

Chapter 1

"I don't know why I'm so nervous! It's not as if I'm all starry eyed at the thought of marrying Michael."

Nikita Daniels swallowed back a rush of pure envy and took a good look at her best friend who was frowning at herself in the mirror as she tugged at her gown. In the background she could hear the boisterous sounds of the bridesmaids in the next room laughing and talking in various stages of dress and she knew that on the other side of the church, Michael and his friends were getting ready for the walk down the aisle. "Girl, please!" Nikita said with a touch of humor that she really didn't feel. No matter how hard she tried to conceal it, the fact remained that she desperately wanted to be the one who was marrying Michael Matheson. "Plenty of women would love to be in your shoes because the man has got it going on in all departments. The way you two have been carrying on, it's got to be love."

Chenelle grinned then, her green eyes sparkling mischievously in her golden brown face. "We've been going at it because that man knows his way around a bed and he comes with some awesome equipment!" She laughed. "That's definitely going to be a big plus after we're married."

"Chenelle!" Niki fought back images of Michael making love to her. Clamping down on those thoughts, she reminded herself that he obviously didn't know of or share her feelings. Neither did Chenelle. After today Niki might still love him, but she would have to give up her dream of some day being the object of his love.

On chic satin pumps, Chenelle turned in the mirror to reveal a side view of the creamy satin and lace covering her voluptuous curves. One finger traced the pearl-encrusted lace along the revealing neckline.

"You know you love him," Nikita chided.

Chenelle's expression hardened, her eyes going flat. "Huh! I don't believe in love anymore, Niki. I've been hurt too much in the name of love."

Niki blinked in surprise, clenching her fist. Chenelle's words hit her like a slap in the face. "Not Michael?"

"No girl. You know how many times I've gone round and round with Lance Coltrane."

Niki nodded. "So why are you marrying Michael?" Her voice broke a little, but Chenelle didn't seem to notice.

"Why not? He's good looking, intelligent, and sexy. Like you said, what more could a woman want?"

"Love?" Niki couldn't help pressing the issue. Michael was everything she wanted in a man too, but unlike

Chenelle, she loved him. She loved him so much she knew she'd never get over it.

Chenelle laughed and Niki felt anger building inside of her. "Me and Michael have an arrangement. We're going to travel and have fun. He's even agreed to invest in my five year plan."

Shaking her head in amazement, Niki found herself muttering under her breath. "What a waste."

"No, it's not." Chenelle put her hands on Niki's shoulders. "We're both adults, Niki, and we know what we want."

"And you really think that will make it work?" Niki swallowed again, angry tears burning her eyes. I'm not going to cry!

"Of course I do. I wouldn't marry him otherwise." Chenelle turned and gave her friend a quick hug. "I know you're only thinking of what's best for me and I appreciate that thought, but don't be negative about this."

Returning the hug, Nikita struggled to hide her shock. If Chenelle wasn't her best friend, she knew she'd be in the groom's area of the church, trying to convince Michael not to marry her. How would she ever maintain her friendship with the two of them after the wedding?

Three years ago, she'd met Michael at the toy manufacturing company where they are both employed and work

on a number of projects together. She had fallen in love with his sharp intellect, good looks, and warm heart, and they'd quickly become good friends. It seemed like she'd loved Michael forever. She'd hoped he'd see that their friendship was the basis for a lasting love.

After working late one night they'd grabbed a quick dinner and run into Chenelle. Michael hadn't been able to take his eyes off her, and Chenelle had sparkled like a rare diamond. Sitting between them, Nikita felt their sizzling attraction firsthand. After that, they'd been inseparable.

She'd hoped and prayed that the relationship between her friends was simply a physical attraction that would quickly fade. No such luck!

Nikita felt the tips of her freshly manicured nails cut into the palms of her hands. *This isn't about you*, she reminded herself.

In a rustle of satin, Chenelle sank down on the cushioned loveseat. One hand smoothed at the pinned-up mass of curls on her head. "I'm really fond of Michael. He's a nice guy and like I said, everything I've ever wanted in a man..."

"Not quite," Nikita interrupted, remembering the only man she'd ever known to throw Chenelle for a loop.

