



# MODEL BEHAVIOR

## Delaney Diamond

Super model Sandrine Ford can't forget the brief affair she had with world renowned photographer, Maxwell Porter, on a shoot in Australia. He can't forget her, either. Despite their mutual agreement that "Whatever happens in Australia stays in Australia," he pursues a relationship with her upon their return to the United States. He calls numerous times and sends her gifts and flowers. Sandrine rebuffs all his advances, until she's face to face with him again.

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Maxwell Porter stood in front of the floor to ceiling windows of the private dining room at the Signature Room restaurant, barely noticing the magnificent nighttime views of the Chicago skyline. He lifted the glass tumbler to his lips and swallowed the clear liquid. The cool progression of the Stoli Gimlet across his tongue and down his throat did little to soothe his anxiety.

It had been three months since he'd seen her in person, though he couldn't escape her stunning image. It was there, moving across the television screen as she endorsed a cosmetics line for women of color. He couldn't pass a newsstand without her round face staring back at him, smiling as if at some private joke at his expense.

She wouldn't return his calls, and she sent his gifts back unopened. His unwavering interest had slowly simmered into heated anger. Her dismissal didn't sit well with him. He wasn't the kind of man who had trouble finding female companionship, and he'd never had to work this hard to win a woman's interest.

Still, he managed to set aside his anger and sense of betrayal because he wanted to see her, and he'd found the perfect opportunity when he read the headline: *Super Model Becomes Super Hero*. Sandrine Ford had retired at the height of her career to open a center for victims of domestic violence in Atlanta. The center would be opened in time to coincide with Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, less than two months away.

It was unfair to surprise her like this, but he didn't know how else to get her to see him. He felt a pang of guilt at how he'd convinced her assistant to arrange this meeting. He had presented himself as a private donor whose sole interest was to meet her and offer a sizeable donation to the center. He planned to donate the money, but he had an ulterior motive for wanting to see her.

He turned when he heard a movement behind him.

“Mr. Porter,” the maitre d’ said, appearing way more frazzled than he was earlier, “y-your guest has arrived.”

Maxwell pitied the other man. He was clearly overwhelmed by the fact that the famous Sandrine Ford had shown up, and no one had warned him in advance. A man had to prepare for an event of such magnitude.

“Show her in.”

Maxwell placed his drink on the round table prepared for two. It was near the window, so they could look out at the skyline while they ate their meal. The lights were dimmed low, and the flame of a small votive candle in the middle of the table created an extra layer of intimacy. The scene was set.

The moment she appeared, his mouth went dry and his body became rigid with tension. She was absolutely stunning. How could a man get a woman like this out of his system? They had only spent a week together, but she was in his blood, and he had failed to expunge her from his thoughts.

Her steps faltered when she saw him, lips the color of ripe plums parting in surprise. He zeroed in on her mouth, graced only with a bit of lip gloss to make it shimmer and remind him of how those full lips had kissed their way down his hard stomach. His loins tightened at the thought.

She wore a mink stole over the wheat-colored material of her strapless evening gown-- no doubt one of the many one-of-a-kind creations designers were always bombarding her with. The material clung lovingly to her slender frame. The asymmetrical hemline hovered just above her

right knee and slanted downward toward her left calf. The beadwork glimmered in the dim light, a perfect complement to her dark, luminous skin.

With a warm smile, she dismissed the ogling maitre d' without a word. She hung her mink near the back of the room and proceeded to walk toward Maxwell. He couldn't help it. His eyes trained on the way her slender hips swayed each time her feet hit the carpeted floor. She moved with the long, graceful strides of a gazelle, ebony legs carrying her effortlessly in heels the height of short stilts.

When she stopped a few feet from him, he made no move to hide his arousal. He wanted her to see what she was doing to him. He wanted her to know he hadn't been able to go to bed for the past 92 days without thinking about her and wishing he could run his fingers across the short afro of close-cropped coils at her nape.

He hadn't even been able to sleep with another woman because of her. Every time he thought he could, he didn't go through with it because all he could see was her face and her slender neck curved in ecstasy. He needed the torment to end.

Maxwell took a step toward her. "You look fantastic," he said, his voice hoarse with hunger. "But you already know that."

She eyed him warily with onyx-colored, catlike eyes. "Mr. Porter--"

"Call me Max," he interrupted.

It came out harsher than he intended, but her husky voice hurtled him back in time, reminding him of the week they'd spent on the shoot in Australia. She knew his name well enough. During their nights together she'd screamed it, moaned it, and panted it. No other woman could make his blood gush hot through his veins just by saying his name. After what they'd shared, they should definitely be on a first name basis.

