

## Chapter One

### Latrice

“All right, Mrs. Williams, I need you to turn to the right just a little bit more. Perfect.”

The camera snapped. Then again, and again.

My attempts to avoid blinking failed. Being photographed was not my idea of fun. In fact, I'd avoided pictures of any kind since childhood. After my parents died, though, my grandmother had become consumed with picture taking.

“Now I need you to relax a bit, okay? Smile. Have fun!” The photographer raised the camera to eye level.

Fun. Yeah, right.

This young guy had no idea what my life was like.

Had been like.

Would be like.

I, Latrice Williams, was a forty-year-old divorcee with a three-year-old daughter.

Following my life-long ambition to be a successful accountant with a major corporation and postponing my desire to become a mother and wife had led to three things: a very successful career, a world-wind romance with a man seven years my junior, and now, a divorce.

Being a single mother with a young child was not how I'd imagined making the trip 'over the hill.'

"Mrs. Williams, are you okay?"

My attention went to the photographer. His brow creased.

"What? Do I need to turn, or—"

"No, ma'am, your pose is fine, but you had a sad look on your face."

My hands went to my cheeks. "Sorry. I was thinking about...never mind."

"Why don't we take a break? I need to make some adjustments to the lighting anyway." He tried to hide his frustration, but it was obvious.

"Sure."

In order to clear my head, I walked around the studio to stretch my legs and let go painful memories of my failed relationship. My friends were right; it was way past time to move on. But how? I'd been on dating sites such as Our Time, Match.com, and even sites for single parents. All were a waste of time. The men there were all about playing games, wanted a sex-only relationship, or had obviously lied about their lives. And with the issue of 'Catfish' on dating sites, I didn't have time to fall into a sugar momma trap. Dealing with a younger man had been close enough.

Now, my happily-married friends felt bad and decided I needed to do something to jump-start my self-esteem. They'd set up this photo shoot, as though I was some young model, as a gag gift for my birthday. They felt that the use of a fresh headshot on dating sites would attract the right kind of man.

That's where they were wrong. My issues weren't about self-esteem. I'm confident, established, and do my own thing. My decision to get involved with a younger man had not been about settling

for the first man who'd paid me some attention. It'd been fun playing the role of a cougar. It'd felt good to know I could attract a man outside of my generation just as well as one within my age group.

Falling in love and expecting him to fit the mold of the man I wanted to grow old with had been my mistake.

I focused on the architecture of the remodeled studio. Solid red brick framed a row of huge windows that ran from the ceiling to the floor and overlooked the city and street three floors below. How in the world had my friends found this place? It was in the heart of downtown Atlanta, yet tucked away in a part riddled with abandoned warehouses that were slowly being re-appropriated for housing and businesses.

*Images.*

The name was creatively painted in a mural on the far wall. A selection of well-placed photographs drew me closer.

Larger than life images of landmarks in the city and its stunning views framed the mural. What drew my attention most, though, were still-shots of women in various stages of undress against a grey background. The lighting focused on individual parts of their bodies — legs, eyes, shoulders — drawing the eye to the natural beauty of each woman. Each model was young, sexy, and in her prime.

Me?

I was at least fifty pounds heavier, twenty years older, and while still attractive, there would be no way to convince me to pose like that.

“Those women don't hold a candle to you.”

Startled out of my thoughts, I followed the sound of the voice that had snuck up behind me. I stared into dark brown eyes that studied me while a slow smile spread across a generous pair of lips.

My admirer was gorgeous.

Skin the color of almonds stretched over perfectly proportioned cheekbones. Thick, jet-black hair peppered with gray screamed maturity. He was at least three inches taller than I was, which meant I had to look up to see beyond the unbuttoned portion of his shirt that revealed curly chest hair with its black and gray mix.

One dimple popped as his smile grew wider with my appraisal.

“Thank you, but there’s no need to suck up to me. You can have my number.”

His head fell back as he laughed, exposing his Adam’s apple. Two things were obvious: he was at least forty and was sexy as hell.

“Well, that didn’t take a lot of work,” he said, the Latin accent in his voice slipped out. “I’m Phillip.” He extended his hand.

