



*Something
Missing*
Is This Love?

j. nichole

SOMETHING MISSING

A LOVE STORY

IS THIS LOVE?

BOOK 2

J. NICHOLE




not the last page

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CHAPTER

ONE

JOURNEY

“Am I desperate? Is that look on my face one of loneliness?” *What does loneliness look like anyway?* I turned to my reflection in the store window. I saw happiness, joy. A little weary in the eyes because it was bright and early, but still, I looked hopeful. Or so I thought.

“Well, I don’t know about loneliness, but they can tell you haven’t had that post-sex glow since they’ve known you.” Nia could use a cup of coffee. Her enthusiasm waned until she had her morning dose of caffeine.

I defended myself against that claim. “They don’t know me well enough to know what my post-sex glow looks like.”

Nia huffed. “Except that post-sex glow is hard to hide. So, if you haven’t had it in two years.” She yawned into the phone. “They know you’ve been dickless and miserable.”

“And what if it’s by choice?” I joined Nia on the laugh that bellowed over the phone. Walked into the store still laughing and tried to cover my mouth. “At this point, it is a choice.” I cleared my throat. “I’m walking around denying...” I looked over my shoulder. The store didn’t have the buffer of the morning traffic and people shouting as they paced the sidewalks. “*Dick*. It’s not like there aren’t plenty of men out here offering it.” I pulled a water from the refrigerator. “I don’t want it.”

“Are you depressed?” Nia’s cabinets shut in the background. “I mean, what other reason would someone avoid

it?” Her voice lowered. “Unless. Don’t tell me you are in one of *those churches*.”

Nia had this strange obsession with cult documentaries. Sharing all the strange ways *churches* recruited followers. How leaders seemed normal, at first, then slowly dissipated. The followers thinking nothing of it when they ended up broke, naked, and living in a brothel-style environment.

I shouted, “No, Nia.” Then laughed. “I’m not in one of *those churches*.”

Ms. Jabowski behind the counter strained her stare. “You see him, honey?” Her little finger pointed over my shoulder.

The man I didn’t notice behind me grabbed a candy bar from the shelf. A bag of chips wedged between his arm and body. His overflowing belly was nothing to excite me. His wide smile, the missing tooth on full display, had me nowhere near close to naming Ms. Jabowski matchmaker of the year. Her lack of the title didn’t stop her from trying. Every morning, she’d point to a new man, and ask, “What about him?”

“No, Ms. Jabowski.” I shook my head. “Not for me.” I placed my water and granola bar on the counter. “Thanks for trying.”

Nia blurted, “Thanks for trying?” She warned, “Better tell that woman you want nothing to do with the convenience store regulars she’s trying to hook you up with.”

But Ms. Jabowski and Nia had something in common. The two of them were trying their hardest to match me with someone. Anyone. My early morning conversations with Nia were the reason Ms. Jabowski started on her quest to find me a lover in the first place. One morning, she ear hustled her way into my conversation. With her broken English she asked, “You single?” A crinkle in her nose showing her disappointment or disbelief.

And she was persistent. Despite me never once talking to her about searching for a man. She didn’t share her desire to change careers late in life from convenience store worker to

matchmaker extraordinaire. So I was a little confused every time she mentioned a new man.

“What exactly should I tell Ms. Jabowski?” I asked Nia.

“Tell her you aren’t interested.”

I cleared my throat, although I was already out of the store and on my path to the office. “Like this, ‘I’m not interested.’” I paused for her to hear me. Make sure the words permeated her thoughts. “Because that’s what I’m telling you. I’m not interested in anyone right now.” I assured her, “I’m enjoying life. I have a cool group of friends, and I’m doing well at work.” Okay, so I exaggerated the latter part a little. Work was stressful. Late nights and weekends weren’t what I expected when I dreamed of working for a big finance firm. I thought the nine to five would only be those hours. Nobody told me that was a phrase and not a firm schedule. Not until one night I looked at my clock and thought I could leave. Only to realize, I had hours left *on the clock*.

“Friends?” Nia scoffed. That’s all she heard of my declaration. God forbid I find someone to replace her. “Let’s use that term lightly. Those ladies you hang out with on the weekend are only placeholders. They are not your friends. Me, Lauren, Danielle, we are your friends. Okay?” I could picture her face, lips pulled into a thin line. Head cocked to the side. Hand on her hip for good measure.

“Whatever, Nia. The point is I’m happy. I couldn’t be happier, in fact. I’m thoroughly enjoying life.”

Nia smacked her lips. “Except someone who has to do that much convincing...” She was right.

I was doing the most to convince her I was happy. I didn’t want anyone to feel I needed a man to complete me though. That was the me of college. The me of my early twenties. As a fully realized adult, paying my own bills—that me didn’t feel it was necessary. Not exactly. If one came along, cool. But I was no longer scouring the street for the man I needed to meet down the aisle.

“So, no more Whitley on repeat?” There was a ton of skepticism in Nia’s tone.

If I said I didn’t, or if I said I did, either answer would surprise her. “Not on repeat.”

“Great, so about six years too late.” I could hear the stream of water in the background. “Have you completely given up on getting married too? If so, you are about six years too late. You wasted that energy in college. Should have been on my side all along. Single and living—in college. Now that we are out, it’s time to let some man sweep you off your feet.”

In college, Nia hated the fact that I wanted to get married after graduation. She didn’t understand my desire to walk off the stage and down the aisle. Looking back, I didn’t understand it either. My determination did little for me though. It landed me in a relationship but didn’t keep me in it. “You live and you learn.” It was my one life lesson I took from college. The thing I fixated on more than anything taught to me in my four years of classes.

“Okay, I give up,” she shouted, and I knew she was under the stream of her shower. Nia’s morning routine was the soundtrack to my morning commute—banging cabinets, running water, driving into the office with loud horns, and random thoughts. “If you’re happy, I’m happy for you. I won’t tell you about the guy that Liam introduced me to recently.”

She tried to bait me. It never worked. Besides the fact that we lived hours from each other. The men Nia tried to introduce me to were a lot like the men in the convenience store. Not my type.

“Good, because I’m not in my Whitley and Dwayne era anymore.” Like my announcement was something that’d change her life, I said, “It’s now *Sex and the City* season.”

Something hit the ground. “So, you *are* getting dick?”

Good thing I walked through the door of my building. Not standing outside trying to get in. I would have missed a step. Tripped over my feet. Ran into the glass. “I mean...” I corrected my grand announcement. “Minus the sex.”

“So, you are a girl in the city. Got it.” The stream of water turned off and her voice echoed louder. “Then what’s the point in *Sex and the City*?”

“Those four ladies.” I tried to make friendship sound appealing to one of my longest standing friends. “The friendship they have. That’s what I’m on. Building good friendships.”

“You do know guys can be friends too, right?”

In a few steps I’d be at my desk, and Nia would have a full face of makeup ready to storm the door and take on the world. I didn’t have to explain why I wasn’t looking for a friendship with a dude. Didn’t need to tell her that, too, was out of the question. If I had more time, I’d explain how friendships led to more, most of the time, then disappointment settled in afterward. And so went the vicious cycle I was trying to avoid.

“Guys could be friends.” I stood in front of my desk and powered on my computer. Sat the bottle of water beside it and removed my purse from my shoulder. “But that’s a conversation for another time. I’m now at work, and you should be leaving soon.”

She groaned. “You’re right. I better run. Love you, bye.”

“Love you.” I laughed as the phone disconnected.

A blinking notification on my screen made my head roll. Not even ten minutes in the office and there was already an *impromptu* meeting on my calendar. I loved finance. Numbers still excited me. Working at the top financial firm in the city, known across the country, made me proud. Meetings because my manager liked to see our smiling faces bright and early didn’t negate how I felt about working there. It was like a papercut though. The initial sting was enough to make you curse, and the lingering cut irritated your soul. But did it kill me? *Not exactly.*

I wrangled my laptop, picked up my notebook, and stalked into the conference room. Everly, one of my *new friends*, flopped down in the chair beside me.