“I didn’t know I would be meeting you tonight.”

“That was the idea,” he admitted without shame.

“I don’t...understand,” she said, her brow gently furrowed. “Does this mean—“

“No, the donation is genuine. I admire what you’re doing. I just wanted to see you, and you’ve done an excellent job of avoiding me.”

“That’s why you chose this ruse?”

Maxwell nodded. “I hope you’ll still join me for dinner, even though I was probably the last person you expected to see.”

The pink tip of her tongue slid out to moisten her lower lip. His biceps tensed, because all he wanted to do was haul her to him and pry her lips apart with his own tongue so he could seek out the sweet warmth of her mouth.

“Why are you doing this? We agreed Australia was a onetime thing. One week, and then we’d both go our separate ways and pretend it never happened—behave as if we only had a business relationship.”

“I’m just asking you to join me for dinner.” She didn’t appear to be the least bit interested in spending any time with him. It was one thing to ignore him, but even in person she was unmoved. Could his feelings be completely one-sided? “You’ve come all this way, and I’m sure you’re hungry,” he added.

A female server hovered in the doorway. Maxwell motioned for her to come forward.

“Would you like a drink, Ms. Ford?” she asked shyly.

Maxwell held his breath, knowing her answer was an indication of whether or not she would join him for dinner.

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ll have a glass of Sauvignon Blanc--Château Ducasse, please.”

“Bring a bottle,” Maxwell instructed.

After the young woman left, Sandrine asked, “Planning to get me drunk?”

He gave her a crooked smile but didn’t answer.

Sandrine turned toward the chair farthest away from Maxwell.

“Allow me,” he murmured.

He stopped directly behind her. She was just a few inches shorter than him in her heels.

He looked down at her from six and a half feet, the alluring scent of her perfume wafting up into his nostrils. It was light and flowery, a blended bouquet of roses and lilies. The same fragrance had remained ingrained in every inch of the sheets in his hotel room.

When she lowered herself into the chair, he pushed it in. He had meant to only perform the act as any gentleman would, but her close proximity and the alluring scent of her skin forced him to act in an unexpected way. Unable to help himself, he bent his head and pressed a kiss to the bare skin of her shoulder.

She trembled. “Max...”

That was the reaction he’d needed to see. She wasn’t immune to him. What he felt wasn’t one-sided.

With a confident stride, he made his way to the other side of the table and sat down. “I’m sorry,” he said, sounding anything but sorry. “I’m only human.”

Sandrine Ford knew she was in trouble the minute she set foot in the private dining room. She’d already thought it strange the donor wanted to meet in such a way--in a restaurant atop the John Hancock Center. He never revealed his name, only asking for a private meeting to discuss the center before he turned over the donation. She understood, though. Some philanthropists

preferred their privacy, but they want to ensure the funds they donate are used to further the work of the nonprofits to which they donate them. She was happy to meet him because the assistance would benefit a cause dear to her heart.

Now she knew the real reason for the secrecy. Maxwell Porter, the photographer with whom she'd had a very steamy and short affair, was behind this entire charade. He'd tried for a solid month to coax her into contacting him, showering her with gifts, flowers, and even phone calls. When he finally ceased all contact, she assumed he had grown tired of the chase. Apparently not.

"That was very inappropriate, don't you think, considering the reason for this meeting?" She smoothed her cloth napkin across her lap, struggling to maintain her equilibrium after he'd thrown her off balance with the kiss. The heat from the press of his mouth still lingered on her skin, as if he'd branded her.

"Are you saying you didn't like it?" Maxwell inquired.

"I'm saying you shouldn't have done it," Sandrine replied.

He stroked his long fingers across the neatly trimmed hair on his cheeks and chin, as if he were in deep thought. "Hmmm...I couldn't tell by your reaction that it was something I shouldn't have done."

"You took me by surprise."

"Are you sure that's the reason?"

"Yes!" she snapped. She was grasping onto the last remnants of calmness, and all because of one little kiss—on her shoulder.

Sandrine picked up the menu, forcing an outward display of composure she was far from feeling. She should have left when she saw it was him, but her legs wouldn't let her. Now they were face to face, she didn't want to leave his presence.

The server re-entered the room carrying wine, a chiller, and two glasses. She poured an ounce in Maxwell's glass. He swirled the liquid then tasted it. When he indicated he was satisfied, she poured a glass for Sandrine, then for him, and placed it in the wine chiller on the table. They forewent appetizers and ordered their entrees.

