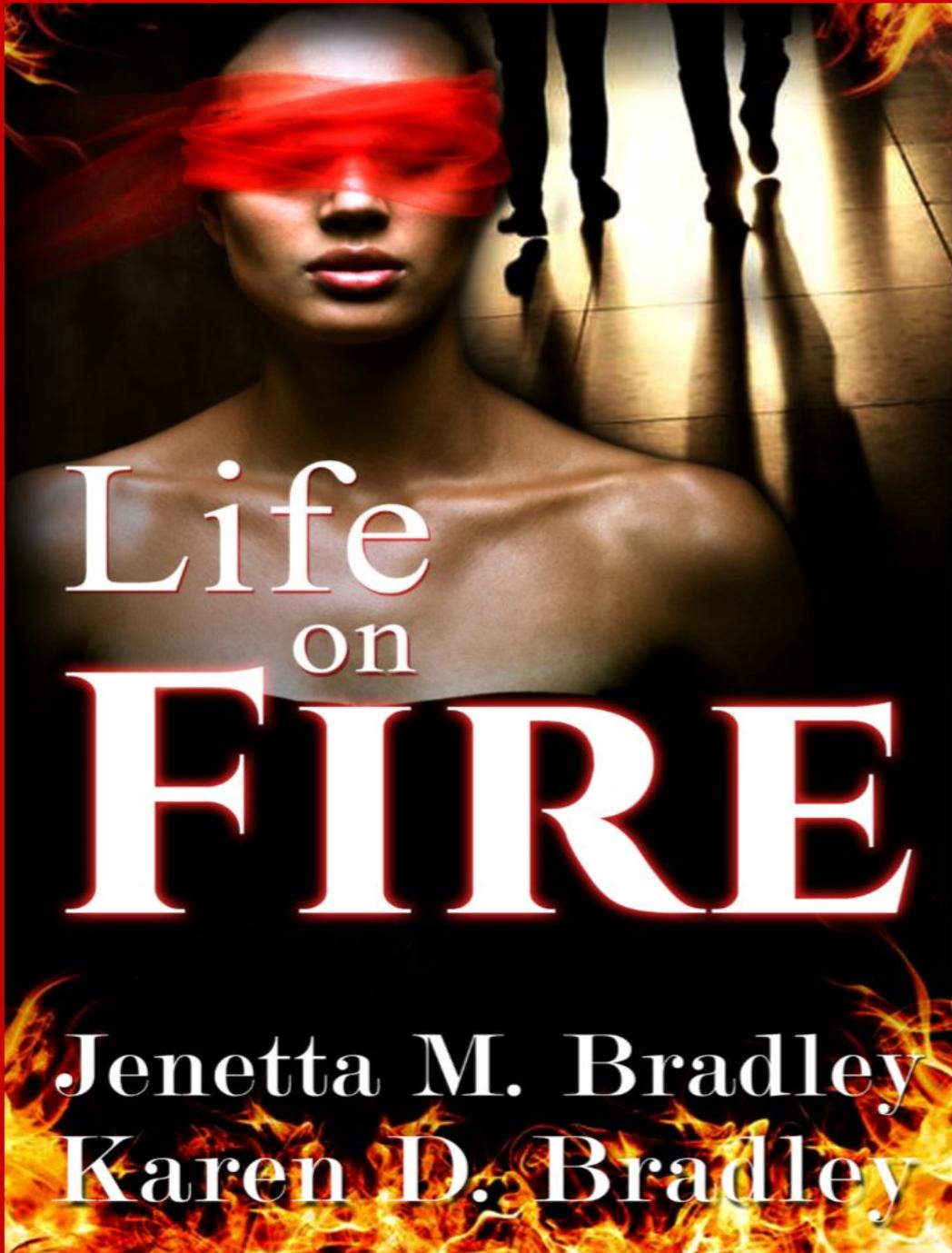


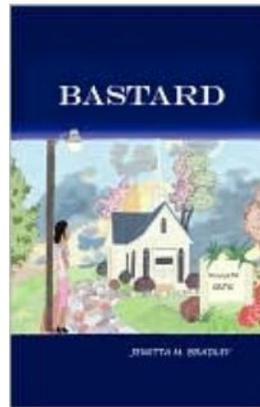
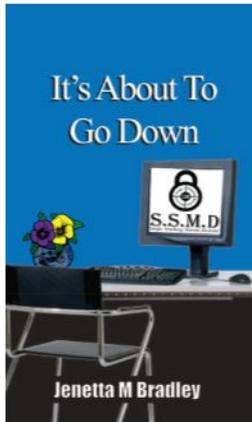
Excerpt of ...



