The couple on the bed had sex as if it was their final act.
   And for one of them it was.
   Neither of them heard the door slowly open.
   Neither of them observed the shadowy figure enter the room. They were too caught up in the throes of passionate lovemaking.
   Until... one single gunshot.
   And the blood flowed.
   And for one of them death and orgasm happened at the exact same moment.
   Life has a strange way of taking you on an unexpected trip...
   This was one of those times.
Book One

The Invitation
Chapter One

Dateline: Moscow

The Russian billionaire, Aleksandr Kasianenko, admired his super-model girlfriend as she stepped, unabashedly naked, out of the indoor swimming pool in his luxurious Moscow mansion. Her name was Bianca, and she was known across the world.

God, she is a beautiful creature, Aleksandr thought, beautiful and sleekly feline. She moves like a panther – and in bed she is a wild tiger. I am a very fortunate man.

Bianca was of mixed race – her mother was Cuban, her father black. There was no doubt that Bianca had inherited the best of both her parents’ looks.

She’d been raised in New York, discovered at seventeen, and now at age twenty-nine was the most sought-after super-model on the planet. Tall, lean and agile, with coffee-coloured skin, fine features, full natural lips, piercing green eyes and waist-length glossy black hair, Bianca captivated both men and women. Men found her irresistibly sexy, while women admired her sense of style and raunchy humour – which she exhibited every time she appeared on the late-night talk shows.

Bianca knew how to handle herself in front of the cameras,
and she certainly knew how to plug her brand. Over the years she’d created a mini-empire that included a fine jewelry line, exotic sunglasses, a stunning makeup collection for women of colour, and several best-selling scents.

Bianca had mastered the art of the sell, making a fortune doing so. Then at the age of twenty-nine she’d finally decided that rather than be a one-man-band who worked hard for her money, she was looking for a powerful man who would take care of her and parlay the money she’d earned into super-rich status.

Aleksandr Kasianenko was just such a man, for Aleksandr was not only a super-rich businessman, he was also tough and rugged with a steely reserve.

Bianca was sick of the long list of pretty boys she’d dated over the years. Movie stars, a clutch of rock stars, a half-dozen sports heroes and a politician or two. None of them had really satisfied her – in bed or out. She’d always been the dominant force in whatever relationship she’d been trapped in. The movie stars were all insecure and fixated on their public image. Rock stars were mostly into drugs and getting fucked-up, not to mention totally vain. The sports stars were publicity-crazy and never faithful. And as for the politicians – sexually incorrect. All horn and no blow.

Then, at exactly the right time, she’d met Aleksandr. And she’d fallen for his silent strength.

Only one problem.
He was married.

* * *

They’d met on Aleksandr’s home turf. She was in Moscow doing a cover shoot for *Italian Vogue*, and since it happened to be her twenty-ninth birthday, the flamboyant photographer, Antonio – an Italian gay man who knew absolutely everyone
who was anyone in Moscow – had decided to throw her a massive party.

The party was a blast. And then she was introduced to Aleksandr.

The moment she saw him, he took her breath away with his brooding dark looks and aura of control and power. He was big and strong, and there was something magnetic about him, something incredibly masculine. One look and she was hooked.

He didn’t tell her he was married.

She didn’t ask.

An hour after their first encounter they were making fast, ferocious love on the floor in her hotel suite. Their lovemaking was animalistic in its intensity, so overpowering that they’d never made it as far as the bedroom. It was all clothes off and straight at it.

After their one night of unbridled passion they were both swept up and addicted to each other. And so began their steamy affair, an affair that had them meeting all over the world.

Now, after one year, and in spite of Aleksandr’s marital status, they were still very much together.

Aleksandr had assured Bianca that he was in the throes of divorcing his wife, but due to several massive business deals that could affect his wife’s settlement, it still had not happened. He also had children to consider. Three daughters. ‘The timing has to be right,’ he’d informed her. ‘However, it \textit{will} happen, and it will happen soon. You have my word.’