"How are things in New York?" Sandrine asked, taking the conversation into what she hoped would be neutral territory.

"Busy," was the short reply. Maxwell tossed back the last of his drink and set the empty glass on the table. "Why didn't you return my calls? Why did you return all my gifts?"

So much for going into neutral territory.

She flexed her fingers in her lap, trying to rid them of the desire to stroke across his chestnut-brown skin. He had no idea how difficult it had been for her to rebuff his attempts at reaching out to her. Looking across the table at him, she realized her memories, though vivid, hadn't done him justice. He could have been a model himself, if he'd been so inclined. He had a broad face and strong, determined jaw line. His dark brown eyes were inviting, with long lashes most women would give their right arm for.

He turned heads wherever he went. She'd seen it herself during their brief time in Australia. He had ignored the women fawning all over him, though. He'd only had eyes for her.

"You know why," Sandrine replied.

"No, I don't. Tell me," he insisted.

"Do we have to do this? I was hoping for a pleasant meal in nice surroundings."



“Answer my questions and I promise I won’t bring up our past for the rest of the evening.”

Sandrine surveyed him with a skeptical look.

“I promise,” Maxwell said through thin lips, obviously miffed he was having to go to such lengths to get an answer from her.

Sandrine took a sip of her wine, more to bolster her nerves than to further delay giving an answer. “We had an agreement. What happened in Australia would stay there. No strings, because we both have different lives. I live in Chicago and you live in New York.”

“That’s it?” Maxwell demanded, his face incredulous. “And that’s why you sneaked from my bed in the wee hours of the morning and took an early flight back?”

“I didn’t sneak from your bed,” Sandrine denied.

“What would you call it, then?” Maxwell demanded, obviously still upset about the way she had departed.

“I booked an earlier flight the day before.”

“Which you failed to mention.”

“I didn’t see the relevance, since we both knew we were parting ways and agreed not to contact each other again.”

“*When we were back in the States.* You ran off while we were still in Sydney.”

“This conversation is ridiculous. Why are you so upset? You were the one who suggested we handle our...affair that way. I agreed with you and followed through. No contact after the fact.”

“You could have at least returned *one* of my phone calls. We were lovers, for god’s sake, and you cut me off like I was some kind of stalker.”

“But we agreed—“

“I know what we agreed!” Maxwell ran his hand down the back of his black, close-cropped hair in an effort to tamp down his building frustration. “Isn’t it obvious I changed my mind?”

“Isn’t it obvious that I didn’t?” Sandrine countered.

The ensuing silence was as deafening as the crash of cymbals.

Sandrine averted her eyes to take in the magnificent skyline. “I couldn’t risk anyone finding out about us. You know as well as I do it can still be difficult for black models, despite all the success we’ve had. I got the cover and a large spread in the magazine. What do you think people would have said?” She swallowed, returning her gaze to his. “Rumors would have surfaced that I got the spread because you used your influence as the photographer to get it for me, or maybe even sabotaged the other models by showing only their mediocre and bad shots-- while presenting only my good ones.”

“You deserved the cover and the spread,” Maxwell said, his voice low and rumbling, making the hair on her arms stand to attention. “The camera loves you. It had nothing to do with our relationship.”

“It doesn’t matter. I couldn’t risk it, and you couldn’t, either. Both our reputations could have been destroyed.”

Sandrine wasn’t telling the whole truth. Part of the reason she had felt the need to stay away from him was because she was afraid of the fierce feelings he awakened in her. She had booked an earlier flight because she’d wanted to escape as quickly as possible, back to normalcy and the calm, level-headed person she knew she should be.

“I never thought about this the way you did, but you should have called me and explained your position. Then we could have waited a few months to ensure there was no speculation about us.”

“You’re assuming I would have wanted to continue seeing you,” Sandrine pointed out quietly.

Maxwell took a sip from his wine glass, eyeing her over the rim. “Are saying you wouldn’t have?” he asked, after he had replaced the goblet on the table.

“No more questions. You’re well past your quota.”

“I think you just answered my question.”

The conversation finally turned to less incendiary topics, and so Sandrine allowed herself to relax. They chatted about the modeling industry, and she told Maxwell about her plans for the women’s center. By the end of the meal, she had forgotten her earlier discomfort.

Sandrine placed her napkin on the table. She cast a genuine smile of appreciation across the table to Maxwell. “That was delicious,” she said. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He leaned back in his chair, his relaxed pose and lowered lids signaled a shift in the mood of the room. “How did you get here?”

