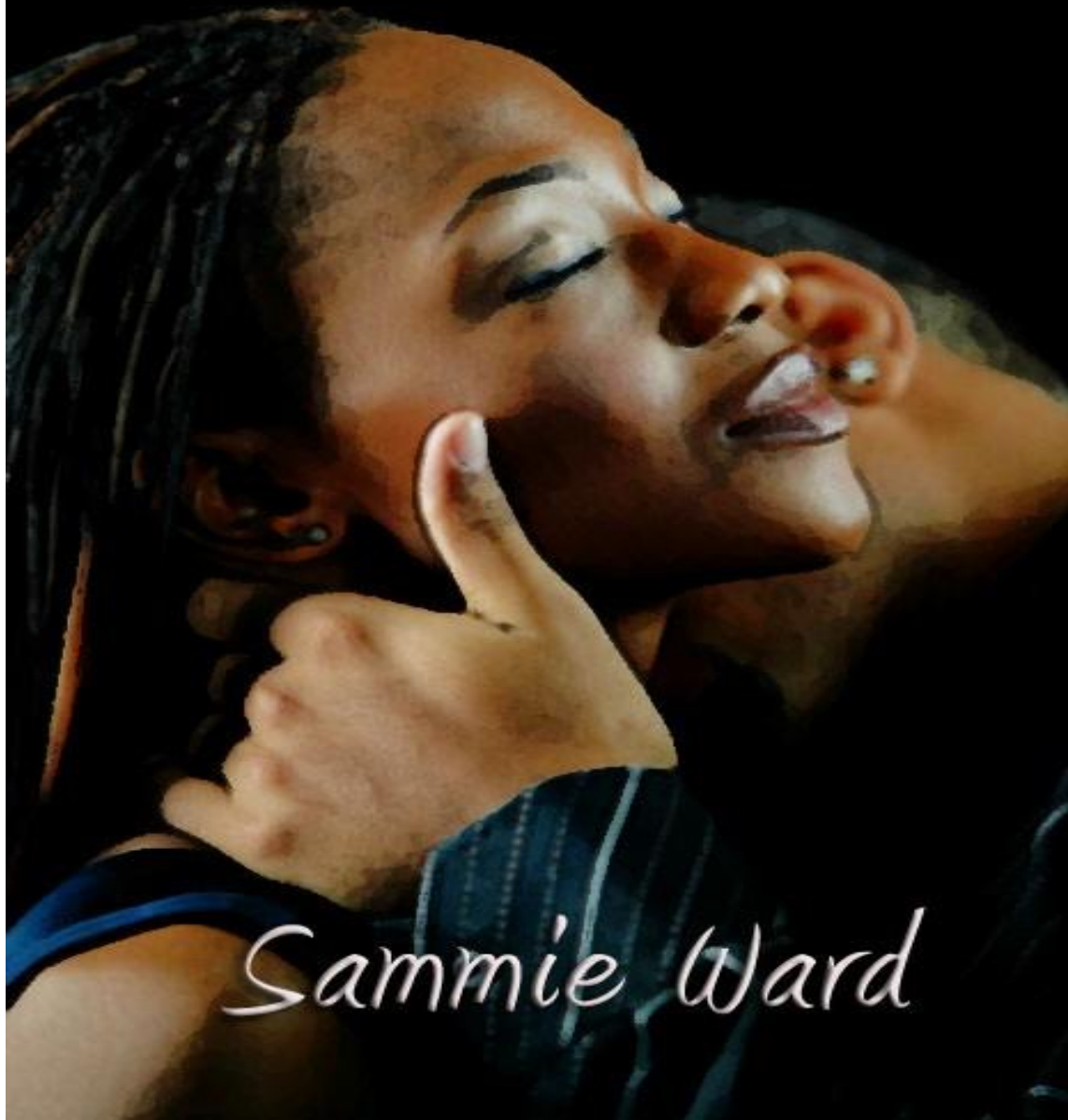


Love to Behold



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Lady Leo Publishing

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Chapter 1

What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder: St Mark 10:9

The Baptist Church in College Park, Maryland brought family and friends of Suzanne Bell and Bradford Stokes together for the event of the year. One family traveled from as far away as Okinawa, Japan to see the couple exchange vows after five years together. It didn't matter to the wedding guests the circumstance that finally made this day possible. They were ecstatic. All that mattered was that Bradford and Suzanne would become one flesh. Bradford, an anchorman with CNN news, was transferring overseas, and Suzanne would be accompanying her new husband. Although their decision to marry was sudden, the couple knew exactly what type of romantic surroundings in which they wanted to exchange their vows.

