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## Chapter 1

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### *Outside New Orleans, Louisiana*

**F**elicia Montrose pulled on the bodice of her dress. No matter how much she yanked, she felt exposed, as if her tits would fall out and the entire group assembled for the wedding would gasp in unison. In her nightmare, they would take bets on whether or not her breasts were real, and then someone would say, *Of course they are. Look at how they jiggle.*

“This might have worked on my twenty-two-year-old boobs, but seven years and fifteen pounds later, it doesn’t look so hot,” Felicia called out.

From the bathroom of the hotel room, a hearty laugh made her groan. “Have you really gained fifteen pounds?” A pretty face framed by curly black hair appeared in the doorway. “I hadn’t noticed.”

An equally voluptuous female, wrapped in a white, low-cut dress appeared. The material made a soft, swishing sound as Courtney Blue moved into the room. Felicia forgot all about the dress she wore.

“Courtney, you look incredible, just like you did seven

years ago. I can't believe it's been so long. But it's also hard to believe you're renewing your vows after just seven years. Most people wait longer."

"Most people haven't had the sucky year Doug and I have had." Courtney moved toward the full-length mirror. "It's our way of reaffirming our promise to each other that the troubles of the past year are gone, and we are putting them behind us and moving on."

Felicia fought back the tears that threatened to fall.

"Do you think Doug will appreciate the fact I plan to leave my hair down this time?" Courtney touched her tresses. "He wanted me to last time, but I let my mother talk me into wearing it up. She said it would look better with the veil."

"He's going to get a hard-on the minute he sees you."

Courtney giggled. "I hope not. His pants are too tight, and everyone will know."

Felicia joined in her friend's laughter. "That ought to make your mother happy."

Courtney started to sit down on the bed, but Felicia waved her arms. "No! You'll wrinkle the dress. We need to hang it up and change into our clothes for the rehearsal."

Felicia worked the small buttons on the back of Courtney's dress. As she undid the tiny fasteners, she prayed her friends would have better luck this time. Their first six years together had been good. And then the last year had been, to coin Courtney's phrase, sucky.

Courtney insisted there hadn't been a third, or fourth, party involved in the breakup, but she'd refused to go into details. Felicia had held her close as Courtney had cried, and then, after months of separation, Courtney and Doug were back together, as if nothing had ever happened.

"I don't understand why you chose New Orleans for your vow renewal," Felicia said as she hung up Courtney's wedding dress.

"It's romantic." Courtney twirled, her petticoat making the familiar swishing sound as she moved. "A southern plantation with lots of trees and big four-poster beds."

"It's also August in Louisiana," Felicia said as she fumbled with the zipper on her dress—the dress that had to be altered to make room for her extra fifteen pounds. "It's like a sauna out there, which means you'll be dripping in sweat before you reach the altar tomorrow."

"I don't care." Courtney fell backward onto the bed. Her laughter was contagious. "By this time tomorrow night, Doug and I are going to be happily married again."

"You mean remarried."

Courtney leaned up on her elbows. "The past is behind us, Felicia. It's like we're getting married for the first time. Just like the song says, all you need is love."

"Yeah, right." Felicia moved toward the bathroom.

There was a pregnant pause before Courtney said, "Ash is here."

"Really?" Felicia said sarcastically. "And here I thought Doug had found a new best friend, just so I wouldn't have to see him." In the bathroom, Felicia looked into the mirror. Her auburn hair hung in ringlets around her face. "He and I are proof that love isn't always enough."

"He asks about you," Courtney said softly.

Felicia took several deep breaths, then came out of the bathroom. She put her hands on her hips as she faced her friend. "Please don't go there. I have no idea what happened between you and Doug, because you won't tell me. But you know exactly what happened between Ash and me. His parents hate me because I'm the white girl. My parents hate him because he's the Indian boy, and let us not forget that my father tried to beat him to death, and might have succeeded if it hadn't been for your father."

Before Courtney could reply, Felicia held up her hand.

“Plus my father had him arrested for sleeping with his daughter—me—when I was under the age of eighteen.”

“You were both seventeen, Felicia,” Courtney said. “You were over the age of consent in New Mexico. It’s not like we weren’t all doing it.”

