

CHAPTER 1

“Capri Jeanine McAllister, yuh lissen ‘ere tuh me, yeah?” the lyrical, disembodied, Jamaican-accented voice asked through the telephone speaker.

“Uh, yes, Mommy,” Capri distractedly answered while curling the chocolate brown mascara over her long, abundance of feathery, light-colored, eyelashes. Peering into a beveled-edged mirror on her double dresser in her dressing room, she blinked repeatedly to assure the pasty fluid didn’t cake or clump as the ad claimed. Generally, she hated to wear the stuff, but it did add drama to her hazel-colored eyes and depth to her all-too-light, honey-toned skin. She needed a sun tan bad, but wasn’t likely to get it this time of the year. That accomplished, she moved on to the subtle lip liner and gloss.

“*Bebé*, you not answer yuh mudda. Yuh nah ‘ere me?” the rich, smooth, and all-too-knowing Jamaican voice came again. “Dis mon, he no gud fa yuh. Yuh not be foolish and tink yuh be in love now, eh?”

Capri released a frustrated breath, her shoulders going slack. “Mommy, I don’t know why you don’t like Lex. He’s bright, handsome, and mannerly. He comes from a fine, old, New England family, just like Daddy, and he has a very successful career with a future—”

“He has no honor, dis one,” Dr. Charmaine Miller McAllister, MD, countered with her low, slow recant. “Yuh lissen ere tuh yuh mudda. Dis white bwoy not gud. Yuh feel me, yeah? Yuh understand me?”

“*Mommy*,” she drawled, lightly brushing the blush over her high, angular cheekbones. “His family is very honorable. The Brockingtons are a very old, Boston family. The fact he’s white has nothing to with it. Besides, Daddy’s white. What difference does Lex’s skin color make?”

“Yuh fadda, iz gud mon. He no need ah Black girl tuh show off he iz independent of hese family. Dis is nah about yuh fadda. Dis one, dis Lex, he do. Dese Lex, he spoiled by hese money and hese position in hese society. He is confused. It is not yuh dese mon see, *bebé*, it is defiance of hese people that keeps him wit’ you. He doh see yuh, chile. He only dealin’ wit yuh to put yuh skin color on display in front of hese people and . . .”

That cut deep—too deep. Capri, for a moment, focused on the shrewd expression in Lex’s sophisticated, yet rakish, youthful-Brad Pitt-look-alike face staring back at her from the polished-silver, picture frame on her black, marble-topped dresser. While her mother continued her usual litany about Lex Brockington, Capri’s eyes glided to the year-old picture of her family. She picked up the eight-by-ten portrait; her French manicured fingernails touched the cool glass. Her father’s face—with a strong, square jaw, startling, dark-blue eyes, unruly, golden-blond hair, and clear, porcelain skin with a perpetual five o’clock shadow—smiled back at her. He always smiled, she distractedly thought, and the memory bowed her mouth. Still, her father had a reason to smile he had told her and her two siblings, who were also in the picture. According to him, his smooth, mocha-chocolate-colored wife of thirty-six years kept him in a perpetual state of euphoria. Mama’s dark-brown eyes smiled too on her still taunt, wrinkle-free and worry-free face, Capri noticed. Charmaine’s thick, dark dreads sans Susan Taylor fell to just above her waist. Her Jamaican body was full, but very shapely and flattering. Capri profiled her own face in the mirror and thought she looked more like her mother than did her older sister, China, or younger brother, Paris. Her siblings looked more like their father. She and her sibs were products of their very much alive French-born, *great grand-mère* Jeannine Vincent McAllister and African grandmother Barletta Robinson McAllister. On her mother’s side of the family was their Jamaican grandparents, Marquez and Julissa Eubanks Miller, who descended from the Taíno Caribbean Indians. What she saw stamped on her and her siblings’ faces was the result of hundreds of years of multicultural evolution.

“She’s not listening, Mommy,” China McAllister, Capri’s older sister, said chuckling in a Jamaican sing-song voice over Capri’s shoulder. That

brought Capri back from her musings. “She’s off somewhere in Never Never Land. Give the kid a break, Mommy. She’s not that dense. She’ll see the light or you can use your conjure on her. You or your obeah will make her see.”

“What yuh sista say iz true, Capri. I cud put some prayers on yuh head. I good conjure woman,” Charmaine said, laughing. “I duz fix tings, yeah?”

Capri gave her older sister a sour, sardonic expression, but then looked at her watch. “Mommy, we’ve got to go now or China will miss the next flight back to New York. Is Daddy home yet?”

“Yuh fadda, he iz still in surgery. An emergency appendectomy. He say ta tell yuh he loves yuh and he will talk ta yuh soon.”

“Tell him we love him too and not to work so hard.”