The sanctuary had been transformed into a spring wedding theme. Nasturtium flowers replaced the traditional rose petals in the flower girl's basket. Yellow tulips were placed inside the pew bows. Arrangements of spring flowers were included on the altar, candle displays, bouquets, and a single boutonniere.

Valencia Hill, the Bridal Consultant, stood in the open double doors. She

smiled and clapped when the groom kissed his bride, signifying the end of the ceremony and the beginning of a union.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Bradford Stokes,” Reverend Otis Martindale announced amid loud applause and soft sobs of happiness.

The couple made their way down the aisle, and Valencia hurried toward the dining area to make sure everything was running smoothly. As owner of New Beginnings in Washington, DC., she’d been at the church since nine o’clock in the morning to oversee the delivery of the contracted services.

She spent long hours away from home. It didn’t matter, though. It wasn’t as if there was anyone waiting for her. One day she hoped to have her own wedding. She almost did once, but as it turned out, it wasn’t meant to be. She wasn’t going to lose sleep over it. Not anymore. But why couldn’t she meet a caring, loving, eligible man who could appreciate an educated, independent woman? Several men asked her out, but she declined. Ever since her disastrous wedding day with Malcolm Wright, she’d been leery about entering into a relationship. She longed to find someone to love, marry, and have children with. However, in order to do that, she’d have to let go of the past.

This coming July would have been her two-year anniversary. She still remembered that day vividly in her mind as if it were yesterday. The church was

filled with family and friends. Everyone was in attendance except the groom. He chose the biggest day of their lives to decide he wasn't ready to get married. She survived the ordeal, but not without embarrassment and emotional scars...scars that refused to heal.

To ease the pain and fill the empty void, she threw herself into her work. For her efforts, she could boast of a two hundred-thousand-dollar home and a lucrative income. At thirty-two, she had accomplished all her goals except for one. True love. With all of her accomplishments, she wondered why one seemed to elude her.

Valencia was content with her life. What was she really missing? She didn't have to go home to cook, clean, or raise children. She owned a successful business. Had a job she loved. It had been a while since she'd been out, but she was free to go whenever and wherever she chose. Freedom, what woman would want to give that up? Not her. For instance, the next day she was invited to Autumn Mills' gala. The two met when another client recommended Valencia for wedding planning services.

Later that evening, Valencia stepped in the entryway of her home to hear the antique grandfather clock chime the hour. Six o'clock. She placed the bags on the sofa. Even though she spent long hours away from home, when she returned, she enjoyed the intimate ambience she created for herself. After stepping out of her

high-heel, navy blue pumps, the feel of her feet sinking into the plush cream-colored carpet brought immediate relief. Shoes in hand, she walked into the bedroom.

The grandiose room was furnished in dark Italian walnut. Fresh-cut lilies and scented candles placed on a silk trade table emanated a fresh, clean fragrance in the air. Two chairs flanked the chamber. Located in the center was a four-post bed adorned in Paris Blue, complete with matching throw pillows and drapes. Artwork from the Impressionist era hanging on the soft white walls completed the sensual surrounding. Even though romance had not been in her life, she wanted to keep the atmosphere as if it had.

Valencia headed to the walk-in closet, placed the shoes in the hanging rack, unbuttoned and removed the navy blue double-breasted jacket and matching pants, then hung the outfit on a pink padded hanger. She felt good inside. Suzanne was glowing when she and Bradford left for their two-week honeymoon in Aruba. The expression on Suzanne's face was what made her job all the more fulfilling.

She'd like to think she was providing a positive experience in couples' lives. Her family, full of bankers and doctors, thought she would follow in their footsteps. She did, just in a way that they never imagined. After graduating from Morgan State with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Accounting and working for

a year at a prestigious firm, she decided accounting was not what she wanted to do with her life. Her family was not happy when she informed them of her decision to leave her job to start a business.

No one expected the obedient, youngest sibling to behave in such a way. Her brother, Ahmad, was a neurologist and sister, Selena, found a career as a corporate banker. Her parents were extremely proud of their choices. The family tried to persuade her to change her mind, even told her she was making a mistake. Valencia was determined to prove them wrong. She worked day and night to get New Beginnings off the ground. The previous year, it had grossed high profits. Her family didn't have to worry. The business was a success. Her clients were among the affluent in the community. She'd planned weddings for politicians, celebrities, doctors, bankers, and athletes just to name a few.