Under her breath she mumbled, “What if I decided to be late this morning?” The question hypothetical because Everly was never late. I could set my clock based on her routine. If she didn’t strut down the hallway at the same exact time each morning, I’d likely call the cops to find her. She’d have to get kidnapped to do anything but be in the office *on time*.

I scoffed. “Everly...”

“I know. The reason I can’t even fathom it is because of these impromptu meetings that happen every other day. I mean, at this point she might as well make it a standing meeting and stop torturing us with the anxiety.”

I wagged my head and curled my nose. “You have a point there.”

Neither of us could say much about Janice though. As a boss, the woman was hardcore. She played no games. Let everyone in the firm know she had her shit together. And she expected no less from us—her team of minions. But as a woman, outside of the work, she seemed to be a decent lady. Sometimes I thought she was a little too much into Black culture, but I could overlook it on most days. Her randomly dropped R&B or Hip-Hop lyrics during meetings were a little cringey.

As our team filled the room, Janice stepped to the front. Her head held high as she said, “Sorry for the last-minute meeting.” The same words she said every impromptu meeting she made us attend. “I want to ensure everyone knows their tasks for the day. I made a few adjustments to reports, and I need them reviewed before final delivery tomorrow.”

She pointed toward me. “Journey, mind being the final set of eyes?”

My soul left my body. Drifted down the hall, and out the building for a minute before it returned. When it did I heard Everly talking under her breath. Before I could reply, I thought of all the excuses I could give Janice. Something that would keep me from being the last person in the office that day. Reasons why I’d need to run home.

I didn't have dinner reservations with my husband. Without kids, I couldn't say I needed to stall in the pickup line or have dinner on the table for them. Thank God, I didn't have any medical emergencies that required my presence at an appointment.

"It'd be great if you could." Janice's stare warmed my forehead. "If not..."

Telling her I wanted to go home and binge a show. Or would rather make it to the bar with Everly and Dawn before happy hour ended wouldn't suffice. Neither felt worthy of mentioning. So, I exhumed my soul and said, "Sure, I'll do it."

"Great," Janice beamed, "Your efforts are never unnoticed."

By unnoticed, she meant mentioned during performance reviews. Only rewarded by a minimal raise. The bonus wasn't like my sister's, nothing that warranted a spending spree.

Still, I was in Neveah City. I had amazing friends. And I was living the life. Even if my work schedule bent beyond disrespectful on most days. "Thanks," I mumbled.

On our way from the conference room, Everly mocked, "Your efforts are never unnoticed." She leaned against my cubicle wall. "She can't be serious with that."

"As a heart attack." I smirked. "I was starting to think single in the city was better than married with children. These late nights make me wish I had something to run home to. Something that would make her think twice about asking me to stay." I noted, "You know, the married folks on our team never stay late."

"Is this..." Everly leaned closer to me and stared into my eyes. "You accepting the fact that you can have a man in your life?" Everly, like everyone else around me, was team *find a man*. Her efforts of matchmaking were as relentless as Ms. Jabowski and Nia's.

I shook my head. "I didn't say all that. Exactly."

"But you thought about having a fine ass man to come home to. Someone who'd welcome you with a kiss, and rock

you to bed? Someone waiting on you so you could tell Janice, 'Sorry, I have to get home.'"

A kiss. The last one happened the day me and Chaz accepted our fate. The passionate one he left me with before telling me to go chase my dreams. It was a kiss of all kisses. Still reigned supreme in my book. It beat out my first kiss. Well, the first real kiss. The one that wasn't crowded with slobber and awkward head bumps. It was the kiss of all kisses, and in a way, I kinda missed those.

"Whoa." Everly blinked. "Wherever you went, bring me with you."

I tapped the password into my laptop and avoided her gaze. "What are you talking about?"

"That look." Her finger wagged near my face. "That was a look like you imagined that man that could be at home." She crossed her arms over her chest. "So, tell me, who'd you see?"

Everly knew all about Chaz. Our beautiful beginning and fateful end. So, when I uttered, "The same man who comes to mind when I think of anything passionate."

"Michael B. Jordan?" She fanned her face. "That man is sexy. I'd do anything to have him waiting at the house for me."

I plucked my tongue. "No." With my head cocked to the side. "But I could imagine that." We hushed our laughter to prevent a warning from our coworkers. "It was Chaz..."

"If a memory can do all that, seems like he shouldn't be an ex." She wriggled her brows. "Or you desperately need someone to replace those memories."

"I'll take the second option for \$200, Alex." *It was time for me to replace old memories. For me to stop avoiding the emptiness left by what would never be.* "Yeah, the second option."

CHAPTER

TWO

LUKE

“Do I look like a tourist?” I leaned against the bar with a firm smirk on my face. If I were on vacation, in another city, I’d be open to doing the advertised events. But as a longtime native of Neveah City, I wasn’t the least bit interested. “No, I don’t want to go to that event in the park.”

Xavier gulped his beer as if he could quench his thirst. Instead of a satisfied grin, it left him side-eyeing the bottle. “This shit is terrible.” There wasn’t any logical reason for us to be in the bar again. Their happy hour specials were enticing, but nothing better than any other bar in the city.

“Man,” Jordan shoved my shoulder, “we are missing out. I hear the ladies love it. This is one of the last weekends. We need to be out there.”

Xavier shook his head before it hung. “You can’t use that as a selling point with this guy.”

I chuckled. “He’s right.” Ladies weren’t any more appealing than the happy hour specials and poorly crafted beers. “You know I’m not looking for anyone.”

Explaining that I wasn’t trying to fuck for fun was like telling Xavier and Jordan I didn’t need air to breathe. To them, the two were synonymous. Fucking and breathing. It wasn’t something you could live without. For me, it was. I had some shit I needed to accomplish, and with fucking on the brain, goals didn’t stand a chance.

“Who said you need to be looking for someone? Nobody is asking you to settle down. To place yourself under lock and key. Be chained to a woman for the rest of your years.” Jordan was passionate about it. “All we are saying is join us.”

“I’m good.” I tilted the bottle up and said, “But if one of you could figure out who crafts this beer, I’d consider it a solid exchange.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “What kind of deal is that?” He tipped his bottle up to his lips but fell short of a full sip. “And why would you want to know who it is anyway? This shit is terrible.” He turned to the bartender. “Can I get something not on special? Clearly the deals only include this nasty shit.”

Jordan’s eyes stretched before he burst into laughter. When he finally recovered he asked, “Why do you want to know who crafted it anyway? You plan on being as disrespectful as this man right here?” He tapped Xavier’s shoulder. “Straight up told the bartender the beer was trash.”

“I mean.” Xavier hunched his shoulders. “Unless,” he turned to her, “did you craft this beer?” He cringed. “I want the answer to be yes, but so badly no at the same damn time.”

The bartender, who looked like she was holding a curse under her tongue and a regret in her heart, snickered. “Nope. Not my handy creation. I’m forced to sell it and smile though.”

“See.” Xavier’s chest poked out. “You aren’t offended then, right?”

She shook her head. “What can I get for you?”

He ordered a Henny and Coke, then asked her, “Do you know who is crafting it? Might as well kill two birds with one stone.”

“Yup. Some man outside the city who clearly doesn’t have a set of taste testers on hand.” She laughed at her own joke. “Why?”

Xavier and Jordan’s eyes were on me. That’s when I took the opportunity to flex my idea. “Not only is the beer subpar,” obviously my final pitch wouldn’t offend the creator, “but this logo is trash. The branding could use a makeover.”

“And?” The bartender passed Xavier his drink. “Do you have a better idea?”

I nodded. “I do. And I’d be willing to give it to him—”

“For a small fee,” Jordan blurted. “If you are signing up to put your touch on this, you need to get paid. Can’t be out here associating your work with every little thing.”

