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There was one thing wrong with *Sunset Over Swaziland*, it was too short. I didn't want it to end.

— BILLIE JEAN ALFORD, LOVER OF SHIRLEY GOULD'S BOOKS



# The Kissing Ball

Shirley Gould



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*To my daughters,  
Shelayne, Sharee, & Shontel  
Our call to Africa affected your lives.  
Thank you for your sacrifices.  
I'm so proud of the women of  
God you've become.*





## Chapter One

**E** *veryone wants to be me. If only they knew.*

Taking advantage of a lull in her schedule and a much-needed break from the press, Angelica Ward slathered pricey lotion on her skin and let the sun do its thing. She loved the safety and seclusion of her private veranda with a view of a manicured lawn, her late grandmother's flower garden, and a peaceful lake in the distance.

People didn't realize pedestal dwellers could get lonely and have few friends. They didn't understand the constant pressure of living in a goldfish bowl. If they reported about her taking over her grandmother's duties—promoting charities that helped crippled and underprivileged orphans—it might be different. But they wanted to portray her as a spoiled heiress and preferred made-up stories showing her in a less-than-flattering light, which tarnished her reputation.

After squeezing lime into her mother's pitcher of ice water, she poured herself a glass. Using her mother's things helped Angie remember her. She drank half the water and reclined on the cushy lounge chair. Considering tan lines were never

apropos for a lady in Dallas' society circles, she wore her strapless, deep-blue, one-piece suit.

Hearing her grandfather, Alexander Ward, conducting a business luncheon on the patio behind the estate, Angie knew he was brokering deals and increasing revenue with every proposal to raise their net worth, which would increase their wealth and draw more unwanted attention. Being the heiress to his millions attracted reporters who circled like vultures.

A pleasant breeze swept the area, sending a loamy smell from the lake bordering their property and clashing with the pungent chlorine from the pool. A pair of cranes took flight into the cerulean sky. Angie slipped on her Louis Vuitton shades and relaxed—until she heard the unmistakable sound of a camera snapping a photo. Jerking into a sitting position, she screamed as the wooden fence cracked and sent a man catapulting through the hedge toward her.

“Paparazzi!”

“Ouch!” He landed with a thud and came up, struggling to protect his camera. Scrambling to get away before security arrived, he reached for Angie's chair to regain his footing.

Angie grabbed the pitcher and swung it at his face. A stream of blood ran from the man's nose and splattered her before the pitcher shattered on the imported paving stones. “Leave me alone!”

The photographer yelped in pain, grabbed his nose, and took off running. James, Ward's chauffeur, chased the man toward the gated entrance of the estate.

When he heard her scream, Tanner Zarello, the maid's son, ran from the pool area, stepping over the broken glass to reach Angie's side. “Angie, are you hurt?”

“No, just shaken. He startled me.” She faced Tanner, her trusted friend, and felt safer when he put his arm around her.



Using a linen napkin from the luncheon, he wiped the blood from her face.

“Angelica, are you hurt? What happened?” Alexander Ward reached the scene with Ellis, Angie’s security guard, on his heels.

“I’m okay, Grand-Papa.” Tears clouded her eyes as she trembled. Her heart beat double time. “Paparazzi again.” She held up her hand. “I know what you’re going to say—it’s the price we pay for having fortune at our fingertips. Maybe I need to move to a foreign country where I’m harder to find. Don’t worry, Grand-Papa. Finish your meeting and let Sarah clean up this mess. I’ll be fine.”

Tanner wrapped another beach towel around Angie and picked up the pitcher. “I think she left an impression on the photographer.”

“It’s the Ward constitution. She’ll come out swinging every time.” Ward squeezed her shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

“Ellis, call the police, take pictures of the scene, and document the details. Tanner, get Angie inside so she can clean up.” Ward took charge, true to his nature.

James returned, struggling to catch his breath. “He got away. Sorry. He took off through the forest. It looks like he climbed the fence on the other side of the hedge, but it wouldn’t hold his weight, so it broke and tossed him onto the veranda.”

While Ward spoke with his security team, Tanner put Angie’s flip-flops on for her. “Let’s get you inside.” He slipped his arm around Angie’s waist and escorted her to the entrance of her private suite. Holding the door, he waited as she paused to look at the pieces of her mother’s pitcher as the water mixed with the splattered blood around it.