“I called a car service. I’ll just give them a ring and they’ll send someone to pick me up.”

“I’ll give you a lift home,” Maxwell offered smoothly.

“It’s not necessary, thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do since I brought you out tonight under false pretenses.”

“You’ve done plenty. I had a wonderful meal, and you’ll be making a sizeable donation to my center. I couldn’t possibly ask you to take me home on top of everything else.”

“It’s no inconvenience,” he pushed back.

Sandrine stood abruptly, almost toppling the chair behind her. The conversation was making her tingle all over, because she knew what he wanted. It was hard enough fighting her internal battle. She didn’t think she was capable of fighting against him, too.

Maxwell rose and made his way around the table, moving as if he had all the time in the world.

“I have to go, Max,” she said, her eyes pleading with him to understand and let her escape with her heart intact. She still hadn’t recovered from Australia.

His perceptive brown eyes locked with her darker ones. She knew he could see the truth. There was no denying the attraction that still simmered between them like a hot broth.

“I’m not trying to keep you here. I’m trying to come home with you,” Maxwell said.

“I have an early morning...” she started, the lame excuse sounding hollow and ridiculous.

Maxwell took her slender wrist in his hand, and her pulse jumped to life. “You’ve avoided me for months.” He stroked the back of his hand across the fine bones of her jaw, and she lowered her thick lashes to rest against her cheek, savoring his touch. He brought his face closer to hers. “Did you really think I would just let you walk out of here?” His breath tickled her neck, and she trembled as a result.

His fingers slipped from her wrist and settled on her small, round bottom. She moaned, moving to escape his roaming hand, but he quickly backed her against the wall.

“Max...” she breathed.

“What?”

She stared up into his eyes. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he whispered.

“Don’t...kiss me.”

His hooded gaze lowered to her lips, his eyes growing so dark they looked black. “Why not, when it’s what we both want?”

Maxwell pressed his mouth against hers with bruising intensity, both hands cupping the delicate curve of her jaw as he gained access to her mouth with his tongue. Sandrine offered no resistance, melting against him and wrapping her arms snakelike around his rock hard torso. She explored the muscles of his back, spreading her fingers to drift freely across the firm flesh under his dress shirt. The kiss went on for an eternity. When he finally withdrew, her lips felt deliciously swollen from the ardor of their kiss.

Maxwell nipped at her lower lip with teeth. “Forget about letting me take you home.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “Come back to the hotel with me,” he whispered raggedly. “I have a suite at the Omni. We could be there in five minutes.”

She could hear the craving in his voice. It was probably the closest he’d ever come to begging. In all honesty, it was unnecessary. The thought of spending the night with him had set her blood ablaze. She was no longer in a position to deny him or herself. It was so much easier to reject his advances when he was hundreds of miles away.

“Yes,” she whispered.

His reaction was immediate. “Let’s get out of here.” He weaved his thick fingers in between her soft ones so she didn’t have time to change her mind.

On the cab ride to the hotel, Sandrine sat snuggled against his side, her slender frame engulfed in the oversized suit jacket he’d thrown across her shoulders to protect her bare skin from the cool Chicago air. In their haste to exit the restaurant, they had left her stole in the

private dining room. Loathe to make the long ride back up the 95 floors to the restaurant, Maxwell had removed his jacket before they stepped outside.

He caressed the back of her head in a soothing motion, stroking across her close-cropped cotton-soft coils. The act soothed him as much as her. He placed a gentle kiss to her temple, struggling to contain the anticipation running rampant through his body. He hadn't stopped touching her since they walked out of the restaurant hand in hand. He didn't think he could ever stop touching her again.

Inside the elevator, Maxwell pulled Sandrine back against him so he could nuzzle the back of her neck.

"Max, they have cameras in these things," she said, turning her head to watch him out of the corner of her eye.

"Then they're in for a show," he whispered wickedly, pulling her tighter into his warm embrace.

Sandrine gasped, partly from his audacity, and partly because of the prominent ridge prodding provocatively against her bottom. She twisted around in his arms. He chuckled, pleased with himself and his devilish behavior. His brown eyes lit up with amusement, the laughter transforming his face. A jolt of pleasure shot through her from head to toe, and she grinned back, leaning into him.

"Behave yourself," she chastised him.

"That's impossible when I'm with you." One hand found its way under her dress, and he squeezed her bare backside. The large jacket hid his actions from the camera's view. Sandrine's eyes fluttered closed briefly as she reveled in his demanding touch.

