

# *Chapter Seven*

Tremaine Walker slid into the passenger side of Vaughn's brand-new Mercedes Benz, turning to smile at him as she pulled the car door closed.

"Hey you," she said.

"Hey," he returned, noting in one quick glance that she looked exceptionally good tonight. The way she had when he'd first met her back in high school. The attraction had been mutual from the beginning, and they'd gone on to date for nearly a year, up until they'd each left for college, she to Spellman and he to NYU. When they met up again some years later, they'd reapproached the relationship but had ended it quickly once he decided to bring her into his company. The potential complications of mixing business with pleasure was something he didn't need clouding his mind. Or his judgement, for that matter.

"Paige called me today-a couple of times, looking for you. It sounded urgent."

Vaughn shrugged. "Yes, well, I'm a bit tired of Miss Paige's little games. It's been two and a half weeks since everything went down and I haven't seen or heard word one from her all this time. I don't know where she's been spending her nights but she hasn't been at home and she hasn't returned my calls or pages. I'm not jumping now because the Diva has suddenly decided she's available."

"It sounded urgent, Vaughn. Seriously. I think you should give her a call."

He glanced sideways at her. "She told you something?"

Tremaine nodded. "And no, I'm not going to tell you what she said. I want the two of you to talk. All this ego-tripping isn't helping any of us decide where to go from here."

Vaughn nodded quietly as they pulled up in front of Javvy's, the trendy soul food restaurant that was frequented by celebrities from all over the country. Its owner, the immensely popular and ever glamorous Javina James, was regarded as one of the scene's "must-know people." A simple photo with the restaurateur added unspoken validation to any entertainer or record company executive's list of credits.

Though hard work, persistence and heavy networking had earned him hitmaker status, Vaughn knew that many of the private meetings and social affairs he'd been invited to, more than one of which had resulted in six-figure deals, had come as a result of the picture of him and Javvy that hung so prominently on the restaurant lobby's "Wall of Fame."

"Wow, it's more crowded than usual tonight," Tremaine remarked as they stepped from the car. A line of people extended out onto the sidewalk but Vaughn tossed the valet his keys, took Tremaine's arm and led her past the waiting crowd of patrons, many of whom flocked there regularly in hopes of meeting a celebrity or two during the course of the evening.

Javina James was in the lobby as they stepped in. Flashing her brilliantly white smile, she graciously ended a conversation and headed towards them eagerly. Dressed in an outfit that only she could properly carry off, she seemed to glide across the room.

"Vaughn," she said in the husky, mellow voice that had made her a local jazz favorite.

"Javvy James," he said, taking her hands. "Looking fabulous as ever."

She laughed, slipping her arm through his. "Well, I do try. Though it gets a little bit harder each day. You know, me being in my forties and all," she said, winking.

Vaughn smiled, knowing she'd been out of her forties for nearly twenty years now, though one wouldn't know it to look at her. She was one of those striking women of color who'd been blessed with ageless beauty, and her warm, inviting disposition only accentuated that quality.

"Tremaine, girl, you're looking pretty as ever," she was saying as she squeezed the younger woman's hand affectionately.

"Not as pretty as you. Look at you, rocking that outfit like that."

"Oh, honey, hush," Javvy blushed, visibly pleased with the compliment. "Now you young folks follow me," she said, letting go of Vaughn's arm. "I reserved a compartment for you. With all that's going on, I knew you'd rather enjoy quieter surroundings."

She led them through the dimly lit hallway that outlined the upper tier of the restaurant. Each spacious compartment, designed with a door that closed and locked, if desired, was secluded enough that one could enjoy a private, intimate dinner without running the risk of being interrupted by unwelcome visitors. Visitors such as Daryl Dunn, who had dinner at the trendy New Jersey spot several evenings each week. Javvy was certainly too gracious a hostess

to turn her away, but she did strongly object to the woman's approaching any of her dinner guests in search of tabloid-like gossip for her tacky entertainment news.

"In case I don't see you again this evening, enjoy your meal. Lance called it in as you stepped into the lobby. It's being prepared as we speak."

"You know," Vaughn said after she'd gone, "I have to comment on how great you look tonight, Tre. I can't help myself."

"You make it sound like I usually look busted or something," she grinned, spreading her napkin out over her lap.

"No, it's not that," he replied, a little embarrassed. "It's just that, well, I mean you just look good. Simple as that."

"Well, thank you," she said, blinking flirtatiously. Vaughn shook his head. "What?" she grinned as he continued to stare.

"It's a man, isn't it? I know I'm right. Come on. You can tell me."

"As Paige would say, why it gotta be over some man? Y'all ain't all that." He laughed. "I'm right though, aren't I?"

Tremaine hesitated. "Yes," she admitted finally. "It just so happens that I've met this man. An intelligent, thoughtful, hardworking brother that treats me like a Queen."