The bartender lost interest in our back and forth and left us for another customer a few seats down.

“I know you want to start this agency and everything, but be careful who you associate your work with. Not too many people will care that the logo snaps if the beer sucks.” Jordan had a point.

Jordan boasted, “So, with that said, is it still a deal? A must for you to hit that event this weekend? We did our part. Seems like you need to follow through on yours.”

The two stood side-by-side. Optimism dripping from their faces. It all drained when I twisted my lips. “I’ll think about it.”

Xavier shouted, “Always on that bull, man.” Someone took his ball and told him he had to exit the court. He could no longer play the one sport he thought he was decent in. He had to go home and knit with his grandma or some shit. That’s how disappointed he looked.

“At least it’s not a hardcore no.” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder and gave them another tidbit of news they’d hate me for. “I better get out of here. Early start in the morning.” A yawn left my mouth on cue, and I stretched my arms over my head for good measure.

Jordan wasn’t letting me get away that easy. He declared, “Early morning?” Then told the same old lie, “You hardly have a job. What do you mean early morning?”

Jordan thought he was Martin and I was Tommy. But unlike Tommy, I had a job. It paid a decent salary and gave me a little freedom to come and go as I pleased. I wasn’t like the two of them. I didn’t have to rock a suit and tie or sit in a cubicle eight hours a day.

“I have to go into the office tomorrow.” I admitted, “I do it every once in a while, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hit us up later and tell us how you aren’t coming through to the event.” Xavier gripped my hand and pulled me into his chest. “We’ll catch you later.”

The walk from the bar to my apartment didn’t take long. It was one of the only reasons we didn’t complain about the happy hour specials too often. The three of us had easy access to the bar and a quick walk home if we had too much to drink.

It would be helpful in the event I needed to go to bed. If I worried about an early morning. I didn’t. I wanted to get in some design time. When I wasn’t in the office, I spent my time crafting improvements to existing designs. Imagining new ones for businesses that only existed in my mind.

I didn’t mind that I dreamed more and got paid less. I knew one day it’d all come full circle. All I had to do was find the right set of clients; keep networking; demonstrate my work; continue creating.

That’s what I hoped anyway. Soon enough I’d get my break.

The vibrating phone brought me out of the fine lines and curved corners of another beer logo. “Hello?” I said with the phone wedged between my ear and shoulder.

“Didn’t know if I’d catch you.” My mom’s voice was warm but had a touch of sarcasm thrown in there.

“Catch me, or if I’d answer?” I laughed because on some days, I didn’t mind letting her calls go to voicemail. Mama had a limit on how often we could talk. Most days she hounded me about what I needed to do with my life. Others she reminded me about how I failed. Hardly did she ever call to check on me. See if I had a good day.

“The latter.” She snickered. “But I’m glad you did. Your aunt hasn’t had the same amount of luck with you.”

I could have asked her to clarify, claim I wasn’t ignoring calls. But she’d call me on my shit if I lied. So, I didn’t. I acted

surprised instead. “She okay?” Like anything Mama told me would be a shock. It wouldn’t. My aunt never wanted much.

“I’m not sure what she wanted. Said she’s been trying to call you for a couple of weeks. Had something to share with you.”

“Like?” I hoped they played telephone, and Mama was calling to give me the details. I didn’t need her to tell me what the missed calls already did.

“For more information, you should answer the phone.” Mama’s lips curled up into her little smirk. The one she rocked when she said *I told you so* without *telling us so*. “Can it be that bad?”

Could it? “You asking me?”

At least me and Mama had one thing in common. We couldn’t take my aunt’s personality lightly. She came full force with everything she did. All or nothing didn’t stand a chance against her.

Mama’s laugh made my own chest rumble a little more. “You’re right. No telling why she’s trying to reach you.”

Then the laughter stopped. It returned to the bottle, tightly capped, and forbidden to see the light of day. “She does have an impressive client list though.”

Something I knew intimately. I scoured her firm’s website. Trying to find a business I could assist. Pitched her on the idea a few times. Each time she’d tell me, “I don’t know, Luke, I’ll talk to them and see what they say. But you know, they aren’t coming to me for creative recommendations.”

“I know. I’ll return her calls.” In case she finally got my name in edgewise with one of them. “Never know what miracles could happen.”

“Unless you’ve given up on your dream to start your own business.” At any moment she could unhinge that laughter. Lighten up the mood. Discuss anything that wasn’t a point of contention between us. Anything. Not the one thing that demonstrated her doubt for my abilities. Second-guessed my motivation.

With a loud, exaggerated sigh, I said, “Of course, I haven’t given up on my dreams. It’s full speed ahead until I reach them.”

“Hmmm...” She was still doubtful. “Okay. Make sure you call her then. Because I can’t wait to brag about my baby and his design agency.” If the clouds were the only place she could see my dream we’d never be on the same page.

“I’m not going to mention anything about it until it becomes a reality.” I wanted to suggest the same for her, but I wouldn’t be that naive. There was no way she would live and let live. She had to pound that thing to the ground till it was limping on one leg.

“In that case, Luke, I hope to hear about it sooner than later.” Then there was a long pause. When I was a kid, me and my sisters used to think Mama fell asleep mid-conversation. But she’d snap back with something totally relevant, squashing our suspicions. “You have so much potential. I want to see you succeed.”

Because working at a company, collecting a sizable paycheck twice a month didn’t equate to success. *I guess.* “Yeah, I know.” And I agreed, “I want it for me too. You have no idea.”

CHAPTER

THREE

JOURNEY

There was something about the park that reminded me of the courtyard on campus. Like campus, the park was the center of everything. In a way, it made Neveah City familiar. Sort of a home away from home. Welcomed me with open arms, and every chance I got to be in the park, I was there.

Most of the time I was there alone. I watched people running along the sidewalk, gazed at the lake and the ducks waddling along. But when the park had festivals, local vendor exhibitions, I made it a point to drag Everly and Dawn along too.

The three of us found an oversized tree with plenty of branches to block the sun. We laid out a plaid blanket, and Dawn splayed out her latest charcuterie board creation. Something with *table crackers*, cheeses I couldn't pronounce, and fresh fruit. She included a selection of salami too. The last time Everly complained the board only teased her appetite.

"Now this is what I'm talking about." Everly grabbed a slice of meat and dangled it in front of her mouth. "Give me the *meat*." She winked in my direction.

A couple walked past, hand-in-hand, and I smiled. I couldn't count how many times I stared out my apartment window and saw something similar. My unobstructed view of the park gave me an extra dose of the comforting greenery, of the cute couples, of the love shared in the middle of the city.

“That could be you.” Dawn nodded toward the couple. “Out here with a little boo, strolling around with matching outfits.”

Everly groaned. “Can we nix the matching outfits? We aren’t old and gray yet. Haven’t had kids. Why do we need matching outfits? To let everyone know we are inseparable? Connected at the hip?”

Dawn raised her hands in front of her. “Tell us how you really feel about their matching polos then.”

Laughter filled our little corner of the park. Nia was right, the two couldn’t replace my friends from college. But they were doing their damndest to maintain that second spot.

“I don’t think I’d ever wear matching outfits.” The couple made it to the edge of the lake. “My parents never even made it to that stage.” I winced. “Think that’s why they divorced?” I questioned, “Think that’s the secret to long marriages?”

Dawn arranged and re-arranged the cheese that Everly moved. “If that was the secret to long marriage, it’s a well-kept secret. How many marriages end in divorce?”

“Exactly. It’s a pointless exercise.” Everly stood firm on her judgment. “But holding hands, now that is something you should consider. Me and Jay come out here occasionally to talk. Hold hands. Kiss on the benches like kids under a watchful eye and no place to hide.”