Bianca believed him. He was separated from his wife, so that was a promising beginning. Still, she couldn’t help wanting more. She wanted to be Mrs Aleksandr Kasianenko, and the less time wasted the better.

In the meantime Aleksandr wished to celebrate his love’s upcoming thirtieth birthday in a big way. He’d recently taken delivery of a new luxurious 400-foot super-yacht, and to christen their maiden voyage he planned on throwing Bianca a
once-in-a-lifetime special event that she would never forget. The celebrations would include inviting several of their friends on a week-long cruise to enjoy the best of everything. What could be better?

When he informed Bianca of his plan she was excited, and immediately started thinking about who they would invite on this very exclusive trip.

‘How many can your new yacht accommodate?’ she enquired.

‘Many,’ Aleksandr replied with a dry laugh. ‘But I feel we should invite only five couples.’

‘Why only five?’ Bianca asked, slightly disappointed.

‘It’s enough,’ he told her. ‘You make your list, I make mine. Then we will compare and decide who gets invited.’

Bianca grinned. ‘This is gonna be fun,’ she said, already planning her list.

‘Indeed it will,’ Aleksandr agreed.
Chapter Two

Dateline: London

Ashley Sherwin stared at her image in the ornate mirror above the vanity for a full ten minutes before her husband, Taye, entered their streamlined bathroom with the marble counters and fancy rock-crystal chandelier – designed by Jeromy Milton-Gold, one of London’s most sought-after interior designers.

‘Whatcha lookin’ at, toots?’ Taye asked cheerfully, taking the opportunity to lean over her shoulder and check out his own image, which was, as usual, totally fine.

‘New makeup,’ Ashley muttered sulkily, annoyed that he’d caught her, wishing she’d locked the door.

Taye had no concept of the word ‘privacy’. Well, he wouldn’t, would he? He was a super-star footballer used to stripping off and basking in all the glory (not to mention the women) that came his way. Cheap and nasty little tarts, ready and willing to chase any famous man. She hated them all.

‘Well,’ Taye said, stretching his arms above his head, ‘you look right fit, an’ sexy as hell.’

Ashley had no desire to look hot and horny; her aim was to look like an elegant fashion icon, a fashionista with style to spare.
Taye simply didn’t get it. He thought he was tossing her a compliment, but as far as she was concerned it was exactly the opposite.

She sighed. After six years of marriage Taye still had no clue who the person was that she aspired to be. Didn’t he realize that she was no longer the pretty blonde, twenty-two-year-old TV presenter he’d married? She was now the mother to their six-year-old twins, Aimee and Wolf. She was older, more mature. She knew what she wanted, and it was certainly not enough to be known as Taye Sherwin’s trophy wife.

They’d had to get married because she was pregnant – never the best of ideas, but better than being a single mother. Taye was a major catch. Black and beautiful. A sports hero. A money-making machine, what with all his various endorsement deals and super-star status.

They’d met on a TV show she’d been co-hosting with Harmony Gee, a former member of the girl group Sweet. Harmony was all over Taye, but it soon became obvious to everyone that he only had eyes for Ashley.

Before long they were a staple in the UK newspapers, billed as the new celebrity couple. They were even given a nickname by the press – Tashley. It had a ring to it.

Ashley was thrilled; she revelled in the attention. For six months she’d been pushed into the background while Harmony scored most of the big interviews; however, with all her newfound PR, her bosses at the TV station were suddenly regarding her with new respect, while Harmony was staring at her with daggers in her eyes.

Then Taye had managed to impregnate her, and that was that.

Goodbye, career.
Hello, marriage.

Taye was a super-star in all respects. The moment he found out she was pregnant, he’d insisted that they got married. Never
mind about his playboy past, Taye was all about doing the right thing. Besides, he loved Ashley. She was perfect for him – a true English peach with her widely spaced blue eyes, flawless skin, long blond hair and curvy figure.

