

One

MARLENA dabbed at the corners of her burgundy-painted lips, then stepped back and checked her reflection in the gold-framed mirror one last time. She didn't know why she was so nervous. She'd been to hundreds of parties in the last ten years—parties that would make this event seem like a backyard barbeque but she'd never been this anxious.

She cast a quick glance behind her and after making sure she still had the bathroom to herself, she tugged on the thin straps of her short, black beaded dress. Why hadn't she noticed *before* that her breasts seemed as though they were about to fall out of the thing? She tugged one last time, then stopped.

What are you doing, Marlena Rhodes? she asked herself silently. This party is in your honor, given by people who watched you grow up. So what if some of them treated you like dirt then? Look where you have them now—groveling at your feet. You've done it, girl. You've made the residents of the elite Rosemont section of Gaines sit up and take notice.

Marlena dropped her hands from the thin straps of her dress. There was nothing wrong with what she wore. Accented with an ivory cameo choker and matching button cameo earrings, her ensemble suited the occasion perfectly. It displayed her feminine form with the understated elegance and subtle sexuality that had become her trademark. She dabbed at her lips once more, took a

final deep breath, then turned on her three-inch heels and left the bathroom.

“We’ve been looking for you, dear,” Mrs. Hampton said as soon as Marlana returned to the intimate gathering on the Hampton’s expansive patio. The older woman wore a gray silk dress adorned with a single strand of pearls and matching earrings. “Come with me, the Browns are dying to meet you. You do remember them, don’t you? They owned the car dealership when you left. Well, now they own four of them.”

Marlana listened to the older woman and wished, not for the first time, that her mother could be here with her. Josie Rhodes would have loved this. She’d always wanted to be on the inside of Gaines’s black society, but she’d never been granted entrance. Though she’d had the style, she hadn’t had the money that would have made her acceptable to these people.

Marlana smiled appropriately as the Browns talked about themselves and questioned her about her practice. These were among the most shallow people she’d ever met. They weren’t really interested in her, she knew; they were dazzled by her success. How many of the lawyers in Gaines got the opportunity to try a case before the Supreme Court and win? How many of the lawyers in Gaines had their faces splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the country after successfully representing a major entertainment figure in a murder case? None.

The only reason all these people were attending to her tonight was because she moved in circles they could only read about. From Washington, D.C., to Hollywood, California, from the White House to Denzel Washington’s house, she’d been there, done that. She wished it meant as much to her as it did to these people.

“I hear you drive one of our cars, Marlana,” Mr. Brown was saying. “Would you be interested in shooting a commercial for us?”

“Thanks for asking, Mr. Brown,” she began, wondering how the man knew what kind of car she drove.

“Call me, Frank,” he said, cutting her off. “I don’t want an answer tonight. You think about it. Maybe you could give me the name of your business manager and have my people talk to him.”

Your people talk to my people. She wanted to laugh at the man’s pompous arrogance. Instead, she opened her beaded purse and handed him a card with her manager’s name on it.

She was about to say more when Mrs. Hampton took her arm again. “You can’t monopolize our Marlena here, Frank,” the older woman chided. “A lot of people want to meet one of Gaines’s most famous natives.”

Marlena smiled at the Browns, glad for Mrs. Hampton’s interruption. For the first time tonight, she appreciated the older woman’s snobbery.

Mrs. Hampton led her to the far edge of the patio where an older, brown-skinned, slightly graying man stood off to himself. “This is Reginald McCoy,” Mrs. Hampton said, pushing Marlena closer to the attractive gentleman whose name and face she didn’t recognize.

While Mrs. Hampton gave detailed biographies of each of them, Marlena noticed that Mr. McCoy’s eyes couldn’t stay away from her breasts. She appreciated a complimentary glance from an attractive man as well as the next woman, but there was something predatory about Mr. McCoy’s stare that made her uncomfortable.

“I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,” Mrs. Hampton said, ending her spiel. Then she rushed off toward the other guests.

“Welcome home, Marlena,” McCoy said, in a deep, husky tone that would have been sensual had his eyes not held the gleam of a cat about to pounce on its dinner.

After talking with McCoy for a few minutes, Marlena relaxed, thinking maybe she’d misjudged the man. He was a flirt, but certainly nothing more and she could flirt with the best of them.

When he leaned close to her and placed his hand on her bare shoulder in an intimate gesture, she knew it was time to end their conversation. She looked up at him to tell him so when she felt the presence she'd been alternately dreading and awaiting. Her lips parted slightly but no words came out.

McCoy took her parted lips as an invitation and the next thing she knew the man had planted his lips firmly against hers.