She finished undressing, slipped on a white silk robe, and headed for the bathroom when she noticed the red message light flashing on the answering machine.

There were two messages. One was from her mother, wanting to know what time to expect her on Sunday for dinner, and the other call was from Autumn an client, who was getting married in one month. All arrangements were complete except for their choice of a wedding song. She couldn't make up her mind. Her selection kept changing every five minutes.

Valencia listened as Autumn's excited, southern voice instructed her that she had found the ideal song. "I found the perfect song. I heard it on the radio this morning."

Autumn's family moved to Arlington, Virginia from Atlanta, Georgia when she was ten years old. Her father, Phillip, accepted a job with the State Department in Washington, DC. Ellen, her mother, was a professor at Georgetown University. Her senior year in college, Autumn met and fell in love with Andre Bowman, an up and coming baseball player who signed with the Baltimore Orioles. They dated for eight years before getting married.

"The song is "On The Wings of Love" by Jeffrey Osborne. I think it's perfect. Call me when you get in."

Valencia grinned. This was the fourth perfect song in one month. Autumn's first choice was Luther Vandross' "Here and Now." A week later, it changed to "When I'm With You" by Tony Terry. Three days later, it was "Happily Ever After" by Case. All four selections were beautiful love ballads and had been used at numerous weddings.

She opened the top drawer of the nightstand, removing her day planner. She found Autumn's number, picked up the cordless phone, and dialed. It was answered on the third ring.

"Hello, Autumn. This is Valencia. How are you?"

“I’m fine. Thanks for calling me back so quickly.”

“No problem.” Valencia sat on the edge of the bed, folding one leg underneath her. “On the Wings of Love” is the wedding song now?” For the moment, she said to herself. She had a feeling the song was going to change again before her wedding day.

Autumn giggled like a nervous school girl. “I know. I know. I keep changing our song, but I believe this is the perfect one. You must think I’m an airhead. One of the most important days of my life and I can’t decide on a wedding song.”

Valencia knew it was common for brides to fret over every detail. Still, it was her job to ensure Autumn’s vision and personal preferences were carried out. Everything had to be perfect. Listening to couples’ requests was part of her job. As a wedding consultant, it was her job to listen to problems, complaints, and compliments.

“Of course not. All of the songs you mentioned are great wedding songs.”

Autumn sighed. “I just have to choose one. I already gave Damien a list of songs I want him to play at the reception.”

Damien Love was one of DC’s popular radio personalities and Andre’s cousin. He agreed to DJ at the wedding without pay as a wedding gift. “Damien is really a great DJ. I listen to his show every morning.”

“Well, you will get a chance to hear him live,” Autumn said. “He will be providing the music at the pre-wedding party tomorrow.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing him.”

They spoke a few minutes more before Valencia hung up and placed a call to her mother. She wanted to discuss her upcoming visit on Sunday. Afterwards, she headed for the bathroom, thoughts of the following day running through her head as water flowed from the mouth of the tub. She hoped she had made the right decision accepting Autumn’s invitation.

Chapter 2

“Val, I’m glad you’re going to the party.” Mrs. Hill turned back to the frying pan and turned the chicken. Stepping back from the stove, she bent low to check on her cornbread in the oven.

“I really don’t want to go. I have better things to do.”

Mrs. Hill sat down at the chrome table in the dining room that she and Norman Hill purchased for their home twenty-five years ago. The four-bedroom, two baths, wooden frame house was filled with good and bad memories.

“Like what? You’re the wedding consultant. What do you have better to do? Spend another night in front of the television watching reruns of old black and white movies?” Beatrice grabbed her youngest child’s chin in her hand.

“Valencia, you’re a beautiful, intelligent woman. It’s been two years. It’s time to stop sulking over Malcolm.”

Valencia lowered her eyes. “I’m not sulking over Malcolm.” Her family and friends might have a full social schedule, but she enjoyed spending quiet time alone at home watching classic movies or curled up with a good book.

“Sure you’re not.” Beatrice reached out, covering her daughter’s hand in reassurance. Valencia frowned. “Just having second thoughts about the party, that’s all.”

Beatrice wagged her finger at Valencia. “You’re going to that party. It will do you good to get out. Dance. Mingle.” She got up and went to check on her frying pan. “Who knows, you may even meet someone.” She glanced over her right shoulder, a hopeful glint in her eyes. “I’m tired of seeing you rambling around in that big old house, alone.”