Taye’s mother, Anais, a heavy-set Jamaican woman, was not so pleased. ‘Yo should be marryin’ one of yo own kind,’ she had complained, her accent heavy with disapproval. ‘This Ashley gal’s nothin’ but a fancy show-pony. She not gonna make yo a satisfyin’ wife.’

‘Yo’ mama’s right, son,’ Taye’s dad had agreed. ‘Yo wanna grab yo’self an island woman – more meat on dem bones. Juicy dark meat. Delicious!’

The last time Taye’s parents had visited Jamaica was forty years ago, so Taye chose to ignore their sage advice. Instead he forged ahead with elaborate wedding plans.

Ashley’s mother, Elise – a faded blonde who worked behind the makeup counter in a department store – was torn. The good news was that Taye was rich and famous. The bad news was that he was black.

Elise tried not to think in a racist way, but unfortunately she’d been raised to regard black people as inferior beings.

Fortunately, Ashley had never harboured any hang-ups about Taye being black. He loved her more than any man ever had – in fact, he kind of worshipped her, which she didn’t mind at all. Being worshipped by a very famous man whom every other woman lusted after was quite a kick.

Their lavish marriage made headline news. So did the birth of their twins three months later. Taye bought them all a magnificent house near Hampstead Heath, and everything was well in the world, except shortly after moving into their new home, Ashley suffered a bad bout of post-partum depression, and refused to go near the twins for the first six months of their lives. This forced Taye into moving his parents and Ashley’s mother into their house, which turned out to be a big mistake.
The two grandmothers soon discovered that they loathed each other – especially when Anais accused the thrice-divorced Elise of making a play for her husband, an accusation Elise hotly denied.

The Sherwin household was not a happy one. Ashley, locked up in the master bedroom refusing to come out. The twins demanding attention day and night. And the mothers-in-law at war.

Taye attempted to keep the peace, although it wasn’t easy. And since Ashley shied away from any sexual contact, he was becoming increasingly frustrated.

So it came to pass that Taye cheated. And as luck would have it, the girl he cheated with (a page three model with outrageous boobs) couldn’t wait to run to the tabloids and sell her story for a ridiculous amount of money.

The headlines were relentless:

MY ENDLESS NIGHT OF LUST WITH TAYE SHERWIN
HE’S A STAR IN BED TOO!
IS TASHLEY OVER?

Oh, the humiliation! The fury! The shock that Ashley experienced. She’d hauled herself out of hiding and confronted her husband in a simmering rage.

His excuses were weak. No sex for months. A depressed wife. Crying babies. Warring mothers-in-law. And a buxom babe throwing herself at him during an aftershave commercial he was shooting.

Taye wasn’t made of stone. He’d fallen into those giant tits like a man starved for sustenance. He’d wallowed in them. Then after wallowing, he’d screwed the random girl, immediately regretted it, and run for his life.

The newspaper story had galvanised Ashley into action. She’d hurriedly hired two maternity nurses, banished both

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mothers-in-law to their own homes, and set about getting herself back in shape.

Meanwhile, Taye presented her with a ten-carat diamond ring, assured her his indiscretion would never happen again, paid for the boob job she demanded, and normal life resumed.

Only it wasn’t that normal. Ashley forgave, but the problem was, she had no intention of ever forgetting.

As the twins grew, Ashley began to think about her future, and what she could do to become more than just another footballer’s wife. She’d started by informing Taye that any ads or endorsements he did in the future should include her. He’d agreed. Having rocked the boat once, he damn sure wouldn’t be doing it again. Ashley meant everything to him, and he wasn’t about to risk losing her.

So, adwise, they gradually became a team. The Taye and Ashley Show. He with the shaved head, muscled body and killer smile. She with the baby-blue eyes, lush body, amazing boobs and tumbling blond curls. They got together with the best photographers and soon created a partnership brand.

Ashley worked hard on her body, toning and tanning, losing any excess fat and gaining muscle – until she looked almost as fit as Taye, only in a womanly way.