“I will do it, but yuh feel what I say ‘bout dis Lex bwoy, yes?”

“Mommy,” she drawled impatiently.

“Oh, an look out fuh Tate Kennedy. Hiz fadda and mudda, they very dear to us.”

“Mommy, I really don’t think it’s a good idea for him to stay here with me. I mean, I don’t even know the man.”

“Capri, yuh do dis ting, yes? Yuh do wut I ask yuh ta do,” Charmaine said in a tone that brokered no question or argument.”

A deep acquiescing sigh escaped before she drawled, “Yes, Mommy.”

“Love you, Mommy,” China chuckled pulling a thick, cherry-red, sweater tunic top over her gun metal grey leggings.

“My babies be safe, yes?”

“Yes, Mommy,” they chorused in unison before Capri disconnected the transatlantic call.

“You would think our parents should consider my feelings before they invited some perfect stranger to stay in my home,” Capri scoffed while checking her appearance in one of the full-length mirrors that spanned five doors of her dressing room’s walk-around closets. “Who is this person, anyway?”

China shrugged as she put the finishing touches on her makeup. Fluffing out her naturally-streaked, light brown-blond hair, her cream-

colored face smiled in the mirror at Capri's dismay. "You know mom and dad, sis, they adopt people. I vaguely remember Colonel and Mrs. Riley Kennedy from when we lived in West Germany. I haven't seen them since then, but Daddy asked me to manage a stock-and-bond portfolio for the Kennedys after I and my partners started the brokerage house. The Kennedys only have two sons, I think. The younger one is Tate. He's about your age. Maybe a little older. You two were in school together a year before mom and dad brought us to the states to live with the grands in Maine and go to school." She sat on one of Capri's bedroom chairs to slip on her stylish, ankle-high, black-leather boots. "Mrs. Kennedy used to take care of you while dad and mom were working at the hospital. Don't you remember?"

"Remember? I was what, four, maybe five years old? I don't remember much about that time of my life at all," she said shaking her head and checking her backside in the mirror. "We've lived on so many military bases around the world—."

"Well, kid, that's the life of a military brat. Now, come on and shake it, sister. I've got a plane to catch in forty-five minutes and you've got to go meet the bane of Mama's existence." Noting Capri's meticulous attention to her appearance, she added, "You look stunning," and gave her sister an appreciative smile and nod.

Capri returned the smile. "Thanks. I wish I didn't have to work so hard at looking presentable. It's easy for you. You always look like you just stepped off the cover of *Elle*." She meant it. China was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. For that reason and much more, Capri idolized her older sister all of her life.

Comfortably seated in her Lexus SUV, Capri drove through the late afternoon Washington, DC, traffic. At a stoplight she asked, "China, what else do you know about this Tate Kennedy?"

China leaned back against the cushiony seat. Furrowing her brow while searching her memory, she said, "He teaches something, engineering or science, I think. Some kind of boy wonder. Studious type, a real nerd from what I remember. You should ask Paris. He knows him.

Paris mentioned Tate Kennedy is a professor-in-residence at UCLA, but lectures all over the world. Dad and Mom asked Tate to look after Paris while he's at UCLA and Paris seems to like him a lot. Says he really knows his topic and he relates real well to the grad students."

"So why is he coming to DC?"

China shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's lecturing here."

"For six months?" Capri asked her voice coated in skeptical confusion.

"You'll have to bite the bullet on this one. You know how Dad and Mom feel about extending hospitality to friends. Introduce him to some of your female friends. It won't be bad having him around that huge house of yours. You and Lex will still have some privacy, if that's what you're worried about."

Capri beetled her brow in thought. "That's not a bad idea. I know a few women who might have some time on their hands."

"Hook up something for yourself while you're at it," China drawled.

Capri quickly glimpsed China's relaxed form and then turned her attention back to the traffic. "You really don't like Lex very much, do you?"

"What's to like?" she quipped. "Still, what do I know? I introduced you to several decent men, including Gregory Alexander, Adam Atterly, Jeremy Lightfoot, and Troy Jackson, but would you catch a clue? You'll just have to let these bull horns hook you before you feel the pain that man can cause."

Capri shook her head. "Gees, China, I like Gregory very much. We dated, but he lives in New York and South Carolina, while I live in Washington. Despite the fact he's a business partner in your firm, he was a professional basketball player. We spent half of our time trying to get the logistics right between his games and my tight schedule. However, I don't get it. Why is everyone so down on Lex?"

China's head came off the headrest and swiveled toward her sister. "How long have you been dating this person?"

Capri stopped for a red light. "Since Gregory Alexander and I decided to call it a day. You know that."

"Has Lex ever asked you what you want to do for the rest of your life? Marriage, for instance?"