Valencia rolled her eyes upward. “I’m not alone. I have friends, Simone for instance.”

“It’s not the same as being friends with a man.” She winked at her daughter. “And you know it. You can’t snuggle with Simone.” Mrs. Hill gave Valencia a curious look.

Valencia met her glance with a glance of her own. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Just checking. If you were, I wouldn’t love you any less.”

“Well, I’m not.” Valencia walked over to the counter. She grabbed a crouton from the salad bowl and popped it in her mouth. “I have to admit, I swore I was through with men after things with Malcolm.”

Beatrice opened the oak cabinet, removing a platter. “Bury those memories

of Malcolm. Move on.”

“I have moved on.”

Beatrice placed fresh, hot slices of cornbread on the platter. “One day I want to see you plan your own wedding.”

“I need to meet someone for that.”

Beatrice glanced over her shoulder laughing. “Yes, you do.”

She playfully slapped at her mother, joining in her laughter. “Behave.”

Mrs. Hill threw her hands up in a surrendering gesture. “I won’t say another word.”

“Until tomorrow.” Valencia strolled over to the dining room table. Grabbing her purse, she placed the thin strap over her shoulder. “I better get going.”

“Try and have a good time.” Valencia’s mother walked over to her, enclosing her arms around her and planting a kiss on her forehead.

Still wondering if she had made the right decision, but knowing it was too late to bow out, Valencia opened the car door and settled behind the steering wheel. As she shut the door, Valencia thought about what her mother said regarding letting go of the past. Easier said than done, she thought as she backed out of the driveway.

By the time Valencia arrived, the party was in full swing. There were people sitting at the built-in bar and standing in clusters. She sauntered in the room as

she studied the sights and sounds around her.

A moment later, she was greeted by Autumn who smiled from ear to ear when she spotted her. “You made it. I was beginning to think you changed your mind.”

Valencia returned the smile. “I told you I would be here.”

“Come on. There are some people I want you to meet.”

The host wound her arm through Valencia’s as she began making introductions.

Michael Gomez was bored with the woman standing next to him trying to pique his interest. He looked at the woman who introduced herself as Sparkle and said, “I’ll pass.”

She understood the meaning and disappointment crossed her face.

Michael was through with that part of his life. He was looking for something with more substance. He had worked very hard to make his way out of the ghetto of Chicago. A straight ‘A’ student, he earned an academic scholarship to Northwestern University where he earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Educational and Social Policy.

One day, on a dare from a friend, he tried out for the college baseball team. Born with natural athletic ability, he earned a position as a right fielder. While

still a freshman, he led the team in batting average, RBI's, and stolen bases—a trend he managed until his graduation, where he was a first round draft pick with the Texas Rangers. Five years later and a free agent, he negotiated a deal to play with the Baltimore Orioles. That part of his life was fulfilled, but lately, things had become too routine and empty of emotional ties. He needed and was ready for a change.

Looking for his teammate, Andre Bowman, Michael maneuvered through the crowd, shaking hands and acknowledging guests. His gaze fixed on a woman who was chatting with Autumn and Andre. He took in everything about her in one full glance. The woman, whoever she was, was breathtaking. A true African-American queen in his eyes. He had to meet her. She was at least five-seven, not that slender, but medium build. The tan, spaghetti-strapped dress covered every curve and ended several inches above her knees, clinging to the outline of her full breasts. Her narrow waist, slim hips, and shapely legs in high heel pumps rounded out the physical package.

Staring at her, Michael experienced an emotion he'd never felt before. He saw a woman he wanted, he craved, and absolutely had to have. He couldn't believe it. His insides quivered with desire and longing. Who was she? There was only one way to find out, so he headed in their direction.

Extending a hand, Valencia concentrated on greeting the next guest. A small

gasp of surprise escaped her parted lips when she tripped and almost landed on top of Andre who was standing next to her.

“I’m sorry. Are you all right?” the man, whose foot she had stumbled over, questioned before getting up and hurrying after his date.

“Can you believe that?” Autumn said in disgust. “He’s more worried about his date than you.”

Valencia shook her head. She was embarrassed. The man’s behavior reminded her of the reason she didn’t attend parties. Talk about rude. She couldn’t believe how he just walked away.

“Are you all right?” Michael asked in a concerned voice over her right shoulder.