“Latrice.” I accepted the handshake and was surprised when he kissed the back of my palm.

I forced my attention back to the pictures. “I remember what it was like to be young and free. Confident, willing to try new things with no fear of failure or embarrassment.”

“True, but that age also breeds ignorance.” He nodded toward the images. “I do not envy that age. I made some of my biggest mistakes back then.”

I angled my head. “Such as?”

“Poor choices.” He winced. “If I could go back, I’d do a lot of things over.”

“Not sure I could stand going back. I managed to skip making too many mistakes, thanks to my family. Instead, I focused on building a lasting career.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m an accountant.”

That brought on another laugh. “That explains a few things.”

I stared with raised eyebrows. “Such as?”

“The reason you’re uptight and uncomfortable when in front of the camera, but not when talking. Though,” he angled his head, appraising me from head-to-toe, “I have to admit...you’re nothing like my accountant. He’s nerdy. Only interested in numbers. You, on the other hand, are more...personable.”

“It comes from growing up in a household full of older brothers and being the only girl. I’m comfortable with men.” That brought on another smile. “How do you know about my photo shoot? Were you spying on me?”

“I wasn’t spying. I was watching from my office.” He indicated a window with half-open blinds in the corner of the spacious room. The angle would allow a person inside the room to see out, but keep anyone from looking in, especially if the lights were off. They were.

“Your office?”

“I own the studio.”

My eyebrows went up again. “Oh...well then, nice place you have here.”

“Gracias.”

“Tell me, Phillip, do you spy on all of your photo sessions?”

“Observe, and no, but Ken is new here. I needed to see how well he works with live subjects.”

I smirked.

He shrugged. “What can I say... The subject is...” he cocked his head to the side as if searching for the right word, all the while, his eyes stayed on me.

*Beautiful, amazing, extravagant...* I imagined the words flowing from his tantalizing mouth. I imagined his mouth on mine along with the feel of his firm shoulders beneath my fingers. A rush of desire flowed through me at the thought of getting naked and posing like the women in the pictures. For him. After several seductive shots, he’d come from behind the lens and make love to me on the studio floor...

He cleared his throat. “Difficult...non-responsive.”

“Excuse me?” My hands went to my hips as reality came back into focus.

Phillip held up a finger. “Any photographer can snap a picture, but it takes experience and the right...touch to find a subjects true potential. If I may, I’d like to show you yours.”

## Chapter Two

### Phillip

Latrice stared at me, a mixture of irritation and question in her eyes.

Maybe that last comment had been a bit out of line.

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

“Give me a few minutes to set up my equipment and let Ken know he can go home for the night.” Latrice’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “I’ll be back.”

Ken was in the back room, his camera in his lap while reviewing the pictures he’d taken on his computer screen. “I don’t like these. For some reason, I can’t get her to stay focused.”

I leaned over his shoulder to get a closer look. “It’s not the best, but it’s the subject that’s the problem, not you.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Tell you what, why don’t you cut out for the rest of the day. I’ll handle Latri—Mrs. Williams.” He looked at me with a raised brow. “Don’t worry. This has nothing to do with you. You’ll still get paid.”

Ken shrugged. “You’re the boss.” He removed the cord from his computer and went back into the studio for his equipment.

*What am I doing?* I ran my hand across my brow.

*Flirting with a beautiful woman and it’s about damn time. my inner voice said. We need the company. She seems to be the perfect candidate.*

I peered out the office window. Latrice continued to wander around, taking in the images on the wall. Ken and his equipment were gone.

Even though we'd only just met, I knew a few things about Latrice. She was recently divorced and in need of rebuilding her self-esteem. At least that's what her friend had said when she purchased the photo shoot package.

Had they been talking about the same woman? The Latrice I'd just met seemed to be the opposite. While that was intriguing, her issues were none of my business.

*She didn't want you to be alone, you know,* the voice said again.

My attention went to my desk where a picture of my beautiful wife sat.

I raised a finger to my lips and put it against the photograph.

