



Blurb

Simone Brooks and Cameron Bennett should not be together. She's a wealthy socialite looking for a suitable husband. A man with the right pedigree and an economic status that matches her own. He's part owner of the hottest nightclub in Atlanta with his siblings. Someone who loves cooking, the outdoors, and women, not necessarily in that order.

After one night together, their sizzling chemistry makes it difficult to stay away. Then comes the hard part—navigating their differences to salvage a relationship that, while it may be imperfect, overflows with love and passion.

A PASSIONATE LOVE

by Delaney Diamond

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Chapter One

“Woo hoo!”

Simone Brooks smiled and shook her head as she watched her older sister, Ella, lift a glass filled with a brightly-colored liquid to the sky and shake her butt to a techno beat in front of the deejay. The way she was kicking up her heels and letting loose, one would think it was Ella’s party and not Simone’s friend Kim’s divorce party.

Divorce parties were all the rage now, and Simone had attended quite a few—the last one taking place as recently as two months ago in Cabo—which turned into a three-day weekend where her friend started out partying and flirting with strange men, and ended with drunken, sobbing pleas for a reconciliation on the phone to her ex. They’d had to wrestle her to the ground and yank away the phone. The ugliness of regret was not a pretty sight.

Sipping her French martini, Simone scanned the rooftop.

At least this particular party was a one-night affair, held at Club Masquerade, a popular Atlanta nightclub. VIP waitresses wearing purple and green masquerade masks weaved between the guests standing around or seated on the wicker sofas and armchairs filled with colorful cushions, and assembled around the low tables and portable fire pits. The design mirrored a living room, giving guests the opportunity to gather close and chat and eat in a cozy atmosphere.

The fifty or so partygoers, many of whom Simone didn’t recognize, seemed to be enjoying themselves. But why wouldn’t they? Her assistant, Adele, had organized the affair, and Adele knew how to throw a party. With Simone covering the cost of the festivities to ensure her friend had a good time, they’d purchased the most expensive VIP option Masquerade had to offer.

The package included a plush suite at the Loews Hotel a few blocks away for Kim, and a chauffeured stretch SUV for her and her closest friends. When they had arrived, two hostesses greeted the core group of ten at the door and promised a night of “mayhem and good times.” They hadn’t stopped partying since.

Ella danced over, clutching a Planter’s Punch, eyes overly bright, and wearing one of the biggest smiles Simone had ever seen. Clearly she needed this night away from her kids.

“Are you having *fu-um?*” Ella asked.

“Clearly, you are,” Simone said with amusement.

“I am. I so needed this.” Ella closed her eyes and swayed to the beat.

A strand of hair had come undone from the tight bun she typically kept it in. Simone smoothed the hair back into place, certain it would fall free again once Ella went back to full on dancing.

“Have you tried one of these?” Ella popped a fried morsel of food into her mouth.

Simone shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“They’re really good. They’re called beer-battered broccoli bites. Mmm. Between them and the teriyaki chicken skewers, I’m in heaven.” She did a little wiggle.

Yeah, she was definitely enjoying herself.

Simone should be, too, and should have eaten instead of only indulging in the strong, free-flowing drinks mixed by the bartender. The menu options here had a good reputation, one of the reasons she’d settled on this location from the list of options her assistant had provided, but she didn’t have much of an appetite.

She set her drink on the low wall and briefly wished she didn’t have to be at the party, smiling and excited about Kim’s divorce. As far as she was concerned, a divorce was nothing to celebrate. There was too much pain and heartache involved in the dissolution of a marriage. A wedding should be celebrated, but she was beginning to think she’d never be one of the lucky ones to have that type of celebration.

She grimaced as the throbbing headache and queasiness in her stomach surged to new heights.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ella asked. Concern filled her eyes.

“I’m fine,” Simone lied. The ache of loneliness lodged in her chest.

Her sister’s hand came to rest on her right shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t look so good.”

