

One

“Just a minute,” Paige Thomas yelled to whoever was ringing her apartment doorbell at nine A.M. the day after Christmas. She’d just gotten in herself, having taken the six A.M. flight from Boston to Atlanta. She’d planned on spending the day being upset with Dexter Fine, her fiancé, for canceling their plans to spend the holidays together. As usual, he’d used work as an excuse. This time, he’d had to visit a client in Los Angeles.

Of course, her father had taken Dexter’s side and chastised her for not being supportive of her hard-working fiancé. She was getting angry again just thinking about it. She closed her suitcase and shoved it in her already crowded bedroom closet and ran to open the door.

“Just a minute,” she said again, in an annoyed tone that she hoped the intruder recognized. She jerked the door open and saw an elderly woman standing in her doorway. The chastisement on her

lips fell away. The woman had to be eighty, if she was a day. She couldn't have been more than five-four, a hundred pounds. She looked rather feeble standing there with her gray hair pulled back in a bun, wire-rimmed glasses, support hose, and orthopedic shoes. The woman was so much the stereotypical senior citizen that Paige was immediately sorry and embarrassed for her rudeness. "I'm sorry, ma'am," she said. "May I help you?"

The older woman opened her mouth to speak, but she was interrupted by a booming male voice coming from down the hallway. "Big Momma, I thought I told you to wait for me at the elevator." Before Paige saw him, she knew it was her friend, Reed Lewis. She'd recognize his deep, rich, Barry White-like voice anywhere. When she saw him, she wondered why he was carrying three suitcases, one under his arm, and one in each hand. The one under his arm had caused his black bomber jacket and sweater to rise, giving a glimpse of his flat, brown stomach.

"Reed, what are you doing—?"

Reed quickly dropped the suitcases by her door and pulled her into his arms. "Go along with me until I can explain," he whispered in her ear. "I missed you, sweetheart," he said, loudly enough for the woman Paige now guessed was his grandmother to hear. "I hope your father and mother were well."

He pulled back from her and she saw the plea in his eyes. What was going on? she wondered.

He looked at his grandmother. "Didn't I tell you she was something, Big Momma?"

His grandmother slapped him on the arm. “You have no manners, sonny. You didn’t even introduce me. The girl looks like she’s scared to death.”

Reed grinned at his grandmother and Paige knew then that they shared a special relationship. “Big Momma, this is Paige Thomas. Paige, my grandmother, Willie Pearl Lewis. You can call her Big Momma, or you can call her Grandma Lewis.”

Paige extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Grandma Lewis.” *Big Momma* was a bit much, in her opinion.

Grandma Lewis looked at Paige’s outstretched hand and shook her head. “You young folks! I’m not shaking my granddaughter-in-law-to-be’s hand. I want a hug, and a better one than you gave your fiancé,” she said with a huff and pushed her patent leather handbag further up her arm to embrace Paige.

It wasn’t a strong hug, because it seemed Grandma Lewis didn’t have a lot of strength, but it was a loving hug. Paige felt the love all the way to her bones.

When Grandma Lewis pulled away, Paige felt that she’d lost something vital. As if she knew Paige’s thoughts, Grandma Lewis winked at her. “You’re a special girl, Paige. My grandson finally did something right.”

Reed put his hand to his heart. “I’m hurt, Big Momma. All this time I thought I could do no wrong.”

Grandma Lewis looked at him and smiled. “Now, greet your fiancée like you love her. If your grandfather, rest his soul, had come to visit me after being separated for Christmas Day, I’d want more than that poor excuse for a hug you gave Paige.”

Reed reached in his pocket and pulled out a dried sprig of mistletoe.

“Reed—” Paige lifted her hand to stop him, but before she could finish the sentence, he had pulled her into his arms.

He hugged her and whispered, “Do it for my grandmother. Please, I’ll explain later.”

“You owe me, big time, Reed Lewis,” she whispered back.

Paige thought she’d done what he’d wanted when he pulled back from the hug, so the kiss surprised her. It was the first time she’d kissed a guy with a mustache. There was something very sensual about the contrast of the feel of his lips against hers and the lingering caress of his mustache against her skin.

She heard herself moan, and felt Reed deepen the kiss. Her arms automatically encircled his back.

“That’s enough, children,” Grandma Lewis said. “I don’t think my heart can take any more of your welcoming.”

When Reed pulled away and smiled down at her, Paige felt as though she were looking at him for the first time. His deep-set light-brown eyes were hooded by thick black eyebrows and long eyelashes that probably made some women jealous. That didn’t mean there was anything feminine about his face,

though. To the contrary, his face was all male, from the wide forehead to the strong cheekbones and the square chin. When he smiled, his features turned soft and inviting. And his ears—she wanted to use them as handles to pull his face back to hers.

Hold up, Paige, she said to herself. This is Reed, your old friend Reed, you're talking about. What's happening here?

Reed mouthed the words "Thank you," then gave her a quick hug before picking up the suitcases in the hallway. "My apartment's flooded and we have no place to stay. Can we bunk with you for a few days?"

Paige was still thinking about that kiss and wondering where Reed had learned to kiss like that.

"Doesn't look like she's going to let us in, Reed," Grandma Lewis said.

"Oh." Paige stammered and stepped back so they could enter her apartment. "Come on in." She smiled at Grandma Lewis. "Make yourself at home."

As Reed passed her, Paige whispered, "You've got a lot of explaining to do, and you'd better do it fast."

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Reed pressed his ear against Paige's bedroom door in an attempt to hear what she and his grandmother were talking about, but he could hear only bits and pieces of sentences.

He listened for a few more seconds before giving up and moving back to his seat on the sofa.

He propped his feet up on Paige's glass-topped cocktail table, smiling as he thought about the grief she'd give him when she saw his feet there.

His smile eased into a frown as thoughts of the last time he'd been in her apartment filled his mind. It had been three months ago, after they'd attended the Hawks' season opener.

"Take your feet off my table," she'd said, pushing his jeans-clad legs to the floor. "You act like you have no home training, and I know your mother taught you better than that."

He'd grinned at her, liking the way her big, brown eyes sparked when she pretended to be upset. "Hey, my mother was more concerned with making sure her men were comfortable than she was about some old furniture." His use of the word "old" was a jibe, since all the furniture in her apartment had been replaced in the last year. She'd called it remodeling. He'd called it a waste of money. Too much white and too much fluff for his taste.

His remark had only gotten a smirk from her before she'd gone off for a quick shower. Then the phone had rung. He knew he shouldn't have answered it, but he had. It had been Dexter. Mr. Fine.

"Lewis, what are you doing in my fiancée's apartment this late at night?"

'Because you're not here, where you ought to be' were the words that came to Reed's mind, but he didn't speak them. Not out of any respect for Fine, but out of respect for his friendship with Paige. "We