“Us too.” Dawn stared off into the distance. “Ten out of ten, I do recommend.” Then she turned toward me and said, “I hear our girl has persuaded you into letting love in.”

I shot a glance at Everly. Her head focused on the squares of the blanket. Traced the black before finding the white lines.

“I did what?” At no point did I ever agree to let love in. Love could swirl around. Could settle in beside me. But inside? I wasn’t sure I was ready for that invasion. That temporary arrangement that could lead to future heartbreak. Love was beautiful when it was beautiful, and ugly as hell on its worst day. “I don’t recall saying that.”

Dawn and Everly exchanged a look before Dawn busied herself with her board again, and Everly picked the corner of the blanket. I knew what they were doing. They weren't going to press. The subject would linger between us for me to contemplate. Alone. Come to a conclusion and offer my own monologue revealing how I felt about the situation. I knew the trick well. But fell for it every single time.

“What’s the point?” I asked. “A charming man convinces me he is better than a good Wi-Fi signal, and I allow myself to like him. To get to know him. Learn his accomplishments, the personality traits that make him admirable. Then,” I swung my hand, “Whoosh, all the bad shit comes out. And I have to list out the pros and the cons to determine which weighs heavier.” Smacking my lips, I say, “It’s the cons. The cons are always heavier. Because why should I settle for the things he doesn’t offer? The things that don’t make me tingle on the inside?”

Dawn looked mortified, and Everly couldn’t stop blinking.

As I caught my breath I shook my head. “No. Love isn’t welcome here right now.” I grabbed a table cracker, stacked it with salami, a little slice of cheese, and took in a mouthful.

Everly challenged, as she usually does. “How will you get to that person who will be everything you want him to be if you don’t go through a few who aren’t anything you need? I thought we were choosing the second option.” She reminded me, “Replacing memories since we weren’t going back to the ex. Because going back to the ex is worse than starting something new. Right?” She shoved my thigh.

If there were only two options, of course, I’d travel the path with the least resistance. “You could have asked if I wanted to swim with sharks or walk through the Everglades. Options were similar.” I chewed the side of my mouth.

Dawn popped a bottle of sparkling water open. Pouring into both of our glasses before her own, her movements were slow, methodical. Until she blurted, “Okay, the third option. Stay single—”

I pointed. “Yes.” With a growing smile I said, “That’s the option I choose.” I explained, “I moved here with a broken

heart and big dreams. The broken heart didn't stop me from eventually enjoying the city. From finding good friends." I navigated a stare between the two of them. "Until this isn't fun anymore, I'll continue. Single in the city." My head lifted and shoulders stiffened. The glass of water at my lips as I said, "This works for me."

"Okay." A look of defeat on Dawn's face. "Idris and I are going out tonight." She started to describe their night out. "He plans the best dates. He's been trying to get us into this restaurant for months. Finally got reservations. It's famous for their five-course meals..."

She continued, and the idea of dating in the city danced in my mind. Dating in college was fun but limited. Me and Chaz weren't doing five-course meals, bottles of wine, shows. Not like Hill Mount had shows we could go to if we wanted, but still, it wasn't happening.

"Idris has this friend..." I don't know how Dawn transitioned from describing the lavish date with her boyfriend to *his friend*. "Every time he's over I tell him I have a homegirl."

Everly said, "If birds of a feather is true," she stares at me, "if I were single I'd at least want to meet him."

Any conversations of matchmaking had to get cut off at the hip. When I visited Lauren she *surprised me* with one of her boyfriend's friends. Because single people can't be single if their friends aren't. It's the rule in some book I must have skipped reading. My first night in town, I expected it would be the two of us catching up. It wasn't. It was a double date. A guy she must not have given much attention to because he was far from anyone I'd date. In fact, I couldn't figure out how him and her boyfriend were friends. His monotone voice and disinterest in anything we discussed at the table had me questioning if Lauren was pulling a prank. But afterward, her boyfriend assured me they'd been friends since grade school.

"Too bad you aren't single, Everly." I pointed to the vendors across from us. "Are we ready to browse?"

The two of them stood from the blanket, shook off their shorts, and said, “Might as well since we aren’t getting far with you.” Dawn held her hand out for me to take. “And I have to leave soon to get ready for my date.”

Without a man, and my friends occupied with theirs, I’d be home alone on a Saturday night. Nothing new, but it’d take someone torturing me before I shared it wasn’t the way I’d want to spend my weekend. I’d have a report of shows I binged and take-out I discovered to share with them on Monday morning.

Everly fingered a pair of earrings. “Let me guess, you’ll be home binging a show tonight?”

I hunched my shoulder. “Likely. Or reading a book.” I hadn’t done that in some time. After college, it was like a silent vow I took with myself—no books. But the longer I was out of the classroom, I realized a fictional book would be nothing like staring down the pages of a textbook. Cramming for a test couldn’t compare to leisurely reading.

Dawn huffed. “These are the best years of your life.”

If I closed my eyes I could have imagined Monroe. My sister took on a mission to convince me my twenties weren’t living up to their potential. Every chance she had she’d tell me how I was failing myself. How I deserved more than the many nights I stayed at home.

We walked from vendor to vendor, stopping to shuffle through vintage t-shirts. With a shirt pulled to her neck, Dawn said, “There is so much potential in the city.”

My eyes were set on the shirt in front of her. “I know. I’d never be able to find something like this back home, or in Hill Mount.”

Dawn chuckled. “Not this.” She pointed across from us. “Them.”

A group of men stood in front of a food truck. I couldn’t deny the options were plenty. And the one with his biceps on full display had me admiring every curve of his muscles, tracing the lines to his neck, and landing on his dimpled smile.

“They are sexy now.” When they noticed us, I looked away. Fidgeted with the rack of hangers in front of me.

Everly’s loud gasp followed by quieted whispers and bulging eyes caught me off guard.

“What?” I shot a look her way before focusing on the shirts again.

“You.” She stood beside me. “This little awkward schoolgirl bashfulness. No ma’am. If you are going to own being single, you have to do it with complete confidence. You need to be able to stare a man down, acknowledge he’s fine, but still decide you don’t want to fuck him. You’re over here looking like you’d melt on the first touch.”

“There’s no problem with melting.” Dawn crowded my other side. “As long as you have someone like him ready to soak you in.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled. “I’m not melting,” I lied. If it weren’t for the shirt clenched within my grasp I’d be a pool of nothing on the ground beneath me. It was the only flaw in my Single in the City plan. There weren’t enough batteries in Neveah to ease the sexual tension that sometimes built up.

There was only one way to soothe that ache. And it required throwing the entire plan away.

CHAPTER

FOUR

LUKE

The basketball court on a Saturday afternoon was like a scene from *White Men Can't Jump*. Teams lined the sidelines waiting for their turn to knock off the winning team. And the winning team was always ours.

Looking at me, Xavier, and Jordan, someone would think we played college ball at the least. With a name like Jordan, they thought he should have done more than that. Simply the name association made for interesting banter on the court. But every time, he shut down the doubters who didn't believe he could live up to the hype.

Me, with a name like Luke, guys didn't know what to expect. They didn't see me coming until I tossed up the first three. Then the others that followed left them in total disbelief.

Between games, I stood on the sidelines listening to the guys from weeks prior talk shit about our game. Tell us someone was going to knock us off. I laughed and shook my head. It wasn't about to happen. They talked a big game, but I heard enough. I stared off into the distance, watched cars driving, and birds flying. The movement inspired designs and the colors added clarity.

"That's you?" Xavier pointed to my bag. "Your phone."

I shuffled through the bag until I grabbed my phone. Janice's name on the screen made me want to stuff it back into the pocket. Zip it up and act like I hadn't heard it ringing in the first place. But I answered, "Janice—"

“Luke,” her voice dragged, “I’ve been trying to reach you. If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were avoiding me on purpose.”

I could have stated the obvious, but I would never hear the end of it. “Aunt Janice, why’d I do that?” I held the laughter bubbling in my chest.

