

Blurb

Hard-working corporate attorney Axel Becker has tried settling down in the past, but when the relationship didn't work out, he focused on his career to the exclusion of everything else. Enter, Naphressa St. James. The sexy project manager is a former lover and reminds him of what his life could be—fun, exciting. She's just the woman he might need to shake him out of a rut, but convincing her they belong together will be a lot harder than he expected.

Naphressa admits she and Axel have chemistry, but she's not looking for marriage—again. Been there, done that. Except the more time she spends with Axel, the more she finds the idea of settling down with him to be downright...irresistible.

Prologue

Axel reclined against the pillows in the hotel bed, the rumpled sheets covering his nakedness as he watched her pull the dress over her head. The light, floral fabric slid lower and covered her bow-shaped hips before falling in a whisper to her knees.

As she leaned into the mirror to apply lipstick, tightness squeezed his chest muscles. His time with her had been nothing short of phenomenal, but she was about to walk out of his life, and he'd never see her again because they'd withheld vital details from each other. He didn't even know her name. At least, he didn't think he did. The name she'd given was almost certainly fake. *Andrea*, she'd answered when he asked—clumsily, awkwardly—but it didn't fit. She didn't *look* like an Andrea.

Axel threw back the covers. The two-week vacation in Belize had been a sort of congratulatory gift to himself for winning a case that had dogged the firm for three years and established him as a force to be reckoned with in corporate law. The resort and beach were mostly empty, since coming here in October meant a much more quiet, relaxing vacation than he would have had during the high season. Meeting her five days into said vacation had been an unexpected bonus, and for five days and four nights he'd thought of little else but putting a smile on her face and losing himself in her delectable body.

Completely nude, Axel strolled to where she stood examining her features as she fiddled with her curly raven hair, trying to figure out the perfect style. He stopped directly behind her and captured the pleasing floral scent of the coconut-hibiscus cream she rubbed all over her body.

Their eyes met in the mirror. Hers were dark, with long, thick lashes that conveyed a come-hither look without trying. She arched a groomed eyebrow.

“You look fine,” he said, placing a hand on either side of her on the dresser. He whispered the next words in her ear while maintaining eye contact. “You look stunning. If you didn't have to leave, I'd take you back to bed.”

She laughed—sultry, confident. Way more confident than when he'd approached her at the pool. Initially, she'd been...shy? No, hesitant. Her eyes had even held a bit of sadness.

The lime-green bikini against her dusky-dark skin had caught his eye, and by cursory observation, also caught the eye of the other two men poolside. He'd been the lucky bastard there

alone and took the initiative to approach her.

“You’re quite the flatterer, you know that? I’m going back home with an inflated ego.”

“And where is home?”

Their eyes locked. “You know I can’t tell you that,” she said quietly.

“You won’t tell me,” he corrected.

“Same difference.” She shrugged.

“Persistence is key in my line of work.”

“Good for you. I’m sure you’re great at whatever you do.”

“I’m great at a lot of things. I’d like to tell you more about me.”

“But I’d rather not know.” Her voice took on an edge.

Frustration ate at him. This situation was ridiculous. He was used to working hard, and hard work resulted in a reward of some kind, yet no matter how much he pushed, she wouldn’t budge an inch on them sharing more information with each other.

“So, you’re just going to leave?” He straightened.

She turned to face him and tipped back her head. “I thought we understood each other, Axel.”

He’d given her his real name and was glad he did. The sound of her panting those four letters during each orgasm was branded into his brain.

“Do we? I understand that you’re about to leave without giving me any more information about yourself, though we both had a great time on this trip.”

“And that’s all it was—a great time. Today I go back to reality.” She dropped her gaze and eased past him.

He caught her arm above the elbow and forced her gaze higher. There was something in her voice. Regret. Disappointment. She didn’t want to go back to the life she left, wherever that was.

“Stay another day with me.”

“I can’t.” She shook her head slowly, regretfully. “I *can’t* give you anything more. If we’re meant to be, we’ll meet again.”

The tightness in his chest increased. She was really going to leave, and he’d have nothing but memories and a fake name.

“You can give me something else. One more time,” Axel said. His need for her

overwhelmed him, and that need was obvious in the heated sound of his voice.

He may not know much about her, but he knew that her need matched his, and if he touched her just right, her body would go up in flames like it did every time since they first made love.

Axel bent his head and tasted her lips. They were wide and full and downright delicious. “One more time,” he whispered against her mouth.

Her right hand caressed his chest, gliding over the tight nipples on his pecs before smoothing over the hair-roughened skin of his abs. His body hardened, and she paused at his left hip, her gaze focused on his rigid flesh.

“One more time,” she said shakily.

Then she licked her lips, and that did it. Axel crushed her mouth beneath his and lifted her from the carpet. Her soft moans filled his ears as he carried her to the bed. He placed her across the mattress and swiftly dragged her panties past her ankles and tossed them to the floor. He dropped several kisses at the apex of her thighs, inhaling her feminine scent and savoring his last taste of heaven.