~ ~ ~

Winston Taylor wasn't surprised when he saw his ex-fiancée lift her face for Reggie McCoy's kiss, but he was surprised at his body's reaction to it. He'd guessed from the intimate way McCoy had been caressing Marlana's bare shoulders that theirs was more than a friendly, welcome home conversation. Well, he told himself, Marlana was a grown woman and she was no longer his. She could do what she wanted, when she wanted, and with whom she wanted.

Maybe she *was* the money-hungry bitch his mother had always said she was, after all. She'd certainly zeroed in on Moneybags McCoy with haste. He wondered how many other men she'd seduced with her kisses.

Winston refused to stop his unkind thoughts about Marlana. It was much easier to hate her than it was to examine the other emotions she evoked in him. Unfortunately, his hatred did nothing to ease his desire.

He could still feel those full lips of hers against his. He remembered how soft and vulnerable she'd been in his arms. She'd worn a mask of indifference for the world, but she'd allowed him entrance into her soul and he'd felt blessed because of it. There was a time when he would have given his life for her. He'd loved her that much.

She hadn't loved him that much though. When she'd had to choose between a simple, though in no way lacking, life with him in Gaines and the lure of an extravagant lifestyle as a partner in

one of D.C.'s top law firms, she'd gone for the gold and left him with a broken heart.

Well, he told himself, that was the past. Water under the bridge, as they said. She could strip naked and have sex with McCoy in the middle of Main Street if she wanted, but she wouldn't make a mockery of this party the town had planned for her and she wouldn't ruin his plans for his new project.

He ignored the flicker of jealousy in his belly and clamped down on the urge to punch McCoy's lights out. "Welcome home, Marlana," he said, when he stood no more than three feet away from the still-embracing couple. When Marlana moved to push McCoy away from her, he added, "No need to break up on my account. I just wish you had waited until you got back to the hotel. The people of Gaines aren't used to such public displays of . . . ah . . . affection."

The gleam in McCoy's eyes over Marlana's head made Winston's hands to curl into fists at his side. The older man's message couldn't have been clearer. He already saw himself in Marlana's bed.

When Marlana finally stepped away from McCoy and turned to face Winston, he felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him. She was more beautiful now than she'd been when she'd walked out of his life ten years ago. He wanted to slip his fingers under the thin straps of her dress and slowly push the garment off her shoulders and down her body, leaving a trail of hot kisses in its path.

"Hello, Winston," she said through those full lips he wanted so much to caress with his own. "How have you been?"

"Fine," he said, amazed his vocal cords worked. "I don't have to ask how you are. You look wonderful." He cast a glance above her head at McCoy. "But I guess he's already told you that."

She smiled one of her rare smiles and he was again a teenager in the throes of first love. Though in those days Marlana rarely smiled, she'd always had a special smile for him. She wore that

smile now. “A woman never tires of hearing she’s beautiful. I’m sure you know that.”

McCoy placed a proprietary arm across Marlena’s shoulders again. “Maybe we should continue this conversation over dinner. Everyone else has gone in.”

Winston pinned Marlena with a stare. “That’s why I interrupted your fun. Mrs. Hampton sent me to get you,” he lied.

McCoy’s hand slid to Marlena’s waist and he led her through the patio doors and into the house. Winston walked behind them, his eyes glued to the foreign hand on the small of Marlena’s back. He needed a drink and he needed one fast.

~ ~ ~

Marlena felt Winston’s eyes boring into her back as McCoy escorted her into the house. She didn’t have to guess what he was thinking. It had been in his eyes when she’d turned around and spoken to him. He’d thought she wanted McCoy’s kiss when all she’d wanted was to slap the older man’s face and get away from him.

Winston’s presence had stopped her. She’d wanted to slap *him* when she realized what he thought. He should have known her better than to think she’d kiss a man she’d just met. Well, if that was how little he thought of her, she’d show him how right he was. She had purposed then to spend the rest of the evening with McCoy.

McCoy seated himself next to her at dinner, as she’d known he would, and she feigned interest in his conversation. When someone tapped him on his shoulder, she stole a glance down the table at Winston. When she’d first felt his presence, all the years between them had vanished, and she’d wanted to turn and hurl herself into the strong arms that had held her close so many times in the past. The years had come back in spades when she’d turned and seen his face. The disapproving frown set clearly in his strong, masculine features showed he hadn’t had any such nostalgic thoughts.

She'd been disappointed he hadn't had even one good memory of them to make their first meeting in ten years special. *What did you expect?* she asked herself. *That he would take one look at you and realize he still loved you? Get real, girl. Life has gone on—yours and his. You came here to put the past in its place. Well, he's helping you accomplish your goal.*

Almost as if he'd heard her thinking, Winston turned and caught her looking at him. When he lifted his wine glass to her in mock toast, she quickly turned away.