Life
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FIRE

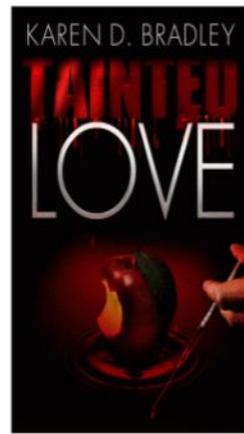
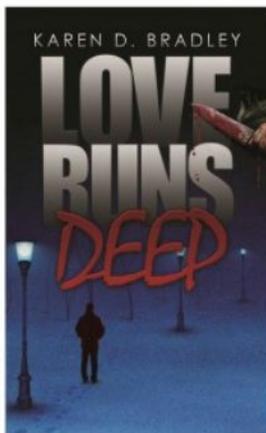
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Life on Fire

Excerpt

Hunter slid his arm around her waist and led her through the crowd to his office. Once behind closed doors, he rounded his desk and picked up the phone to have Carlos get her a cab. "I guess we won't be enjoying each other's company tonight, or shall I say this morning," he commented.

"It never seems to be the right time for us," Brooklyn answered. "It's a rare occasion that we're both single at the same time. Now we are, and ..."

"And your ex pops up, wanting to reconnect. By the lip lock I found you two engaged in, you're clearly not over him." Hunter leaned onto his desk and pulled her to him.

"As if you're over Sophia," Brooklyn whispered, resting her hands on his chest as he wrapped his arm around her back.

He pulled her closer to him. "I should have pulled you back here and swept the desk when you first came through that door tonight. I don't know how we remained friends so long without crossing the line."

Brooklyn linked her arms around his neck. "I've been waiting for your fine behind to be single, but the line to get to you is always too long."

"Hell, I was planning to spend more time with you tonight, but you were rarely without company. Look what happened when I left to wrap up for the evening so I could." Hunter's cell phone buzzed. He took a quick glance at it. "It looks like your cab has arrived."

Brooklyn tipped forward, kissing him on the cheek. "You're too good to me. You know that?"

"I'm surprised Sophia never spilled a drink on you," Hunter teased as he released her.

"It's only because when you met her, I was with Max. I was absolutely no threat to her." Brooklyn stood straight.

"If you haven't gotten back with your ex by tomorrow, roll through the club and we can decide if the time is right for us to find out if there's any real magic behind our attraction." Hunter stood, walking with her out of the office and to the exit.

"That's if I'm not dead to the world tomorrow night from being out until two-thirty in the morning then trying to make it to work by seven a.m." She yawned as she followed him to the coat check. Hunter helped her put on her coat then walked her out to the waiting cab.

"Hey, make sure you text me and let me know you made it safely home." He pulled her into a quick hug before opening the cab door.

"Yes, sir." Brooklyn slid into the cab. Hunter shut the door and waved as the cab pulled off.

A flash of Dante's face saying they were not done entered Brooklyn's mind. She knew that devious expression too well. As she leaned forward to give the cabbie her address, she thought, *Dammit Dante Nines. What are you up to?*

Brooklyn started surfing the Internet on her phone for anything that might keep her mind off of Dante. It wasn't working. She started thinking about one of the times she had reached out to him after they had let too much time pass. If he was with another woman at the time, it made her question whether she was the real reason they never really got it together. Her attempt to focus on his negatives to calm down the excitement that ran through her tonight wasn't working

either. The only thing she could think of was how he created an environment that made her feel protected, empowered, supported, and loved. That was the reason she had a hard time staying mad with him. The natural high she got from being with Dante was something that she couldn't replicate with any other man. Even when he wasn't active in her life, the words he spoke to her over the years inspired, encouraged, and strengthened her during some of the most challenging times.

