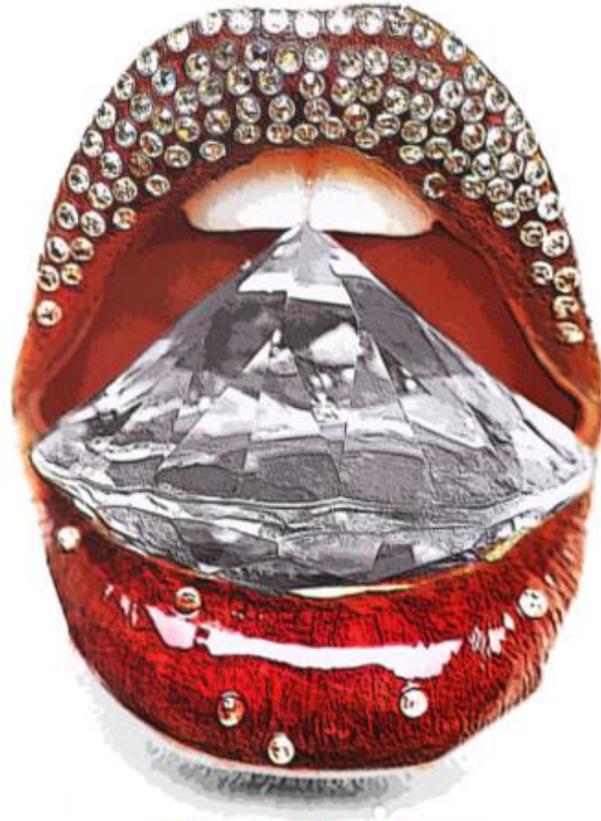


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THE DIAMOND *Tiara*

PART VI OF THE DIAMOND COLLECTION
A NOVEL BY VOGUE

The Diamond Tiara: Special Preview

Part VI of The Diamond Collection

Vogue

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I

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II

Diamonds Are Forever

III

The Ace of Diamonds

IV

Black Diamonds

V

Diamonds N' Roses

VI

The Diamond Tiara

VII

Dirty Red Diamonds

Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

1

Kenema, Sierra Leone

A small amount of light adorned the stairwell. Despite the lack thereof, a band of armed men moved down the steps without breaking formation. The only sound which echoed off the walls was the repetitive stomps of their black tactical boots. The noise ceased as they neared the last step. One of the soldiers opened the basement door. Light spread like wildfire throughout the space. The repetitive stomps roared back to life.

The band of soldiers poured into a room already occupied by another group of armed men. The same black tactical gear was upon their frames. The number 66 was plastered in azure blue on their backs. Both parties stood in a loop around a white gentleman who rested at their feet. His face was clear and untouched while his clothes were in shreds and stained with fresh and dried blood.

The group broke formation.

Out of their core, a man in a blindingly white suit appeared. Pearl-colored alligator loafers lined his feet, large gold and diamond rings laced his fingers. His countenance was different from the designer labels he wore. Surly was an accurate description. He walked towards the center of the circle where the gentleman laid. Upon reaching him, he knelt for a closer look. Familiar was an understatement. He knew the man's identity way before he entered the U.S. Embassy in Freetown. Nonetheless, he didn't place a tracker on Howard Grendel until he learned Kenema was his destination.

A little over a year ago, his second in command brought him a copy of *The Brookstone Times*. The front-page headline was all about how his biggest buyer had beaten another case. It was a win for all of them. After hearing the news, his first task was finding the man who helped his comrade obtain his freedom. His original plan was to anonymously bestow upon him a jewel of gratitude. The plan changed when he learned his buyer's saving grace was a part of a scheme within the U.S. government.

He remembered that day clearly. A yellow manila envelope arrived on his desk. The envelope contained several photographs of Grendel, which placed him in the city of Brookstone, New York. Previous photos he received showed Grendel outside The White House. The first photograph he pulled from the envelope was a shot of Grendel walking up the steps of a brownstone. The second was a complete shot of the structure, a building inscribed with the words Blue Magic. The third photo was the golden ticket. In the photo was the owner of the establishment—a Puerto Rican businessman, Jay Santiago, who he supplied with some of the most exquisite diamonds known to man. He was walking up the same set of steps.

The pictures showed that Grendel was more than a random American who stumbled upon a surveillance tape. He had ties to Santiago. Evidence suggested that Grendel assisted Santiago on his case in exchange for one thing—him. The U.S. government believed Grendel was harmless and could enter Kenema under the guise of a missionary. They were mistaken. He was already ten steps ahead of them. It was the reason the man was at his feet half-dead. He knew what they wanted. It wasn't his diamond mines. It was the people who worked his mines.