Chenelle blushed, her chest heaving slightly. "I know what you're thinking, but what I felt for Lance was more like a sickness. Thank God I've gotten over that.

"Maybe you haven't." Nikita bit her lip, suspicion growing within her. *The people who upset you most are the people you care most about. Is Chenelle still in love with Lance?*

"Yes, I have. I'm marrying Michael today." A proud note crept into Chenelle's voice as she continued. "We make a great couple. With our combined salaries, investments, and my financial plan, we'll be secure within the next five years."

Swallowing back an exclamation of disgust, Nikita groaned under her breath. Then she bent over and kicked off the fancy shoes. Rubbing one aching foot absently, she suspected that the real issue with Chenelle was dollars and cents. Her friend had been working on that big plan for financial success for several years now, and Michael wasn't the first man with whom she'd tried to implement it. Nikita's expression turned skeptical.

Several sharp raps at the door interrupted her thoughts. A querulous voice spoke in good-natured but imperious tones, "All right, ladies, get it together in there. Chenelle, I told your mother I was coming back here to light a fire under you'all. Everyone that matters is

here. Let's get this show on the road! You've got ten minutes."

Chenelle winked. Grinning mischievously, she yelled, "Thanks, Aunt Doris!"

It was an inside joke in Chenelle's family. Her spinster aunt, Doris, was always in charge of everything, and she took her duties seriously.

Aunt Doris grumbled on, but they couldn't catch the words because of a growing commotion outside the door. Raised voices thundered back and forth.

Nikita stood up and stepped back into her shoes. "Let me see what's going on out there." Aunt Doris was arguing with someone. When Nikita opened the door and saw just who it was, she nearly rocked back on her heels in surprise.

Aunt Doris' tone was heating up. "*Nikita*, will you tell this young man that he's no longer welcome at any of the Crestwood family functions?"

Nikita stood with her hands on the door, her body filling the narrow opening. "Hello, Lance." She heard Chenelle groan softly in the background.

His Tommy Hilfiger jeans and shirt contrasted sharply with Aunt Doris' pale blue tea dress. Tense fingers clawed through the roots of his dreadlocks. Red lines of misery scored the whites of his onyx eyes as he tried to insert

the towering bulk of his muscular six-foot-three-inch frame between the furious Aunt Doris and the door.

Lips tightening, Doris moved to block his path as he tried to step around her. All the while she stared him down, as if he were some kind of bug.

Looking over her head, he called to Nikita, "Where's Chenelle?"

"Getting ready to be married."

"No! She can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because she's in love with me!"

"Lance, she doesn't even want to see you."

"Yes she does! Ask her." With firm hands, he held Doris still, then moved around her.

Furious, Doris wagged a finger. "Young man, if you don't leave now, I'm calling the police."

"Ms. Crestwood, I'm sorry, but I *have* to talk to Chenelle."

Aunt Doris stomped closer, her voice gaining volume. "You are the last person Chenelle wants to see."

Feeling somewhat sorry for Lance, Nikita broke in. "Aunt Doris, let me handle this, please?"

Aunt Doris deliberated for a moment. "All right, Nikita, but you girls have five minutes, ten minutes tops, to get out here."

Nikita controlled her tongue. "We'll be out in a few minutes."

Aunt Doris nodded. "Then I'll go make sure everything else is ready." After a few steps, she wheeled and said to Lance, "I'll expect you to be gone, young man," and started towards the chapel.

"Lance, are you still in love with Chenelle?" Nikita asked.

He glared at her. "I never loved anyone else. Why do you think I'm here, letting Aunt Doris browbeat me?"

"Do you want to get married?"

"Yes. No. Hell, I don't know. I just know that I can't let her marry someone else." He shifted his feet and put a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Nikita, have a heart. Let me talk to her. You know how she feels about me." That was for sure, Nikita thought. But did Chenelle realize it?

With a swish of satin, Chenelle approached the door. Her eyes glistened with tears. "I'll talk to him," she said quietly. "Just make sure you come back and get me in ten minutes."

"Sure." Nikita widened the opening to let Lance in.