The cab began slowing down and she noticed that the meter wasn't on. When he pulled over, Brooklyn looked out the window. The area was familiar, but it wasn't her neighborhood.

"Excuse me, sir, I think you must have misheard the address. I need to be taken to—" Her eyes widen as her door flew open.

Dante took a very shocked Brooklyn by her upper arm and wrist, to half-assist, half-pull her out of the cab. "He brought you to the right place."

"What are you thinking? I have to go to work in a couple of hours." Brooklyn wished she had driven tonight.

Dante moved her out of the way, closed the door, and waved off the cab. "While the cabbie waited for you to come out of the club, I made arrangements to drop you off here. It cost me a pretty penny."

"You know this is foolishness. I need to get home and get some sleep before I head to work." She put her hands in her pocket, searching for the business card she'd gotten from the cab driver that took her to the club a few hours earlier.

Dante took her by the shoulders and turned her towards his townhouse. "Sweetie, I know from experience that you can function relatively well on only thirty minutes of sleep."

She put on brakes as soon as she found the card. "What don't you understand about no?" she fussed, taking her phone out to call for another cab.

Dante grabbed her phone out of her hand. "I don't take no for an answer. Give me thirty minutes, Brook, thirty minutes." He put her phone into his pocket then walked to the door, opened it, and waited.

Brooklyn stood there awhile, staring at Dante on the porch. *Don't do it, Brooklyn! You can't be alone with him. You tend to cave every time you are around him.* She looked down the street, debating her options. *Just take the two-block walk to the hotel around the corner, catch a cab there, and take your behind home. You can get another phone tomorrow. Just say it was stolen.*

"Brooklyn," Dante insisted, sounding convinced that he'd have to drag her into the house.

"Fine, thirty minutes." She glanced down at her watch thinking, *You're playing with fire, young lady.*

As she walked slowly up the stairs, Dante watched her like a hawk, as if he was waiting for her to bolt at any second.

She turned her body sideways and tried to skim past him at the door without touching. Dante stepped back, giving her room to get past. After he locked the door, he led her to the living room.

"Would you like some coffee?" Dante asked, motioning for her to sit on the love seat.

"No, thank you." Brooklyn figured she'd be safer sitting in the chair. "How about you say what you need to say so I can get my phone and go?"

Dante sat on the sturdy mahogany coffee table directly in front of her. "Look, Brooklyn, I know I screwed up. I had signed a confidentially agreement and couldn't speak about the project I was working on."

"That's bull crap. I wasn't asking you about the project. I was asking when you'd be back and if you were still interested in pursuing a relationship with me." Brooklyn leaned back in the chair when Dante moved forward.

"I made a mistake by not letting you know the project was taking longer than we originally thought." Dante slipped off the table and onto his knees in front of her, sliding his upper body between her legs. He took her hands. "You know we're good together."

"Dante, we had our chance and you blew it. Twice I might add." She snatched her hands from him.

"Can I at least have a goodbye kiss?" Dante pushed off his knees but only raised himself high enough so that his mouth hovered just over her lips.

Brooklyn put her hand on his chest and pushed him away. "I need to go." She stood as he sat back down on the table. He pulled her to him, pushing her coat open and planting a kiss on her exposed stomach.

"Don't do that! I've been sweating all night." She attempted to step back, but with his hands interlocked behind her, it didn't do her any good. Before she knew it, he went from sitting to lifting her up by her thighs as he rose to his feet. Quickly moving her back against the closest wall, Dante gave her a heated kiss. Their tongues did a seductive tango until she couldn't think straight. *Oh Damn! Here I go again*, she thought as she kissed him back, started grinding into him, and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Brook, baby, you don't know just how much I've missed you. But, I plan in the next few hours to show you." Dante carried her toward the bedroom, kissing her all the way there.

"Ah, I see you brought me home a playmate," chimed a soft, feminine voice from the bed.

Brooklyn immediately broke the kiss and looked at the beautiful, slender Asian chick laying in Dante's bed, wearing nothing but one of his white, button-down shirts.

