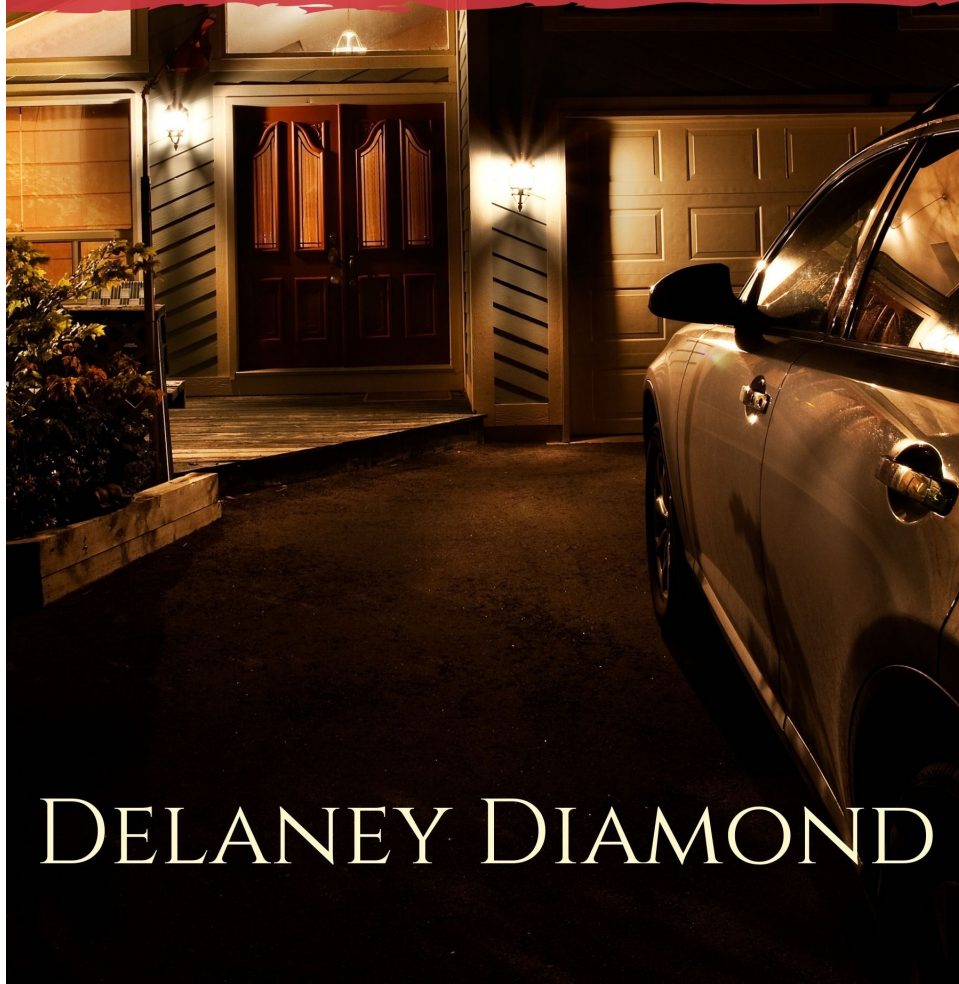


TWO DAYS



DELANEY DIAMOND

Stephanie is about to marry another man, and Giles decides to make an effort to get her to change her mind. But is it too late?

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Giles couldn't remember when she'd looked happier. Of course, that was to be expected. In two days, she'd be married to one of the most successful attorneys in the city. No wonder her eyes shone like brown gems and her face lit up the room with the kind of bliss that came from loving and being loved.

Having once been in possession of that type of adoration, he knew it was hard to relinquish—had been nigh on impossible for him to relinquish the day she hurried away, tears in her eyes, and told him she could no longer be last in his life. But he'd managed to let her go. At the time, he hadn't fully comprehended just how important she was to him. He hadn't begged. He hadn't promised to change. He simply let the best thing that ever happened to him walk out of his life.

Now, three years later, another man was lucky enough to call her his own, and the dull pain under his breastbone hadn't seen fit to leave him alone since he'd heard the news.

A strong hand dropped to his shoulder blade and jolted Giles from his thoughts.

"Giles, how the hell are you?"

The question came from a fellow attorney who knew the story of their breakup and her subsequent relationship with another one of their co-workers. He understood the awkwardness of having Giles at the firm's party for the woman he'd once loved and the senior partner who'd swept her off her feet. One big happy family of attorneys celebrating the pending nuptials of two of their own.

Giles held up his half-empty tumbler of fifty-year-old Scotch. "Great. Plenty to drink. Plenty to eat. What could be better?"

The other attorney shoved a hand in his pocket and rocked onto the balls of his feet. "Stephanie looks great."

"Yes, she does." His gaze drifted back across the room in time to catch her gaze leave the man she was talking to and land on him. The corners of her mouth lifted into a smile. The kind of hesitant smile that suggested she wasn't sure why he'd come, but since he had, she erred on the side of being civil. "I think I'll go over there and tell her how good she looks."

The other attorney's brows shot up in alarm, but before he could mutter a word of protest, Giles ambled across the carpeted floor, eyes zeroed in on Stephanie.

Two days. In two days she'd become another man's wife. The woman who should have been *his* wife.

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Laughter spilled from her plump, rosebud lips as he neared. Once he arrived at her side, the smile arrested on her face and her eyes widened fractionally.