She ignored my question and stated, “I have something you’ll love.” Her spot on QVC was secure if she wanted it.

The one thing she had, something I’d love, would be worth it. “A client who needs a graphic designer?” I asked as my heartbeat mimicked its beat on the court—quick and pounding hard.

“Not exactly.”

I wish I could have changed the channel. The deal was a non-starter. I didn’t need to listen to her spiel about what ‘the low-low price of four \$29 payments’ included. Whatever she was selling, I wasn’t interested. I kept my response simple though. “If it’s not a client, Aunt Janice, I’m good.” I could have asked why she’d been stalking my phone. Especially if it’s not a client. What the hell could she want? The woman was a lot. Too much most of the time.

“I’ve been talking to your mom.”

The guys were lining up to take the court again, and I needed Janice to get on with whatever it was she needed to say.

“I need to get on the court, Aunt Janice.” I started moving the phone from my ear. “I’ll call you—”

“Wait,” she shouted. “I know it’ll be forever before I talk to you again. It’s a woman. Someone I want you to meet. You are so focused on your career. You need to balance that out a little.”

The exasperated breath released was loud. Louder than the passing cars and the guys talking shit beside me. Loud enough for Aunt Janice to hear loud and clear. “I’m good.”

“Luke, tell me you’re open to it and I can coordinate a meeting. Only once. After one date, if you two aren’t up for it, you don’t have to worry about me trying ever again.”

Now that was worth the low price of \$29 for the next four months. “Okay. If that’s all I have to do so you’ll forget about it forever.” I emphasized forever because that’s how long I wanted her to leave it alone. The soonest I’d want to hear anything else about her hooking me up with one of her *little friends* was never. “Do what you need to do.”

Instead of a firm reply, I heard clapping in the background. Like I’d won the prize of the day and my purchase included a freebie. “I’ll call you with details later.” Her bubbly smile was noticeable over the phone.

I hung up and rushed back to the court. Each dribble up the pavement, I imagined what type of woman Janice could introduce me to. Anyone like her would be a hard pass. Janice’s unique personality didn’t leave an appetite for wanting to know much about her. I don’t know how she managed to wrangle my uncle. The two couldn’t be further from the same person. I know opposites attract and all that jazz, but at some point they have to repel.

Xavier threw the ball to me, and I tossed it into the basket. Even with Janice and all her crazy tactics on my mind I still managed to pull a lead on the other team. There wasn’t much shit talking going on when we left the court victorious again. Nobody had anything to say about *fake* Jordan.

The only way to celebrate a win had to be with wings and drinks. We headed to the lounge and sat at the bar. With a beer in front of me, I said, “Man, my aunt is trying to hook me up with someone.”

Xavier and Jordan both met Janice. They didn’t know much about her, but the few minutes they spent with her was enough.

“I can only imagine all the ways this can go wrong,” I said with a huff.

“But you don’t want to hang with us to meet someone. You want *her* to hook you up?” Xavier used his swinging beer to emphasize, “Now you know we could do better than her on a bad day.”

“If the woman is anything like her, it’ll be a short introduction. Done before it starts. It won’t last long then I can ignore anyone else she tries to introduce me to. Better yet, I told her she can’t mention anyone else again.”

“Or.” Jordan raised his hand. “What if she ends up introducing you to the love of your life?”

I toyed with the words on my tongue. Tried to imagine them leaving my mouth. Announcing them to the world. I wagged my head. “Naw.” I reminded them, “Nothing has changed. But you know my aunt. She’s persistent.”

“Probably how she wore your uncle down.” Xavier had a look of disgust on his face. “Poor man didn’t stand a chance.”

Jordan had a look of satisfaction on his face when he said, “And you think whoever this girl she introduces you to hasn’t learned a lesson or two from Janice?” His fingers wipe the condensation from his bottle.

“God, I hope not.” Janice teaching a class on how to snag a guy would make her a pretty penny. The type of salesperson Janice was, she could sell a class on icemaking and fill her bank. “Either way. I know what I want. And it’s not a relationship. Not now. I can circle back after I start this company.”

I expected the skepticism in Jordan’s eyes. Not Xavier’s though. I didn’t expect his doubt to roll from him and permeate the air between us. I thought he’d agree.

“Man,” Xavier started with a sigh, “I don’t know about all that. What if this company situation takes ten more years, or more?”

I hunched my shoulders. “Can’t rush—”

“Please don’t say perfection.” Jordan pushed off his seat. “Because on that note, my ass needs to get home. Shower and

get ready for a night out.” He hit Xavier’s shoulder. “We got plans tonight.”

Xavier stood behind him and took the rest of his beer to the head. “Let us know how this all goes with the girl though.” He joked, “I’ll be waiting on the day you call me and tell me she has you wrapped around her finger.”

Jordan piled on, “Talking about I’m *in love*.”

“Love.” I chuckled. “Don’t hold your breath.” The last time I said those words to a woman...well, shit. I never said those words to a woman. I’d gotten kinda close with one of my exes. She almost got me. Words were on the tip of my tongue, but then an argument broke out about how she wanted more of my time. Ironic because I spent the whole day with her. I wanted nothing to do with her dramatics. So, the words stayed tucked away.

I held my beer to my mouth and declared, “Nope. You won’t get me, Janice.” *Or Janice’s protégé.*

CHAPTER

FIVE

JOURNEY

It took three computer screens. Three screens of spreadsheets for me to compare the numbers. To ensure we entered everything properly, and the math added up. I couldn't afford to make a single mistake, but the more I stared at the lines, the more they started to cross. Not only did my eyes pulse, but a lingering pain also inched up my neck and throbbed at the base of my skull.

I was already two hours beyond the *nine to five*, and ready to call it a day. But one failed line, one missed number, one incorrect formula, and all the work dedicated to the project would be in vain. So, I hung my head and decided a two-minute break was all I could afford.

My head dipped closer to the desk until finally it rested on the edge. Not in a position that made a nap conducive though. I couldn't fall asleep. A taste of slumber would pull me into a depth I'd be unable to return from.

"Journey, how's it going?" God knew I needed to get jolted from the edge of sleep. He sent the highest-pitched voice imaginable to wake me.

"Janice." I eased my head up, blinked a few times, then stared at her. "Hey."

"The project starting to get to you?" The wide smile didn't offer any empathy. She was beyond her days of pouring over numbers, and late nights because she was in the thick of a

project. “Hopefully it’s almost over.” The statement was more for her benefit than mine.

Still, I assured her, “Almost done. Doing my last check now. Then I’ll be able to submit the reports.” I shared, “I love running projections and reconciling. But staring at the screen, going line by line, it’s a little daunting.”

“It is.” She leaned against my desk. “But you are the perfect person for the task. You are methodical and detail oriented.” Her voice lowered, “There are some who are great at numbers. Others who hands-down never fail on their projections. But none of them could find the slightest error in a calculation like you can.”

Okay, Janice wasn’t all that bad. She wasn’t the manager from the pit of hell. “Thanks.” The smile on my face didn’t indicate how I felt about her compliment though. It couldn’t even hold up my cheeks. Before fully forming, it left.

Her fingers traced the roses on my desk. The ones I insisted on buying every week to decorate my cubicle. The small space couldn’t hold much, but the flowers were enough to brighten most days. Well, when they weren’t wilting and in need of the bright sun. “When you get out of here, do you have someone at home waiting on you?”

Her voice trailed off. Almost as if her question was inappropriate. Or irrelevant to the topic at hand. Like my response would be a distraction preventing me from leaving the office. And the importance of me leaving was more important than *who* I was going home to.

I matched her enthusiasm when I responded, “Nope. Nobody at home.” But then I remembered my tactic, I needed someone at home so the late nights could end. So somebody in my firm would feel bad about assigning me tasks that would take longer than the workday. “I mean, not exactly.”

