

Nikki was released the next day, just before noon. Wesley had remained at the hospital by her side.

“Where are we headed?” she asked as she continued to stare out the passenger side window of his sleek, black 2011 Camaro.

“To my place.”

“For what?” Nikki suddenly whipped her head around to stare at his profile. She wondered what he was up to.

“I’m not going to infringe on Mrs. O’s hospitality when I have a place of my own. And you need to be constantly watched over. So consider me your bodyguard as of this moment.”

“You, sir, are out of line,” Nikki said, pointing her finger in his face.

“Whateva. I’m not taking you back home so you can end up dead, next. And that’s exactly what will happen if I take you back to Mrs. O’s. You’re gonna leave like you did before. I’m not stupid, Nikki. And I don’t want to play your games.”

They rode the rest of the way to his apartment in silence as she sulked in her pain, and he in his confusion.

The pain was easing up somewhat as Nikki and Wesley entered the breezeway at his apartments. Unlocking the door, his eyes softened when he looked at her face once again.

She saw a mixture of anger and compassion nestled there.

“What?” she asked when he continued to stare at her longer than what she deemed comfortable.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. Wesley led her into a galley kitchen and pulled a sandwich bag from one of the cabinets, filled it with ice, and then wrapped it in a paper towel before applying it to her face.

She was in awe at the tenderness with which this man handled her. Every time he touched or said a word to her, it was with such protection, like she had never known. This was a side of Wesley that she had not seen in the five years of knowing him.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing her by her free hand and leading her to the back of the apartment. She looked around at his bedroom; not at all what she would have expected for a single man. Decorated in oranges, greens, browns, and yellows, it had a Caribbean look and feel to it. The room was small, but neat and exhibited a nice décor. The full-sized bed sat directly opposite the black-framed, chestnut-colored dresser. To the right of his bed was a small nightstand in the same black framing and chestnut top as the bed and the dresser. To the left of his bed was a double-paned window, with orange, brown, and green curtains blocking out the midday sun. He walked over to the window and opened the curtains halfway and then opened the blinds to allow the sun to stream through.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” she asked with a look of apprehension in her eyes.

His eyebrows lifted slightly. “Just to the bathroom, Nikki. I’ll be back.”

Exhaling a deep breath, she realized that a new fear had come over her. In all the altercations she had endured with Carlos, he had never left her for dead. Why did he leave like that? What if the neighbors didn’t come? I could’ve died in that bathroom, she thought.

She tried to fight back the tears, but they betrayed her. Sucking in her sobs, she stood and walked to his dresser and began looking at his pictures, anything that would take her mind off her problems. There were a couple of him and his father at various stages of his life, a few of some children, and one of a lady she assumed to be his mother. She stood up and walked to the bed, staring at the amazing likeness he had to this woman.

“That’s my mom.”

She jumped at the sound of his voice; she hadn’t heard him return to the bedroom.

“Oh, I didn’t hear you come up. Are you always so quiet?” she asked as he came and stood beside her. She still had not looked at him, wishing she could make the tears disappear from her eyes and face.

“No. Are you always so scary?” he teased. He regretted the words almost the moment he said them. Her body tensed up, and she looked down. Her fear had come as a result of the relationship she was in. She was always tense and on edge, because she never knew what fuse Carlos was about to blow.

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m sorry. Here, look at me,” he said, turning her face up towards him. “Why are you crying?” he asked as he wiped her tears away with his fingers.

“I’m sorry. I just...I don’t know.” She couldn’t explain if she wanted to. No one would understand her confusion or pain. She could forgive Carlos if he just had not left her. Didn’t he love her? Didn’t he want to work things out? Maybe he didn’t love her, after all. If he did, he would not have left her there like that.

“Don’t be sorry. You haven’t done anything wrong. I have the feeling you have spent many years apologizing,” Wesley stated.

He lovingly caressed the bruise that had formed on the right side of her face.

“Too beautiful,” Wesley said, being drawn into the power of her presence in his bedroom.

“Huh?”

“You. You’re too beautiful for this. I don’t want you to be scared every time people come near you. Relax, okay? Just be...I promise I won’t ever do nothing to hurt you,” he said as he drew her nearer to him. Looking down into her big, dark brown eyes, he felt himself getting lost.