America always wants to be the savior.

“Howard Grendel,” he called. The man’s eyes flickered open. “Ship him,” he ordered. His directive was clear. He left the room just as the man was bludgeoned. Grendel was no longer his concern. His comrade was. The name Santiago was now a trigger. It was a clear reminder that even genuine partnerships were built off deceit.

2

Brookstone, New York

The clock hadn't even struck seven-thirty, yet the city of East Brookstone was bustling. While the area was not as populous as Manhattan, the current atmosphere showed something different. Crowds of people filled the downtown area. The majority was on foot; whereas others hailed cabs or utilized other forms of public transportation. The subdivisions had far less traffic, but that didn't mean it was any less hectic inside the homes. School may have been out due to the holiday break, yet it was business as usual for parents and child-less adults who were chasing a dollar.

The Washington household was no different. Located in one of the wealthiest gated communities in the city, the mansion was a far cry from Tiara and Malik's humble beginnings. Their home, a property that had graced the pages of *Architectural Digest*, was well over ten thousand square feet and filled with only designer décor. That morning, they moved circles around each other, both working on different things, but with the same goal—to get out the house. Malik had their four-year-old daughter, Robin, on his hip while his free hand worked on the morning coffee. Tiara, on the other hand, was packing Robin's day bag and ignoring her cell phone, which had been beeping every few seconds.

"Can you get that?" Malik urged. The noise had become an annoyance.

"Not if I want to get out this house on time," Tiara shot back. Her phone beeped again, which was all Malik needed to leave the Keurig alone. He headed to the other side of the kitchen and picked up her phone. Tiara saw him out the corner of her eye, yet she didn't stop what she was doing. They made an agreement there wouldn't be any secrets in their house. He was free to check any device she owned and vice versa.

"This will definitely get you out the house," Malik told her.

He held the phone at eye level. Numerous notifications were on the screen, mostly texts and emails. There were also two missed calls. "Why is Monifah at the gate?" he asked.

That question made Tiara drop Robin's bag. Monifah Harris, now Monifah Kane, was a mutual friend she shared with her longtime gal pal, Carmen Santiago, back in their high school and college days. Monifah left town shortly after the murder of her ex-boyfriend, Rakim (who just so happened to be Malik's twin brother) and popped back up as the new girlfriend (but now wife) of Carmen's ex-husband, Michael Kane, who simply went by Kane. Most people expected Tiara and Malik to be close to Monifah due to her connection to Rakim. However, they never spoke.

Tiara pulled her phone from Malik's hands to read the messages. Monifah was in the area and wanted to see if she was available to chat. "I don't trust that woman," Tiara admitted, throwing the phone on the kitchen's island. "It's too early to be coming over to someone's house. It's not even eight o'clock." Tiara went back to Robin's bag, double checking to make sure she hadn't missed anything. "What does she want to talk about?"

Malik pulled the bag from Tiara's grasp. "You'll have to tell her the gate code to see."

"No, you just want to know," Tiara joked. She picked up her phone and texted the code. "Look at you. You ain't even dressed." Tiara glanced at her phone again, checking the time. "I have to deal with her, you deal with that." Tiara pointed at Robin's hair. "You've mastered the bun."

Malik kissed Robin's cheek. "Tell Mama she ain't got nuthin' to worry about. Daddy is going to have you lookin' good."

"He better," Tiara said, leaving the kitchen. Once she reached the foyer, she peeked out a window to see if Monifah was there. A car was pulling in her driveway. Although she wasn't prepared to deal with her, she stepped outside. The energy between them was awkward for several reasons, which boiled down to one—Carmen.

And from the looks of things, it ain't gonna get better, Tiara thought.

Her mouth dropped open as Monifah stepped out her car. She hadn't seen her in a few weeks, but her former friend had blossomed into a pregnant woman overnight. "Wow," Tiara mouthed, walking towards her. "This is so unexpected."

Monifah had a large grin on her face as if she came to gloat. "The cat is out the bag," she shrieked. She did a Kenya Moore-inspired twirl so Tiara could see all sides of her bump.

"You and Kane are having a baby?"

Monifah stopped mid-twirl. "Who else would I be having a baby with?"