Janice’s eyes flickered to mine. “Does that mean you aren’t single?”

When my mama stared at me the same way, I couldn’t tell a lie. I divulged every secret, even the ones she didn’t ask

about. I spilled all the tea without withholding a sip for myself. “I’m single.” Then I couldn’t explain my previous statement and relied on my tiredness to save me. “I’m tired. Long day.” With my eyes still aching, I returned my gaze to the screen. The three monitors in front of me. The endless rows of data.

“I see.” Her long, pale finger rose to her chin. “This may seem awkward coming from me.”

It wouldn’t be the first awkward conversation we had. Janice was infamous for those. Like the one we had about female rappers. Not some intellectual debate about lyrics. Or disdain about their outfits on stage. She didn’t have a perspective on whether they were role models or not. What’d she want to know? Which lyrics were the soundtrack of our college years. *Which female rapper defined us?*

She used the question as an icebreaker when new hires started on her team. Every time she’d ask the same question. It wasn’t unique to me when I started. It wasn’t something I imagined in the depths of my anxiety. It wasn’t an irrelevant answer I blurted when I said, “I never thought about it.”

The twisted look on her face as she flipped her blonde ponytail over her shoulder. Her icy blue eyes staring into my soul. As if she needed to pull *my Black card* for not having an answer on the ready.

Yeah. There have been some awkward conversations.

“What is it, Janice?” Because not only did I want to push past awkward, I wanted to finish my day. No matter how many more minutes or hours remained of it. I wanted to get away from her longing stares, and out of the office. To my house and the comforts of a good meal and a decent show.

“I have a nephew.”

Okay, that wasn’t awkward at all. Maybe a cute little pudgy-cheeked boy she needed me to babysit. It wouldn’t be the worst way to fill an afternoon. But I’d set boundaries. I couldn’t become her sister, or brother’s, *de facto* babysitter. “And he needs a babysitter?” I offered when she didn’t continue.

She gave me an icy stare, and the ponytail flip. The confusion written all over her face should have been my clue. The clue that me and Janice would never be on the same page. There was more to our differences than the melanin, or lack thereof, in our skin. More than her love of everything rap culture. Her ability to recite the lyrics of a trending song. One I'd always know the hook, but never the bars before and after.

But when she said, "Not exactly. I am hoping I can introduce you to him."

Because? Why would I need to meet her nephew? The giddy smile on her face was another clue, and it took a second for the conversation to come into perspective. "You want me to meet him. Like meet him, meet him?" My voice squeaked higher than hers when she offered greetings and salutations. A hand poking into my chest. "Me? Your nephew?"

Awkward would be me pointing out the obvious. The image of the little white boy with blonde hair meta morphed. He wasn't a cute little kid whose cheeks I'd pinch. He was a well-dressed white man who sold life insurance. Someone I'd avoid if he passed me on the street. Someone I wouldn't answer when he called after hours. I couldn't hide the terror on my face, the shock seeping into the innermost chambers of my heart. "Ugh..." I froze. How could I explain that it'd never happen? *Oh, I know.* "I'm not looking to date right now." The firm smile on my face was convincing.

Or so I thought.

Her laughter spilled from my cubicle, touched the walls of the office, and lifted the ceiling tiles, rattling me. *Things got a little more awkward.*

My eyes bulged and I asked, "Wait. Did you not mean like that?" I laughed. The sound coming through my nose instead of my open mouth. "Not like dating. You mean in some other way. Like networking or something?" Because, of course, she did. Janice is my manager. Unlike every other person in my life, she couldn't be another one trying to make a love connection. *Could she?*

“No.” She shook her head. “That’s exactly what I meant. I want you to meet him. There could be potential between you two.”

On the day I should have described the soundtrack of my college years, I drew a blank. With her sitting in front of me wide-eyed and optimistic, there was exactly one song that looped through my thoughts. And as the words, “I ain’t got no time to play, better hurry up...” went through my mind, I shook my head as the chorus sang, “No, no, no.” Okay, so it wasn’t a rap song. But it was one of the greatest groups of all time. She couldn’t pull my card for reciting Destiny’s Child. Right?

As Janice insisted, as she always did, I wanted to tell her something uberly private. Blurt, “You know I’m practicing celibacy.” A lie, but one that could throw her off my scent. My old cheer days even came to mind. A chant replacing the Destiny’s Child melody, “I’m fine. F I N E. Fine. I don’t need a man. I’m F I N E. I’m fine.” A breath caught in my nose, and I hung my head. *Did it take all that?*

“He’s handsome.”

What’d she know? Her husband probably rocked a collar shirt and drank whiskey straight up while he practiced hits on the golf course. *Too old and sophisticated for me.*

“He’s kind, and creative.”

Creative? That had to be code for he’s not that cute.

“It’d be the perfect balance for you.” Her finger fluttered in front of a screen. “All these numbers. This logic. Left-brain thinking. You could use some right-brainness.”

My right eye quirked. “Is that a thing?”

Janice stood. I hoped my rebuttal worked and she would move along. Accept defeat and never try again. But then she said, “One date. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.” She tilted her head to the side. “C’mon, Journey.”

She reminded me of my cheer coach from college. Trying to persuade us to do the impossible. Running stairs after doing our entire roster of cheers, flips, and dances.

“Fine,” I reluctantly agreed. “One date. That’s it.” Then I wanted to remind her she was my boss and there had to be some sort of HR action I could take if she pressed further. I didn’t though. I turned to my screen and focused on the numbers.

“I’ll give him your number.” Her voice was higher than ever. “Expect to hear from him soon.”

If her nephew was anything like her, I’d hear from him before I could get home. I imagined him having her energy. Excitable in the worst way, and punctual.

As she walked away I mumbled under my breath. Nothing that made any sense. The grunts and syllables that couldn’t form a word weren’t even audible. Janice managed to do what my friends of years couldn’t do. Get me to agree to a date. *And with a white boy at that.* If the universe wanted me with someone that badly, I could have taken Dawn up on her offer. Shoot, the men Ms. Jabowski pointed out at the convenience store could have made it do what it do. But crossing over? *To the other side.*

The innermost depths of my soul cried out. That’s what I get for thinking Travis Kelce with a beard was kinda cute. For noticing the white boy from the first floor. On the rare occasion he didn’t wear a tie and looked semi-decent with his Mr. Rogers sweater hugging his biceps. *No. See. That’s how I got here. I confused God.*

It could be the only logical explanation.

I cringed at the idea. Let the numbers overcome the thoughts of any and every white man I ever noticed. I buried the images of them beneath the calculations, formulas, and reconciliation necessary to get me out the door. “Finally,” I said with an exhale. I hit the send button and grabbed my purse. I rushed from the office to avoid any other run-ins with Janice.

The walk from the office to my apartment wasn’t terribly long. Most nights, I enjoyed the breeze, and people watching. That night, I made sure to people watch the *Black men* a little harder. Sending hints to God with every man I passed. “Like

him..." If God felt it was time for me to date again, I might as well have someone attractive. I laughed to myself and said, "But God, it's my single girl era." As if He needed convincing, I added, "And I'm good. Honestly. When's the last time you heard me complain? Pray for a man? I'm over that."

I couldn't say my prayers in college weren't riddled with requests for a man who would knock me off my feet. Every other prayer probably contained something along those lines. What if it was an answered prayer—a little delayed?

By the time I made it into my apartment, I was convinced everything that happened was of my own doing. I flopped into my chair and stared out at the park. A couple walked under the shining light. I imagined it being me. Me with Janice's nephew, and I frowned. *One date. That's it.* It wasn't necessarily a warning to God or anything. But a decree to myself. A concession to my brain so I could stop spiraling.

Then my phone vibrated in my purse. I dug it out and stared at the unknown number on my screen. When I opened the message, it read, "This is Luke, Janice's nephew."