“That was Mom’s pitcher.” Shards of the crystal sparkled, reflecting the sunlight of what would have been a perfect day.

“Sorry, Ang.” He guided her inside. “And I hate that he got so close. Being rich and gorgeous makes for great fodder for the gossip rags. Move over, Kardashians. ” He used the corner of her towel to wipe some blood off her arm. “You want to sit for a while or head straight to the shower?”

“Let me rest a minute.” Still wrapped in her towel, she sat on the leather couch. “Why are you here today? I thought you had appointments in the city.”

“Mom had a last-minute shortage of two waiters for the luncheon. I came to her rescue.”

“So you need to get back? Go. I’ll be okay.” She put her hand on his arm. “Finish your responsibilities, and I’ll see you later.”

He stood. “If you’re sure you’re okay, I’ll check on you before I leave.”

“Deal. Thanks, Tanner.”

When the door clicked shut, she headed for the shower to wash the lotion off her skin, hoping the warm water would rid her of the fright. She needed to stop trembling.



Tanner walked through the massive commercial kitchen equipped with the best of everything. Their staff could feed a few or a crowd, offering exquisite cuisine served with precision. “Mom, what else needs to be done?”

Maria turned from the sink. Though in her mid-fifties, she was still an attractive woman. “Get a plate and enjoy some of this food. After Ward ends his meeting, we’ll begin the final cleanup. Is Angie okay? I saw you run to the rescue when she screamed.” She handed him a tall glass of iced tea.

“She was shaken by the paparazzi again. Why don’t they give it up?”

“They do it for the almighty dollar. A scoop promises notoriety and big bucks, so they push the limits to get a story.” She sat beside Tanner with two pieces of chocolate meringue pie. “Don’t leave until I give you a check for today.”

“Mom, I came because you were shorthanded. I don’t expect to be paid.” He cut into his filet mignon. “Good steak, and your au gratin potatoes are the best.”

“Thanks, son. All who work the event will be paid, including you.”

“Yes, Mother.” He winked and finished his lunch. As a single mom, she’d sacrificed so much to raise him. After being hired by Joy Ward, she ran the Ward Estate like a WAC sergeant, making sure every need was met on time and with perfection. Sixteen years of tenure proved she was good at her job.

“I hear voices in the living room. Their meeting must have ended. It’s time to get to work. Finish that pie.” She took her plate to the sink.

“Slave driver.”

She laughed and left the kitchen, barking orders to her team.



With security tightened and paparazzi at bay, Angie ventured into the sunshine, scanned the Ward Estate with her trusty Nikon, and breathed in a mixture of chlorine and flowers. Her grandmother’s garden teemed with butterflies. She loved being behind her camera’s lens, but her last name often shoved her out front.

“Angie has left the building.” Ellis, her security guard, spoke into the intercom at his wrist. “Sound off, guys.”

“All clear on the home front,” James reported from his post.

“Clear,” Andy, Alexander Ward’s personal security guard, reported in from the pool area.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” Ellis responded in his best Elvis impersonation.

Angie smiled. “Ellis, I’m going to buy you a gaudy white jumpsuit for Christmas.” She was glad his love for the king of rock and roll, though humorous, didn’t hamper his work.

He gave her a thumbs-up and scanned the property like a watchdog.

“Hummingbirds are hovering around the coneflowers, Ellis.” She took the shot and showed Ellis her screen.

“Beautiful, Miss Angie. You’re good with that camera.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? I love photography—the very thing that’s making my life miserable. Grand-Pa-pa’s money makes me a sought-after subject of every paparazzi’s lens. It wouldn’t be so bad if they didn’t put me in the tabloids with their vicious lies.”

“I know, Miss Angie. Your wealth and looks make them think you’re older than you are.”

“It’s surprising they aren’t seeking you out, Mr. King of Rock and Roll.” She grinned and headed toward Emerald Lake, which bordered their property. Her long black ponytail swung as her flip-flops slapped the sidewalk. When she reached the end of the twenty-five-foot weather-worn dock, a flock of ducks took flight. She raised her camera as they rose toward some cumulus clouds.

The clanging of dishes disrupted the solitude of the setting as the staff cleared the pool area from Grand-Papa’s luncheon.

“Hey, Zarello, can you bring that table to this side of the pool?” the caterer called out.

“Sure.” Looking buff in his polo shirt and cargo shorts, Tanner lifted the heavy table, unaware of Angie’s scrutiny. His Italian blood came through in his looks—black hair, brown eyes, and dark tan skin.

