

## **CHAPTER 1**

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Raegan stood at the entrance to the sanctuary on the arm of her father. The double doors remained closed as they waited to hear the wedding processional, signaling it was time for them to enter. She was so nervous that the bouquet of roses and lilies was starting to slide around in her hands.

She was about to make one of the biggest commitments in her life. Marriage. She believed in *till death do us part* and had dreamed of this day since high school, but right now she wondered if she was making the right choice by marrying Damian.

All had been well in her mind until her weekend getaway with her girls last month. They traveled to Miami as sort of a last hoorah for Raegan before she tied the knot.

## Love, Lies & Consequences

The weekend was perfect at first. They entertained themselves with spa appointments, fine dining, sightseeing, shopping, and time on the beaches.

During her last night in town, they dined at Rusty Pelican, one of Miami's waterfront restaurants that offers a stunning view of the skyline. She must have chosen the perfect seat because she had a great view of everything from the entrance of the restaurant to the people walking along the beach and the gorgeous skyline. Although it was nearing dusk and she had a few sips of wine, she was very clear on who she saw in that moment. Caleb. She could identify him anywhere. He was strolling along the beach with a few friends, people she did not recognize.

She thought her father would be giving her hand to Caleb, but Caleb messed that up some time ago. But there he was again. A slight smile formed on her face when she thought about their time together back in college. That smile quickly turned into a frown when she remembered how and why things ended between them. She didn't mention seeing him to her friends. He didn't notice her and neither of her friends noticed him, but her facial expressions changed so quickly that her friends expressed concern. "Oh, it's just some food that caught between my teeth," she told them with a wince and a small laugh.

Now here she was, on the arm of her father walking down the aisle to join in holy matrimony with Damian Charles. The wedding processional played and started to sound more blurry by the moment. She could see the goofy

smile plastered across Damian's face as his legs visibly shook. The closer she got to the altar, the more she realized that something wasn't right.

She took slow, deep breaths, reminding herself that this was just a case of cold feet and that she could do this. This was her moment. She recalled the day he proposed. He took her to the movies. They went at midday on a Saturday afternoon and she thought it strange that they were the only two people in the theater. As the previews began rolling, she gasped. Pictures of the two of them played across the screen until finally the last screen displayed a diamond ring with the words, "Will You Marry Me?"

Without much hesitation, she said *yes*. There were no butterflies like she thought there would be; her heart was not fluttering with excitement. They had been dating for about a year. He asked and she accepted. To rethink all of this now was bad timing, but the closer she got to the altar, the more she wanted to bolt out of the door.

She caught glimpses of the flashing cameras and smiling faces of family and friends until the next thing she realized the pastor was asking who was giving her away. Her mom stood along with her dad and in unison, they said, "We do." Her father kissed her forehead and placed her hand inside of Damian's. He whispered into Damian's ear, "Take care of my baby girl."

As she walked hand in hand with Damian toward the pastor, she began to tremble even more. She turned and placed the bouquet in her maid of honor's hand. She

stepped closer to Damian and placed both hands in his. As the ceremony continued around her, she stared blindly into her husband-to-be's eyes. She couldn't see him, though. All she could see were thoughts of Caleb and *what-ifs*. This probably wouldn't have happened had she not seen him last month. However, it was happening, and she knew that it wouldn't be fair to Damian to spend the rest of her life with him wondering how things would have turned out with another man.

She thought of how things started and the current state of their relationship. They were moving too fast. Pre-marital sex and living together; it was as if they were already married. *The relationship is already doomed*, she thought. *We can't do this*, she reasoned with herself. Her heart was beating double time now.

"Raegan, do you take Damian to be your lawfully wedded husband?" Pastor asked. He must have asked more than once because she felt Damian's gentle tug on her hand, bringing her back into the present.

"I...I...I do...I do not. I'm so sorry Damian; I can't do this," Raegan said as she slipped her fingers out of his, grabbed her dress so that she wouldn't trip, and ran back down the aisle. She rushed inside the bride's holding room, locked the door, and quickly peeled off her dress in tears and relief, thinking that she may have avoided one of the biggest mistakes of her life.

Seconds after she stepped out of the wedding gown, Damian's mother and sister were banging on the door.

“Raegan! What are you thinking? You better get your behind back down that aisle and marry my brother!” his sister screamed through the door.

“Hush girl!” Raegan heard Damian’s mother say. “What is going on with you Raegan? Your parents and I spent a great deal of money making this wedding happen for y’all. Come out of there, now!” she demanded.

“Please, just let me be,” she stated faintly, leaning against the door.

Raegan felt the knob jiggling in her back. She stepped away when she realized that a key was being inserted. Her heart sank to the floor. She didn’t think of others having the key when she locked the door. To Raegan’s relief, her mother entered the room, pushing Damian’s mom and sister out of the way. “Let me talk to my baby,” she said. She gently closed the door behind her, drowning out some of the sound of Damian’s mother spewing much angrier words than before.

“What happened out there, dear?” her mother asked in a quiet, non-judgmental tone.

Raegan didn’t answer. She just stared back at her mother in silence. She wasn’t quite sure why she allowed things to get this far, but she was certain it shouldn’t go any further and this was the right thing to do.

Glancing at the dress on the floor, her mother said, “I take it you’re not planning to go back out there?”

“I can’t Momma. I feel like a terrible person for leading Damian on this way. I should have said *no* to his proposal.” She paused, giving her mother a moment to speak, but when her mother said nothing Raegan continued. “This just feels wrong. It’s almost as if we’re married now because we’re living as if we’re married. I want a better relationship with the man I’m going to marry. I need sparks and lights in my eyes. Besides, I want a marriage that is blessed by God. I want to do things right. No shacking and no sex until marriage,” Raegan said.

“It’s your life, Raegan, and I can’t tell you what to do. However, you can’t leave Damian like this. You’re going to have to be a woman and tell him that you’re not going to marry him. If you want a right relationship with God and the man you are to marry, make sure you settle this now,” her mother advised.

“But how am I supposed to go back out there? I don’t even know what to say.” Raegan chewed on her bottom lip as she paced the floor. “How can I even face him right now? Especially with his mother and sister outside of that door probably wanting to kill me.”

“Raegan,” her mother said in a tone that caused her to stop pacing, “I did not raise you to act like this. You’re going to have to get it together. Is there something you’re not telling me?” Her mother walked over and lifted Raegan’s chin so that she could see Raegan’s eyes when she answered.

“What do you mean Momma?” Raegan whined a little. “The truth is that this isn’t going to work. Not now, not ever. I don’t love him the way he loves me and I think I deserve to be truly happy,” Raegan said, thinking of the only person she had been truly happy with before things went wrong.

Raegan spoke without blinking. Her mother knew that there was something Raegan wasn’t telling her but she would find out soon enough. She advised Raegan again to talk with Damian. Now his voice was the only voice outside of the door calling her name, asking for answers. She could tell he was hurting by the sound of his voice.

The door banging and screams from his mother and sister had ceased. After she felt confident enough, she opened the door to allow Damian to enter. He had taken his jacket off, loosened his tie and unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt. Her heart broke for him but she cared enough for him not to spend the rest of her life lying to him and wishing he was someone else. He walked past her and stood silently waiting for answers. Her eyes pleaded with her mother for help but instead, her mother shot her a look that said *you’re on your own*. She left them alone to talk and sent the guests to the reception to enjoy the food.

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