And his name is Luke? A little piece of me died on the inside.

CHAPTER

SIX

LUKE

Maybe Janice missed her calling. For someone who worked in finance, she sure found great joy in hooking me up. She should have been a matchmaker. I didn't suggest it though. Because the mere suggestion when she called to give me the woman's number would imply she made a match.

A compromise, an agreement to get her off my back, was far from a success on her part. But the guarantee I gave her that I'd reach out to the woman, *Journey*, was a check in her win column.

"Let me know how it goes," she said before hanging up the phone.

It was still early when I texted her. And the response came quickly. Either she was as eager as Janice, or like me and ready to get the whole thing over. We agreed to meet the next day. At a local restaurant, sight unseen. No pics beforehand, no descriptions, no heads up on what I was walking into.

I expected someone who looked like Janice. A blonde-haired woman with blue or green eyes. Someone petite and bubbly. I scoured the sidewalk looking for *her* outside the restaurant. With a name like Journey I imagined she'd wear some bohemian-style outfit. Looking like a blast from the past. Still, not a single woman walked by that looked like my version of her.

There were older white women. Nobody I could imagine my aunt thinking twice about introducing me to. There was a

younger woman, someone who didn't fit the description, but cute. She kept walking into the restaurant. On her phone, and she didn't look twice in my direction.

Whoever the girl was, she was different from Janice in one way. She wasn't ten minutes early. I checked my watch as the time ticked on. *Where is she?* Then I saw her. *Not her.* But a woman I would have followed into the restaurant and gladly sat across. A Black woman. A woman with curves, style, and hopeful eyes. She looked a little lost as she neared the restaurant, and I would be more than willing to be her guide. Still, she wasn't *the* woman.

She bypassed me, walked into the restaurant. Her neck strained as she stood near the hostess stand looking for something. I wanted to join her in her search and abandon mine.

A loud sigh left my mouth, and my shoulders slouched. If I had to be out with anyone, why couldn't it be someone like her? I swept my head left and right and saw no one else who looked like they were coming toward me. My watch told me Janice's protégé was late. I looked over my shoulder at the other woman still standing, still waiting.

I grabbed my phone to call Journey, to figure out if she got lost. Or wasn't coming. My luck, she wasn't coming. I could go home and ignore all future requests by Janice. "Journey—" I said, still watching the sidewalk and the people passing.

"Hey..." her voice was soft. "I'm here at the restaurant." I realized she was whispering. "Are you running late?"

Am I late? It had to be some sort of joke. "No," I said firmly. "I'm outside the restaurant." A sign above *Finneman's Bar & Grill* confirmed I was at the right place. It was the only one on this side of the city, and the place we agreed to meet.

"Okay, well I'm inside," she said, "let me walk back out."

A woman with a phone to her ear neared the door.

"Journey?" My head jerked back as she stepped outside. "You're Journey?"

“Luke?” We exchanged a surprised look. Guess I wasn’t who she was looking for either.

I shifted my phone from my ear and reached my hand out to shake hers. But she didn’t move, didn’t budge, not even slightly.

“You’re Black...” She looked over her shoulder then back to me with a squint. “And Janice is your aunt?”

Because, of course, she’d think I’d be a white guy. Janice insisted on calling me nephew to anyone who’d listen. When she married into the family, she went all in. I pointed to the hostess stand and suggested, “We should sit.”

The hostess led us to a table, and I fell behind. *Ladies first* or whatever. My reward—a view of Journey’s ass. Perky and round like she spent hours in the gym every week. *Okay, Auntie.*

As we sat, I explained, “So, Janice married my uncle.”

Journey’s hand flew to her forehead, and her head shook. “Of course.” The side of her mouth tucked between her teeth. “Here I was all worked up about her introducing me to her *nephew*. I knew this date was going to be a one and done.”

“So, you weren’t thrilled about meeting her *nephew*?” I leaned into the table. I wanted to hear her version of the story, because it was starting to sound a lot like mine.

“No. But,” she cringed, “Janice is kinda persistent. I tried to explain I’m not dating. And when she said nephew I tried to be diplomatic and not state the obvious. I’m not into white guys though.”

Our story was the same, too similar, eerily so. “Same.” I said, “Janice doesn’t stop. She would have nagged the two of us until this happened.” I looked around then offered, “We should take a picture together. Proof it happened so we don’t have to hear about it anymore.”

Journey’s eyes stretched wide, and a smile she kept hidden came out. It lifted her eyes and brightened her face even more. “Good idea.”

I fumbled with my phone until I had it propped in my hand. Ready to snap a quick picture. But Journey stood from her seat, rounded the table, and placed her hand on my shoulder. Her face neared mine, and a scent wafted to my nose. Something light, flowery, and enticing. I licked my lips before lifting the camera in the air.

The two of us smiled, and I snapped the picture. Showing it to her for approval. “Send it.” The gorgeous smile from before turned into something mischievous. And I wanted to know every thought that would elicit that exact grin again.

She returned to her seat, and her scent stayed behind, assaulting my senses in the best way. If I could have reached out and grabbed it, rubbed it on my shirt for later, I would have. “I saw you when you walked inside.” I admitted, “I almost followed you and ditched whoever Janice sent.”

“Ditch her?” As if the girl I’d be ditching her for wasn’t her. “That would be terrible.” A pitiful look stayed on her face. Her eyes blinking and mouth slightly open. A little pout, something I regretted when it didn’t leave. “Left the poor girl upset.”

Her commitment to the hypothetical was commendable. “Poor girl?” I laughed. “Imagine Janice finding out I ditched her.” If she could commit to the fake situation, so could I. “I would never hear the end of it. You know that woman called me several times. Involved my mama too.”

“She must think highly of you. To want to introduce you to someone this bad.” Then she cringed. “Does she not think you are capable of finding someone on your own though?” Her head tilted to the side.

I could have gone the entire night in our hypothetical. Committed to what could have been if things were different. If for some reason I was trying to find someone. If I had time and energy to dedicate to it. Since I was there, I didn’t mind playing into the *what-if* of it all.

But since she asked, I answered with an honest answer, “She knows I’m not looking. She thinks I should be.”

A smirk played at the side of Journey's mouth. That, too, was cute. Everything about Journey was cute, sexy, or fuckable. There were ranges. They all made me question the determination I had to focus on starting my company.

"Same. Everyone I know is trying to introduce me to someone." She laughed and I felt lighter for hearing it.

The weight on my shoulders lifted. The pain in my left knee healed. And my worries ceased to exist. There was something about her. Something that would make me throw all caution to the wind if I wasn't careful.

"The woman at the corner store has tried." She joked, "And she hardly says three words to me otherwise. Every day it's 'how about him.'"

I tried to imagine the situation. The men in the store in a lineup. The woman trying to convince Journey they were someone worth her time. I couldn't imagine any of them were. Not if they weren't bold enough to step to her on their own. "And none of them have tried to talk to you?"

It must not have been a question she considered herself. Her puzzled look confirmed the guys weren't worth her time. "No." A scrunched nose and twisted lips was a new expression, and as cute as all the others. "They haven't. But that's a good thing." She looked over her shoulder. "Wonder where the waiter is."

The waiter. *Right*. Because we were in a restaurant. On a *date*. We should eat. "I can grab someone." I stood from my seat and walked toward the bar. Leaning over it, I asked the bartender, "Is there a waiter for that table?" I pointed toward Journey and watched the man notice her.

He saw what I saw, and his face grew into a grin I didn't necessarily care for. "Yeah, let me grab her." His eyes stayed fixated on Journey though.

I cleared my throat then said, "Thanks."

Within minutes of knowing Journey, I defended her. She was worth more than the men at the convenience store could

handle, and I didn't want the random bartender staring her down either. *Dammit, Janice.*

The walk back to the table was slower. I took my time returning to her. I needed to gather my thoughts. Remind myself of my goals. The reason why I shouldn't have been on a date. The reason I tried to ignore Janice's suggestion.