Tanner moved the table, caught her gaze, and waved. Angie took a shot, checked her screen, and returned his wave before he shouldered a tray stacked with dishes.

Lazy swaying grass under a weeping willow caught her eye. After taking another shot, Tanner yelled her name. Right as she jerked around, everything went black.



“Angie!” Tanner dumped the tray and sprinted for the dock. “Ellis, call nine-one-one and get Alexander Ward! Now!”

The paparazzi drone that hit her head was long gone by the time Tanner plunged into the lake to search for Angie. The murky water buried all signs of her. He surfaced, sucked in a breath, and dove again, frantic. Seconds mattered. He plunged deep. No luck. He swam left of the dock and kicked, propelling his body forward until her hair tickled his ankle. He dove deeper and wrapped his right arm around her limp body. Shoving off the muddy bottom of the lake, he swam as fast as he could, pulled Angie out of the lake, and began CPR.

“Ellis, 911?”

“They’re on the way.”

Water ran out of Angie’s mouth when he pressed her lungs. Yes. He pressed again, and more water came. Still no pulse. He began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and repeatedly pressed her heart. No luck. He tried again and again. Seconds dragged by in slow motion.

“Please, God. I need a miracle.” His panic soared as sirens

howled in the distance. “Angie, don’t give up.” He pressed his mouth to hers again and forced air into her lungs.

When Tanner moved again to pump her heart, Angie coughed up lake water, took a deep, strangled breath, and coughed again. Her wide eyes held his gaze as she drew precious air into her lungs. They stared at each other for a long moment as water dripped from his black hair onto her face.

“What happened?” She coughed again.

“A paparazzi drone rammed into your head, and you hit the water.”

“And you rescued me?”

“Yep.” He felt along her hairline and touched the gash, spilling blood onto the manicured lawn.

“Ouch!”

“You’re going to need stitches.” He moved her hair and held the gash closed to slow the blood flow.

Siren screams competed with Alexander Ward’s voice. “Ellis, take charge. Clear a path for the ambulance. Sarah, pack a bag for Angelica. You know what she’ll need. Tanner, what happened?”

Tanner stayed close to Angie, holding her head wound. “Sir, a paparazzi drone hit her in the temple, and she fell into the water unconscious. We could’ve lost her.” Tanner’s eyes met Angie’s with those last few words.

“She’s breathing. You can let her go now.” Ward eased out of his golf cart, using his cane for stability on the uneven ground.

“Come closer, sir. There’s a serious gash here on her hairline. I’m trying to stop the bleeding.”

“Great job, son.” He grabbed Tanner’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze of approval.

Within minutes, the EMTs moved in and took over, forcing Tanner to let Angie go.

“Can you start here, guys? She’s losing a lot of blood.” Tanner stepped back. “She was unconscious for about four minutes.”

“Hey man, you did good. She’s breathing on her own,” the tech said as he checked her temperature.

Tanner stood, unmoving, as her blood dripped from his hand. He thanked the Lord she was breathing.

The staff paced the scene, watching and worrying. A tech retrieved a gurney and brought it to the water’s edge as the lights on the ambulance reflected on the lake. When a police car joined the scene, Alexander Ward met the officers and filled them in.

Tanner stood sentry until the ambulance doors slammed shut and sirens pierced the air. *Paparazzi*. With his jaw set, he scanned the scene, looking for any sign of the guilty party. A slow burn simmered as he started toward the estate and noticed Angie’s camera lying on a coil of rope. He picked it up and stared at the cracked lens. *It was a close call. Too close.*



His drone barely made it back to shore. *That was close. Shoot! I didn’t expect her to go to the end of the pier. How could I have messed that up? It would have been a perfect shot for a front-page spread. The boss is gonna be furious.*

He grabbed the drone and hurried to his car. After stowing it in the trunk, he sped away on the rocky back road as sirens screamed in the distance. He maneuvered the forested area, drove through a subdivision, then took the freeway ramp. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. “Yeah.”

“Did you get us a front-page shot? You said she was in the backyard. The lighting and setting are perfect this time of the afternoon.”

“I haven’t looked at the photos yet. She took a fall, and someone called the paramedics. So I got out of there.” A wailing ambulance passed him, heading the other way.

“You moron! That would’ve been great footage of our princess in distress and you missed it. You blew it again.”

