

Chapter One

Jared Kyles opened the sliding-glass door and stepped onto the patio of his new home in Red Oaks, Georgia. It was a spring morning, and the sweet smell of wild jasmine was in the air. The temperature was cool. The dogwood trees were in full bloom. Fallen pink and white petals covered the ground at the base of them.

He inhaled the heady fragrance of good, clean fresh air as he stood there wondering which of the six burly black men presently removing huge squares of old sod from the lawn was Alex Cartwright. A big hand brought the coffee cup to his lips. He frowned as he sipped thoughtfully. The man *was* here, wasn't he?

He lowered his gaze to his watch. It was nine o'clock and Cartwright, whom he'd hired over the phone, and sight unseen, hadn't come up and introduced himself yet. Cartwright's secretary had promised he would show him the blueprints that had been drawn up for the final layout of the yard before the work progressed too far. Jared didn't like to be kept waiting. Time was money.

This was the last time he would hire someone based solely on the opinions of others. When he'd sent out feelers to various colleagues in the construction business in Macon, they'd all concurred: Alex Cartwright was the best man to use when it came to landscaping. He was the consummate professional.

Looking at the vigor with which Cartwright's men performed their duties, Jared had to admit one thing, Cartwright knew how to pick dependable workers.

He placed his cup in the only piece of furniture on the patio: a deep green molded plastic chair that could be bought at any discount store. He made a mental note to buy patio furniture, and then he turned and walked up to the man closest to him.

“Excuse me, would you tell me which of these fellas is Alex Cartwright?”

The guy, who was at least six-four, over two-hundred pounds, with skin so dark it gleamed, ran a hand over his bald head before saying, “Good morning!” His grin was wide, and white. The first image that flashed into Jared’s mind was that of a black Mr. Clean. All the guy needed was a single gold hoop earring in his left earlobe.

“Good morning,” Jared said, smiling back. People in small towns rarely forgot their manners. His mother would be disappointed that he’d forgotten his.

“Alex ain’t here yet,” the bald man told him. “She went to pick up her brother, Sam, at the airport. He plays basketball for the University of Florida.”

She? Jared thought, but didn’t voice his surprise.

The guy saw it on his face. “Don’t worry man,” he said with a short laugh. “She does the work of *two* men.”

Jared laughed too, but it irked him that Alex Cartwright had misrepresented herself to him. Or had she? None of the men who’d recommended her had thought to mention her sex. They must be having a good laugh at his expense right about now! Then again, perhaps her gender had not mattered to them. Just the fact that she was good at what she did for a living. He put his sexist tendencies in check and offered his hand to the guy. “Jared Kyles.”

“Ruben Jackson,” the black Mr. Clean said with a firm handshake. “I’m the foreman. Alex told us to get started on removing the old sod, and by the time that was done, she’d be here to supervise the landscaping.”

Jared nodded. “All right, Mr. Jackson, you fellas seem to have everything under control. Tell Ms. Cartwright she can knock on the patio door when she arrives.”

“Will do,” Ruben said, and promptly returned to his work.

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Alexandra Cartwright was in her element, speeding down I-75 with a Shemekia Copeland CD on low and her kid brother by her side, complaining. She’d missed this. There was a smile on her face, and a happy light in her dark brown eyes.

“All of my friends are either in Daytona Beach, or Atlanta gettin’ their freak on!” Sam, nineteen and the spitting image of their father: tall, dark-skinned, and rangy with light brown eyes, said. Alex had been the only one of them to inherit their mother’s dark brown eyes.

“How often do we get to see each other, Sam?” Alex asked reasonably. “I haven’t seen you in nine months, and it’s been longer for Vicky. She’ll be here tomorrow afternoon and we’ll all be together for the first time in over a year. You know Momma and Daddy would have wanted us to stay close.”

Sam sighed. He turned his head to look at his older sister. “You’re gonna get me with the guilt trip now, huh?” His thick brows arched as he smiled at her.

“I’ll use every trick in the book, little brother. You know I’m right,” Alex said, her full lips curving in a winning smile.

“Yeah, I know you’re right,” Sam conceded. “But that doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop giving you a hard time. You’d think something was wrong with me if I didn’t.”

Alex laughed. She pushed a lock of wavy, shoulder-length black hair behind one ear, and briefly peered at him. Eyes back on the road, she said, “You know, I think you’ve grown an inch since I saw you last. When are you going to stop growing?”

“I guess when you stop treating me like a child,” Sam countered.

“Never, then,” Alex returned, still grinning.

Sam groaned. “I could be in Hotlanta right now with a sepia honey all over me.”

“Sepia?”

“I’ve been paying attention in English class. I’m broadening my vocabulary.”

“I’m sure the honeys are impressed.”

“Well, you know, what can I say? I’m all that!”

“Oh, now, hold up. Don’t go gettin’ cocky on me. I changed your diapers!”

“See? That’s why I’m never gonna bring a sweet thing home with me for Thanksgiving. I don’t want to be embarrassed by comments like that,” Sam said.

“I have no doubt that one day you *will* bring a ‘sweet thing’ home with you. But, do me a favor, make sure she’s good people before you get all up in her business.”