McCoy said something to her but she couldn't concentrate on his words. Her thoughts were still in the past. "I love you," Winston had said the day they'd parted. "Don't do this to us."

Her heart ached every time she remembered that day, but she'd had no choice. She'd had to end the relationship then or he would have ended it later—when he found out.

She cast another quick glance at him and noticed the gorgeous woman, whom she guessed was his date, seated next to him. Apparently, Winston's taste in women had changed over the years. Though he'd often told her how much he loved her dark skin and how he thought her short, curly hair made her look sexy, his current date was a light-skinned beauty with long relaxed hair.

Her old insecurities kicked in and she wondered if Winston had ever really loved her. How could he have? She'd been a poor girl from the wrong side of town who'd had to struggle for everything she'd ever gotten. She'd worn the same clothes day after day and week after week. Of course, they'd been clean, pressed and repaired; she'd made sure of that. Ironically, people had often commented on her sense of fashion, not realizing her choice of classic styles that endured was because she couldn't afford to keep up with the latest trends.

The same could be said of her hair. Though she wore it short now because it was more manageable that way, she'd had to wear it cut short back then because she hadn't had the money for regular perms.

What had Winston Taylor, son of one of the wealthiest black men in Gaines, seen in her? He could have had any girl he wanted and he'd chosen her. She'd never understood why and she'd always thought that one day he'd ask himself the same question, decide he could do a lot better, and leave her.

~ ~ ~

Winston suffered through the dinner. He'd barely heard a word his date had said all night. All his thoughts centered on Marlana. He needed to talk to her about the project, he told himself as he made his excuses to his date and made his way across the room to Marlana.

"Do you mind if I borrow Marlana for a few minutes, Reggie?" he asked, when he reached her side. He wondered if the older man was really going to spend the night with her. "I need to talk to her about some plans the council has on the table."

McCoy smiled down at Marlana. "Only if you promise to bring her back."

Before Marlana could respond, Winston had taken her arm and was pulling her out of the dining room and into the Hampton's library. He closed the door behind them.

"You seem to be having a good time tonight," he said, with a little more of an edge in his voice than he'd planned. He couldn't help it though. The thought of Marlana in bed with McCoy made him angry.

She walked to the mahogany bookcases that lined the far wall and began fingering the books. "This is a nice party. I *almost* feel welcome."

"You sound surprised," he said, taking a seat on the leather couch in the middle of the room. "Gaines is your home. Of course you're welcome here."

She smiled what he'd always called her public smile because it didn't reach her eyes. "Is it me they're welcoming, Winston, or the things I've done? Somehow I don't think I'd be as welcome

without that Supreme Court case or that L.A. murder trial behind me.”

She sounded like the girl he'd loved: vulnerable, a bit insecure, yet strong and determined. She'd always felt she didn't belong, that she wasn't good enough, and though he'd tried to tell her she was wrong, she'd never really believed him. He'd thought her success would have given her the validation he hadn't been able to give, but it hadn't. Marlena still needed to prove her worth to herself and to the people of Gaines just as she'd felt she had to do years ago. “It's what you wanted, isn't it?” he asked. “You wanted fame and recognition and now you have it. You should be happy that Gaines's finest has opened their arms to you. You've achieved your goal.”

He thought he saw a flicker of regret in her eyes but it was quickly replaced with boredom. “What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked, taking a seat in the leather Queen Anne chair next to the couch.

“Oh,” he said, trying to focus on the project he wanted to talk to her about instead of on her smooth legs that screamed out to him when she crossed them. “I'm working on a special project with the city council.”

“You've accomplished your goal then, too,” she said, her words forcing his eyes back to her face. “You always wanted to come back here and make a difference. A job on the council allows you to do that, doesn't it?”

“I'm trying,” he said, leaning toward her. “That's why I wanted to talk to you. I'm working on this project to get more Gaines High graduates to return here to live and work.”

“How can I help?” she asked. “I'm only here for a visit. I don't plan to live in Gaines ever again.”

He leaned back away from her. “I wouldn't expect someone as prominent as you to be content here with a bunch of small town yahoos like us,” he said with a sneer. “But I had hoped you would lend your name and support to the project.”

“That's not what I meant, Winston.”

He waved his hand in the air. “It doesn’t matter. Just hear me out. The program, called *The Way Home*, has contacted all the major businesses within a forty-five-minute driving radius about professional job opportunities. We’re in the process of matching those opportunities with the professions of some of our graduates. Once that’s finished, we have to contact the graduates and convince them to come back here and interview for the positions.”

“You make it sound so simple, but why would anyone want to come back here? This town wasn’t very friendly to a lot of us. Are you sure you aren’t the only one who wants graduates to come back?”