My attention went to the woman now standing in front of the empty tripod. Camera in hand, I walked toward my client.

"Are you ready?" Finding enthusiasm about my current task was easy. My subject was ...

Latrice met me with a set of breathtaking brown eyes. Dark, deep, mysterious wells that made me pause. I'd photographed many women over the years, looked into hundreds of eyes, peered into the depths of many souls. None had spoken to me as Latrice's eyes had.

Not since Debra.

"Are you okay?" Latrice stared at me, her face full of concern.

"What?" I forced myself back to reality. "Fine. I'm fine. For a moment, you reminded me of someone."

"Who?"

*Tell her and get it over with,* the voice instructed.

I swallowed. "My wife. She died two years ago. Ovarian cancer."

Latrice's hands went to her mouth. "I'm so sorry."



“Thanks.” I forced myself to focus on the camera in my hands as I set it up on the tripod.

“How long?”

I looked up.

“Was she sick, I mean...”

“A few years. She was a fighter, for sure. So much so she gave me a beautiful daughter before leaving this world. She found out she was pregnant the same time she was diagnosed with cancer. The type of cancer she had could have been cured, but she would have lost the baby. We’d been trying for years to get pregnant. Surgery would have made it impossible to conceive again. She avoided chemo and focused on holistic medicine until she gave birth. By then, it was too late. She lived to see Anna’s first birthday.”

My attention went to resetting the lights. I didn’t want her to see my wet eyes. Talking about my late wife was not something I did very often, especially not with another woman.

The room was silent.

Finished, I moved back to my camera, removed the cap from the lens, and stared into the viewfinder.

“I’m divorced. Younger man... Thought I could handle him. Turned out he got over his desire to be with an older woman. I have my daughter, though, so it was worth the heartache. She’s three, also.”

“Seems like we have something very precious in common.”

Latrice smiled.

Camera focused on my subject, it was time to go to work.

“I’m going to ask you some questions. Don’t over think the answers; just give me whatever comes off the top of your head. I want to capture your natural reactions. Okay?”

“Um...sure, I guess.”

And that's what nervous looked like.

*Snap.*

"Your daughter, tell me about her. What's her name?"

A smile raised the corners of her lips at the same time her eyes brightened. I snapped a photo.

"Camey is a clown. She's always making me laugh." She chuckled, her head dropping down to her chest, shoulders bouncing up and down.

*Snap.*

"Camey?"

"Short for Cassandra. I named her after my grandmother, who took care of me after my mother passed away when I was ten. Dad was in the military."

The bright smile turned soft as a look of remembrance came to her eyes.

*Snap.*

"I don't know where I'd be if it weren't for her. Grammy is the one who convinced me to follow my love of numbers and see where it took me." Her eyes rose to mine. "I got picked on a lot as a kid for being a nerd. Add the fact I was the tallest in my class and wore thick-rimmed glasses and well..."

I laughed. "Well, I wasn't a nerd, but I guess I can understand."

Latrice angled her head taking me in, a smirk on her face. "You? Please, I bet you were a jock in school. With all those muscles and that build, I'm guessing, what, football?"

"Wrong." I laughed. "I spent the majority of my high school career stuck in the dark room of my school's photography class. I was trying to keep out of trouble, but trouble still found me."

"In the photo lab? What did you do, burn down the place?"

"No," I adjusted the height of the camera and switched positions for a different angle. "Some gang members thought it would be the perfect spot to keep their stash of drugs. With all the

chemicals in the room, they assumed the drug-sniffing dogs that came into the school once a month to do spot checks wouldn't go there. One day they decided to check the room. I was in there working and the cops immediately thought the drugs belonged to me."

"Did they?"

I met her gaze. "No. They belonged to my brother who was in a gang. I had a choice, tell the police the truth and get cleared, or rat out my brother who had already been in trouble with the law and watch him get sent to jail." I shrugged. "Family was more important. I got a smudge on my record that crippled my chances of going to college on a scholarship as I'd planned. In the end, my sacrifice was a waste. Six months later he got busted in a street raid and still ended up in jail." He shook his head. "Thus the reason I said I learned the hard way about some things."