“Don’t get salty. My drone malfunctioned. Not my fault,” he lied. “Let me see what pics I got, Joe, and I’ll get back to you.” He punched the off button and tossed his cell into the passenger seat. *I don’t need him sweatin’ me right now. I know the front page is the goal, but Angie is the prize subject. My prize.*



“Can you ask for a pair of scissors and cut the band holding my ponytail, Sarah?”

“Right away.” Sarah hurried to the nurse’s desk and returned to do as Angie requested.

“That is so much better. Thanks. You’re the best.” When she rubbed the back of her head, her damp hair fell to her shoulders.

“Angelica, where are you?”

Angie recognized her grandfather’s voice before he barged into triage.

“Sarah, bring him in here for me,” Angie said from behind the closed curtains where a lab tech stuck her with a needle, trying without success to find a vein. The sterile scene smelled of cleaning supplies and antiseptics. It took her back to her visits to this hospital to see Nana Joy before they said their final goodbyes.

“Sure, Miss Angie.” Her trusted assistant hurried to do as requested, her messy bun bouncing as she rushed from the room.



“Grand-Papa, I’m going to be fine. After a couple stitches, I’ll be good as new.”

He grabbed her hand and patted it, a sign of love. “I’ll find out who was behind this.” He watched the medical team clean the gash on his granddaughter’s temple.

“Doc, how bad is it?” Alexander Ward waited for answers.

“The wound is deep. When we’re sure it’s sterile, we will suture it closed. A concussion is my biggest concern. I’ve ordered a CAT scan of her lungs and her head wound. We’re starting a strong antibiotic now because of the lake water she ingested.”

Angie gritted her teeth as a lab tech made his third attempt to find a vein. “Can I go home soon?” she asked.

“No. Sorry, Miss Ward. You were hit pretty hard. We need to keep you for at least twenty-four hours to watch for fever, headaches, and dizziness. With near-drowning cases, there is a possibility of acute respiratory distress syndrome and lung problems. We want to rule those out. Do you have any questions?”

“No. Thanks, doctor.”

The physician wrote something on her chart and turned to the head nurse. “Shave the edge of the gash and flush the area again. I’ll be back to suture the wound.” He left the area.

Ward’s forehead furrowed. “It’s best we do as the doctor has advised, Angelica. We can’t gamble on your health. You had a close call today.”

“But Tanner saved me.” She closed her eyes as the technician found a vein.

“Yes, he did.” Ward squeezed her hand. “I’ll wait outside until they have you in a room.”

“Grand-Papa, don’t wait around here. Go back to moving mountains. The company needs you. You can bring dinner later. Sarah will stay until you return.”

“You sure? I don’t mind staying.”

“I’m sure. Too many memories haunt these halls.”

“Sounds like a plan. My executives for the Waco project are waiting for me at the estate. Sarah, call me if anything changes.” He kissed Angie’s hand and left.



When he returned to the estate, Tanner opened the sedan door for Alexander Ward. “How’s Angie, sir?”

“She’s alive, thanks to you. They were cleaning her wound and preparing to stitch her up when I left. They’re keeping her overnight. The doctor is concerned about her concussion. She’ll be fine with some strong antibiotics and bed rest for a few days.”

Tanner massaged the back of his neck. “And she’s breathing okay?”

“Yes.” Ward stared at Tanner. “What’s wrong, son? You look pale.”

Tanner paused. “Years ago, on vacation in Galveston, Texas, I rescued an eight-year-old boy caught in the undercurrent. I got him to shore and did CPR. I tried so hard, but he didn’t make it ... didn’t take another breath.”

Ward put his hand on Tanner’s shoulder. “But today is a different story. Angelica is alive. You can only do your best in each situation. It was too late for the boy, and I’m sorry. He probably panicked and took in too much water. Angelica was unconscious, and you got her out in time. That bad experience put you in rescue mode the second Angelica fell. Glean from it, but don’t let it cripple you.”

“Thank you, sir. I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

Ward shut the door of the limo. “I have a meeting to finish. If you need to, we can talk later.”

“I’m good, sir. Thanks.” Tanner watched him enter the estate. A slight limp slowed his pace. He was grateful that through the years, Alexander Ward had taken meaningful moments with him, spoken truth into his life, and offered him encouragement to reach for greatness.



Angie’s afternoon was consumed with a CAT scan, breathing treatments, and meds before she was finally assigned a private room.