“Yeah, but your dad didn’t have Doug put in jail for it.” Felicia’s stomach turned, just as it had thirteen years ago when she’d found out Ash was behind bars. She’d cried and pleaded with her father to convince the sheriff to let him go. Her father had refused, until she’d told him she would never speak to him again unless he dropped the charges.

She’d reminded him that the age of consent in New Mexico was seventeen. Her father had said he would prove she’d been younger than that when the events had taken place. Felicia told him she’d refuse to cooperate, mostly because she hadn’t been sixteen. She and Ash had been careful to wait until they were both of legal age.

Her mother had cried; her father had screamed, but Felicia had remained firm. The next day, Ashkii Yazzi Chee was out of jail. Two days after their high school graduation his parents, well-known Navajo artists, had whisked him out of the country to mark his graduation from high school.

When they’d returned, they packed the family up from their home in Shiprock and moved them to Santa Fe.

The last time she’d seen him was seven years ago, five years after the incident, when Courtney and Doug had tied the knot.

Every time he’d tried to talk to her, Felicia’s father had rushed to her side, putting himself between the two of them. Ash had given her his phone number. Felicia had not called.

But every time she dated someone, practically every time she closed her eyes at night, she remembered how he’d looked at Courtney and Doug’s first wedding—his muscular body resplendent in a tuxedo, his thick, silky black hair hanging in a

tight braid that ran down his back, his dark eyes serious as he stared at her over the happy couple. She'd been the maid of honor; he was the best man.

When they'd linked arms to go back down the aisle together, Felicia had been crying. Ash had put his arm around her back to steady her. Everyone had been sure her tears were from happiness at seeing her friend married. Felicia was sure Ash knew it was because she would never be able to marry him—the man she still loved.

She'd been without him in her life for thirteen years now. She knew he'd had other relationships, but he'd never married, just as she'd stayed single.

Was it for the same reasons? Because he couldn't see himself married to anyone but her?

She hoped so.

“Felicia?”

The questioning tone of Courtney's voice brought Felicia out of her memories. “Thirteen years is a long time, Courtney. He's a famous Native American sculptor now, and I'm a school secretary. He travels the world. Every once in a while I make it to Albuquerque to visit you.”

Courtney stood, crossed to her, then hugged her. “If you lived in Santa Fe with Ash, we could see each other all the time. You're thirty years old now. You don't have to do what your father demands anymore.”

“If Ash wanted me, he would have been more insistent.” But Felicia knew that wasn't true. When he'd passed her his number, they'd been dancing as part of the wedding party. He'd whispered in her ear, *“It's your choice, but I'd love to see you again.”*

She could still feel his arm around her waist, his hand holding hers as he'd pressed the paper into her palm. She still had that paper hidden in the small jewelry box Ash had made

for her in woodworking class. It had a place of honor on the headboard of her bed.

Felicia smiled at her friend. "I can handle walking down the aisle with Ash one more time. For you, I'd do anything."

"With luck, you'll walk with him one more time after this, because you know, Felicia, love is always enough, no matter the past."

It would do no good to argue, Felicia knew. When the past included her father, who had accused the man she loved of statutory rape, love might never be enough.

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It was like the original wedding all over again. Felicia's hands were sweaty as she walked into the dining room, her gaze raking over the assembled people, searching for Ash.

She found him talking to Doug. Tonight he wore black jeans and a white shirt held in place by a black leather vest. His hair hung in two braids over his shoulders.

Felicia thought she would have an orgasm right on the spot. One of her favorite things to do was brush and braid his hair. It had always made her feel close to him, to feel his silky tresses in her hands. As if he sensed her looking at him, he turned his gaze toward the door. The smile that lit up his face made her go weak at the knees.

He started across the room and before she could put out her hand to shake his, he'd gathered her in his arms.

"Felicia." He held her close as he whispered, "You look beautiful."

The extra fifteen pounds felt like thirty as he held her. His body was more toned than she remembered.

"You must work out five hours a day." She laughed nervously when he didn't release his hold on her.

"One, maybe two," he said. He took a step back, but he

kept his hands on her waist. "I'm disappointed you never called me."

Wow, that's an opener, she thought as she licked her lips. She hadn't thought of a response to vocalize when the justice of the peace began clapping his hands, calling them to gather so he could explain tomorrow's service.

