
Chapter 1

Monet stood backstage, her hands were pressed against her lips in the praying position, her heart pounded against her chest with nervousness that echoed in her ears. Two of her best friends, Khyrs and Jaidyn, did final touches on the models' hair and makeup to make sure they were ready to walk the runway. She watched her partner in crime and business, Shay, adjusting belts and hems to make sure they were flawless and fierce. Monet felt dizzy and faint as the models scrambled to their positions and lined up for the fashion show, the fashion show to launch her and Shay's new clothing line, the fashion show that was going to change her and Shay's lives forever. This was it!

She peeked out of the side of the curtain, and her heart surged with love when she saw her family, all of them in the front row. The entire crew of lethal ladies were there to support and represent for her and Shay.

They were all dressed in a Monet and Shay original, tailor made to each of their tastes. Even Asia and Butchie's baby girl, Anisa, and Tayana and Jazz's son, Jihad were wearing one-of-a-kind originals at nine months old.

Monet felt, with everyone still so tense about Whisper's brother Man lurking around causing trouble and the suspicion that her other brother Calvin might be joining forces with him, this clothing launch couldn't have come at a better time.

It gave them a reason to celebrate, it was not just a win for her and Shay but the entire crew as a whole. Tayana always told them, "When one of us falls, the rest of us bend down to catch and uplift our sister; when one of us shines, we all catch the glow."

The lights backstage flickered on and off three times to alert the stage hands the show was about to begin. As the lights dimmed in the auditorium and the first model prepared to walk down the runway, he stepped up behind her.

Monet didn't have to look back to know *he* was there, the scent of cinnamon always followed him or at least she thought so.

Shay told her on several occasions that she was straight out of her right mind, that he smelled like any other man they worked with and maybe the reason she always smelled cinnamon when he was around was because of her attraction to him. A fact she continued to vehemently deny.

"Are you ready for this, Monet?" he asked, leaning in and whispering in her left ear just as the music dropped and the first model strutted out.

Monet closed her eyes for a second and prayed for the show to be a success, and that she didn't say anything stupid like she always did, before she turned to face him.

Damien 'Diamond' Padam smiled at her, his deep-set dark eyes twinkled in the lights, he was just as excited as Monet and Shay were for the launch. He was the first person in her adult life who caused her to react as strongly as she did. In fact, he was the first person she was truly attracted to since a bad relationship when she was in high school, years ago. Yes, she had her needs and from time to time she would hook up with one

of her standbys to have them met, but for the most part she had been content being unattached and single until she met Diamond. Now far too often she found herself actually craving more of a connection with someone and that someone was Diamond.

Just like always, the minute she looked at him she longed to run her hands through his beautiful, thick, black hair that gave away his Indian heritage from his mother's side, while kissing his luscious full lips that were 100% from his African father's roots.

In her opinion, he had the most handsome face she had ever seen with his high cheekbones and a pointed chin and the slightest hint of a mustache. He was tall but not towering over her, he stood at 6' foot even, so tall enough to look down at her with those dark eyes and make her weak in the knees.

He took her by the hand and stepped back to admire the outfit Shay designed for her especially for tonight, she had returned the favor and designed Shay's outfit as well.

"You look stunning, Monet, maybe we should have you out there walking the runway too," Diamond said, his eyes moved up the dark blue velvet and lace, high waisted jumpsuit with full sleeves, which molded to Monet's thick and curvy body perfectly.

With her six-inch matching stilettos, she came up a little past his shoulders.

"Thank you for the compliment but you and I both want this evening to be a success not a reason to call 911." Monet dropped her eyes as she felt her face grow hot as she blushed. "You look pretty good your damn self, but of course that is always a given, you always look like you just walked off of the cover of *GQ*," Monet informed Diamond while admiring him in his black suit, black silk shirt and tie.

Since she didn't immediately know who the designer was, she assumed this was another Diamond original he commis-

sioned someone to make for him like he did most of his clothes.

Her eyes had a mind of their own as she stared at him, the smell of his cologne and the faint smell of cinnamon had racy thoughts and images beginning to dance in her head. When she caught herself biting her bottom lip, as desire pulsed in her middle, she forced herself to look away, to look anywhere except at her own personal brand of forbidden fruit and focus her attention back on the fashion show.

Monet could feel his eyes on her as she peeked out at the show again but she refused to turn back around. She wasn't about to put herself out there and look stupid as hell when he shot her down again, it was crazy how the tables had turned.

Six months ago, when the crew noticed her and Diamond's attraction to each other, they started to tease her mercilessly about how bad he wanted her and she wanted him, which she, of course, denied over and over again. So when Diamond made it known in no uncertain terms that he was attracted to Monet and would stop at nothing to have her, Monet freaked.

