

Chapter 1

"You need to get back to the office right away."

The high quivery voice alarmed Mariah even more than the words. Pulse quickening, she turned to face her secretary, Lynn. She was obviously upset. Her eyes were wide and frightened, and her hands shaking. "What? What's the problem, Lynn?"

"Imani's up there looking like death warmed over. I'm afraid it's serious."

A wave of apprehension coursed through her. "Oh no!" Hurriedly fumbling, Mariah took out a few coins from her opened change purse, and tossed them on the counter. "What happened?" She asked, grabbing her soda and following Lynn out of the store as fast as she could in her red pumps. Panic rioted within her. What was Imani doing in her office anyway? She wondered fleetingly, and then she remembered tonight's charity event at the governor's mansion. Had there been some sort of accident? Imani had to be all right.

Lynn's fingers fluttered nervously, her eyes wide. "I was just talking to her, and she suddenly sort of keeled over on the couch. She's out cold, Mariah!"

"Do you think it's drugs? Did you see her take anything?" Mariah asked, feeling oddly disloyal. It was a fact that Imani had been a wild teen-ager. Had she really changed that much? Rushing to the elevators, she pushed the up button. Fatal images of the standoffish and often prickly model filled her mind.

"No, I didn't see her take anything, but I came to get you because if she has to go to the hospital, I figured she wouldn't want an official record."

"You're right about that, but if she's not conscious when we get up there, I'm calling 911. Her reputation is not worth dying for." The elevator doors opened and both women scrambled into the compartment. Mariah's heart thumped madly as she pushed the button for the tenth floor. The elevator doors seemed to close in slow motion. After an inordinately long time, the doors opened and both women ran down the hall to the McCleary Modeling Agency.

In the outer office, Imani lay curled in a fetal position on the couch with her head in the crook of her arm. She lifted her head as they entered, her eyes seeming much too big for her face. Mariah suspected that the thick make-up covered dark circles beneath her eyes. "Hello, Mariah. Lynn, I'm sorry, did I scare you?"

Lynn circled the couch. "Out of a few years of my life! What's wrong with you?" Imani's hands held her stomach. "I-I must have fainted. I haven't been eating very much. My stomach's been giving me the willies."

"Are you okay? Should we call you an ambulance?" Mariah asked, noticing that despite Imani's reasonable sounding words, her coloring seemed unnaturally pale, her bottom lip trembled, and her hands moved back and forth across her abdomen. She'd never seen Imani look anything but glamorous.

"Just let me rest a little, and I'll be alright." Imani's head turned sideways and dropped back into the crook of her arm. "I don't need a doctor."

Mariah stared her at her, her thoughts racing. *Oh yes you do. I haven't seen anyone who needed a doctor more!* Aloud, she said. "I've got a soft drink you could have..." Imani rotated her head from side to side.

Mariah and Lynn exchanged glances, then Mariah motioned Lynn into her private office and closed the door.

"She is *not* alright." Lynn said obstinately.

"Yes, I know." Mariah said, trying to steady her erratic pulse. She ran a hand across her forehead. "I've got visions of stomach flu, or appendicitis, or even stomach ulcers." She glanced at her watch. It was well

past time for Lynn to go home. "Go on home, Lynn. I'll handle this."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Lynn said, not bothering to keep the relief out of her voice. "I've got an appointment."

"No, I don't mind. Imani has an assignment tonight, and I'll probably need to get a replacement anyway."

Lynn lifted her black bag onto her shoulder. "Then I'll be on my way. Let me know all this all turns out."

"Sure."

"Good night, Mariah."

"Good night." Mariah called softly as Lynn opened the door and exited. Was Imani really all right? She didn't think so, but at least she was conscious. Mariah knew better than to think she could force her to see a doctor right now. She'd let her rest for an hour, then try to reason with her.

With nervous fingers, she found the 'worry wart rock' in its spot by her nameplate. Absently rubbing it's semi-smooth surface, Mariah paced the area in front of her desk. Tonight's assignment was important for a number of reasons. The client was her best friend, Ramón. She couldn't let

him down. The event was in support of her beloved Juvenile Diabetes Association. Her eyes touched on the family photo gracing her desk and zeroed in on her little sister's face. Reason number two, she thought, biting her lip. Poor Jennifer had died from Juvenile Diabetes. As a result, Mariah always did everything she could for the organization working towards a cure. As for reason number three, supporting the community and its organizations made good business sense.