“The shower felt great, but this bed isn’t very soft.” She turned, trying to get comfortable.

“It’s a beautiful suite and much quieter in here,” Sarah said. “You’ve been through a lot in the last few hours. Try to rest, Miss Angie. A nap might help your headache. I’ll be right here.”

“Thanks, Sarah.” Angie pulled a blanket over herself and relaxed. The meds helped sleep come easy. When she woke, the moon cast its glow into her hospital room. “I feel like I just closed my eyes, but it’s already dark outside.”

Sarah sat in a recliner with Angie’s camera screen close to her face. “Hi, Miss Angie. How do you feel?”

“Like I drowned, and life was forced into me.” She pushed herself further up in the bed. “Is that my camera?”

“Yeah, Tanner brought it while you slept. He gave me the camera, put daisies on your food tray, then just watched you breathe.” Sarah turned the camera off.

“He didn’t say anything?”

“No. He just stood there a while, then slipped out of the room.”

“I thought I lost my camera in the lake.” She pushed a button to raise the head of her bed.

“You’re an amazing photographer. I hope it’s okay for me to look at your photos. I was hoping you got a shot of the drone that hit you, but you didn’t.” She handed Angie her Nikon.

Angie checked the camera for damage. “I’ll need a new lens, but the body looks fine.” She held it toward Sarah. “Tanner saved me today.”

“I know, and we’re thankful.” Sarah retrieved the camera case, put Angie’s Nikon away, then handed her a glass of water.

“You said we’re thankful. We who?”

Sarah walked back to the recliner, wearing a sheepish expression. “The staff. We talk about you and Tanner, and we’re rooting for you two to get together someday.”

“Really? I didn’t know.” Angie smiled. *That would be fine with me.* Being in Tanner’s arms twice in one day had turned her growing infatuation into something deeper—much deeper. His touch created an urgency, a strong desire to win his heart. The look of panic in his eyes spoke volumes, and his caress held unspoken messages. She didn’t want him to let her go. Ever.

That look was a game-changer, bringing her buried feelings for him to the surface, making her wheels turn. Her new goal—happily ever after with Tanner—could be reachable. If she started college courses early, tested out of as many subjects as possible, and took heavy course loads, she could finish her BA degree and a Master’s in record time. She could pursue her career, live up to her grandfather’s expectations, and catch the man of her dreams in the process. But for now, she’d keep things as they were and not risk the friendship they shared.

“Anybody hungry?” Alexander Ward’s smile brightened the room. His tie had been removed, but his designer suit spoke volumes about his status. Though the gray at his temples denoted wisdom, the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes

reflected the happy years he'd enjoyed. His looks turned heads, but he only had eyes for Nana Joy, who'd passed six months before after a brave battle with cancer.

"Maggiano's takeout. They doubled the order. Sarah, take some with you," Angie insisted. "Thanks, Grand-Papa. I'm hungry."

Sarah pulled Angie's rolling table closer and began preparing her dinner. "Mr. Ward, which one is yours?"

"The lasagna." He removed his suit coat.

Sarah arranged his meal on a table in the suite and opened Angie's food. After getting them set, she left for the evening, taking home a serving of some shrimp Alfredo.

"How are you feeling, Angelica?" Her grandfather stood by her bed, his brow furrowed.

"I have a headache, and the gash throbs, but the doctor said I'll be released tomorrow with antibiotics and orders for three days of bed rest."

"I've been thanking the Lord. You're all I have left."

"And I'm not going anywhere, Grand-Papa. You're stuck with me. Now let's eat."

"Good idea." He made himself comfortable in one of the recliners. "Are you past the shock of what happened this morning?"

Angie stirred her Alfredo, letting the steam rise from the dish. "The photographer invading my space on my veranda made me mad. But my trip into the lake shook me to the core. It wasn't like my life flashed before me, but it did bring some things into perspective."

"Into perspective? I don't understand." He cut his lasagna into pieces.

"As they worked on me, I did a lot of thinking. I want to make a difference with my life. If it's okay with you, I'd like to rush my education." She took a bite as he digested her idea.

“What do you mean by ‘rush your education?’”

“With a November birthday, I started school late. Then, I lost over a year of my life when Mom and Dad died, and I endured those surgeries. I want to make up for lost time.”

“Does it bother you to be two years older than your classmates?” He watched her face.