Tiara shrugged her shoulders. "No, it's just that I've been friends with Kane for years and I know he's..." Tiara didn't finish. It wasn't her place to tell Kane's business although a large part of her assumed he told Monifah he was infertile. "He and Carmen used in vitro to have Kristian, so—" Tiara was interrupted.

"And he did the same for me," Monifah snapped. "Why would I be any different?"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. I just..." Tiara had backed herself in a corner.

"I came over because this is all new to me." Monifah took a few steps closer to Tiara to close the gap. "I've been gone so many years. This is my hometown, and I don't have any friends. I thought this was a good time for us to reconnect. You're a mother, I'm about to be a mother. I thought you could be someone I could go to for advice."

Tiara tried not to show her emotions on her face. Monifah wasn't on Carmen's hit list, but she didn't know how Carmen would feel if she got chummy with her ex-husband's new wife.

"Silence," Monifah muttered. "I guess that's my answer."

"No, no, it's just..." Tiara tried to back herself out a corner again. "Come on, Monifah. We haven't talked in like twenty-something years. You walked back in our lives in the least way we expected."

"You can't be my friend because you're friends with Carmen?"

Tiara gave her a reminder. "You married her ex-husband."

"And she fucked your boyfriend."

Tiara was taken aback. What Monifah was saying was true, but she hadn't thought about Carmen's bad deeds in a long time. To her, it was all water under the bridge.

"Carlos Rodriguez," Monifah stated with a smile. "Puerto Rican drug dealin' bad ass, the underboss of the Santiago cartel, former best friend of Jay Santiago, and the man behind Carmen Davenport who helped her get her coins up to start one of the biggest fashion companies in America, Flame." Monifah described him as if she were reading a character bio for a reality show. "What do you get from being her lapdog? I bet she has you taking care of her fifty billion kids while she's on her honeymoon fuckin' underneath an island sunset."

"I'm actually about to drop my daughter off at *her* house so her maid can watch her."

Monifah came back with, "I bet you have to pay her to do it."

Tiara sucked her teeth. She did pay Fiona. The woman deserved to get paid. She cooked, cleaned, and watched after three children five days a week and sometimes the weekend, if needed. "Okay, you're pregnant, you hate Carmen, what else?"

“Damn,” Monifah muttered as if she hadn’t started the Carmen-hate train. “We used to be close, Tee. Yes, you were always closer to Carmen, but we were like sisters, too.”

The memories flooded back quicker than Tiara wanted. The three of them were like sisters. People even mistook them to be when they would see them together. With their deep rich ebony complexions, similar physiques, and hairstyles, they were the same aesthetic.

“Maybe we can try to get back there,” Monifah suggested.

Tiara shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t want to be in the middle of you and Carmen.”

Monifah looked away. “You will always be loyal to her. For what, though? I don’t get it. That woman is evil. Didn’t you see what she put Kane through?”

Tiara had heard enough. She knew Carmen wasn’t a saint. Yes, her friend had done some downright dirty and disgusting things, but it was *years* ago. Her friend learned from her mistakes, matured, and was focused on being the best wife and mother she could be. Monifah couldn’t see it because she hadn’t witnessed Carmen’s growth. All she saw was the Carmen of the past.

“I need to go,” Tiara announced, a hint the conversation was over. “Hopefully, you’ll find what you’re looking for even if it’s not here.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for, too.”

Tiara raised her brow, unsure of what Monifah was getting at. It was on the tip of her tongue to probe her, but Monifah was walking to her car. She hadn’t left though, which meant the opportunity was still there. “What is that supposed to mean?” Tiara asked, following behind her. “What is it that you think I’m looking for?”

Monifah didn’t respond as she opened her car door. She got inside and for a split-second Tiara thought she was going to leave her guessing. She thought it even more when she heard the doors lock. Then, the driver side window rolled down.

“A hand to pull you out the rabbit hole,” Monifah replied.

Tiara became even more quizzical. She didn’t ask for another explanation as it would prolong Monifah from getting off her property. Still, her mind wondered. Monifah believed she wanted to be out Carmen’s shadow. Yet, Tiara never thought she was there. Other people did.

But was she?

Truth be told, Tiara had given her life to Flame, a company she barely owned any part of. If anything were to happen to her, Robin would only inherit five percent, although she served as Vice President for over twenty years of her life. *That is a problem*, Tiara thought. She was the one who made Flame what it was. Carmen only provided the financial backing and designs. She built the business while Carmen was locked up and handed it off to her once she was released. At the time, Tiara thought she was doing the right thing because Carmen owned Flame. However, a fair percentage of the company should’ve been given to her. Instead, Carmen sold twenty percent to her and three other execs.