Who could she get to replace Imani? Quickly, she ran through all the possibilities and came up empty. All her models were either on assignments, or not the type requested. In desperation, she called a couple of models on vacation, and ended up talking to their voice mail.

After an hour, her office began to feel like a cage. She got up and walked into the outer office to check on Imani.

"I don't see how you'll be able to make that assignment tonight." Mariah's gaze ran over Imani's beautiful features, cringing at the waxy, almost grayish cast to her normally peachy-looking walnut skin tone. Imani's dark fringe of lashes lay against her drawn cheeks; her trademark pouty lips were slack and unanimated. The short, red knit dress she wore barely covered her hips and

crotch, and half her full breasts hung out of the low cut neckline. The dress was something her friend, Ramón, would call a classic 'ready sex' dress, easy in and out. Imani's long, slim, yet curvaceous form hung over both ends of the office's short leather couch like a drooping exotic flower. "Are you sure I shouldn't be taking you down to the emergency room?"

Imani's lashes lifted just enough for Mariah to see the sherry brown pupils of her eyes. "Don't worry." She rasped. "It must have been the shrimp I had at lunch. That's all I ate. I'll be fine."

"Well you certainly don't look fine." Mariah replied. "And telling me not to worry is simply not going to work" She moved closer, her hand behind her back to keep it from touching Imani's forehead. Did Imani have a fever? Imani hated anyone fussing over her and until recently, was usually very standoffish. Deciding to go for it, she applied cool fingers to Imani's forehead. Surprise! Imani's forehead, although not exactly cool, was only a little warm.

"Mariah, quit fussing." Imani's lids drifted closed again. "Alright, I guess I won't be able to make tonight's assignment. Get a substitute for me, and I promise I'll be able to make my commitments the day after tomorrow."

"I can't get a sub." Mariah said, becoming more worried by the minute. "Most of the girl's are at that fashion show in New York, and Tammi and Linda are on vacation in the Bahamas! There's no one I could call on this short a notice!" She didn't want to think about the publicity and business opportunities the agency might miss out on. It had virtually outgrown the present office space, but lacked the additional funding needed to pay for the new building and the necessary remodeling. And what about the island vacation she'd been promising herself? She hadn't had a vacation in three years due to the level of activity in the agency and the total commitment of her funds.

"Why can't you do it?" Imani mumbled, rolling over onto her side, one hand kneading her stomach.

"Me?" Excitement bubbled within Mariah at the thought. She glanced at her caramel brown features in the mirror on Lynn's desk. Her dark eyes were fringed with lashes that weren't as thick as Imani's, but they were more than adequate. Her nose was small and short; her lips well shaped and full. Instead of the prominent cheekbones that helped make a model, she had full dimpling cheeks. Mariah pushed the dark brown cloud of her mid length pageboy out of her face. She'd never considered herself

glamorous, but she knew she was attractive. Could she do it?

In her secret heart of hearts, she relished the opportunity to show Ramón that she too, could be glamorous and exciting. She'd never met a better-looking man, and he was sexy as hell. Ramón Richards was the kind of guy women drooled over, and with good reason. She had no intention of chasing him, or becoming one of the statistics in his little black book. Make that big black book, she added in her thoughts. If she successfully covered for Imani, it would be a morale booster. She'd given up any romantic ideas she had about him long ago.

Ramón liked the tall glamorous babes, but none of them seem to have any sort of staying power. She'd never been sure if it was because he dumped them, or they mutually agreed to go their separate ways, but she'd never ventured enough to find out personally. Boyfriends had always been easy enough to find, but she'd never been blessed with a brother. Ramón was as close as she was going to get.

"Exactly what's wrong with you?" Mariah asked Imani, hedging her bet.

"I feel a little dizzy, and nauseated. If it's not the shrimp, I've probably caught a virus. You know, hopefully one of those twenty-four hour ones. I can't go

Mariah. I couldn't even stand up right now." Slowly, Imani rolled over onto her stomach, moaning lightly. "And if I could, I might just barf all over poor Ramón. You've got to do it."

Imani didn't look as if she would get any better. Mariah took another glance at her own face in the mirror. *Do it!* A voice whispered in her thoughts. What was she afraid of anyway? Mariah scratched that thought. She knew what she was afraid of. Ramón Richards, that was who. She loved him dearly, and had been friends with the man for years, but she just knew she couldn't go the distance. In all the years they'd been friends, he'd never really looked at her as a woman. Did she really want to change the way he looked at her? In her thoughts, Mariah could find the idea attractive, but actually carrying it off would be no mean feat.