He hurriedly put on a condom, and with desperation born from gut-rending hunger, he sliced his length into her and began to thrust in earnest. His hips drove hard between her thighs. Bending his head, he showered her throat and face with kisses. How was he supposed to forget her after this? How the hell could he go back to the emptiness his life used to be?

Her fingernails clawed his back and ass, and he flinched against the pain that simultaneously brought pleasure. With a rough groan, he continued to drive into her. Their shallow breaths beat against each other, eyes wide open and gazes bound together as if by a rope of yearning and a plea for more.

As she came, her eyes shuttered closed and her head fell back. Her lips parted on a sound that sent shivers down his spine as she cried out his name one last time—her voice bouncing back and forth against the walls.

The boarding announcement had come several minutes ago. Soon they’d call her zone, and she’d be on her way back to Atlanta. Back to an existence that seemed like a death sentence after her time with him.

Find me, and maybe there’ll be another chance for us. That’s what she’d told him,

knowing good and well she'd given him a fake name and zero information. He'd never be able to find her.

Axel. Is that his real name? Naphressa wondered.

Didn't matter. She'd never forget him or the way he made her feel. She hadn't been whole in so long, but this short trip and the time she spent with him had changed her perspective on her lot in life.

She felt alive. Renewed. More like her old self.

She tapped out the obligatory text. *Boarding soon.*

Seconds later, the response came from her sister. *Enjoyed your trip?*

Just what I needed.

Good. See you soon. Love you.

See you soon. Love you too.

"Zone four. We are now boarding zone four," the airline attendant said over the speaker.

Naphressa stood with her carry-on and joined the line of passengers. After getting settled in her seat by the window, she slid open the zipper of the pocket inside her purse and slipped out the gold band. She needed to do this before she forgot.

She placed the ring on the wedding finger of her left hand and, closing her eyes, rested her head against the seat.

Back to reality.

Chapter 1

Axel strolled into Double Trouble Bar, and immediately the tension from the week lifted off his shoulders. Today in particular had been long and tense, with a potential conflict headed to court, but at the last minute he'd managed to negotiate a truce between his side and the opposing counsel. As a corporate attorney at the law firm of Abraham, MacKenzie & Wong, there was never a dull moment, and today, he'd earned the drinks he was about to have.

"Heyyy, Axel," a waitress crooned, flashing him a flirtatious smile as she passed by with a tray full of drinks.

"Hey, Lisa," he returned, biting his bottom lip. He paused a few seconds, casting a glance over his shoulder to appreciate her shapely figure as she walked away.

She'd made no secret of her interest, and though he found her attractive, he decided against hooking up since he visited the bar at least once a week. Coming here would become awkward when they didn't work out.

He spotted his two buddies at the end of the bar and headed that way. For three years, almost from the day they met during a basketball league, the three men had been coming here on a weekly basis to unwind and catch up.

"Look who finally made it," Cole remarked.

Colton "Cole" Eubanks was tall, with golden brown skin and a full beard. An investment manager, he co-owned the bar with his sister, Dani.

"Don't start, I had a rough day. What's the score?" Axel glanced at the basketball game playing on one of the televisions behind the bar. Having left his tie and jacket in the car, he rolled up the sleeves of his light blue shirt.

"Seventy-nine, seventy-seven. Hawks have the lead," Cole answered.

Axel sat next to Braxton Harper, a computer network architect with walnut-brown skin and a close beard. He was the third member of the trio. Axel waved at Dani behind the bar, and she nodded to let him know she'd seen him and would soon come over with his rum and Coke.

"What were you working on that had you running late?" Braxton asked, before taking a long drag on his beer.

"A licensing agreement almost fell apart." He launched into a general explanation

without giving details that would breach the confidentiality of his clients.

During the talk, Dani dropped off his drink and he ordered some wings. In the meantime, he noshed on pretzels from the wooden bowl on the bar top.

“Do you ever get tired of these close calls?” Braxton asked.

“You’d think I would, but I love it. Gets my blood pumping.”

“There are better ways to get the blood pumping,” Dani said, setting the basket of wings in front of him. She placed a hand on one hip and challenged him with her eyes.

“I’m going to assume you’re talking about women, and I agree. Except sometimes I wonder if your gender is worth the trouble. Finding a good one is like finding a needle in a haystack, and you’re unpredictable. Frankly, right now I’d rather have a root canal than deal with women and your random mood swings.”

Cole and Braxton chuckled.

Ignoring them, Dani asked, “Didn’t you almost get married once?”

“Almost.”

“And...?”

“And what? It didn’t work out.” He shrugged one shoulder.

“Your fault or hers?”

“What do you think?” Axel spread his arms as if to say, *Look at me, I’m the total package.*

Dani rolled her eyes.

“Ignore my sister. As usual, she thinks she knows everything and is dipping into grown men’s business.” Cole held up his empty glass. “Another Scotch, please.”