She adored her new breasts, they gave her so much more confidence, and Taye loved them too.

Would he ever cheat again?

He’d better not, because if there was a next time, she’d leave him, take the twins and make his life pure hell.

* * *

Eighteen months previously, Ashley had decided that appearing in ads with Taye was no longer enough for her – it was time she had her own career. The twins were getting older and she’d been thinking about doing something that was all hers. Since she’d
always fancied herself as an interior designer, she’d approached Jeromy Milton-Gold, the designer who’d worked on their house and asked him if she could be part of his team. Jeromy, the older boyfriend of Latin singing star, Luca Perez, was always looking for ways to up his profile, and he’d told her that it was a fabulous idea. If Taye was prepared to invest in his business, he said, they could definitely work something out.

Ashley went to Taye and asked him to put up some money. To keep Ashley happy, he’d obliged, in spite of his business manager telling him he was nuts.

Ashley was delighted that Jeromy wanted her to work alongside him.

Before long there was a new hot show in town. The Ashley and Jeromy Show, interior designers to the stars. Both with famous partners. Both with endless ambition.

It had started out as a winning combination. Lately, things were not so good.

* * *

‘I’ve got somethin’ to show you,’ Taye said, waving a large cream envelope in the air.

‘What?’ Ashley asked, moving away from the mirror and drifting into the bedroom.

‘Wouldn’t you like t’know,’ Taye said, following her.

Taye enjoyed teasing his wife – it gave him a feeling of power. And he was holding power in his hand, for in the envelope with the embossed gold border and exquisite calligraphy was an invitation that, if he knew his wife, would positively make her come!

‘Don’t mess about,’ Ashley said, still slightly irritated.

‘Give us a kiss, then,’ Taye said, putting his arms around her from behind.

‘Not now,’ she said, wriggling out of his grasp.
'What’s wrong with you?’ Taye complained. ‘The kids are at me mum’s. Nobody’s around. It’s the perfect time.’

‘No, it’s not,’ Ashley argued. ‘We’re about to go out to dinner, and I don’t want to ruin my makeup or my hair.’

‘I’ll make it a quickie,’ Taye promised.

‘Don’t be disgusting,’ Ashley responded. ‘If we’re going to do it, then we should do it in our bed like normal people.’

Taye shook his head. Sometimes Ashley acted like a total prude. Normal people! What was *that* all about? Made her sound like her racist mother whom he barely tolerated.

‘I suppose a blow-job’s out the question then?’ he ventured, edging closer.

Ashley’s look of disapproval informed him that indeed it was. Whatever had happened to the girl he’d married? Free and easy, up for all kinds of sexual adventures. They’d had sex here, there and everywhere. Now he had to practically plead to get any sex at all. It wasn’t right. He still loved her, though. She was his wife and nothing would ever change that.

‘Later?’ he asked hopefully.

‘We’ll see,’ she said. ‘Now go get changed – and hurry up. We’re meeting Jeromy. He’s off to Miami tomorrow and we can’t be late. You know how punctual he always is.’

‘Jeromy’s such a borin’ wanker. Do we have to go?’

‘Yes, Taye. In case you’ve forgotten, I work with him, so stop moaning and go and get ready.’

‘Okay, okay.’

Since she appeared to have forgotten about the envelope, Taye decided not to show it to her until they came home. He knew it would put her in an excellent mood – that, and a couple glasses of wine, and he’d have no trouble getting a piece of what was rightfully his.

Yes, Taye knew how to handle his wife.

*Carefully.*

That was the secret.
Chapter Three

Dateline: Paris

There was never enough time in the day for Flynn Hudson to achieve all the things he wished to accomplish. As a respected, somewhat maverick, freelance journalist and writer, he was always on the move, travelling wherever the latest disaster took him. Over the last year alone he’d been in Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Japan and Afghanistan. He’d covered tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, wars.