"Wow! That's messed up. So you didn't go to college, but you still ended up doing photography. How did that happen?" She angled her head to the side, exposing the side of her throat. A throat that led to an exposed shoulder due to the halter styled dress she wore.

*Snap.*

"Community college. It was cheaper, and I managed to get some financial aid. It wasn't the big school I wanted to go to, but it was still an education."

Latrice's eyes drifted to the framed images on the studio walls. "Those are your pictures, right?"

I followed her line of site. "Most of them, yes."

"Then I imagine your talent is what got you here, not the price tag of your education."

Our eyes met again, and damn...I liked her.

"Those women, you did them?" Her eyes widened, her hand shooting to her mouth. "Sorry, that didn't come out right. I mean, did you take those pictures?"

My eyebrows shot up, laughter following. "Whose mind is in the gutter?" I shook my head. "Yes, I took those pictures as part of my final exam in school. They earned me an A+, by the way."

“I can see why. Why did you take them that way? I noticed you focused on parts of the body and not faces.”

Curiosity was now on her face.

*Snap.*

I raised my head from the viewfinder. Her curiosity was genuine.

“The theme for that series was *Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder*,’ which was me. The point I wanted to make is that the media teaches us beauty comes from what our face looks like. The dimensions of eyes, ears, nose, and mouth have to fit inside this perfect group of lines in order to show perfection. The truth is no one is perfect. Our eyes don’t sit directly across from each other. Very few people have button noses. Jawbones can be unbalanced. It’s natural. True beauty comes from within. It can also be found on other parts of the body.”

“Such as legs, eyes, shoulders,” she said, looking at the images again. “Did you know them? Your models?”

“No. I put up flyers on campus asking for models and paid them twenty bucks for an hour of their time. It was strictly business and impersonal. All three of them had boyfriends who insisted on accompanying them to the shoot. I felt like they were breathing down my neck the entire time.” I chuckled. “I’ve always wanted to do it again, but just haven’t had the time, or the perfect candidate.”

“Would I work?” Latrice’s cheeks flushed a bit, but the resolve was in her eyes as she watched me. “I mean, you did say that they didn’t hold a candle to me, so...” She shrugged, nervous laughter escaping. “I am a lot older than those models, though. If that was just a compliment to be nice, I understand. No hurt feelings.”

My eyes traveled over her, first as a photographer. The lines of her physique were nice. As a woman twice the age of the women in my collection, her body had a story to tell. Imperfect...yet, perfect.

In the eyes of a man, though, Latrice had everything that turned me on. Eyes full of wisdom, a mouth that was experienced, bountiful breasts, thick hips, and legs that led my imagination astray.

“Absolutely.”

“Are you sure?” Genuine surprise was on her face.

“Are you?”

Her response came as a slow nod.

“Then we need to change a few things. Lighting, it has to be dark so I can focus the lights on what I want the camera to see. I’ve got candles in the back so it won’t be pitch-black.” My eyes went to the background. “I’ll go with black this time, to compliment your skin tone. And instead of a chair, I have a platform covered with black sheets and a few pillows to keep you comfortable. You won’t be sitting the entire time. Some pictures will be of you lying down. Are you okay with that?” Latrice looked at me with eyes that had gotten rounder the more I spoke. “And you’ll need to be naked.”

Latrice held my gaze. I tried to keep my expression strictly professional, but I could tell by the way that she was looking at me I had failed. Big time. She didn’t seem to mind because she didn’t hide the heat that was in her eyes either.

“Where do I change?”

## Chapter 3

### Latrice

What the hell was I thinking? Getting naked in front of a man I didn't know? With a camera?

Okay, he was a professional, but that didn't mean the images wouldn't turn up on the internet, or on the walls of the studio.

And oh, my God, I'm an *accountant* for God's sake. We didn't do stuff like this!

Was I fun and flirty? Yes. Did I like to play around? Yes. In the privacy of my bedroom. This was a studio, a *public* studio. What if a family with five kids walked in looking to get a family portrait? What if one of my friends decided to show up and see if I went through with the photo shoot? Or worse, what if that young Ken guy came back because he forgot something?