The conversation with Monifah created dialogue in her head that only existed in spurts. The thoughts also never created any action. With Carmen temporarily away from the business, she could start putting together a proposal for a greater percentage of ownership. She didn’t know how her friend would feel about it. Therefore, she made a mental note to discuss it with Malik. He wasn’t one to hide his opinion no matter how much it hurt. He also would tell her if she was letting Monifah get in her head.

“No one is even out here.”

Tiara heard Malik behind her. “She just left. I’m gonna check the mail.”

“Cool,” Malik replied.

Once he closed the door, Tiara made her way to the mailbox. She looked up the street for any sign of Monifah's car, but her ex-friend was gone. Tiara told herself the conversation they shared should be as well *or* at least for the time being.

3

Gros Islet, Saint Lucia

A radiant beam of sun warmed Carmen's face as she stepped onto the terrace. Despite the early hour, the temperature was at a raging high. To adjust to the heat, she donned only a kimono-styled silk robe over her deep melanated skin. There was little need for modesty when the property was tucked away on a hillside distant from the other villas. With privacy at her fingertips, Carmen didn't hesitate to untie the robe's belt from around her waist.

She moved about the terrace carelessly, taking in the beauty of the villa. Ocean waves crashed around her. Birds chirped in the distance while the scent of Mother Nature tickled her nostrils. As if those splendors weren't enough, an infinity pool laid below her, the bluish green water bleeding into the Caribbean Sea. The sight of it reminded Carmen why she was on the terrace in the first place. Swimming at the very edge of the pool was her husband of all of two days—Jay Santiago.

Let's see how attentive you are.

Jay raised his head from the water. She smiled at him although he hadn't yet noticed her presence. His mind was elsewhere, which she noticed when he disappeared underneath the water for another swim. She let him be, moving towards the lower level of the terrace. Once she reached the pool's edge, Jay raised his head again. This time, their eyes met.

"Someone finally decided to get up," he said with a smile.

Carmen sat down, allowing her legs to fall inside the pool. Jay used it as an invitation, pushing his muscular frame in between her thighs. Naturally, she draped them around his waist. "I was taking advantage of being able to sleep in. You know our days are numbered."

"You're taking advantage of more than that," he replied. Jay's fingertips traced the edge of the robe as a reminder she was nude.

"So are you," Carmen stated, motioning to his bare skin as well. Certain they had the same intentions, she slid the robe off, leaving it on the terrace as she eased herself into the water. "Is this breakfast?"

The only reply needed was Jay's lips on hers, his tongue pushing its way deep into her mouth. When their bodies became entangled, there was no turning back. Their pants and moans floated through the air unnoticed as if the villa were surrounded by soundproof walls. The moment was an everlasting peace until the peace became disturbed.

"I'm not answering," Jay whispered. His phone was ringing from a nearby lounge chair. He ignored it, as did Carmen, until the ringing failed to cease. The unwanted noise forced him out Carmen's arms. He retreated to the terrace to grab his phone. *Malik* was on the screen. His friend for the past thirty or so years, he knew something was brewing if Malik called him.

"This has to be about more than business," he stated. Multiple voices were in the background, which made Jay believe his speculation was true. "What's going on?"

The voices became silent as Malik spoke. "Tiara was trying to reach Carmen, but she wasn't getting an answer. When she dropped Robin off this morning, Fiona told her she hadn't seen Patricia. She called me to come over to help look for her."

Jay kept his back to Carmen. The memory hit him hard as Malik reminded him of a sin he'd left in Brookstone. Patricia Davenport was Carmen's mother and his latest victim. "Carmen's phone is in the house. We're at the pool."

Malik overlooked what he said. "I broke her door down. Patricia's cell phone was still in her room, her purse, everything. We searched the premises, the cameras, it's like she vanished into thin air. Roman said he hasn't seen her in a while, too. I know he lives with y'all."

Jay visualized Patricia's lifeless body behind the rosebushes of their multi-million-dollar estate. That was where he left her. "Are you sure y'all looked everywhere?" Part of the y'all he spoke of was Roman, Linx, and Gully, his three right-hands, who were at his house almost twenty-four seven. The latter, Gully, was also his first cousin.

"I wouldn't have called you if we hadn't," Malik told him.

A wave of confusion fell over Jay's face. Malik's words didn't make sense, but he couldn't tell on himself. Someone had moved Patricia's body, which meant his secret was known. "Look, I'll see what Carmen wants to do and call you back."

