the moon to illuminate the dark cabin. She watched his shadow on the wall mimic his movements.

"Goodnight, Zane."

"Night, princess. I love you."

The gentle rocking of the boat and the sound of rain steadily hitting the deck above was the perfect lullaby.

"I love you, Zane."

Instantly Zane was leaning over staring into her face.

"Tell me again."

She smiled drowsily. "I love you."

He drew her into his arms, cradling her against her chest. His voice was husky when he spoke. "Never stop telling me that."

He ran a finger lightly over her bottom lip before stroking her eyelids and her cheekbones with his thumbs. He kissed her earlobe, sucking it into his mouth, his breath hot against her skin. His fingertips trailed over her collarbone and down her left arm, her smooth skin giving way to a patch of roughness.

Her eyes met his and she smiled.

"What's this?"

"A birth control patch."

He shifted his position, pressing her into the bed as he settled between her thighs. He buried his head in the crook of her neck, kissing her shoulder, his hands fluttering over any bare flesh before settling at her waist.

He cupped a breast in his hand and stroked her nipple through her t-shirt. As the nipple hardened he replaced his finger with his mouth, wetting the t-shirt with his tongue and grazing with his teeth, his breath catching at the darkness of her nipple visible through the sheer white material. He lowered his head once again, suckling heavily, his tongue rasping against the material.

Dana arched her back in pleasure and moaned.

His fingers found their way under her shirt, lifting it away from her body and over her head. Her breasts were perfect. High and tipped with dark chocolate circles with thick nipples. His thumbs swept over both nipples, flicking back and forth before leaning forward and suckling one nipple into his mouth, running his tongue around it in circles, sucking harder followed by gentle nips that turned to firm tugs as she wound her hands in his hair.

He deftly plucked at the other nipple with his fingers, pulling it taut, applying and relaxing pressure. Her sighs encouraging him, quickening his own responses. He released the nipple from his mouth and licked the underside of her breast, his tongue trailing into the valley between her breasts before latching on to the other nipple.

Leaning back on his haunches he smiled down at her, trailing his hands down her smooth stomach and slipping them into the waistband of her panties. Grasping the sides of the panties he slid them over her hips, his eyes on hers. He stroked one hand along her stomach, resting it at the top of the juncture of her thighs, his fingers massaging her mound. Her hips rose slightly from the bed and he grinned.

"Patience, love. It seems as though I've been waiting for you for years. You can wait a few more minutes."

He gave in to the temptation before him, sliding his finger over her mound, tugging lightly at the wiry hairs there and smiling to himself.

Dana moaned with each sharp tug and growling, sat up and rose to her knees facing him. She ran her hands up his torso, teasing his nipples and delighting in his audible pleasure. She bent her head and lapped lightly at his nipples, drawing them into her mouth by turn. Her teeth applied the slightest pressure before licking around the nipple once again. She sucked and licked the skin at the base of his throat and grasped his forearms before sliding her hands down his arms, her touch featherlight.

Zane groaned as she stroked one hand down his stomach, repaying him by tugging lightly at the trail of hair leading into his boxers. Her hand brushed his erection through the material,

once...twice...before grasping it and sliding the material along his shaft. She slipped her hand inside, aroused by the heat and feel of him.

Zane pushed her back against the bed again, his mouth on hers as he parted her folds, collected wetness on his fingertip as he slid his finger up and down, dipping briefly inside before pulling out to circle her clit before sliding his finger into her mouth. She parted her lips, her tongue curling around the finger, tasting herself.

Zane groaned and replaced his finger with his tongue as he removed his shorts with one hand. They both sighed at the first bare contact. Zane closed his eyes and attempted to gather his composure, rocking his hips as her hands trailed over his ass.

With nothing more than a look she urged him on and with his mouth on hers he slid inside. He was still for a moment, allowing the urge to come immediately pass. She was wet, warm and seemingly molded to his length and width. She bent her knees and pressed them against his hips and he began thrusting, changing the tempo and depth according to her facial expressions. When she smiled dreamily, he was shallow and slow, pulling out to drag his cock against her clit before sliding back in. When her mouth formed a small "o" he thrust in deep, hard, pressing forward, pumping rapidly.

She raised her hands to her breasts, pulling the nipples as he stroked in and out and he murmured "I love you" before nudging her hands away with his head and taking her breast into his mouth, raking the nipple with his teeth. She cried out and tightened around him, her legs dropping to the bed and quivering as she came. He followed soon after, filling her and content to remain inside her as he softened.

He woke in the night to find her between his legs, her tongue running up and down his length before she inserted her tongue between the head of his cock and his foreskin. He motioned for her to come to him and she shook her head. He gave in and eventually his hips rose from the bed to meet her mouth as she loved him. She cradled his sac in her hand before sucking it into her mouth gently. He came suddenly when he realized that she was coming from having him in her mouth.

Dana woke the following morning to Zane sitting on the side of the bed waiting for her.

"Hi"

He turned to look at her, his expression worried.

"What's wrong?"

"What did last night mean to you?"

She reached her hand out and drew him down to the bed. "Zane, I'm not running."

"Are you sure?"

She slipped her hands under the t-shirt he was wearing and caressed his skin. "Positive."

Chapter Thirteen

The snow started early in November and they spent weekends snowshoeing and cross country skiing before spending the evenings in bed cuddled under blankets.