“All up in her business?” Sam asked, shocked that his sister had suggested she knew anything about sex. Didn’t she know it was taboo to talk to her brother about such things? No, he could answer that question himself. Since their parents’ deaths, Alex had assumed the role of the parent. She thought she had the right to say anything!

“Don’t you think it’s a little too late for that talk?” Sam asked, sounding calmer than he really felt. He was a man, after all. A man who knew the score. He’d been sexually active since he was sixteen. Three years now. Not that his sister knew that. She didn’t have to know *everything*!

“It’s never too late for that talk,” Alex said. “Oh, don’t go looking all puffed up like Daddy used to when Momma would say something to upset him. I just want you to stay safe, Samuel Edison Cartwright. Choose your partners with care. Never,

and I mean never, have sex without using a condom. Use two if you need them.”

Tightlipped, Sam turned on the seat so that he could see her face. “You’re so interested in my love life, what about yours? Do you use a condom every time, big sister?”

“Honey, it’s been so long since I did anything, I qualify for sainthood. But, yes, little brother, I most certainly did always use a condom.”

If it were possible, Sam’s face would have turned a bright red hue. “Good God! I thought you were a virgin!”

“At twenty-seven?” Alex asked with a short snort. “I’m not exactly a femme fatale but no, Sam, I’m not a virgin.”

“Who?” Sam asked, his curiosity piqued. He knew she’d dated Rick Washington, a local attorney, about a year ago. She’d never mentioned why they’d broken up.

“A lady never tells, just like a gentleman never tells,” Alex said lightly.

“All right,” Sam agreed. “But you know this conversation is creeping me out, right? Now, I’m going to be looking at every man in town who’s around your age wondering, could he be one of Alex’s ex-lovers?”

“There have been only two, so you can put your mind at ease.”

“Oh, so the number of ex-lovers you’ll reveal, but not their names.”

“Their names are of no significance,” Alex said. “I’m not still involved with them, and it’s highly unlikely we’ll ever interact with them socially. I only told you I’m not a virgin so that you wouldn’t think me a prude for giving you advice about your sex life.”

“Fair enough,” Sam said, reaching over to turn up the volume on the CD player. “Now, can we let Shemekia serenade us the rest of the way home? I’m afraid you’re going

to bring up something else embarrassing.”

“Like that big bag of dirty laundry you brought with you?” Alex asked.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” Sam said, chagrined. “I just didn’t have time to do it before I left. I’ll do it as soon as I get home.” He lowered the volume.

“I know you will,” Alex said. “You and the washing machine have been on good terms since you were ten years old. I hope you aren’t letting some ‘sweet thing’ do your laundry for you while you’re at school.”

“Well, if they ask, who am I to refuse?” Sam said, smiling roguishly.

“If I didn’t need both hands to drive with, I’d knock you upside your head!

You don’t use women like that, Sam. Do your own funky laundry!”

“It’s not as if I don’t do them favors,” Sam defended himself. “It’s the barter system. I fix their cars for ‘em, or something, and they do my laundry. It ain’t nothin’ negative.”

Alex eyed him briefly. “Are you telling the truth?”

“Cross my heart,” Sam said. When they were kids, that had been the sign that absolute truth was being spoken. You *had* to believe whatever was being said.

“All right,” Alex said. “It’s just important that you respect women. We work hard for it, and we deserve it. Daddy never disrespected Momma, no matter how much they argued.”

“They argued?”

“You were only seven when Daddy died. I guess you don’t remember much. Yes, they argued like any other couple. But I always knew they loved each other, so I never worried that they were going to get divorced. They were so close. You could feel the love coming off of them just by being in the same room with them. That’s

how much they loved each other.” Her eyes grew misty at the memory.

“I can’t believe it’s been ten years since Momma got killed,” Sam said, his voice low and wonder-filled. “All I remember about her was that she always hugged me before I went to school, and she always kissed me on the forehead before I went to bed at night. She never forgot to do that.”

“No, she didn’t,” Alex said softly. She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye with her index finger. “Now, tell me about your studies, quickly, so I can get my mind off of sad things.”

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The Kyles residence was located in The Heights, a section of town where homes started in the two-hundred-grand price range, and went up to a million dollars or more. Alex had several clients in The Heights, but she had no friends who lived there. Her friends were middle-class people like herself, working jobs that paid the bills, but allowed for few luxuries.

When the SUV rolled to a stop in front of the two-story Tudor-style home, Alex got out and strode confidently across the torn up yard, her work boots making deep imprints in the soft soil. She noticed, with satisfaction, that the old sod had been removed. Her men were now using a forklift to take the new squares of St. Augustine grass off the back of a flatbed truck.

She waved to Ruben, and he gave her a crisp salute. “Hey, Boss, Mr.Kyles said to knock on the patio door.”

“Thanks, Ruben! You all did a great job. I’ll join you in a few minutes!”