They ran through it several times. He showed them the proper places to stand, which was the same arrangement they'd had the first time Courtney and Doug had tied the knot.

When it was finally time for dinner, Felicia sat across from Courtney, who sat next to her husband. She wasn't surprised when Ash sat down next to her. His jean-clad leg brushed against her bare one, since she'd taken advantage of the covered table to hike up her dress in an effort to try and cool down.

"You must be hot," she said, in what she hoped would be a way to begin a topic about the weather, a hopefully innocuous conversation.

"With you around, always."

"I meant because of the jeans and the leather. It's so humid." She picked up a napkin and fanned herself.

"The weather has nothing to do with how I'm feeling," Ash said, his voice low. "I want to see you tonight."

"I can't." The words were hard to say. "I promised Courtney I'd stay with her. She wants to paint toenails and do other girlie things."

"Yeah, she's making me sleep by myself tonight," Doug said. Felicia saw him frown at his wife. She hadn't realized they'd been listening to her and Ash talk. Doug leaned into the table. "Shall we go find a strip club, Ash? Maybe go all the way into New Orleans and Bourbon Street?"

Courtney huffed in pretend anger. "I don't think so."

“It’s what we did last time, only we were in Albuquerque,” Ash said with a laugh.

“This time he’s already married,” Courtney said. “No strippers.”

“Fine.” Doug threw up his hands as if he were disgusted. “What do you suggest Ash and I do?”

“Well, there’s always TV,” Courtney said. “Felicia and I are going to stay up all night and do fun things to get ready for tomorrow.” She batted her eyelashes at her husband, and then they bent their heads together.

“I know Courtney, and how much wine she’s had,” Felicia said. “She’ll be asleep by midnight.”

“Then meet me,” Ash whispered in her ear.

Why the hell had she said that? She’d left it wide open for Ash to repeat his invitation, one she wanted desperately to accept. “Where? Plus I’m not certain she’ll fall asleep.”

“She will.” He pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket. “Once again, this is my number. Call or text, when she’s asleep, and we’ll set it up.”

“You came prepared.” She took the paper.

“I did.” He leaned close to her. “I want you, Felicia. I’m not going to beat around the bush about it. If you don’t want to see me, just say so and I’ll jack off tonight, but I’ll be thinking about being inside you.”

He smelled so male, a hint of sandalwood with just a touch of cigarette smoke, a habit she knew he’d picked up when they were younger. And his words were so like him, open and honest.

She glanced over at Courtney and Doug. Their foreheads were pressed together, and they were talking softly. “What happens if it turns out to be just an infatuation we had when we were younger? What if you see me naked and wonder how you could have ever wanted me? What if we lose the fantasy of it?”



“Never going to happen.” He ran his strong hand up her bare thigh, and for the second time that evening, Felicia thought she would climax.

Despite the fact it had been thirteen years since they'd been lovers, that every outside force in their lives had conspired, and been victorious, in an effort to keep them apart, she knew she was going to lie under him again tonight.

“I'm not active,” she said. “I don't have any birth control.”

“I'll take care of it.”

The grin on his face made her laugh. “Just like you did when we were younger?”

“Call me the condom king.” Her breath caught in a hitch, and she raised her hand to a scar that ran under his right eye. It was faint now, but she could see it.

“It's not that bad.” He took her hand and lowered it to his mouth, pressing his lips against her skin.

He might say that, but it brought back vivid memories of her screaming while her father slammed his fist—complete with a large silver ring—into Ash's face. When she'd tried to go to him, her mother had held her back. At the hospital, his mother had kept her from seeing Ash. After that, he'd been behind bars, barely eighteen.

His parents had wanted her father to be jailed for assault, but Ash had refused to press charges; as a legal adult, he'd had that choice.

“It's a reminder, Ash, of all that happened.”

“It's a blemish—one that reminds me to fight for what I want. I'll fight again, if I have to.”

She wanted to touch it once more, see if it felt different now that Ash said he didn't notice it.

Instead she lifted out of her seat just enough so she could place her lips against it. His skin was hot, salty, and just a little uneven from where the puckered skin met the smooth. She

kissed it again, then blushed when Doug's voice broke into the moment she and Ash were sharing.