She ignored his advances, sidestepped his invitations to dinners, plays and movies. She even respectfully declined flowers and little trinkets he bought for her too. When he showed up at her or Shay's house for meetings, she went out of her way to appear indifferent and uninterested in anything but business.

And when he asked her why her answer was always 'no', she told him she didn't want to jeopardize their working relationship with something based solely on physical attraction without substance. Monet would never forget how wounded he looked when she told him that, but from that moment, all his advances stopped.

She convinced herself that was the way she wanted things, until the day she walked into his office for a meeting, and it

was like she was looking at him for the first time. His handsome face and solid frame had her damn near drooling as he went through his presentation. By the end of the meeting all Monet knew was she had a craving for cinnamon candy and wanted to get to know Diamond better.

When she approached him and told him she had been thinking about things and maybe they should go out on a date. Diamond's eyes flashed a bit, measuring surprise before he smiled at her and told her 'no'. He wanted to respect and support her original stance, and he had to agree their working relationship was far too important to ever cross that line again.

Now, here she was with egg on her face, pining for a man she had been stupid enough to convince herself and everyone else she didn't want in the first place. To add insult to injury, since his rejection, she had become like a nervous, skittish little mouse around him all the time. She stumbled over her words, tripped over her feet and twice in the last week alone, she spilled water in his lap. Monet dreaded the day he actually started dating someone else because, truth be told, she might not survive that kind of heartbreak.

"Why do you look so serious? Relax, Mo, everything is being well received. Do you hear the applause out there? That is not just Whisper and them, girl, we are a hit!" Shay said, walking over to her and throwing her arms around her after she had the models changed for the finale. It had been decided earlier in the day that Monet couldn't help the models dress because she was driving everyone crazy with her nervous energy, and kept trying to change things on the clothes that were already perfect.

Diamond walked up behind Shay, taking in the crisscross back of the multicolored handkerchief dress Monet had designed for Shay to wear for the show. It fit her thin, dancer-like torso beautifully, the red, strappy Jimmy Choo's she chose to wear with the dress made her look classy and regal.

Their eyes met over Shay's shoulder, and for one brief moment Monet saw a flicker of the way he used to look at her, when she blinked and let Shay go his face was back to being emotionless. He looked so stoic that she was actually doubting what she just saw.

"I hope both of these outfits will be added to the line as well," Diamond said about forty minutes later, just as the last of the models walked backstage.

He offered both of them his arms, as his assistant Tammy gave their brief bio and called them out on stage. He escorted them down the runway, Monet's eyes were blurry with tears of happiness as the entire auditorium echoed with applause and cheers as they stood at the end of the runway with Diamond.

Diamond kissed them both on the cheek and took a few steps back, people screamed their names and camera flashes were going off all around them. Their models strutted back out on stage giving the audience one last look at the fashions. Shay was right, they were a hit!

"Congratulations to my fashionistas, Mo and Shay! I already know I'm going to be looking fierce with my new outfits after I have these babies!" Yolán, who was seven months pregnant with twins, shouted holding up her glass of ginger ale later on the same night at the private room at 'Sweets' where they went to celebrate.

The entire crew was there including Yolán's fiancé Ryan, aka Reaper, who was on the other side of the room with all the other men Jazz, Butchie, Butter, Diamond, Goon and Pain but unlike the others who were all engrossed in the basketball game on the giant TV screen in the corner, Ryan only had eyes for Yolán in her slip style maternity dress.

Monet prayed that she would know love like theirs or Whisper and Jazz's one day. Her eyes drifted in Diamond's direction, his eyes were on her until his eyes met hers and he looked away quickly.

"Yass! Slay, slay, slay, Mo and Shay! Two of the baddest divas in the fashion game!" Khyrs shouted, snapping her fingers in the air as Monet and Shay moved to the center of the room, still beaming from their successful show.

"Thank you guys, so much for supporting us tonight and always. We couldn't have done this without our lethal ladies in our corner, I checked our website and we have already sold out of a lot of our inventory!" Shay stated beaming with pride, happy tears filled her eyes. Monet put her arm around Shay's waist and clinked her glass against Shay's, wiping away her own tears of happiness.

"I didn't have much of a family life growing up and it wasn't until I met all of you, my sisters in sin, that I knew what family was really like. In a world where women are quick to shatter the next female's dream because she's afraid to pursue her own, we are blessed to have all of you successful, amazing, talented women in our corner. To the crew, tonight is about all of us," Monet said, voice cracking with emotion as she lifted her glass.

"To the crew!" they all said in unison, clinking glasses and hugging each other before breaking apart at the sound of guns being cocked and readied.

Joy and Rini immediately set down their glasses and pulled their guns rushing to the door of the private room to join their security. Seconds later Calvin Bradley, Tayana's youngest, older brother walked in surrounded by security, looking unfazed.

"Ay, yo Tayana sorry to crash the party, but I think we need to talk."