“Sometimes. Especially now. If things had happened differently, I’d be further along on my education track.” She noticed his look of concern. “It’s not your fault. However, I only lack a few credits to finish high school. If I apply myself, I’ll still walk with my class in the spring. I’d start taking college courses right away. With my grade point average, I can test out of some courses, putting me farther down my degree path.”

He paused and wiped his mouth. She watched him take a drink of tea. “What do you think?” she said.

“Would you be overloading yourself? It could be an extreme workload.”

“Southwestern University has an online track of courses I’d utilize. If I see it’s too much for me, there’s an opportunity to withdraw from classes.” She popped a shrimp into her mouth and savored the morsel, giving him time to think. “Do you care if I try it?”

“I see no problem as long as you pace yourself.”

“Thanks, Grand-Papa.” She twirled her noodles, enjoying the smell of Alfredo sauce as she loaded her fork. “I have another request.”

He smiled. “Has your mind been working double time since your dip in the lake?”

“Well, maybe. I’ve also been thinking about Christmas.”

“Christmas? It’s a bit early, don’t you think?” He reached for his tea.

“Yes, but we need to plan. Do you mind if I change a few things this year? I want to put up a children’s tree for your

office staff party. We could have their names on ornaments filled with gift cards for the kids.”

“I think some change is beneficial.” He took a bite of garlic bread. “It sounds like a great idea. I’m good with it.”

“My second request is a bit of a stretch.” She caught his gaze. “Would you be willing to ask Vice President Saitoti from Kenya to send us a kissing ball from the Mt. Kenya area? If he could have it here by December first, we could incorporate it into our decorations.”

“I’m afraid I’m at a loss. What’s a kissing ball?” He closed his food container and placed it in the sack.

“When we were at Mountain Lodge at the base of Mt. Kenya, our driver, Peter, showed me a round green growth in the trees. He called it the ‘kissing ball.’ When I asked why he called it that, he said in America it is called the ‘miss-toe plant.’ It took me a minute to realize he meant mistletoe. He said it held Christmas magic. The vice president has greenhouses and exports thousands of roses to Europe each week. He would send it to us if you asked him. Will you do it for me?”

“I’ve had conversations with him recently about some business matters. I don’t think he would mind. I’ll ask him if it would make you happy, Angelica.”

She pushed her rolling table away. “It does. We need a few changes to help us through our first Christmas without Nana Joy.”

He stood and put her empty plate in a sack to discard on his way out. Gathering his things, he stepped to her bedside. “You need to rest. Ellis is here, So relax and get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Grand-Papa.”

He kissed her cheek and left.

Angie turned toward the window to watch the stars poking holes in the darkness. He was going to order the kissing ball.

She smiled. Kissing Tanner would be amazing. Christmas couldn't get here soon enough.



Tanner slung his duffle into his Hummer SUV and shut the door harder than he intended.

“Did you go to the hospital?” Tanner’s mother handed him some snacks for the road.

He opened the container and shoved a chocolate chip cookie into his mouth. “Yeah, she was asleep. I just needed to make sure she was okay.”

“Do you have feelings for Angie?” Maria paused. “She lives in a bubble. Bodyguards have been her constant companions since the car wreck that ended her parents’ lives, and I’m not sure she’s had any relationships.”

He eyed her for a few seconds. “Are you worried about me, or her? She’s my friend, and I’m aware of the bubble she lives in. Look where we’re standing, Mom. I know which end of this estate I come from. With a proper education and some professional success, I hope to be worthy of her affection.” He paused and let out a deep breath. *Someday.*

“Angie has been through a lot,” he continued, “and I’ve walked through most of it with her. I won’t risk destroying the camaraderie we share by letting feelings grow between us. Don’t worry, and tell your crew of matchmakers to take it easy.” He hugged her goodbye.

She kissed his cheek. “I’ll tell them, but it won’t do any good. Drive carefully. It looks like some thunderstorms are headed our way.”

He tossed his computer bag into the back seat, slipped behind the wheel, and cranked his truck. With a wave, he left the estate. As his older model Hummer ate up the miles, his



mind replayed the afternoon. *The paparazzi have to be stopped. They got too close today.*

He'd talk to her bodyguards about keeping her safe. Extra measures needed to be implemented. He'd frequent the estate and be a loyal friend. He'd never desert her like his dad had done to him and his mom years ago. That pain had never subsided. It never would.