She continued around the back of the house, the muscles in her long legs flexing

with each step. As she had done the first time she had seen the Kyles property, she paused to look at the twin dogwood trees in the backyard. She was glad they hadn't cut them down. Some people had no respect for trees. She could tell by the size of the trees, both over twenty feet tall, that they were old. But they were still healthy. What would the South be without its old oak trees and dogwood trees? They lent an air of serenity to the landscape. She could picture a white-painted bench underneath one of those trees, and her sitting on it sipping iced tea or lemonade.

She was momentarily lost in her daydream.

"You must be *Mr.* Cartwright," a deep masculine voice said with a hint of humor.

Alex looked up to find Jared Kyles smiling at her. She smiled back. He was standing on the patio, wearing jeans, a Morehouse College T-shirt, and white athletic shoes. He was moving a silver dollar between his fingers. She watched, totally charmed.

"It's something I learned as a kid when I was laid up with a broken leg for months," he explained. He tossed the silver dollar in the air, caught it and pocketed it. Their gazes held as she closed the space between them. He was a leg man and noticed, at once, how long and shapely hers were. He guessed her height at five-ten, give or take an inch. She wore a short-sleeve khaki shirt, and a pair of mid-thigh shorts. He wanted to see her eyes, but she was wearing dark-tinted sunglasses.

His eyes moved downward. She had on tan work boots with a pair of rolled socks. Her calves were as conditioned as a long distance runner's. All that masculine garb, but there was no mistaking her feminine curves. Full breasts, small waist, full hips, and those gorgeous legs. When she got closer, she reached up and took off the sunglasses.

Her eyes were a deep shade of brown, almost black. They were sable-colored, dark

brown with black centers. He could get lost in those eyes. It was her mouth, however, that made his own fall slightly open and a soft sigh of longing escape from between his lips. It was heart-shaped, full-lipped, and had such sensual contours that all he could think about was what it would feel like to kiss her. *Damn*, he thought, *I was complaining about the fact that the fellas might have gotten one over on me by not telling me she was a woman. Hell, they did me a favor!*

Alex removed her black cap before offering him her hand to shake. Her hair fell down her back in a single braid. “Mr. Kyles, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

As she was approaching, she’d been sizing him up, too, as she did with everybody she met: Jared Kyles’s height was around 6’3”, his weight was a bit over two-hundred pounds. He was solid: Muscular and in great shape. And from the expression in his light brown eyes, he was surprised by her appearance. To be truthful, his appearance was upsetting her equilibrium, too. For one thing, she loved men with dark skin.

His was like dark chocolate at room temperature. With skin that dark, she’d expected dark eyes. But, no, his were the color of golden wheat. Darker striations ran through the irises. She had to consciously will herself to stop staring at him. And he wore his dark brown, partly nappy, partly wavy hair in a natural style like actor Michael Ealy’s.

They allowed their hands to fall to their sides. It was then that she recalled his first words to her: He’d called her *Mr. Cartwright*.

She laughed shortly. “I guess it’s safe to assume that Marcy didn’t tell you I’m a woman.” Marcy, her secretary-cum-accountant, and everything else she needed to be in the office, was a mother-hen. She was always telling her that she’d get more business if she didn’t advertise that Alex was short for Alexandra instead of Alexander,

which was her father's name. She still used the business cards her father had used.

Everybody had called him Alex, too.

"No, she left out that bit of information," Jared said. "Not that it matters."

How magnanimous of you, he silently chided himself.

"Great," Alex said. She withdrew the large sheaf of rolled up papers she carried under her right arm. "These are the blueprints for the layout of your yard." Turning, she looked for someplace where she could spread out the blueprints. She wound up squatting there on the patio and quickly showing him where the flowerbeds would be planted with impatiens, marigolds, azaleas, roses, and sunflowers. Her work was neat and precise, showing him exactly how she'd envisioned his yard.

When she'd finished, they rose and regarded each other rather shyly. The close proximity they'd shared the past few minutes had left both of them aware of one thing: They were strongly attracted to each other. How to proceed?

Their eyes met and held.

"Excellent plans," Jared said with a smile. "I can't wait to see the end results."

"All right, then," Alex said, reluctant to draw her eyes away from his face. "It'll probably be nearly sundown before we're done. I'll knock on your patio door before I leave to consult with you again."

Jared offered her his hand. They shook on it. It was just an excuse to touch her once more. His big hand engulfed her smaller one. He imagined he could feel the strength and energy coursing through her luscious frame. Alex, too, felt something akin to electricity emanating from him. A wave of warmth swept over her. Her heart raced. She had a sneaking suspicion she was smiling like an idiot.

She cleared her throat. “Well, I’d better get to work.”

He let go of her and she hurried away, self-consciously adjusting her cell phone on her utility belt as she did so. She felt his eyes on her. *Felt them!* Nervous energy crawled up her neck, making her ears burn with embarrassment. Had it been that long since a man had looked at her like that? As if all he wanted to do was grab her and kiss her senseless? There had been no mistaking Jared Kyles’s intentions. She hoped that her own thoughts hadn’t been so easily read. She took a deep breath as she quickly walked across the large yard to join her men. If her reaction to Jared Kyles was an indication of her state of loneliness, she was one sad sister!