Valencia turned, getting her first view of a perfectly sculptured face. She wasn’t prepared at all. He absolutely took her breath away. His light brown complexion drew her in. The sights and sounds of the party faded into oblivion. His looks could only be described in one word. Exquisite.

She slowly exhaled. He stood a little less than six feet. His cocoa skin tone enhanced his features. His black, curly hair was cut close to his head. He had high cheekbones; a thin, delicate nose; a sensual set of thin lips; and beautiful, dark eyes with long flowing lashes that complimented his mixed Hispanic and African-American ancestry. He sported a diamond earring in each ear. She had

never seen anything like him.

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

“You’re so beautiful men just fall all over you.” Michael said

Valencia looked around and thought she would faint from the sight of him. She tried to sound as casual as possible. “I’m flattered. But he wasn’t falling for me.”

Michael bent his tall frame a little closer. “I disagree,” he said, flashing a handsome smile and displaying even, white teeth. “I’m falling for you as we speak.”

Lord, help me. His voice was low, husky, and sexy. Smooth, she thought. That was a good line. She’d never heard that one before. Definitely worth a cool point.

Andre cleared his throat. “Valencia, the man drooling over you is Michael Gomez.

Michael Gomez, Valencia Hill, our bridal consultant. Michael is my best friend, teammate, and the best man at the wedding.” He flashed Michael a smile.

Michael offered Valencia his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Valencia.” Michael’s hand clasped hers, enveloping it in heat.

Valencia tried to ignore the warmth it generated and the fact that he held her hand a little longer than necessary. “Same here, Mr. Gomez.”

“Please, call me Michael.”

A shiver slithered up and down her spine from Michael’s open, direct stare.

“Michael,” she repeated. “You and Andre are teammates?”

“Yes. I play right field.” Michael angled his head, fascinated by the vision of beauty standing before him. “Do you follow baseball?”

“No, I don’t,” Valencia answered.

“Neither did I before Andre and I met,” Autumn chimed in. “I didn’t know a thing about RBI’s or batting averages. Now, I’m a pro.”

“True.” Andre smiled over at his bride-to-be. “She screams louder than everyone at the game.”

“Valencia, you should come with me to see the team play,” Autumn suggested. “It will be fun.”

The ends of Michael’s mouth curved into a smile. “What you don’t know about the game, I’ll be glad to explain to you.”

Andre and Autumn stared at each other. Autumn raised a perfectly arched eyebrow in approval. She hoped the two would hit it off.

If Valencia didn’t know any better, she would have sworn Michael Gomez was flirting with her. As far as she was concerned, he was wasting his time. She didn’t have time to go to a baseball game with him or anyone else. “I’ll think about it. I’m not much of a sports fan.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be able to change that. May I get you something to drink?” Michael asked Valencia, trying to change the subject. Autumn handed Andre an empty champagne flute. “I’ll have another glass of champagne, please, honey.”

Valencia looked at Michael. “I’ll have the same, thank you.”

“I’ll be right back.” Michael headed to the bar with Andre following close behind. When the two men were out of earshot, Autumn grabbed Valencia’s arm in excitement.

“I think Michael likes you. He can’t take his eyes off you.”

Valencia tried to pretend that she hadn’t noticed him staring at her. “I know.”

Autumn’s face beamed. “From what I saw, the feeling is mutual. You were staring at him, too.”

Valencia was embarrassed. “I must admit, the brother is fine.”

Autumn was excited. “This is great. I think you two make a good couple.”

“Wait a minute,” Valencia began to say, when she noticed a tall, attractive, caramel-skinned woman making her way toward them. She was dressed like she just stepped out of the pages of Vogue magazine.

Autumn followed her gaze. “What is she doing here?” Her warm smile turned cold.

“Who is she?” Valencia inquired.

“No one you need to worry about.”

The woman stopped in front of them. She flashed a transparent smile a blind man could see through.

“Hello, Autumn.” She was speaking to Autumn, but her gaze was locked on Valencia. “Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials,” she quipped.

“Thank you, Kendall.” Autumn returned a tight smile. “I’m sure you meant that from the bottom of your heart.”

Valencia did not know what was going on between the two women, but it was obvious they disliked each other.

“Are you going to introduce us?” Kendall tilted her head to the side.

“Why, of course,” Autumn exclaimed in that southern dialect of hers.

“Valencia Hill, this is Kendall Morrows. Kendall Morrows, Valencia Hill, a friend of mine, and Michael’s girlfriend.