“Actually, I feel a little nauseous.” Simone rubbed her belly.

“Have you eaten anything at all?” Ella asked.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Drinking on an empty stomach is not good.”

“I know.” Simone pulled in a breath.

She had moved from Seattle to Atlanta a few months ago. As a philanthropic ambassador for the family’s Johnson Foundation, one of the largest private charitable foundations in the world, she did important, meaningful work on a daily basis. Yet she remained unfulfilled. Disappointment and frustration were constant companions since her last breakup only weeks before the move.

Thirty years old and back to square one.

“I’m going to find a bathroom,” she said.

“It’s out the door and to the right,” Ella said. “Hurry back.”

Simone smiled wanly at her sister. “I will.”

She didn’t really have to use the bathroom. She just wanted to get away from the loud music and laughter for a few minutes.

It was darker inside the club, and with the dance floor a couple of floors below, the music was not as loud. Only the distant beat of a hip hop song could be heard as blue, purple, and red strobe lights flashed across the ceiling.

A wave of dizziness hit and Simone placed a steadying hand to the wall. Groaning inwardly, she reluctantly admitted her sister was right. She shouldn’t have been drinking on an empty stomach. Maybe she should find the bathroom. Moving along the carpeted hall with slow, careful steps, she dragged her hand along the wall, eyes searching for the restroom sign.

Up ahead a man stood near one of the pillars, wearing a dark brown suit, forearms on the balustrade, head bouncing to the music as he surveyed the action below.

Simone paused.

She couldn’t see his face. Craning her neck to get a better look in the dimly lit interior, she only saw the back of his closely shorn head and the height and shape of his body. He was a big guy, with a wide neck and broad shoulders.

Inexplicably, her heart began to race. She blinked a few times and quietly circled behind him.

Now she could see his profile, and had a good look at a strong jaw. Her heartbeat quadrupled, pounding so fast she placed a restraining hand against her chest. What the heck was wrong with her?

She continued to move, silently cursing when she staggered. She shook her head briskly to clear the dizziness, but doing so only worsened the disorienting feeling and she flailed her hands to regain balance.

The movement caught the stranger’s eye, and he turned suddenly. Simone managed to face him, legs spread apart to keep her balance. She placed a hand to her queasy stomach.

He left the railing and came toward her, his face furrowed in concern. “Ma’am, are you okay?”

“I…” She couldn’t even talk, and he remained silent, giving her ample opportunity to fully examine him.

He looked like an African god dropped into modern society, wearing a chocolate suit and matching tie. Even under the conservative attire, she could tell he had a firm body. All man, he was easily six foot three. He had a dark brown complexion, as if he'd been dipped in maple syrup, a beautifully broad nose, and lips so thick and luscious-looking they were downright indecent.

Dark brown eyes scoured her frame, dragging down the length of her body with the same intense inspection she gave him. His right eyebrow lifted a fraction higher over his eyes, and her nerve endings heightened at the attention, the hairs on her arms standing on end.

“Ma’am, are you okay?”

The sound of his voice again—deep and decadent as the finest chocolate—made her insides tremble.

Opening her mouth to speak, Simone flayed her hands in a flustered, inane movement that affirmed how rattled she was by him. Finally, she regained control of her limbs and pointed up. “I’m at the rooftop party.”

He nodded his understanding. “Oh, you’re a guest at the divorce party?”

“I’m throwing the party for one of my friends.”

“Oh.” He came forward, his smile friendly, its brilliance rivaling the colorful strobe lights that crisscrossed the ceiling. “I’m one of the owners of Club Masquerade. I hope you’ve been enjoying yourself.”

Simone wanted to say what a good time they were having, and how pleased she was with the service they’d received so far. She opened her mouth to speak those very words, but they didn’t come.

The building nausea chose that very moment to make its presence known in a horribly embarrassing way. Instead of words issuing from her mouth, the liquid contents of her stomach bubbled up and spewed from her lips—all over his black shoes.

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