"Really, Dante? A threesome? Didn't we fall out about this once before? Put me down and give me my damn phone." Brooklyn was kicking herself in the behind for caving in to him once again.

Dante put her down, looking from her, to the woman in his bed, and back to her. "Brook, I—"

"Hey, you two can have at it. You always have a pinch hitter in your back pocket. Let whoever she is"— she glanced down at the woman on the bed—"serve your every need and fantasy." The woman simply rolled to her side and propped herself up on her elbow. "Enjoy," Brooklyn hissed to her. "Dante, I want my phone!" she demanded as she stormed out of the room.

"Brook, give me five minutes and I'll give you your phone." He looked into the living room to see Brooklyn walking to the door.

"Now, Mr. Nines!" Brooklyn stood by the door steaming and snarling at Dante, who stood by the open bedroom door.

Dante looked back at the woman in his shirt. "I'll be right back." He exited the bedroom. Walking over to Brooklyn, he grabbed her phone out of his pocket and slowly handed it to her. "Brook, we'll continue this next time." He tilted his face close to hers as he opened the front door.

"There won't be a next time, Mr. Nines." Brooklyn walked out, quickly trotted down the stairs, and headed for the hotel.

Brooklyn fingers were crossed that there were still a few cabs around the hotel. Glancing back, she could see Dante standing on his steps, watching her.

"Hey, Hunter, I'm sorry," Brooklyn answered after her cell rang and she saw it was him. She tucked the cell between her ear and shoulder as she tightened the belt on her coat.

"I didn't get a text from you. I just wanted to make sure you made it home safely." Hunter's concern reflected in his voice.

"My ex rerouted my cab to his house. It's a long story. I'm heading home now." A couple got out of a cab a few yards away from Brooklyn and she sped walked over to the cab to catch it before someone else did. Glancing back, she saw Dante reenter his building in the distance.

"Do you need a ride?" Hunter asked.

"No, I walked to the hotel near him and got a cab." She gave the cabbie her address. As he pulled off, Brooklyn looked one last time at Dante's place before it faded into the distance.

"Well, I'll stay on the phone with you until you get home."

"I don't know if I want to talk to you." Brooklyn searched for her apartment keys.

"Why?"

"Because in a few hours, you'll be sleeping while I'm working." Brooklyn shook her purse and rummaged through her coat pocket. Her keys were nowhere to be found. "Shit, it's just that kind of day." She exhaled her frustration. "Hunter, I'm so sorry to do this to you but I need you to meet me back at the club." Brooklyn leaned forward to give the driver the new address.

"What happened?" Hunter questioned.

"I think my keys fell out in the club." Brooklyn noticed that the cab driver adjusted his rear view mirror so that her chest was showcased every time he looked in it.

"You're sure you didn't lose them at your friend's place?" Hunter asked in a way that let her know he wasn't pleased that she'd been with her ex.

"I didn't take off my coat. I guess I could have lost them when I sat in the chair." Brooklyn hoped beyond hope that that wasn't the case.

"I'm on my way to the club, but I'll call ahead and see if anyone is still there to let you in if you get there first," Hunter spoke with urgency in his voice.

"Thanks!" Brooklyn replied as she hung up.

"Can't find your keys?" the eavesdropping cabbie asked.

"Yes, but I didn't lose my wallet, so you don't have to worry about getting your money." She fished her wallet out almost as confirmation.

"I wasn't worried. Any person that has the power to get one of the most popular clubs in the city to open back up after hours just so she can retrieve her lost keys has the power to get me paid." The cabbie smiled, taking a quick peek in his rearview mirror.

Brooklyn laughed.

Hunter's ringtone started sounding off. "Hi, what's the verdict?" Brooklyn sat up as they neared the club.

"Everybody's gone. Ask the cabbie if he minds staying till I get there. There's an extra hundred in it for him."

"That's not necessary," Brooklyn insisted, pulling out her wallet.

"Dammit, Brooklyn, ask! I don't want you standing out there by yourself." Hunter kept a lot of security on site when the club was opened. The club was in the Ivy City area of Washington, D.C. but with mostly warehouses around, it was not the best neighborhood for Brooklyn to be waiting in alone. "Brooklyn, ask him."