Caught off-guard by Autumn’s unexpected remark, Valencia’s jaw dropped. She didn’t know what to say. Kendall made it easy for her.

Kendall flashed Valencia another factitious smile. “You’re Michael’s girlfriend?”

Valencia wanted to say no, but when she looked over at Autumn who was wearing a desperate expression on her face, she replied, “Yes. Yes, I am.”

Kendall looked down her nose at Valencia. “How long have you two been

dating?” The question was asked in a hard tone.

Valencia’s breath caught in her chest in response to Kendall’s query. Her gaze skidded over to Autumn’s as she stared back at her. She nodded. How did she get herself in this situation? How would she get herself out? All she had to do was tell Kendall that she was not Michael’s girlfriend. But she didn’t. “A while,” she said quickly, knowing it was the farthest thing from the truth. Ten minutes ago, she had never even heard of Michael Gomez.

Whatever Kendall was going to say died on her lips when Michael and Andre appeared with the drinks. Kendall glared at Michael as he handed Valencia the flute of champagne.

“Michael, I was just introducing Valencia, your girlfriend, to Kendall.”

Autumn nodded at Michael for him to follow her lead.

Michael looked over at Valencia. She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze head on. “Thank you, Autumn, for keeping my girl company.” He placed an arm around Valencia’s waist and pulled her to his side. “How are you, Kendall?” He had gone out with Kendall in the past, but she was determined to make it more than it was.

“I’m fine,” Kendall responded in a sharp tone. “So, you two have been dating for a while?”

Michael didn’t know what had been said among the three women, so he

went with his gut instincts. “Yes, we have. We couldn’t be happier.” Lowering his head, he pressed his lips lightly to Valencia’s. She breathed lightly between parted lips at the sweet tenderness of the kiss.

Autumn and Andre stared at each other in surprise. Kendall’s gaze was locked on the couple.

“Isn’t that right, sweetheart?” Michael whispered, his breath hot against her ear.

A delicious shudder heated her body. “Yes, it is,” Valencia answered softly.

“I wish the both of you good luck,” Kendall replied in a low voice taut with anger, then turned and walked away.

Filled with humiliation, Valencia turned to Autumn. “Why did you introduce me as Michael’s girlfriend?” She couldn’t miss the huge smile on Michael’s face.

“It just slipped out.” Autumn defended her actions.

Valencia stared at a retreating Kendall. She couldn’t help but wonder what her connection was to Michael.

“Andre, let’s go check on the other guests. You two enjoy yourselves.”

Autumn gave Michael and Valencia one last smile before walking away.

Valencia waited until they were out of earshot before turning to Michael. “I can’t believe what just happened. Kendall thinks I’m your girlfriend. And you

went along with it.”

Michael placed his arm around her waist. “What’s wrong with being my girlfriend?”

Valencia stepped out of his embrace, shaking her head. Was he serious? Pretending to be his girlfriend was one thing, but Michael was taking it too far.

“I’m not your girlfriend.”

He smiled. Two dimples appeared as if loving fingers had squeezed his cheeks. “You said you were.”

Valencia lifted her chin. “I only said it to help Autumn out.” She pointed back and forth between them. “We don’t even know each other.”

Michael angled his head. “We have to fix that. We have to go out. Get to know one another.”

“We do?” she challenged. Actually, she wouldn’t mind going out with him, but didn’t want to be another female statistic. A professional athlete? She was sure women like Kendall were tripping over themselves to get to know him.

“Of course. That’s how relationships begin.”

“I can just imagine your definition of a relationship. You take me out, wine me, dine me, and then look for something in return.” She emphasized the word something.

Michael tried to look hurt. “I’m not that type of a man.”

Yeah right, she said to herself. “I’ve heard about professional athletes. The report isn’t that glowing, believe me.”

He knew professional athletes had a reputation for being philanderers, and he’d be the first to admit he was no angel. For some reason, though, he believed this woman could make him a one woman man.

“Don’t believe everything you hear/read in the media. Reporters will say or write anything to get people to read their stories. You can’t judge people by that stuff.”

She cocked her head to one side and gave him an inquisitive look. “None of the stories are true?”

He paused a moment. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

Valencia was right. She thought about what her mother told her. You can’t judge all men by one man’s actions. She felt terrible, judging him without knowing him. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I didn’t mean to judge you.”

“I know how you can make it up to me.” He leaned closer and she found herself drawn into his gaze. He was standing so close, only sheer power kept her from taking a step backward. “Go out with me. That way I can prove to you that what you heard about athletes is not true.”