Flynn was always front and centre of the action, reporting on events, government corruption, human rights. He was an activist who answered to no one except himself, with a website that had almost a million followers, for when Flynn wrote one of his essays, his faithful readers knew they were getting the real deal, not the fake bullshit that most news stations fed the gullible public.

Yet Flynn preferred to keep a low profile. He turned down TV interview requests and avoided being photographed, while home was a small apartment in Paris, where he lived alone.

He did have girlfriends. Several. Although none of them had ever gotten close.
Flynn Hudson was a loner. That was the way he liked it.

Born in England thirty-six years ago to an American mother and British father, he’d been educated across the world as his father was a diplomat. They’d travelled extensively, until at the age of twelve his parents were killed by a terrorist car bomb in Beirut. Miraculously he’d survived the tragedy, and he had the scars to prove it.

After the death of his parents he’d led a double life – spending half his time with his American grandparents in California, and the other half with his British kin who resided in the English countryside. He didn’t mind flying back and forth; it was an adventure.

After attending a university in the UK for a year, he’d switched to UCLA in L.A., before dropping out when he was twenty-one and setting out to roam the world.

He backpacked across Asia, mountain-climbed in Nepal, learned martial arts in China, joined the crew of a fishing vessel in Marseilles, worked as a bodyguard for a Columbian billionaire who turned out to be a drug lord, until finally at the age of twenty-five, he’d sat himself down and written a successful book about his travels.

Flynn could have been a media star, he was certainly handsome enough. Six feet two, strong and athletic, with longish dark hair, intense ice-blue eyes and a permanent stubble on his sharp jawline.

Women loved Flynn. And he loved them back, as long as they expected nothing permanent.

Once upon a time he’d made a lifetime commitment. It hadn’t turned out the way he’d expected. No more commitments for Flynn. He was done.

As an alpha male he respected women, enjoyed their company on a short-term basis, and never tried to control them. He wanted what was best for them, especially women in third-world countries who had to fight every day for their very survival. He
helped out when he could, writing about the places he went to, exposing corruption, using whatever resources he could get his hands on to assist the not-so fortunate.

Money had one meaning to Flynn, and that was helping others.

* * *

The girl crawled on top of Flynn like a particularly energetic spider-monkey, all long gangly legs and arms, small breasts, cropped hair and enormous khol-outlined eyes. He thought her name was Marta, he wasn’t sure. Sometimes he felt he wasn’t sure of anything any more, not after some of the atrocities he’d witnessed. He’d recently returned from Afghanistan, where he’d watched a photographer colleague get caught in the crossfire between border guards and a car carrying two suicide bombers. The guy had had his head blown off—literally—by getting too close to the bombers simply to catch the best shot.

The image of the car blowing up was embedded in Flynn’s mind, and the headless body of his friend lying in the mud. It was a photograph he couldn’t erase.

After returning to Paris, he, who didn’t drink much, had gotten hopelessly drunk two nights in a row. Marta, or whatever her name was, happened on night two, and he wished he’d never picked her up and brought her home.

After reaching an unsatisfactory orgasm he managed to slide her off him.

‘Comment c’est fini?’ she said indignantly.

‘Not tonight,’ he mumbled. ‘Go home.’

So she did. Reluctantly.

In the morning, nursing a massive hangover, he discovered she’d taken his wallet with her.

No more drinking.

No more random sex.
It was his own fault, he should’ve known better.
Lately, things were getting on top of him. His recent visit to China, where in some places it was deemed acceptable to drown baby girls at birth. Another trip to Bosnia, attempting to give aid to women who’d been raped. And then to Pakistan, to write a story for the *New York Times* about an American citizen who’d been drugged by a prostitute and had one of his kidneys cut out and stolen.
Flynn needed a break.
Sorting through his mail, mostly bills, he came across a fancy envelope addressed to:

*MR FLYNN HUDSON & GUEST*

Extracting the invitation, he scanned it quickly.
It wasn’t his kind of thing, but then the thought occurred to him – why the hell not?
Maybe this was exactly the break he’d been looking for.