"This isn't looking good," Malik was saying as Jay ended the call.

"What is it?" Carmen asked once she saw him hang up. "Is something wrong with the kids?"

Jay shook his head. "No one's seen your mother."

Her face read what he expected. She was taken aback. As if she could rush off to Brookstone that very minute, she climbed out the pool and slid her robe on. "No one has seen her since we left for Puerto Rico?"

"From what it seems. Fiona told Tiara she hasn't seen her. Malik checked her room. All her stuff is there, but she isn't." Jay handed his phone to her in the event she wanted to call Malik. She didn't take it, so he draped his arm at his side.

"Did he check—"

"He checked everywhere," Jay interrupted.

"Why are you cutting me off?" Carmen's tone was now one of suspicion. "What does everywhere mean to him? Did he check the cameras to see if she left or if someone picked her up? Did he check the hospitals?"

"I trained my men to be thorough."

"But did you train them to check the city and ask around?"

Once again, Jay handed her his phone. When Carmen didn't take it the second time, he tossed it onto the lounge chair. "Just tell me what you want to do."

Carmen rubbed her brow. While she should've been hopping on the next flight to New York, she wasn't ready to leave Saint Lucia. She didn't want to rush back only to learn her mother had taken an unannounced vacation. It seemed like the right thing to do, but it wasn't what she wanted. Everyone knew her relationship with her mother was strained. In Carmen's opinion, no one should've been shocked if she didn't hop on the first flight to Brookstone. Still, with the clock ticking, she needed a plan of action.

"Call Malik back," she replied. "Have him go through my mother's things and do a check on all her accounts. I'll figure out what I'm gonna do once I see what he finds out."

Jay grabbed his phone from the lounge chair to do as she requested. She headed in the house while he made the call. "For right now," he stated once Malik picked up, "we're gonna stay here. Carmen wants you to go through her mother's things and see if you can access her bank accounts. Check to see if there are any debits."

“Gully did that. She had her passwords written down in her planner. I forgot to mention it. Patricia hadn’t used her account in weeks. The debits made were automatic drafts and it wasn’t many of ‘em,” Malik shared. “We also checked her emails and there wasn’t anything suspicious there.”

“Where’s Linx?” Jay asked. He was trying to narrow down who could’ve moved Patricia’s body. “Is Akaila there?” Jay mentioned his stepdaughter on purpose. She was the 19-year-old adopted daughter of Carmen and Kane, who was currently studying at Brookstone University. There was a possibility she saw something as she lived under their roof and was home all the time.

“They’re both right here,” Malik answered. “Do you want to talk to them?”

Jay parted his lips to say no, yet, it was Tiara’s voice, which prompted his silence.

“We should call Kane,” she was saying. “He used to work for an intelligence agency. He knows what to do. This is what he does.”

The last suggestion Jay wanted to hear; he didn’t hesitate to voice it. “Don’t call him. I don’t want him anywhere near my house. Do what I said and check the city. I’m gonna talk to Carmen and we’ll go from there.” Jay gave Malik a chance to respond until a new thought entered his mind. “You know not to contact the police. The last thing we need is them in our business.”

Once Malik agreed, Jay hung up. As much as he wanted to toss his cell in the pool, he settled for throwing it back on the lounge chair. What he was currently facing was the result of him being sloppy with his crime. A rookie, he was not, but his actions deemed him to be. Now, he was stuck on an island facing the end of a marriage, which had only begun.

Or so he thought. The sound of his phone ringing caught his attention. This time when he answered, it was Linx on the other end. “Did something change?”

“No,” Linx informed him, “everything’s the same. You know I have your back, right?”

There it was. The information Jay needed. “You always have my back. That’s why I’ll always have yours.” Jay looked towards the house to see if Carmen was eavesdropping. He didn’t see her in earshot. “Neither you nor your family will ever be in need.”

“How far are you going to let this thing go?”

Jay didn’t have an answer, but he would have to find one soon. It wouldn’t be long before someone else would suggest for Carmen to get the cops involved. He couldn’t let the search get far, but he also couldn’t tell Carmen what he’d done. He would have to play it all by ear. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll figure it out along the way.”

A loud sigh sounded out Linx’s mouth. “I guess we both will.”