“Don’t you know how to behave?” she moaned, straining against him.

“No way,” he muttered against her throat, his beard scratching her delicate dark skin.

“Besides, you have to be punished for the torment you put me through.” A shiver of excitement ran down her spine.

The ping of the elevator signaled the arrival on his floor.

By the time they entered his room, both were worked into a frenzy. Sandrine tossed her shoulders back to relieve herself of his jacket, leaving it in a heap on the floor. He dragged her to him and she went willingly, tying her arms around his neck and opening her mouth to experience the naked hunger in his kiss.

The intimate contact was his undoing. The shudder that ran through him was the signal his thinly held control had snapped. He unceremoniously pulled the dress down her body and yanked off her thong. He grabbed her willing, naked body and hoisted her up onto the small table in the entryway. In the next instant he powered into her, thrusting deep, as his mouth devoured hers. Her moaning fueled the fire of his lust, and he pounded her, his pants around his ankles, her hands gripping his naked butt. He hooked his hands behind her knees, compelling her legs higher.

When the table collapsed, he somehow managed to keep her from falling by hooking one hand under her bottom. Kicking aside his pants, he hurried to the bedroom and gently laid her on the king bed before stripping off the rest of his clothes and joining her.

Max dipped his head and pulled the nipple of one of her small breasts into his mouth. Her whimpers transformed into moans.

“Max...” she moaned, delirious with pleasure.

He sucked the tasty blackened berry, swirling his tongue against the turgid peak over and over again.

“Max...” she choked out, louder this time, panting. Her nails clawed at his back, her long body arched beneath him.

He thrust into her again, shifting so he could pull the other nipple into the moist cavern of his mouth and rub his palm across the peak of the other. Sandrine trembled, her internal muscles clamping around him. An unbearable crescendo of pleasure spiraled through her as she lifted her hips in time to match each powerful thrust. Her inner muscles convulsed around him as ecstasy tore through her. With a guttural cry, he joined her.

The next morning, Sandrine found it difficult to get out of bed. She was way too comfortable, wrapped in Maxwell’s muscular arms, feeling like she never wanted to leave them. Unfortunately, he had a morning flight back to New York. From there he was headed to Toronto for a photo shoot. Even though he told her she could stay in the bed, she chose to get up when he did.

After she was dressed and freshened up, she found him at the wet bar having a cup of coffee.

His appreciative gaze ran over her. Her skin tingled, as if he’d touched her.

“I liked you better naked,” he said, a flash of desire darkening his brown eyes.

“I can’t catch a taxi naked,” she said.

“Oh, yes, you can,” Maxwell insisted.

They both laughed.

He poured her a cup of coffee.



“When can I see you again?” he asked.

Sandrine shrugged. She took a deep breath, not wanting to ask, but knowing she had to. “What are you suggesting we do? I’m moving permanently to Atlanta in a week. You’ll still be in New York. We’ll be even farther away from each other than we are now.”

Maxwell’s body grew still. “I still want to see you.”

“And how often will that be?” Sandrine asked. She took a sip of the hot black liquid.

Maxwell set his cup on the counter. “We could see each other every day if you moved to New York.”

“Are you suggesting we...move in together?”

“No, although that would be nice. You could just move to New York. I’ll rent you a place, and then we could be together more often. You’re retired from modeling now, so you could come with me when I travel.”

Sandrine followed suit and placed her cup on the counter, too. “You have it all figured out, don’t you?”

“What’s the problem?” His expression became guarded.

“The problem,” Sandrine began, “is that I’m about to open a women’s center. I can’t just walk away from that.”

“I’m not asking you to walk away,” Maxwell said irritably. “You can still open the center, but you don’t have to be there every day. Hire someone to manage it for you.”

Sandrine’s mouth fell open. “Hire someone?” she repeated. “I have to do this. I *have* to be a part of it.”

“Why do you *have* to do this?”

“Because it’s important to me. Isn’t that enough?”

“And what about us?” Maxwell asked tersely.

“We could get together every now again. We could try it long distance for awhile.” That idea was as appealing as eating dry straw on an empty stomach.

Maxwell pushed away from the counter and walked away from her, as if needing to clear his head. “Will that be enough for you?” he demanded harshly. “Because it sure as hell won’t be enough for me.”

“You’re asking me to choose you over...” Sandrine said softly. “I can’t make that decision.”

Silence.

“What if I tell you that I love you?” He still didn’t look at her.