Winston stood and pushed his hands into the pockets of his dress pants, making her smile. As he stood before her now in his dark gray pants and jacket with the light gray banded-collar shirt, he reminded her of the man she’d always loved. Her Winston had never been one to wear ties. It was comforting to know that he was still the same in some ways.

“The town needs to grow,” he said. “Or it’s going to die. Some people don’t believe that, but I know it. I see it already. Most people who have the option, choose to leave Gaines, so we’re left with a town full of people with no options.”

“I never thought you were a snob, Winston.”

He looked down at her. “I’m not. Don’t take what I said the wrong way. I’m not complaining about the people who stay. My point is that for people to have hope, they need examples, they need role models. What role models are left for the people here? What examples do the kids have to follow? It’s a much tougher world than it was when we were kids, Marlana.”

“And you think this program . . .”

“*The Way Home*,” he supplied for her.

“And you think *The Way Home* will make a difference?”

He walked over and crouched down next to her and the memory of the day he’d proposed flashed in her mind. “We’ve got

to do something before it's too late," he said. "I think *The Way Home* is worth a try. Will you help me?"

She looked into the sad puppy-dog eyes that had attracted her from the first and knew she wouldn't be able to refuse him. "What do you want me to do?"

"So you'll help?"

She got up from her chair and walked to the windows to keep from embarrassing herself by grinning in his face like some lovesick teenager. "You still haven't told me what you want me to do."

She felt him walk up behind her, and needing something to do with her hands, she pushed back the heavy velvet curtains and looked out on the Hampton's immaculate gardens.

"Two things," he said to her back. He was so close that she could feel his breath on her neck. "Both of them easy. First, I want you to contact some of the graduates about the program."

She stepped closer to the window, and then turned around to face him. He wasn't as close as she'd thought. At least three feet separated them. "Sounds easy enough. What else?"

He turned on the puppy-dog smile again. Goodness, that smile should be registered as a lethal weapon. "You could go on a couple of interviews yourself."

"No way, Winston," she said, still fighting the teenage grin. She realized the years hadn't diminished Winston's power to affect her senses. "I'm not interested in interviewing for a job."

He took a step closer to her. "Look, it's not that bad. They really won't be interviews anyway. A few firms and businesses in the area have expressed a strong interest in talking to you. They want to wine and dine you. I hope you know that you can have any position in the state that you want just by saying the word."

"That's exactly the point," she said, going back to her chair. He'd gotten a bit too close for comfort. "I don't want any position in the state. I'm perfectly happy where I am."

He marched right behind her back to her chair. "I know that, but the people who want to meet you don't have to know it. Go to

dinner a few times and listen to their pitches. I wouldn't ask you to do this if it wasn't important, Marlana, but the program needs you. The companies and firms interested in talking to you have a lot of influence. They can help place a lot of candidates." He dropped down next to her chair again. "The council is threatening to pull its support from the project if you don't get involved."

Disappointment grabbed her heart. She should have known he was only asking her because he had to. "I'm only going to be here a few weeks, Winston," she said, being deliberately vague. She'd planned to be away from the office for a month but she wasn't sure yet she wanted to spend the entire month in Gaines.

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

"I can't very well let the council pull the plug on the project. I'll do what I can, but I'm not moving back here."

"Great, Marlana," Winston said. Before she could respond, he surprised her by pulling her into his arms. She thought the embrace would be a brief hug of thanks, but it quickly progressed to something more as his hands caressed her back. Giving in to the moment, she pressed her lips against the side of his neck and inhaled the masculine scent of his cologne. Their closeness erased the ten years that separated them and they were young and in love once again.

Sensing he shared her feelings, she pulled back and looked into the eyes of the man who had loved her so well in the past. She didn't say anything because there was nothing to say. She lowered her eyelids and waited.

Winston knew he shouldn't do what he was about to do, but he also knew he was going to do it. He'd wanted to kiss her since he'd first seen her in McCoy's arms. He'd wanted to wipe that kiss from her mind and her body and make her forget the other man existed.

He touched his fingers to the corners of her eyes and she raised her eyes to his. He smiled at her, and then slowly lowered his head to hers.

“There you are, Marlana,” Mrs. Hampton said from the doorway. “Reginald is looking for you.”

Winston cursed softly and dropped his hands from Marlana’s face. “You’d better go join your date,” he said. “I’m sure he doesn’t think the evening is over yet.”

Marlena jumped up and grabbed her purse, as shaken by what had almost happened as he was. Winston noticed that she was licking her lips when she left, much as she’d done in the past when he’d teased her and made her hot with passion.

He stood and straightened his jacket and his now tight pants. That he still wanted Marlana was the only thought on his mind when he left the library.