Valencia could not believe how persistent he was for her to have dinner with him. He was almost pleading. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I think it is.” He arched an inquisitive eyebrow. “Unless you already have a boyfriend.” She leveled him a stare. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Husband?”

“No.”

“Girlfriend?”

Valencia gave him a don’t even go there look.

Michael laughed. “That’s good.” A look of satisfaction crossed his face. He continued to look directly in her brown eyes. “Then there is nothing stopping you from having dinner with me sometimes.”

She placed the champagne flute on the tray a hired waiter was carrying.

“Are you always this persistent?”

Her statement made him laugh. “It got me where I am today. I’m sure you possess the same quality. That characteristic is needed to become a successful bridal consultant.”

“And business owner,” she added.

His eyes stretched. “You’re a business owner?”

She smiled proudly of her accomplishments. “Yes, I own New Beginnings. It’s the name of my bridal consultant firm.”

“An entrepreneur. The lady is not only beautiful. She’s intelligent. I like that.”

“Thank you.” She beamed. She was proud of her accomplishment.

“Are you from the area?” he inquired.

“Born and raised in Virginia. So where are you from? When did you begin playing baseball?” Valencia blabbed a series of questions.

He flashed that beautiful smile of his. “If I answer your questions, does that mean I’ll get a date?”

Valencia returned his smile. “Maybe.”

Michael shook his head. He wasn’t used to working hard to get a woman to go out with him. Valencia Hill was different. That fascinated him even more.

“I’m from Chicago,” he began, “the Southside. My father is African-American and my mother is Hispanic. I began playing baseball my freshman year of college. Never picked up a bat before then. Still, the sport has been good to me.”

“Impressive.” She bobbed her head up and down, prompting him to tell her more. “Where did you go to college? What was your major?”

“Okay, okay,” he said, laughing. “I went to Northwestern University in Chicago. I majored in Education and Social Policy.”

“Education?” Her eyes stretched.

“You look surprised. I like working with kids. When I retire, I plan to teach. During the off season, I mentor at the Boys and Girls Club.”

The more Michael disclosed about himself, the more Valencia liked him. He

seemed sincere enough.

“Tell me about Valencia,” Michael probed.

“Well, I graduated from Morgan State with a degree in Accounting. I’m the youngest of three children. I have one brother and one sister.”

“I’m the oldest of two. I have a sister,” he volunteered, then added, “Accounting is a great career choice. What happened?”

Valencia shrugged. “It wasn’t the career for me. I came from a family of bankers and doctors. Accounting is what they expected me to do.”

Michael nodded. “You wanted to plan weddings?”

Valencia pepped up. She loved discussing her career. “I like creating, organizing, and planning. I wanted to be my own boss. Being a wedding consultant is very fulfilling. There’s nothing like creating the dream wedding for couples.”

“What about your own dream wedding?”

Valencia took a glass of ginger ale from the passing waiter’s tray. “What do you mean?” The last thing she wanted to do was talk about planning her wedding.

The light that was in Valencia’s eyes died out. Michael had a feeling he’d wandered into sensitive territory. “I mean, what type of wedding would you plan for yourself?”

Valencia took a sip. “I haven’t thought about it.” She lied. The truth was she

knew exactly what type of wedding she wanted. She'd planned her wedding with Malcolm only to see it evaporate before her eyes. "What's going on between you and Kendall?" This time it was her turn to change the subject.

Michael paused. How could he tell Valencia that she'd been right in her assessment about his past? He had a feeling she would never go out with him if he confessed the truth. His best chance was for her to get to know him...discover for herself that he'd gone through a lot of self-awareness the past couple of months. He wasn't the man he once was.

"Nothing." Michael hated lying to Valencia. It was not a good way to get to know her. "Kendall wants to be more than friends."

"And you don't?" she inquired. "No."

"She's a very attractive woman."

Michael looked her up and down seductively. "So are you." Valencia's response was to break into a wide smile.

"There it is." Michael returned her smile. "You have a smile a man can get lost in." Although he hadn't physically touched her, Valencia felt as if he stroked her with his words.

The rest of the evening passed quickly. Valencia began to feel at ease and enjoyed herself. Michael remained at her side, introducing her to friends and other teammates. As she watched him interact with the guests, she found him to

be attentive, down to earth, and approachable. For a man of his status, there didn't seem to be a hint of arrogance about him.