“I’m grown, too, and I happen to know a thing or two about women. More than the three of you put together.” Dani pointed at each of them individually.

“Thanks, Dani. You’re always such a breath of fresh air during our conversations,” Axel said.

She narrowed her eyes and he winked at her, forcing a reluctant smile from her lips.

“Whatever, Axel. Another Scotch, coming up,” she said to her brother.

As often happened, the conversation shifted to women and the three of them started complaining about the difficulty they’d had in finding good women to marry. Valentine’s Day had taken place a week ago, and Axel hadn’t sent flowers to anyone but his mother and a great

aunt in Michigan. His assistant knew to purchase herself a meal and her favorite chocolates. That had been the extent of his Valentine's Day gift-giving, but he missed making a woman he cared about smile by buying her gifts or taking her on a trip somewhere.

"Women don't know what they want, anyway," Braxton grumbled. "They say they want one thing, but they always go for the opposite."

"No point in trying to figure them out," Cole said.

"I hear you," Axel agreed.

Dani was once again in front of them, this time with both hands on her hips. "I'm so tired of hearing the three of you complain. You guys are idiots. Let me tell you what your problems are. Axel, you're too withdrawn and emotionally unavailable to women. Though you make jokes, it's probably because of how your engagement ended. Braxton, you're waiting for a *perfect* woman. She doesn't exist because no one is perfect. If you stopped being so picky, you might find someone. And you, my dear brother, are the most self-centered man to walk the face of the earth. You guys are never getting married until you make some changes."

"Hold up," Axel said, straightening on the stool.

"What makes you the authority on why we aren't married and won't, according to you, ever get married?" Cole asked.

"The three of you come in here at least once a week griping about this woman or that woman. I listen, and it's the same complaints every time. You think someone is always after your money or trying to use you in some way," she said to Cole. "And Axel, the way you go through women, how is it possible you haven't found anyone yet? Could it be because you refuse to open up?"

"That's a bit harsh. I date a lot, but I wouldn't say I go *through* women," Axel muttered.

"So you say." She arched an eyebrow and then walked off.

After Dani's verbal takedown, they all fell silent.

Axel frowned into his rum and Coke. What Dani had said wasn't news. He'd heard those comments about himself from his own mother. He'd even heard the words *cool* and *aloof* thrown out by a woman or two.

He wanted to get married, but he'd been burned before. He and his ex-fiancée, Rose, had talked in detail about the life they planned to live together—the number of kids they wanted and where they wanted them to go to school, annual vacations, and which part of town they wanted

to live in. She'd been enamored with Brookhaven, a northeastern suburb of Atlanta filled with historic homes, which in recent years had seen an increase in commercial developments. He'd purchased a home for them in that area—a four-bedroom with four bathrooms, a basement, and a spacious yard in a community of equally large homes.

Yet as the time drew nearer for their wedding, they encountered an insurmountable obstacle. As a pharmaceutical rep, Rose was offered a promotion to be sales manager over her own team, but the promotion meant moving to Maryland. In the end, their arguments and heated conversations resulted in a conclusion he'd seen coming from afar. He did his best to push back on her decision, but in the end, she took the job, and their relationship fell apart. She couldn't pass up this opportunity, and he didn't want to leave his work and being near his parents in Augusta.

So was it any surprise that he was a bit...cautious when it came to relationships?

The three of them continued talking, but the tone of their conversation had changed. Dani had gotten inside their heads—at least, inside his, and her comments made him think about the one woman he hadn't been able to forget since he met her. The one woman whose beauty and personality eclipsed everyone else. With whom he hadn't been withdrawn or aloof. Andrea, the woman he met in Belize sixteen months ago.

Where was she now? The desire to see her again hadn't extinguished, and Dani's words made them flare to life again. Maybe he should take another trip to Belize and see if he could dig up some information on her, because despite his reluctance to agree with Dani, her suggestion had been right. He had become emotionally unavailable to other women since his engagement ended.

But with Andrea, he'd been wide open. He let his guard down and enjoyed himself immensely. She made him laugh, their teasing and playfulness completely natural though they'd only known each other a short time. He wanted that feeling again.

Once, in his twenties, he'd looked at his parents joking around in the kitchen and wondered what it would be like to find someone he connected with on the same level. Someone who not only made him laugh, but someone he could sit quietly in a room with—not saying a word to each other for an hour stretch at a time—and still be content.

Later that evening, after his mother had retired to bed and he and his father were smoking Cubans on the back porch, he watched the smoke curl upward into the night and asked his father

the same question men had been asking their fathers for centuries.

“How did you know Mom was the one?”

His father idly examined his cigar and puffed smoke through his lips. Finally, he looked at Axel with a smile and said, *“When you find her, you’ll know. Trust me. And no one else will do.”*

He hadn’t fully understood the answer and had been mildly annoyed because he’d wanted concrete advice. Something tangible he could lock away and pull out to examine as the need arose.

Then he went to Belize, and his father’s words finally made sense.

No doubt about it. He had to find Andrea. Because no one else would do.