Sandrine’s stomach clenched in agony. She had wanted to hear those words, yet hearing them was bittersweet. Her heart rejoiced, but her brain kept her grounded, refusing to partake in the celebration.

She could barely see Maxwell through the tears when he turned to face her again. “I would tell you that I love you, too, but I can’t move to New York.”

He withdrew from her completely then. His jaw became rigid, and he stood up taller. “I guess we’re just wasting our time,” he said bitterly. “I’ll call you a cab,” he finished, leaving the room.

Watching his retreating back, a single tear escaped and drifted down Sandrine’s right cheek. She brushed it away angrily. She didn’t have time to feel sorry for herself. There was so much work to do. Good work. She had made a promise to herself and her family, and she intended to keep it.

She would eventually get over Maxwell, even though it didn’t seem like it right now.

*Thirty days later...*

Sandrine stood in the kitchen of the two story renovated house that was the women's center. She was dressed casually in jeans, a figure-hugging t-shirt, and tennis shoes. She looked around at the empty walls, smiling to herself. She couldn't wait until the furniture and other furnishings arrived in a couple of days.

The check from Maxwell had been waiting for her when she arrived in Atlanta. He had kept his word, and his generosity would do a lot of good for the women and children who needed it. Sandrine continued stacking cups in the cabinets, trying to keep upbeat and positive. She didn't want to dwell on her melancholy thoughts about Maxwell.

The center was named Josette's House, after her deceased sister. Her older sister had suffered through domestic violence in her marriage, experiencing emotional and physical abuse, but she hadn't left her husband. Sandrine was nineteen and had been modeling for a year when it happened. The middle sister, Lucelle, called her in Paris and told her. Their beloved older sister had been beaten to death. She died of a brain hemorrhage.

Their parents had been inconsolable and the sisters wracked with guilt. They all felt if they could have just done more, they might have been able to save her. Fortunately, Lucelle used her training as a psychologist to help the family, including her nieces, through the experience.

Lucelle would be one of two staff therapists at Josette's House. Sandrine was the director and would teach a class one evening per week on wardrobe and makeup, to help the women rebuild their self-esteem. The rest of the small staff and volunteers would provide a number of services, including childcare services, job training, and legal aid.

"Hey, Sandy," Lucelle called from the front of the house. "It looks like our new neighbors are moving in."

Curious, Sandrine made her way up to the front where her sister was standing, in what would become the reception area. She was staring out the large bay window. Lucelle was four inches shorter than Sandrine, with a more rounded figure.

A large moving van was backing into the driveway across the street. Three weeks ago, the For Sale sign had been taken down after a cash offer was made and closed on the house. All the homes were zoned commercial, so she wondered what type of business their neighbor had. The neighborhood had been depressed for some time, but people had recently begun to move in and take advantage of the rock bottom prices.

Both women watched as a black Range Rover pulled in front of the truck.

“New York plates,” her sister murmured.

A phone rang in one of the back rooms. “Oh, that’s my cell phone,” Lucelle said. “I better get it to see if it’s the girls calling to tell me they’re ready to be picked up from the matinee.”

Sandrine barely heard what her sister said, her eyes riveted on what was taking place across the street. She didn’t realize she was holding her breath until she saw him step his six foot five frame down from the shiny black truck.

*Max!*

Her trembling fingers flew to her mouth. *He’s here.* Her whole body began to shake, tears of happiness filling her eyes.

She rushed out of the house and raced down the small incline. He faced away from her, talking to one of the movers.

The man must have said something to Maxwell, because as Sandrine rushed up the small hill on his property, he turned in her direction. He looked so serious. She stopped abruptly, about twenty feet away. She was suddenly unsure of herself.

“Don’t stop now,” he coaxed, his face breaking into a handsome grin.

Needing no more encouragement, Sandrine ran over to him and leaped into his embrace. He wrapped his muscular arms around her hips, cinching her to him like a magnet.

“You came,” she sobbed into his neck.

“What choice did I have?” he asked in a gruff voice filled with emotion. “You drive a hard bargain, woman.”

Sandrine laughed through the tears.

She placed a kiss against his hair-roughened cheek and then lifted her head so she could look him directly in the face. Staring into his brown eyes, she said, “You understand...this is it for me. Atlanta’s my home now.”

“Yes,” he said, his face solemn. “It’s mine, too, now.”

Her throat hurt too much to speak. Sandrine rested her cheek against his and closed her eyes. A calm came over her body. Finally, her heart and mind were in synch, celebrating the special connection between her and Maxwell.

“I love you,” she finally managed.

“I love you, too.”

The End

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