Chenelle turned to Lance, her face full of hope.

Lance's eyes lit up. "Chenelle!" he cried hoarsely, then pulled her roughly, almost violently to him. His lips covered hers hungrily.

Carefully, Nikita shut the door. Neither of them even noticed. She was certain that Chenelle still loved Lance. Hopefully, her friend would back out of marrying Michael. *Time to go see what's going on in the chapel.* Nikita headed towards the front of the church.

Stumbling around in a white tux, Earl, the best man, caught up with her. He virtually reeked of alcohol. Slurring his words just a bit, he said, "I've been looking for you, Nikita. Have you got an aspirin? My head is killing me." Nikita had a flash of sympathy for him. Still hung over from last night's bachelor party, he could barely walk. How was he going to make his stand at the front of the church? She fished in the little cutesy purse that went with her outfit and gave him two aspirin.

"Hey, thanks. I'm forever in your debt. Now all I need is the water fountain."

"Right outside the groom's area," she said helpfully.

"Yeah. Thanks." He started to stumble away, then turned. "Ah-Michael wants to talk to you."

"Is there something wrong?" she asked, wondering if he knew what was going on in the bride's camp right now.

"I don't know. He says it's urgent. He begged me to come out here and find you."

Nikita sighed. "All right. I'll go, but we've only got a few minutes."

She walked back to the section of the church reserved for the wedding party. What would she say to Michael? Her thoughts dwelled on the things she couldn't say, such as the big convincing speech on why he should call the whole thing off. *Don't marry Chenelle. She doesn't love you! I do!* Much as she wanted to, it wasn't her job to tell Michael about the scene between Chenelle and Lance. The wedding would probably go on as planned. Lance had given up a chance to marry Chenelle in the past, and chances were, he still didn't have the guts to do it now. So where did that leave Nikita?

A heady blend of male cologne and after-shave mixed with musk assailed her as she entered the rooms reserved for the groom and his men. As she knocked at the groom's closed door, a couple of the guys in the outer room called out compliments at the sight her. Somebody whistled and yelled, "Hey Nikita, you're looking hot!" Flattered, Nikita grinned and murmured her thanks. She'd spent so much of her life trying to be one of the guys that she hardly knew how to act when men appreciated her female attributes.

Michael opened the door on a whiff of Perry Ellis cologne, looking deliciously handsome in his tux. The suit hugged the lines of his tall, lean-muscled body, the white color contrasting perfectly with his curling black hair and smoldering brown eyes. *Mama mia!* If she had ever wondered what people meant by 'eye candy,' Nikita thought this had to be it, every bit as good as double chocolate with the nuts on top.

He gazed at her appreciatively. "You look good, Nikita. You should wear dresses more often," he rasped in that husky voice of his. A thrill of excitement shook her and her heart contracted. Only someone who knew him well could catch the slight slurring of his words. Earlier, one of his buddies told her that the bachelor party had gone on till four o'clock in the morning. Was it any wonder that half the guys were either still drunk, or hung over?

Nikita breathed in the scent of him, her heart fluttering. "You're looking good too," she said a little breathlessly. "Just think, you and Chenelle are only minutes from going down the aisle..."

"That's why I've got to talk to you. Come on in." His warm fingers caught her arm and drew her into the room with an unconscious intimacy that made her yearn for more. She glanced around quickly.

"There's no one else in here," he mumbled, closing the door. "You should have been the best man." He seemed a little off balance as he dragged a wooden chair forward and motioned for her to sit down. "Make that 'best person,' because I can talk to you better than anybody else." Hauling another chair for himself, he sat on it backwards.

"What's this about?" Nikita held her breath.

He thrust a hand through his dark hair. "I couldn't sleep last night, and I've been nervous all morning. After waiting all these years to get married, the thought of going down the aisle has me shaking in my boots. I feel strange. It's all I can do not to light up, and you know I quit smoking years ago."

Her pulse doubled, seeds of hope sprouting within her. *What was that saying? 'It's not over till it's over.'* *You're wrong to feel such joy. They'll get married and live happily ever after.* Carefully, she asked, "Why, Michael? What's the matter?"