Brookstone, New York

The morning dew was still on the ground when Tiara exited the front doors of the Santiago Estate. She left the mansion the same way she came, except, this time, Malik was in tow. Robin was inside eating breakfast with Rakim and Nyla, the youngest of the Santiago clan. In total, her best friend, Carmen, had six beautiful kids. The oldest, King, being 21-years-old, who she shared with Jay. Then, there was Kristian, who was born while Carmen was married to Kane. She was the same age as Akaila, who Carmen and Kane adopted along with Akaila’s 16-year-old brother, Malachi.

They got adopted right when shit was hitting the fan. Tiara remembered everything about that time. After serving seventeen years in prison, Jay was released, came home, laid Carmen on her back, and out came Rakim, who was now almost five. The infidelity caused Carmen and Kane to divorce. The two reconciled only for there to be infidelity on Kane's part. That put Carmen back in Jay's bed where they conceived Nyla who was now four. More drama occurred, which led Carmen to remarry Kane, divorce him a second time, only to marry Jay, days ago, on December 25th.

What a time, Tiara thought. She exhaled, unsure of where she should be headed. Normally, her destination would be Flame. With Patricia nowhere to be found and her best friend living it up in Saint Lucia, Tiara felt she should be on a scavenger hunt.

"You know you need to call Kane," she told her husband once he walked past her.

"We heard what Jay said," Malik replied. He continued to his car as if he didn't want to finish the conversation. Tiara followed behind him until they were standing at his vehicle.

"So, we're just going to wait around to see if she turns up?"

"Jay hasn't given another order. Plus, I can't be here all day. I have a meeting with King in an hour." Malik wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in to him. He planted a firm kiss on her lips. "Do I need to get Robin this evening?"

"I'll get her," Tiara replied. "I want to stop by for an update."

Malik looked at the house. He understood his wife's concern, but he wasn't trying to take the lead on Patricia's disappearance. He was growing tired of handling Carmen and Jay's messes. It was one of the reasons he took a position at King Records. By breaking away from Jay's businesses, he expected to have less of his friend's problems in his hands. Unfortunately, expectations were just that, expectations. "Don't involve yourself any more than you have to," he responded. "Have a good day, baby. I love you." Malik gave her another kiss before getting inside his vehicle.

When his engine revved, Tiara made her way to her own car. She was already late for work and sticking around the Santiago Estate for a second longer wasn't going to do anything for business. She missed most of the morning rush and walked onto the executive floor of Flame right before the clock struck ten-thirty. Her intention was to head straight for her office, yet she was bum rushed by Carmen's receptionist, Jessica McClain. Their new employee was the widow of Carmen's former driver, Donnie. Her best friend hired her after Jessica reached out to her for financial help. While Carmen did gift her with a six-figure check, she also gave her a job. Carmen hired her previous receptionist, Cathy, as her personal assistant, and she got paid to do little to nothing.

"I'm not used to you arriving this late," Jessica stated.

"Me neither," Tiara replied, still headed in the direction of her office.

"A man came by looking for Carmen. I asked him for his name, but he wouldn't give it. I referred him to you, but you weren't in your office. He said he would come back."

Tiara stopped in her tracks. "No one should've come looking for her. Carmen rescheduled all her meetings. How did he get on the floor?"

"I told security to let him up," Jessica shared. "I was hoping to get some information from him so I could direct him to either you or Jerry." The latter was the Senior Marketing Director for Flame.

Tiara rolled her eyes. It was obvious Carmen's new receptionist had zero knowledge of her boss' background or that of her boss' husband. Security was tight around Flame for a reason.

“I can tell you this,” Jessica continued. “He looked mixed, kind of like Carmen’s husband, but without the hazel eyes. His hair was cut low. Does he sound familiar?”

Tiara shook her head. “I don’t know. What was he wearing?”

“He was pretty casual, some black pants and a white button-up.”

Tiara gave Jessica a strange look. “He isn’t a designer if you said he was in something casual. I don’t know who that could be. Hopefully, he’ll come back.”

“I hope he does. I want to know who he is.”

Jessica went back to her desk while Tiara escaped into her office. Too much was going on for her to even comprehend. The worst part of it all was that she was stuck in Brookstone to deal with it while her best friend was living carefree on a sandy white beach. She cringed at the thought, although she shouldn’t have. Carmen wasn’t the one who made her mother disappear nor did she order some man to come to Flame looking for her. The timing was horrible, but it wasn’t her fault. If anything, Tiara hoped Carmen cut her honeymoon short to help her deal with it. If she didn’t, she would do the one thing Jay and Malik warned her against. She would contact Kane.

The Diamond Tiara will be released on June 7, 2022.