In Zane, Dana had found her sexual match. Often, at the end of a long day for both of them, he was content to pull her down into his lap, her legs spread open and stroke her to a quivering climax. She had pulled a dressing mirror into the corner of the room, opposite the deep chair where they spent time making love and watching his pale hands caress her brown body, dipping inside before slipping into his mouth, gave them both pleasure, as did watching her rise and fall along his length.

One lazy Saturday morning, the yard was covered in heavy wet snow perfect for use in snowballs. This was evidenced by the perfect snowball that landed in the center of her chest.

"No fair! You're supposed to give me five minutes to build up my stockpile."

Zane shook his head and grinned. She came up with the most ridiculous rules. "Whoever heard of a head start in a snowball fight?"

Dana had a retort on her lips when her cell phone rang. She answered the phone to the sound of her sister screaming hysterically and sank down into the snow.

Zane stood next to Randy under the graveside tent, each watching helplessly as the sisters clutched one another, their grief palpable as the casket was lowered into the grave.

In the limousine on the ride back to her mother's home, Zane held Dana against his chest as she cried, her sobbing broken by the occasional hiccup. He stroked her back gently and glanced quickly at his parents who had flown down for the funeral.

Her voice was so low that he didn't hear her at first, the steady rainfall outside drowning her out.

"She was the first person to love me. The first person I loved. What will I do without her?"

Zane didn't have an answer to the question. He could only hold her.

Dana spent a month in Memphis, working with her sister to sort out their mother's belongings and pack up the house. She also spent considerable amount of time thinking.

"I'm coming home."

Zane waited. Dana had put off returning home for a month. He didn't doubt that she had a lot to do, but as time wore on, he was afraid of what she might be thinking.

"Zane?"

"I'm here, love."

"Did you hear me? I'm coming home."

Zane wanted to ask her if she was sure, but settled for asking her when she would arrive. Dana declined his offer to pick her up from the airport. She needed time alone.

Dana walked into her home, noting the fresh flowers in a vase near the door and the neatly piled mail on the dining room table. She dropped into a leather arm chair and looked around. The world seemed less bright without her mother. Her sister was now six months pregnant and Sam's grief was gently giving way to excitement.

Dana had been home for an hour when the doorbell rang. She didn't bother checking through the peephole, anticipating that it would be Zane. She threw open the door to find the delivery guy from her favorite Pan-Asian restaurant on the landing. He handed her the bag and nodded.

"Wait, I didn't order this."

"Someone ordered and paid for papaya salad and spring rolls."

Those were two of her favorite dishes. She closed the door and walked to the kitchen. She called Zane at the office and hung up when his voicemail greeting played.

Twenty minutes later, having eaten and stored the leftovers, Dana walked out of the kitchen, just as the front door opened and Zane walked in. Before she could speak, Zane reached out for her hand and led her to the sofa, tugging her onto the sofa next to him.

"Are you staying?"

"Zane, we need to talk."

"All I want to know is if you're staying. If the answer is no, then I don't have anything to say. If after all"

She cut him off, "I'm pregnant."

"we've been...Did you just say that we're pregnant?"

Dana felt a frisson of hope at we."

"Yes, we are."

He finally raised his head to look at her. She was more beautiful than he remembered. She was glowing though the sadness remained in her eyes.

"Then why did you stay away so long?"

"Zane, I needed time to think. I don't want to live my mother's life. Unmarried and pregnant by my white lover."

He nodded and placed his hand on her still flat stomach. "I understand."

"You do?"

"Yes. I understand that you've lost your mind."

"What?"

He looked at her in astonishment. "We aren't having a child out of wedlock, Dana. We'll be married when all our children are born. There's a church and minister in Alton, ready when you are."

She exhaled a nervous breath. "Are you certain you want to get"

He cut her off by cradling her head in his hands and pressing his lips to hers. "Don't you dare ask me that question, Dana." He tugged her head back, exposing the length of her throat and running his tongue along it. "If you need to ask me if I want to spend the rest of my life with you, to raise children with you and to take care of you, then we have a big problem. Understand?"

Dana nodded as Zane suckled the skin at the curve of her shoulder. "Will your parents be disappointed?"

"Are you kidding? They love you. If they were disappointed, it would only be in me, for not getting you to agree to marry me sooner."

He whispered roughly before standing and pulling her up with him, "I told you once before that you're not your mother, Dana. I'm not your father, either."

Dana followed him up the stairs towards the bedroom, careful to keep the smile off her face.

Epilogue

Randy handed a babbling toddler off to Dana as he bent to tie his pregnant wife's shoes. "Maybe for pregnancy number three I could invent some type of shoelace tying contraption."

Randy dodged the playful punch Sam aimed at him.

Dana held her nephew, moving her head side to side as he reached for her earrings. She looked around Zane's parents' backyard, full of family and friends celebrating Labor Day. Kids were running around and babies were in abundance.

Zane was standing with his parents, reaching out to take his daughter, Zoe, from his mother when he caught his wife looking at him. He lifted the 6 month-old above his head, grinning at her excited babble before cradling her to his chest and walking across the lawn. He bent his head and kissed his wife's head as Zoe's hazel eyes lit up at the sight of her mother. Zoe reached for Dana and she cradled Zoe in one arm, while holding Tyler on the opposite hip.

Zane took one look at her, holding two children and grinned, bending to whisper in her ear, "See, you can handle two at once. I think we should get started on a sibling for Zoe."

About the Author

E. Harper Milam writes about black girl magic! Find more at www.eharpermilam.com.