"Hey, you two, get a room."

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"Didn't we do this when we were teenagers, driving around to find condoms?"

Ash couldn't help but laugh at Doug's words. "The difference is, then we *hoped* we were going to get laid. Tonight, I know I'm going to, which is more than I can say for you."

"Mine's coming tomorrow," Doug retorted. "I can wait."

Ash piloted the car down the strange stretch of road, keeping his eye out for a drugstore. What was really foremost in his mind, though, was Felicia—his sweet, beautiful Felicia. When she'd kissed his scar, he'd thought he would flood his pants. The blemish, as he'd called it, reminded him of her every time he saw it. It didn't piss him off; it made him want her, made him remember the passion he'd felt for her, one that would be rekindled tonight.

A smile touched his lips. *Rekindled* might not be the right word. His passion for her had started when he was young and continued even when he didn't see her.

When she hadn't called after the first wedding, he'd been crushed. He'd tried to tell himself that her parents had kept her from contacting him, but he knew it hadn't been true. They'd been adults, capable of making their own decisions.

So he'd thrown himself into his art, into working out, and into other women. He discovered lots about himself, like the fact he enjoyed tying women up for sex. He believed a good spanking heightened sensations for both of them. But the hardest thing for him to come to terms with was that he always—always—thought about Felicia while he was screwing someone else.

Eventually it drove him to limit his sexual partners to one—a woman named Alison who had told him up front that she would never fall in love, and she wanted nothing more than a good fuck buddy. That had ended a year ago, and since then his only partner had been his hand.

Part of his problem was his newfound fame. His statues attracted attention, and he'd sold a lot of sculptures to Hollywood stars and other famous people. When he attended parties hosted by the people who bought his work, a great number of women coozied up to him. He never knew if they were interested in him or in the idea their photo might be featured in art magazines once they were on the arm of Ash Chee.

Alison had been perfect for such events. When they'd split, he'd been sad that he would have to search for someone else to accompany him to parties. In the end, though, he'd go alone and turned down the advances he constantly received.

The only real attention he wanted, had always wanted, was from Felicia. He needed to make sure it didn't get screwed up. He'd waited a long time for this chance.

"So is this a one-time fuck or what?"

Doug's question drew Ash out of his thoughts. He turned into a drugstore parking lot before he answered. "Not for me. I want her in my life again."

"Listen, don't get pissed, but you're my best friend, so I think I need to point some things out here. You don't really know her anymore, do you? I mean, don't get me wrong. She's great; she always has been. But the two of you haven't spoken two words to each other, other than tonight, in seven years. What if you want her just because she makes your dick hard?"

"Then I'll have some good sex." Ash put the car into park. "But I don't think that's the reason. Wait here."

Damn Doug for bringing out things Ash didn't want to think about. He was right, of course. That didn't mean he

wanted to be responsible tonight. He wanted to feel Felicia's soft skin under his hands, wanted to savor the tightness of her around him once more.

There were few people in the store, but those he passed gawked at him. He might be well-known at home in Santa Fe, but here in this small town near New Orleans, he was an oddity—a brown-skinned man who wore braids and stood out in a crowd.

He found what he wanted and started toward the register, then turned back around at the last minute. He located the sale aisle and selected the cheapest T-shirt he could. The front of it proclaimed it was *Party Time!* and had a photo of beads and champagne glasses.

At the register he put the condoms and T-shirt on the counter. The young clerk stared at him.

"Something wrong?"

"No, sir." He picked up the items and scanned them.

After Ash had paid, he told the kid to have a good day.

"Looks like you're going to have a better one than me," the kid replied with a smirk as he bagged Ash's purchase.

At that very moment, his phone buzzed. Ash dug it out of his pocket and checked the screen. It read, *Thirty minutes. Just tell me where. F.*

"Yeah, it looks like I will." He picked up the sack and headed out of the store. The shirt he would use when they were in his room. But for now, he wanted to see Felicia under the stars, make love to her in the hot, humid night.

After that, they'd have the rest of the night to play.

Ash promised himself he wouldn't bring up the past. Now wasn't the time to discuss the problems they'd faced. Tonight they would see if the spark was still there. If it was, then they'd take their new path together.

One step at a time.