

An Excerpt of First Husband

The Hallelujah Series

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Prologue

In the heart of Kansas City, Missouri is an upscale, meticulously-maintained area called the Country Club Plaza. At the northeastern-most corner of this area is a new building of luxury condominiums, the least expensive of which sold for just over four-hundred thousand dollars. On the top floor of the Spanish-styled multi-dwelling are four penthouse residences, all priced at over a million dollars. Those residences enjoy the benefit of rooftop access with outdoor living spaces rivaling those seen in magazines like *Architectural Digest* and television shows like *Million Dollar Listing*. The most lavishly and well-appointed space belonged to Lance Elliott, a handsome, successful East Coast native who'd relocated to the Midwest less than a year ago. With the help of one of the country's most sought-after interior decorators he'd transformed a twenty-by-twenty foot concrete deck into a tony Zen garden. Drab cement had been covered with decorative brick, textured fabric and a copper wall fountain. Treated cedar planks created a lush floor for slipped or bare feet. A row of aromatic lemon Cyprus trees anchored the wall opposite the fountain. Repurposed wine casks turned planters held an urban garden of greens, beets, lettuce, peppers, tomatoes and a profusion of herbs. A fire pit, spiritual statues, black wrought-iron tables and ivory-colored furniture were visually appealing, comfortable and inviting. Leaves from a Fernwood maple added a burst of color to the ivory and black theme—dazzling fall foliage in yellow, red, orange, gold and green—and partially shaded an inlaid Jacuzzi where Lance and his partner Malachi conversed and relaxed amid Microsilks micro-bubbles that rejuvenated their skin. Within

the confines of their private paradise, behind large potted plants and beneath a lattice-styled pergola made of Costa Rican bamboo, the men felt free to show their true feelings, to be overly demonstrative with their affection, compensating for the time they were forced to spend apart and for the days and months and years they'd had to hide a love that was becoming more widely accepted universally but in their world was still strictly forbidden.

Malachi Emanuel Clark IV stretched his six foot three inch frame toward the center of the softly bubbling water and allowed his body to float. He turned his head this way and that as previously tense muscles began to loosen under the ministrations of Lance's magical fingers.

Lance smiled, nodded. "That's it, baby. Let go. Relax."

"I had no idea I was so tight. Guess I've been carrying the stress of missing you on my shoulders."

"A stress that could be solved by your moving here."

"Something that will never happen, though nothing would please me more."

Lance eased Malachi away from between his legs so that he could sit beside him on the marbled bench situated underwater, and look into his Hershey lover's mesmerizingly chocolate eyes.

"So what are you going to do? Deny who you really are to satisfy those who insist that you be who you are not? So you can please your family, uphold a legacy that would disown you in a heartbeat if they knew the truth?"

"Babe, do we really need to have this conversation? You already know the answer."

"I can't accept the answer. Not the one that says you're going to live a lie for the rest of your life."

“What other choice do I have? What does it matter the things I desire or how I feel? This decision isn’t about me. It’s bigger than me, than us. The reality is that my family founded one of the largest religious denominations in the United States, one that stretches around the world. I bear the name of that denomination’s founder, as does my grandfather and my dad. Like it or not, I have a responsibility to that legacy and to the millions who believe its doctrine.”

“A doctrine that would cast you into the pit of hell for loving me.”

“And yours wouldn’t?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point, baby? Because this is a conversation we’ve had too times, without resolution. One that can never be resolved the way we want it to be.”

“The point, my love, is that I left a church and a city that I deeply love in order to become who I really am, a successful, God-fearing, God-loving gay Black man. But I can’t be that man, not really, not in the fullest sense, because the partner I want to be that man with is still in the closet, and if I come out it might drag him out, too. I love you more than life, Mellie. I want to shout my love for you from the rooftops. I want to take you out and show you off, and not just at the secret parties where other men like us who the world thinks are heterosexual get the chance to be themselves. I want to stop worrying that the people in church who know about us might turn coat and tell somebody. Not for my sake. My family knows who I am. But for yours. I want to stop being afraid of losing you to a woman you’ll have to marry to become bishop, and a church you believe you have to serve to satisfy the legacy of someone else’s vision.”

Malachi shifted his body, pulled Lance back and into an embrace. Lance nestled his head against Malachi’s shoulder. Malachi kissed his temple, brushed a hand across Lance’s soft, damp curls.