Nikki didn’t know what she was feeling or what was happening between the two of them. And she couldn’t contain herself as he pressed his full firm lips against her soft, lush ones. As their foreheads touched, he continued to gently apply pressure to her lips, asking for permission to enter in.

She slightly parted her lips allowing him to tug her bottom one between his teeth. He wrapped big hands lovingly around her small waist, rubbing his thumbs in little circles on her sides. She grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him closer. Her slight moans of encouragement had him pressing her back against the bedroom door. She could feel the rising pressure of his penis pushing against her crotch.

The heat rising in her body and the firmness of his hands encircling her was enough to drive her over the edge. Yet, it wasn’t her who pulled back first, it was him.

“Damn!” he said, slapping his palm against the doorframe.

“What, Wes?” she asked, in a tone riddled with desire. She was shocked to realize she hadn’t wanted him to stop. Just being here with him in this moment was more than she had ever dared to think about in her wildest dreams.

“I can’t do this, girl. You got my head all screwed up. All I wanna do is take you in that bed right there,” he said, turning sideways to point at his bed. “I want to love away the hurt and the pain.” He still had not released her and had his right arm circled around her.

“Whaa...” she couldn’t find the words to speak. How could she tell him she wanted that, too, when she knew it was so wrong? She knew, as a married woman, she shouldn’t be in this situation. She had no reason to be yearning for any man other than her husband...even if he did beat the crap out of her.

“Look, it’s unfair for me to do this to you right now. Some would say I’m taking advantage of you, and I promised you I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. Right now, you just went through some stuff with your husband, and your emotions are fragile. I gotta step back. You gotta get your situation cleared up. I’m sorry, I’m supposed to be one of your closest friends.” He searched her eyes, imploring her to stand strong with him.

They both were aware that the first sign of weakness she showed, would cause him to lose control. That’s precisely why she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down towards her. This time, it was her turn to press her soft, pliable lips against his full ones.

“Mmm, Wes, I need you,” she murmured between kisses. Nikki needed to feel beautiful, loved, and desired. She had not felt this way in such a long time. And standing here at this moment in her friend’s arms, she found everything she craved from her husband.

He held her face between his hands as he trailed his chocolate kisses down her caramel-colored face to her neck. She squirmed against him as she wanted to feel his desire for her pressing against her once more. When his hands pulled her tight black fitted t-shirt free from her Khaki pants, he eased his hands up her back and around to her breasts.

“Oh, God, I can’t do this,” he said, pulling away from her once more, as if he had just been seared by a branding iron.

“Why not?” she begged to know. She wanted him right now more than she had wanted anything else, of that much she was sure. It was a struggle she knew she needed to fight off, because she knew it was wrong. She never expected to find herself in this situation. Now that she was, it was too difficult to turn back. She wanted and needed love and protection.

“Damn, girl, you’re married. I can’t do this. I’m not the type of man that can go creeping around with another man’s woman.”

“Wesley, you’ve been a good friend to me. And I thank you for that, but tonight...tonight I just need to feel desired and wanted. I need you to want me; don’t you want me?” she asked. Nikki didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as the words fell from her lips; it was so unbelievable.

“No! I mean, yes. Damn! That’s not what I’m telling you. I do want you, girl, more than you can even imagine. We both been flirting with each other a long time, but we were just playing. If I take you tonight, I’m gonna want all of you, Nikki. I can get any woman I want to in my bed. That’s not what I want. I’m not that man. If I take you now, I want all of you. I’m going to want you to be mine. If we take this step, ain’t no going back. You understand?”

She blinked back the tears that were suddenly stinging and demanding to be released.

“Aww, please don’t cry on me,” he growled. Using the pads of his thumbs, he rubbed away her tears and then pressed soft kisses against her eyelids.

She grabbed his face between her hands and began kissing his lips softly, at first, and then with more fervor, trying to communicate her desire for him.

Nikki could feel the rapid and loud thumping of his heart in his chest as the heat of longing for each other threatened to burn them up. “Nikki, girl, I want you so damn bad...you hear me? Just one more word, and it’s over baby.”

She didn’t need words. Nikki unclasped her bra and threw it to the floor, allowing her breasts to pop loose, teasing and taunting him.