She leaned forward. "Would you mind terribly waiting until my friend gets here? We can keep the meter running."

"That's fine." The cab pulled in front of the club.

"Thank you. Did you hear that? He'll wait." Brooklyn relaxed back on the seat.

"All right. See you soon." Hunter hung up.

While the cabbie answered a call, Brooklyn began playing with her phone to kill time. A gentle tap on the window alerted them to Hunter's presence.

Hunter shook his head, looking at the black sedan sitting in the distance. Neither Brooklyn nor the cab driver had been paying attention to their surroundings. The cab driver unlocked the doors. Brooklyn pulled the money out of her wallet.

"BK, you know I got this," Hunter insisted, holding the door open for her. The cabbie rolled down the window and stuck his hand out. Hunter shut the door, then slipped some bills in the man's hand.

Smiling from ear-to-ear, the cabbie beamed, "Have a good day," then pulled off.

"Did you see his crazy grin?" Brooklyn asked as they walked towards the club. "How much did you give him?"

"Two hundred dollars." Hunter glanced down at her chest. "But he's probably grinning from staring at your girls."

"Whatever," Brooklyn smirked as she walked towards the coat check.

Hunter caught her by the back of her coat. "Hey, where are you heading?"

"To look for my keys." Brooklyn gave him a confused look.

"How about we check the lost and found before we search the coat room? If one of the attendants saw them, they would be there." In the lost and found room, he grabbed the log. "It looks like you're in luck. A set of keys was logged in. Now let's just hope they're yours."

"Fingers crossed, 'cause if not, we're taking a trip to my ex's house to pick them up." Brooklyn shifted in her four-inch heels.

"Are these yours?" He held up the set of keys.

"Yes." She grabbed them then hugged him.

"Let me grab one more thing, then I'll take you home." He signed out her keys then locked up the room.

Brooklyn sat on a bench near the door. "What size shoes you wear?" Hunter called out from down the hall.

"Nine, why?" Her heels had reached their expiration date. She wanted so badly to take them off, but she knew that if she did, she wouldn't be able to get them back on.

"Take these," he ordered, stepping out and tossing something at her. Brooklyn caught it and the corners of her mouth curled up when she looked down and saw the ballerina slippers in her hand. "Sophia was crazy to let you get away," she responded as she slipped off her heels and slid her aching feet into the soft flats.

"You used to bring your own." Hunter locked the display case. "That's what gave me the idea to stock them here at the club. They're big sellers every night."

Brooklyn stood, grabbing her heels. "My feet thank you." She followed him through a doorway and exclaimed, "Sweet!" when he led her to his black Audi A8. "When did you get this beauty, Mr. Big Shot?"

Hunter laughed. "I've had it for three years. You would have known if you'd ever accepted my offers to hang out outside the club." He unlocked the car, got in, and threw his wallet into the cup holder.

"Ooo la la," Brooklyn moaned, sinking into the soft leather seats and pulling her seatbelt around her.

Hunter started the car then opened the garage door. Brooklyn was amazed as they pulled into the club's parking lot. "Wow, as many times as I parked here I never noticed this door."

"That's the point," Hunter stated as he waited to make sure that the door closed completely. He crept into the street. "So what happened with you and your ex?"

"Let's just say you can't disappear for an extended period then expect me to engage in a threesome." Brooklyn was still mad at herself because the only thing that had kept her from being entangled in the sheets with him was the fact that there was another woman in the bed.

Hunter chuckled. "Well you've always liked bold men."

"There's a difference between bold and disrespectful. He can't bother to call, but he can ask for a threesome. I will not be treated like some street walker or common whore."

"So if I treat you like a special whore it's all right?" Hunter glanced over at her.

She punched him in the arm. "You're stupid."

"In all seriousness, I need to ask you a question." Hunter looked in his rearview mirror again.

"What?" Brooklyn asked with a frown.

"What kind of trouble are you in?" His facial expression turned really serious.

"None. What are you talking about?"

"So you're not going to tell me why there's a black sedan following you?"

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