“Giles.” She breathed his name, the sound wrenching a familiar response from him. Heat ignited under his skin, and his hand ached to mold her soft curves to his body.

“James.” He nodded at the man she’d been talking to, who said a quick greeting and then quickly excused himself, leaving them alone. His eyes scoured her face. Her toffee-colored skin looked even more radiant up close. “We haven’t talked in a while.”

Stephanie clasped her fingers in front of her. “Yes, well...when would we see each other?”

True. In a firm of their size, months could go by without them catching a glimpse of each other. She worked in civil litigation on the third floor. He handled corporate cases on the fifth. But when they were a couple, they’d always made time for each other. A ten-minute quickie in the small conference room on the fourth floor had not been unusual. Neither had a lunchtime hookup of sandwiches and sex at the hotel a block away.

Stephanie tucked her loose hair behind an ear, her eyes darting around the room, searching. Perhaps for her fiancé, to see if he saw them talking. The light glinted off the diamond solitaire on her finger, a glaring sign that she’d soon belong totally and completely to someone else.

Unless he did something. Unless he said—

“There you are.” Her fiancé, Alexander, sidled up. He had curly hair, graying at the temples, and a winsome smile that turned into a snarl when he performed in the courtroom. He slipped a proprietary arm around her waist and brushed his lips across her smooth cheek.

Giles’s stomach pitched forward in protest and his fingers tightened around the glass in his hand.

“You doing okay, Giles?” Alexander’s hand remained around her waist, and he held her close to his side.

Smart man.

“Fine. I came over to congratulate Stephanie...and you, too, of course.” The lie scraped the back of his throat on the way up.

“That’s mighty nice of you. I have to steal away my fiancée for the moment. I need to introduce her to someone.”

With that, he took her away, and Giles could only watch. She glanced back at him,

and he thought he recognized the same sentiment he felt—the pain of loss. The pain of knowing mistakes were made and couldn't be rectified.

Or could they?

He was either nuts or crazy. One or the other.

Parked down the street from Stephanie's home, Giles tapped the steering wheel with his thumb. He'd waited for more than an hour, half expecting Alexander to arrive soon after she did. Giles had heard him mention going out drinking with a few of the partners, but Giles had waited to make sure that he truly wasn't coming by tonight.

Now certain, he exited the vehicle and slammed the door. Taking a deep breath, he marched past two houses and up the walkway to Stephanie's front door.

He rang the doorbell twice before the exterior lights came on. Seconds later, the door cracked open and Stephanie peered out at him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Can I come in?"

She hesitated, biting her bottom lip. But instead of saying no, or even suggesting that it was a bad idea, she widened the door and Giles entered the house.

She tugged the red terry cloth robe closer around her body. Crossing her arms across her chest, she hovered near the door, like a jewel thief edging toward escape after a particularly hairy heist. "What are you doing here, Giles?"

"I came to talk. We haven't had a chance to talk privately in a long time."

"It's not easy to do at the firm."

She spoke in low, husky tones that reminded him of what it felt like to wake up next to her in the morning, her body soft and warm and his fitting perfectly around her. All of the dreams he'd planned flashed before his eyes, the way people claimed occurred in a near-death experience. Perhaps that's why those images flitted across his retina. Because in two days, he would be as close to death as he'd ever been without actually falling into eternal darkness.

He imagined the two children they'd discussed having—one boy and one girl. He saw again the four-bedroom bungalow from the open house in Edison Park. In such a family-friendly neighborhood, they'd have few concerns about their children's safety. And then of course, the occasional trip overseas, to sample the world their modest upbringing

hadn't allowed them to experience as children.

He'd given up on all of those ideas. For what?

"Don't marry him."

Her eyes widened. "You can't be serious. You think you can come here—"

"Do you love him?"

"Of course I love him."

"Are you *in* love with him?"

"He—" Her upper lip twitched. A telltale sign of discomfort. "He's a good man."

"I didn't ask if he was a good man or a bad man. I asked if you're in love with him."

"I love him. And that's enough." Her lips firmed.

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is! Because being in love didn't get me anywhere. Being in love never got me anything but a broken heart." Her voice quivered with pain.

Giles stepped closer, more confident than he'd been in a long time. "What if I can patch that heart?"

"It's too late," she whispered. He heard doubt, hesitation, but not rejection.

"It's not too late. I refuse to believe that."

"Giles, why now?"

"I regret letting you go."

"It was three years ago."

"I never stopped loving you."

Stephanie clutched her stomach and her face twisted into a grimace of pain. As if the words had plunged into her with the depth and ease of a newly sharpened blade.

"And you never stopped loving me, did you?" he asked quietly.

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I had to walk away. I had to leave."

"I know. Because I was too stubborn to see what was right in front of me. I was too stubborn to see that I was losing my future. That I was losing my *life*. But I see clearly now."

She closed her eyes, and he took both of her hands in his. Hands soft enough to lovingly caress his head but strong enough to slice through the air and make a point in court.

"Stephanie, I love you. If you give me another chance, I'll put you first for the rest of our lives. Please don't marry him." He bent so close to her their heads almost touched. So close he could hear her breath and feel the longing exuding from her pores. He lifted her

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fingers to his lips and pressed the knuckles to his mouth. “Marry *me* instead.”

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