"And you've never met a brother like that before," he stated sarcastically.

"Hm, am I detecting a little envy? Remember, you're the one that kicked me to the curb."

"Aw, come on, girl. Don't say it like that. You know it was a mutual decision."

"I know. Business and pleasure and all that. Besides," she said, suddenly serious, "it's hard to be with a man whose heart is with someone else."

He looked startled for a moment, leaning forward to reply just as his cellular phone rang.

"We'll finish that conversation in a minute," he said quickly, pulling the phone from inside his expensive Italian suit. He glanced at the screen, then back at Tremaine.

"It's Paige," he said, purposely letting it ring twice more.

Tremaine resisted the urge to roll her eyes. These games that she'd watched Vaughn and Paige play were all the more amusing because neither of them would admit to themselves that they had feelings for each other. It had been very obvious to her the very first time that she'd

met Paige. Something in their eyes as he'd introduced the two women had made it clear to her that she'd never fully have Vaughn's heart this second time around. When he'd hired her on as the Divas' publicist and then ended the relationship shortly thereafter, supposedly due to his personal "business/pleasure" policy, she'd often wondered whether the real reason had been his hidden feelings for Paige. Until tonight, she'd never even approached the subject.

"Are you sure?" Vaughn was saying, his mouth tight.

Tremaine watched him as he leaned forward, resting his head in his hand. Paige was obviously recounting to him all that she'd told Tremaine earlier that day but, as stressful as the news about Simone's underhanded tactics was, there seemed to be something else that disturbed him further.

"Okay. Sit tight on this, Paige. Don't do anything, do you hear me? Promise me. I'll take care of this. Okay?"

"You know," he said to Tremaine as he pushed another button on the phone. "Simone is shady, true, but she didn't carry this out by herself. She's not that smart."

"What are you thinking?" Tremaine asked as he continued to push still more numbers.

"Lance, this is Vaughn West," he said into the phone. "Would you tell me if Omar Mason has a reservation for tonight? Oh, he's already here?" he said, staring at Tremaine as he spoke. "The usual table? Thanks, Lance. I appreciate it."

"Wait, Vaughn. What's going on?" she said as he threw his napkin down and got to his feet.

"I'll be back," he frowned, visibly struggling to keep his composure.

Tremaine reached into her purse for her phone, dialing Paige's number quickly as he left the compartment.

Vaughn stepped down on the second level of the main diningroom, swiftly heading for the table that he and Omar often shared. With each step, he grew more and more incensed but kept his temper in check. Losing it in a public place such as this would do nothing more than damage the professionalism for which he'd become known.

He'd nearly reached the table before Omar noticed him. Omar greeted him with a smile, which quickly disappeared as Vaughn came closer.

"What's up, man?" he frowned as Vaughn sat down across from him. "You okay? You look stressed."

"I must be losing my touch," Vaughn replied, his voice low and controlled. "I didn't even see this coming."

"What are you talking about?" Omar reached for his drink casually, but Vaughn could see his hand shaking slightly as he did so. Punk, he thought to himself.

"This," Vaughn replied, gesturing towards his longtime friend and Simone, who sat quietly beside him with a smug look that Vaughn wanted to wipe off her face. "You and Simone. You played me, both of you. I get it now. The nights when the two of you took off after shows while we were on tour all last year. Invoices from time spent in studios I've never dealt with, in towns I've never heard of, with people I've never met. You tell me you're developing a new vocalist and so I let you charge all the expenses to the company because you're my boy and I'm looking out for you, trying to help you get your own thing started and you screw me over like this," he said, his voice a little too loud.

"Keep it down, Vaughn," Simone said, sipping her drink nonchalantly, her eyes quickly sweeping the room.

"You really need to keep your mouth shut right now, girl," he replied evenly, regaining his composure.

"Don't come at my lady like that," Omar said defensively.

Vaughn got to his feet so suddenly that he upset the table, knocking a glass of water onto the floor. Aware that the sudden commotion had caused some in the open dining area to turn curiously, he forced a smile, shrugging his shoulders apologetically. Satisfied that there was nothing to see, most of the diners had turned away by the time he'd leaned over to pick up the broken glass.

"Think about this, dog," he said, his voice barely audible as he carefully placed the broken pieces in his hand. "When Simone is finished with you and moves on to the next sucker who can further advance what will be a pathetic solo career, ask yourself-was she worth it?"

With that he stood, and with one last look at the couple, gently dropped the pieces into a linen dinner napkin, handing it silently to one of the busboys who'd rushed to the table.

Across the way, in a corner of the diningroom where Javvy had decided was a safe place to stow her, Daryl Dunn extracted a mini cassette player from her purse, inconspicuously recording what would be the next morning's entertainment report.