“It’s time like these that I wish I weren’t a part of that legacy, when I want to risk it all to run away from that mega-ministry spotlight.”

“You can’t run from the light when the light is in you.”

“I’m not running from that light,” Malachi clarified. “God and I made peace a long time ago. I’m talking about the spotlight of the supercilious saints, those already watching and judging my every move, those hot watts of condemnation that would scorch my salvation should our secret ever get out to the world.”

“No man can condemn whom God has exalted. It is He who anointed you, and appointed you. Your family was the vehicle but they weren’t the ones driving. God gifted you before you were born, and He who knows all knew you’d be a gay man with a big dick—”

“Lance!” Malachi’s back had rested against a float pillow but at Lance’s unexpected comment straightened so quickly that Lance was upended into the water.

Lance laughed at Malachi’s appalled expression. “Would you prefer the term overly adequate appendage?”

“I’d prefer you not use God and a description of my private parts in the same sentence.”

“God made you, and He made me.” Lance’s voice dropped and his hazel-green eyes darkened as he returned to the bench and slid his hand over wide shoulders and a hard chest and down to where it settled on Malachi’s crotch. “He knew that we’d find each other and fall in love.”

He kissed Malachi’s shoulder, ran a tongue up to and inside his ear.

“He knew that and still we were chosen, predestined. And whom He predestined He also called.”

He kissed Malachi’s perfectly arched brow.

“And whom he called he also justified.”

He kissed the side of Malachi's mouth."

"And whom He justified, he also glorified."

"Why are you quoting me scripture? I know all that."

Lance placed a finger on Malachi's chiseled jaw, gently turned it so that they were eye to eye.

"I'm saying it because I believe it's time we stand in that glory. For too long people have erroneously cursed what God has blessed, none more so than those who claim to know Him, when His image is reflected in two men who love each other. Let's get out from under their curse, baby. Let's live our love, naked and not afraid. Gay and not ashamed. God will be with us, Mellie. I know He will."

"God would be with us but not my family." Malachi turned away, his eyes becoming bright with unshed tears. "That's a loss I don't think I could handle."

Lance forced his face back around as a tear slid across Malachi's cheek. Lance used his thumb to brush it away.

"It's okay, baby."

"No, it isn't. I love you, Lance, now and always. The only time I'm truly alive is when we're together. An ache stays in my heart when we're apart. But I can't do what you're asking, no matter how much I want to live my truth. To come out would kill my father." Malachi paused, and offered a bittersweet smile. "And make my grandfather want to kill me."

Lance chuckled. "You ain't never lied. Senior Bishop would have you tied to the wall and stoned by the Executive Council."

"Ha! Mother weeping at the Hammond B while playing a mournful song."

“Yes, something like, ‘soon I will be done with the trouble of the world’.” Lance sang the line with hearty zeal, his beautiful tenor blessing the air.

Malachi joined in, a perfectly pitched raspy baritone blending perfectly with Lance. “Going home to be with our Lord.”

They finished the song with a dramatic flourish, and laughter.

Lance gave Malachi a quick kiss. “It’s good to be able to laugh in spite of it all.”

Malachi kissed him back, then kept his face close and said, “Laughing is easy when I’m with you.” He brushed his lips against Lance’s and kissed him again. “You make me happy.”

“Not nearly as happy as you make me.”

Their lips touched for a third time, softly, slowly, then with more pressure. Lance swiped his tongue across Malachi’s full lips and when they parted, slid his tongue inside. The kiss deepened, intensified, as did their desire.

Malachi turned in the water to face Lance fully. Lance pulled Malachi’s chest into his own, slid a hand over well-defined muscles and pampered skin to squeeze Malachi’s firm butt. Malachi ground himself against Lance’s burgeoning hardness, pulled at the elastic on Lance’s swim trunks with the need to be flesh to flesh.

“Wait,” Lance panted, his breath hot and wet against Malachi’s ear.

He reached down and pulled off his shorts, tossed them on to the wooden planks surrounding them. Malachi did the same, a measured throw that landed his black boxers on top of Lance’s white ones. The lovers kissed again, touched, fondled, explored each other’s magnificently toned bodies, loving each other with unbridled intensity. Here, safe from the prying eyes of others, they could love freely, endlessly. And they did.

Except they weren’t safe, or alone.

They were being watched.

Photographed.

Within forty-eight hours the pics would be sold, and a love long kept secret would be a tabloid's front page news.