A knock on the door made me jump and yelp.

"Latrice? Sorry, it's just me; I didn't mean to scare you. Is everything okay?"

The sexy timbre of Phillip's voice warmed my insides.

"Yes, I'm fine, just checking my phone to see if the babysitter sent me any messages," I lied.

"Oh, okay. If you need to go, I'll understand."

"No, no, I'm fine, I swear." I squinted, then wrinkled my nose.

"Good. Well, I'm leaving the black sheet beside the door on a chair, okay? Take everything off and wrap it around you. Come out when you're ready. I'll be finished setting up in about ten minutes."

Ten minutes? That soon?

I forced myself to relax. “Okay!”

Phillip stood near the door for a few more seconds before I heard him walk away.

I sat down on a chair in the changing room and popped my forehead with the heel of my hand.

And to think, thirty minutes ago, I imagined getting naked in front of him for pictures. What seemed like a great fantasy was now frightening reality.

But, Phillip was a professional, and my imagination had been just that. This was going to be strictly about his portfolio and not attraction or sex. The sex part was just my need of some action after a dry spell since the divorce. After all, I wasn't some free and single woman anymore. I'm a mother with a young daughter who was not about to introduce anyone to her because mommy needed to get laid.

I forced myself out of the chair, retrieved the sheet he'd left behind, and stripped. Naked, I stood in front of a full-length mirror so conveniently hidden behind the door. For the first time, I appraised myself in a way I hadn't done before. I wasn't the same woman I was four years ago...before I'd given birth to my daughter. Back then, my body had been tight because of the amount of work I put in to keep it that way. Why else would Evan have been so eager to be with me? But after giving birth? I was thirty-seven at the time, and my body didn't bounce back as it would have if I'd been younger. A few things were sagging in all the wrong places and my tummy wasn't exactly flat anymore.

I sighed. It was too late to back out now. Besides, he'd only be aiming the camera at my shoulders and feet, right? Thank God for the recent pedi.

When I opened the door to the studio, it was nearly pitch-black. I gathered the black silk sheet – man he had good taste- from around my feet and walked carefully toward the light. The studio had

taken on a completely different appearance. Candles stood on tall pedestals around a platform that was also draped in black satin. Two lights stood on stands, aimed at the platform.

As I padded up behind Phillip, he turned. His eyes traveled the length of my body before he cleared his throat. “Are you ready for this?”

Unable to speak, I nodded.

He walked over, extended his hand. I accepted, and he led me to the back of the platform, to a set of steps. He held my hand until I reached the top step.

“I promise to make this as enjoyable as possible. You look beautiful, by the way.”

I laughed to keep my nerves from showing. “In a sheet, thanks. Um...how do you want me?”

“Sit, please. Keep your back to the camera. I want to focus on your hair. Would you mind taking it down for me?”

Keeping a tight grip on the gathered portion of the sheet covering my breast, I did the best I could to remove the pins with one hand.

“May I?”

“Please.” I tried my best not to get caught up in the smell of his cologne as he eased closer, inserting long fingers into my hair. My eyes closed, and I nearly moaned as his fingers grazed my scalp to finger comb the loose strands, setting them down on my shoulders. He stood before me, taking in my appearance. I tried not to stare at his eyes, but it was impossible. He reached for my chin, tilting it up as if putting my lips in the perfect position for a kiss.

“Perfect. Now, don’t move.”

He walked behind me and seconds later, I heard the rapid click of the camera as he took multiple pictures.

“Do you have an active imagination?”

I laughed. “Doesn’t everyone?”



“Good. I want you to relax and let loose. Imagine that you’ve just had the best sex of your life and your lover is sitting across the room. You want him to come to you again, so you seduce him by flirting and showing off parts of your body. I want you to flirt with the camera. Can you do that?”

Was he kidding? Flirt with the camera?

“If you want, you can pretend you’re flirting with me.”

Okay...