After several hours of nonstop music, DJ Love slowed things down and lowered the lights. Soon, Valencia found herself dancing in Michael's arms. She clasped her hands around his neck. They moved in perfect rhythm, matching each other step for step. Michael's hand traveled the hollow of her back.

Valencia locked herself into his embrace. His hands dropped to her hips, locking hers to his. Her breasts pressed heavily against his chest. She groaned inwardly as she tried to ignore the warmth between her thighs that occurred from the hardness of his solid body.

When one song finished, Michael held her through the next one. It was as if he didn't want the evening to end. She felt safe and protective in his arms. No matter how she fought it, she was very attracted to him. She knew he felt the same way about her, but she wasn't ready to enter into a relationship. Valencia stepped out of his arms and cleared her throat. "I better get going."

Michael could feel her trembling. He looked at her with concern. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she stammered out. "I just have a busy day tomorrow and need to get up early." Valencia could tell by the look in his eyes he was disappointed.

"Come on. I'll walk you out." Michael reached out, lacing his fingers with

hers to lead her through the crowd. She didn't attempt to pull away.

After saying good night to Autumn and Andre, they stepped outside into the cool, spring evening. Valencia could not have been more grateful. It gave her overheated body a chance to cool down.

“Where's your car?” A strong hand pressed into her back. The touch of his hand was almost unbearable in its tenderness. She couldn't help but wonder what kind of lover he would be. Would he be slow and thoughtful, or wild and aggressive? Maybe he was both. She pushed the thought aside. Get a grip, girl, she told herself.

Two years. It had been that long since she shared her body with a man. Was that the reason she was so attracted to Michael? Then again, it could have been the champagne she'd been drinking. She wasn't much of a drinker.

“Valencia?” Michael's voice broke into her thoughts.

“Around the corner.” When she arrived, all the parking spaces close to the house were taken.

“I'm closer. I'll give you a ride to your car and follow you home.”

She could have argued with him, but why bother? He probably would just followed her anyway.

Michael's fingers closed around her elbow and guided her to a black Lexus. He swept back his jacket, pulled out a set of keys, and deactivated the alarm. He

opened the passenger door and she climbed inside.

A few minutes later, she started her Maxima and pulled out of the parking space. Michael followed closely behind her. She occasionally glanced in her rearview mirror to see the lights of his car.

She gripped the steering wheel. "I should have objected to him following me home. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. I don't care how fine he is," she said aloud. "I'm not going to invite him in. It's bad enough I was introduced as his girlfriend, but he isn't getting any privileges."

With her heart pumping, she pulled into the garage of her home. Michael parked behind her and got out. She opened her car door and got out, also.

"Thanks for following me home, Michael."

"Anytime," he said as he cleared his throat.

Silence enveloped them as Michael escorted her to the door. He hoped the silence didn't mean she was angry at him about what happened at the party. He let his emotions get the better of him while she was in his arms. He couldn't help it. There was something about this lady that just caused his pulse to speed up every time he looked at her. His gaze stayed on her face and then dropped to her lips as he remembered the softness of them on his. His body ached to taste them again.

"I had a great time."

She reached inside her purse for her door key. “Me, too.”

When she pulled out the key, he caught her hand in his. “Here, let me do that,” he offered. The mere touch of his hand sent a warming shiver through her. He unlocked the door and handed her back the key.

Valencia stared at him for a long minute. It had been ages since a man accompanied her home. She wasn’t sure what to do. From the intensity in Michael’s eyes, she knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to kiss her again. She remembered the feel of his lips interacting with hers. She wasn’t in control of that situation, but this was on her terms. She wasn’t about to let Michael kiss her goodnight.

“I better get inside,” she said after a long breath, crossing the threshold into the foyer.

“You never answered my question,” he reminded her, not ready to let her end the night. Valencia turned to face him.

“Which one?”

“Will you have dinner with me?”

She angled her head to the side. “Can I call you? I have to check my schedule. I have a lot of weddings to plan.

He gave her a gentle smile. “All right, we’ll do it your way.” Michael reached in his back pocket, pulled out his wallet, took out a piece of paper, and

wrote his number on it. “Don’t just take my number and not use it. If I don’t hear from you, Valencia Hill, I will show up at your place of business.” Michael grinned, boldly taking Valencia’s hand in his.

“Goodnight.”

Without another word, he turned and strolled away. He opened the car door, and slid behind the wheel. Before he started the engine, he looked back at the house. She had gotten to him. Something no other woman had ever accomplished.

-END OF EXCERPT-