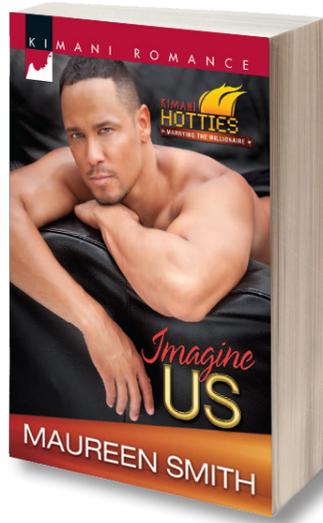


MAUREEN SMITH



AN EXCERPT FROM **IMAGINE US**

“Neveah.”

Neveah Symon turned at the sound of her name. And nearly dropped her empty champagne glass.

The man who’d addressed her was so handsome he took her breath away. His skin was the richly decadent color of caramel. His face was a mesmerizing study in contrasts—the masculinity of heavy eyebrows, granite cheekbones and a square jaw juxtaposed by thick, curly eyelashes and a lush, sensual mouth framed by a trim goatee. His eyes were heavy lidded, and as dark and sinful as melted chocolate. He was tall, with broad shoulders, long legs and a powerful build that was wonderfully accentuated by the cut of his expensive black suit.

As Neveah stared at him, the room began to spin. She swallowed hard and fought to keep her balance, which was a feat considering that she’d just received the biggest shock of her life, coming face to face with the man who’d broken her heart and shattered her dreams thirteen years ago.

Xavier Mayne gazed down at her with deep-set eyes that traced her features beneath the low brim of her hat. She wanted to duck her head, turn away from him. But she couldn't. As her heart drummed wildly, she could only stare at him and wonder what he was doing there. Surely he knew that he was the absolute *last* person on earth she wanted to see.

"I can't believe you're here." His voice was deep, dark and dangerously intoxicating. "It's been a long time."

Not long enough, Neveah wanted to say, but her vocal chords had apparently gone on strike. She couldn't believe that the gorgeous, Versace-clad stranger who stood before her was the same roughneck who'd stolen her heart—along with her virginity—a lifetime ago. His face was leaner, tougher, the angular contours more sharply defined. His silky black hair was cut close to his scalp in lieu of the cornrows he'd once favored. Also gone were the diamond stud earring, the iced-out chain and the platinum three-finger "Rated XXX" ring he'd famously sported. But it wasn't just the absence of bling that intrigued Neveah. The grownup version of Xavier exuded confidence, finesse and a smoldering masculinity that completely robbed her of speech.

After a prolonged silence, Xavier's expression softened with concern. "Are you all right?"

Absolutely not!

"I'm fine." Her voice barely rose above a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

Neveah shivered, her fingers reflexively tightening around the stem of her glass. "How did you know I was back in town?"

"Does it matter?"

“It does to me.”

“Why?” He moved closer, close enough to breach her personal space and set her pulse hammering. She dragged in a shaky breath, then wished she hadn’t as the subtle, spicy notes of his cologne invaded her senses. Even after all the years she’d spent trying to purge him from her system, his presence still wreaked pure, unadulterated havoc on her body.

Heat gathered beneath her skin as his penetrating gaze roamed the length of her before slowly returning to her face. “You look amazing, Neveah,” he said huskily.

She hated the way her heartbeat quickened, hated that she still loved the way her name rolled off his tongue like a lover’s caress.

She swallowed with difficulty. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“Did you really think I would stay away?”

“I *hoped* you would.”

“I couldn’t,” Xavier said.