I licked my lips and dug back into the brief fantasy I had about him and let go. Not moving, I turned my head ever so slightly to peer over my shoulder, making sure my hair hung in my face. Diving back into my fantasy, I bit my lip. Though my hair covered my eyes, I could see him through the loose strands. He smiled ever so slightly and shook his head.

“Perfect.”

*Snap. Snap. Snap.*

“Now, turn to your left and put your legs up on the platform. Yeah, that’s right. Now, let the sheet fall and let me see... Oh yeah...”

The intense light caused my body to heat up. Probably because I was wrapped in a black sheet. But more than likely, Phillip’s reactions were what sent a rush of heat through me as, little by little, he got a peek of more skin.

“Tuck your hair behind your ear and look down...hold it...”

*Snap. Snap. Snap.*

“You’re looking so good up there. Are you feeling bold enough to try one more?” Phillip’s gaze was one of appreciation and hopefulness.

“What do you want?”

He set down the camera, walked over to me. “I want you to lie on your stomach and drape the sheet across the lower part of your body.”

The way he looked at me made it easy to follow his directions. I did as instructed. My heart nearly flew out of my chest when he made adjustments, exposing more of my naked flesh.

“Now, look at me and make love to the camera.”

*Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap. Snap.*

Then he set down the camera and walked over to me. “Don’t move. I have one more question to ask you.”

Feeling vulnerable, yet never more turned on in my life, I lifted my head to look him directly in the eye. He seemed as if he was having trouble keeping his eyes above my lower half. “Ask me.”

He cleared his throat. “May I...kiss you?”

I blinked. Then blinked again, my eyes going to his luscious mouth. Unable to speak, I nodded.

To my surprise, he didn’t go for my mouth. Instead, he placed his mouth against my shoulder and lingered there.

“I love this tattoo. What made you choose this design?” He grazed his fingers over my one rebellious act.

My fairy, which sat on my right shoulder. God, I’d forgotten all about it.

I forced myself to laugh. “Long story. It was the one time I was disobedient and didn’t follow my grandmother’s rules.”

“Sounds interesting. Why don’t we go out after you get dressed? I’d love to hear the tale.”

I rolled onto my side, making sure to bring the sheet with me. “Phillip, are you asking me out on a date?”

His eyes lingered on mine before slipping down to the gathered sheet in my hands. “Yes.”

“Even though you’ve got me naked and we’re alone. You ask to kiss me, but you didn’t kiss my mouth. You’re obviously attracted to me, but you’re not trying to take advantage of the situation.

Why?”

“Because...” Those gorgeous eyes lowered to my mouth as if contemplating what to say before meeting mine again. “I want our first kiss to be with your clothes on. I want our first time to be after we’ve gotten to know each other a little more. And I’d really like to see if our daughters could be friends. Jumping into bed now could ruin something good, don’t you think?”

My mouth nearly fell open. Was it possible that I’d finally met the perfect man?

I reached out to touch his face, feeling the light stubble of a beard in my hands. His eyes closed for a second as if absorbing my touch.

“Phillip, I’d love to.”

####

THE END



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

M.J. Kane stumbled into writing. An avid reader, this once stay-at-home mom never lost the overactive imagination of an only child. As an adult she made up stories, though never shared them, to keep herself entertained. It wasn't until surviving a traumatic medical incident in 2006 that she found a reason to let the characters inhabiting her imagination free. Upon the suggestion of her husband, she commandeered his laptop and allowed the characters to take life. It was that, or look over her shoulder for men caring a purple strait jacket. And the rest, as they say, is history.

No longer a television addict, if M.J. isn't reading a book by one of her favorite authors, she's battling with her creative muse to balance writing and being a wife and mother. She resides in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia with her high school sweetheart, four wonderful children, and four pit bulls. MJ can often be found at the local library where she now works, at Barnes & Noble as the director of a local writer's group, or online connecting with readers and other authors. Other activities she enjoys include: creating custom floral arrangements, assisting her children in their creative pursuits of music and art, and supporting her husband's music production business, 3D Sounds. M.J. is the Newsletter Editor for Romance Novels in Color Reader and Author newsletters and contributes to the CCLS Branching Out Newsletter.

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