"Thanks." She frowned. "I was starting to get a little hungry."

Easily, I pounced back into defender mode. If it wasn't for the waitress hurrying to our table, I would have gone to the kitchen and demanded a plate. Full with whatever to ensure Journey didn't go another minute without eating. *What is going on?*

It was deprivation. You remove something, then get one little taste of it again, and you can't stop. I avoided women for so long, one little encounter with Journey and I couldn't get enough.

"I'll have the shrimp alfredo." She looked up from the menu. "Oh, and a white wine."

"I'll have the same." Because I didn't want to waste time staring at the menu. Or another minute for her to go hungry. "How do you know Janice anyway?"

"She's my manager." The secret fell from her lips in a whisper. Not for anyone nearby to hear.

"Oh." Janice of all people seemed like the person who would call HR, not the person reported to HR. "Isn't that inappropriate? For her to be your manager and trying to hook you up." I laughed. "Now you're telling me she pressured you. Is your job on the line if we don't get married?"

"God, I hope not." Her hand flung to her mouth and her eyes widened. "I didn't mean it like that."

Although a little offended, I laughed. And after I started she joined me. "It's cool, but if a promotion is on the line then..." I hunched my shoulders. "Gotta get your money."

“The way rent works in this city, I might have to ask you to be my fake boyfriend.”

She's joking. I had to settle my excitement somehow. Because for a minute, I almost volunteered to do it. Sign up to be her fake boyfriend with a fake kiss, and a fake rumble in the sheets. All for the advancement of her career, of course.

“Are you from Neveah City?” Not that it would matter one way or the other. I asked anyway.

She shook her head. “No, I moved here a couple of years ago. To work at the firm. I’m from a small town. Lake Side.”

“Small town girl, chasing dreams in the city.” I could have posted her face on a billboard welcoming everyone who wanted the same to the city.

She hunched her shoulder. “Something like that. Are you from here?”

I nodded. “Born and raised. Only left for...”

“Here we are.” The waitress sat the wine glasses on the table. “Food will be right out.”

She raised her glass. “A toast?”

I nodded and asked, “To?”

“To two people, hoping their dreams will be far greater than love.”

She sipped and sat her glass down before I tipped mine back. It was the warning Janice gave. To not forget about love. Sitting across from Journey, I didn’t want to admit I started to understand. I didn’t avoid being out. Hanging with my friends. I did plenty of that. Sitting across from Journey though, it was the first time being out and not wanting to hurry home. To get in front of my laptop and design something, anything.

Although, the curves along her body could inspire a sexy logo. Or something bohemian to go along with her name. A bright color scheme to match her smile.

“What do you do?” The question fell from her lips haphazardly. Like the response would hold no bearing on what

happened after I said it.

As I explained, our food came to the table. Between bites, I described my work, my passion, my dreams. She nodded along, and asked if she could see some of my designs. Outside of people I worked with, Journey was the first to ever ask to see my work. “I’d love to show you some stuff I’ve designed.”

“I swear, I came into tonight thinking this would be over before it started. But this was fun.” Her fork rested on her plate. The restaurant around us was clearing out. It was time for us to leave.

Before the night started I imagined Journey would go one way, and I’d go the other. “I’m thinking I’d want to do it again.” Then I joked, “But we could never tell Janice.”

Journey shook her head. “Absolutely not.” She tapped her chin. “But then again, there could be some perks involved.”

I paid the bill, and we stood. I followed behind Journey again, and when we were outside I stalled. “It’s dark, I can walk you to your apartment.” Mama did raise a gentleman.

“You don’t have to do that,” she started, “I navigate these dark city streets alone often.”

A common error of many newbies. “That was probably okay in Lake Side.”

Her eyes rolled, and a smirk followed. “I know. Big city, danger.” She looked over her shoulder. “I’ve never felt fearful.”

“Glad my city gives you that vibe.” I looked both ways down the sidewalk. “Which way to your apartment?”

She turned to the left, and I followed. Keeping an even pace with hers. “See,” she pointed to people passing, “everyone minds their business.”

“Everything seems great until it isn’t.”

Our eyes met and she said, “Valid point.” She slowed in front of a building and announced, “This is me.”

I inched us closer to the brick wall beside us. “Would it be too much if you had to tell Janice you had an amazing night with me? Then tell her it ended with the most intense, passionate kiss you’ve ever experienced?”

“I have no plans of kissing and telling....” She bit her lip then said, “But you have to make sure you live up to all that you are projecting.”

My hand wrapped around her neck, and my lips crashed into hers. I teased them open with my tongue until hers lingered in my mouth. Any other time, maybe some other place, or in our hypothetical, the kiss would have never ended.

But in our reality, my lungs were gasping for another breath. I tugged my lips from hers and watched her intently. Her hand lifted to her mouth and a finger traced her lips. “So?”

All night Journey’s words were clear. Articulate. Audible. In that moment, a stutter. “Damn.”

Hypothetically, if we were both looking for something, I’d admit I was close to finding it.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

JOURNEY

The nine to five felt more of an urgent boundary when I had somewhere to go. I walked in at nine, so I should be out by five. There could be no delays. I wasn't looking for an excuse to be *that person* who had to run. But when Luke opened my lips and left me warm in places that'd been cold for too long. Well, what was I supposed to do?

Maintain the *I'm not dating* line? Avoid his request to meet again? No. Especially since we both were on the same page. Neither of us was looking, and wham. Something dropped from the sky. Into my lap, an unexpected gift. One I wasn't ready to give back, yet. I needed to play with it a little more. See if it was worth keeping or sending back to the store to collect my refund.

With all refunds, there were thirty days before it was too late. I'd be willing to keep him for twenty-nine.

I shuffled the windows on my laptop, closing each and shutting down the machine. Grabbed my purse and tried to exit before anyone noticed my departure.

“Where are you going?”

The voice sent a shiver down my spine. Stalled my feet and made me clench my eyes closed. If I could think on my feet, I would have proceeded through the glass doors and took the stairs. But I couldn't think.

Not with Everly's hand on my shoulder. Her words in my ear, whispering, “Are you leaving?”

“Yes.” The thought of leaving *on time* felt like I was sneaking out when I left after seven most nights. “Leaving on time tonight.” I stressed the sentence to her. Not like she needed the reminder because she was often the one who paraded out of the office at five if she was done working or not.

“Oh, in a hurry too. Where are you going?”

I looked over her shoulder, and behind me, trying to spot Janice. “On another date,” I said between tightly clenched lips.

“With *Luke*?” Everly wasn’t the friend you could wink and nod at. She didn’t catch a clue ever. “If I would have known this nephew she always spoke of was a sexy ass Black man, I wouldn’t have avoided her. She needs to work on her descriptions though.” She laughed. “Had me thinking he was some nerdy white boy. Someone who’d push his glasses up his nose, twirl a Rubik’s cube in his hand, and rock a pocket protector.”

Luke was far from that. But when I went to that restaurant in search of him, I thought that’s what I’d find. Not the Rubik’s cube, or the pocket protector. But a certified white boy for sure.

Boy was I surprised by the tall, deep chocolate, Black man with a gorgeous smile. A beard I wanted to run my fingers across, and a body that screamed for me to climb on top. The man was irresistible. I held back my constraint. Maintained my position on dating. Knew the end of the night would be the *end of us*. That was until he insisted on walking me home. Offered to give me a passionate kiss. One that was arguably the most passionate kiss I’d had in life. Although, after two years, a peck on the cheek was smoking hot. His tongue down my throat had me on fire.

Amazing what a little tongue persuasion can do. Had me ready to change my entire manifesto for the summer. *Single in the City* no more. I’d upgraded to at least *Sex in the City*. Heavy on the sex. At least once. Mama used to tell me I had to try everything at least once. And I was not going to prove her wrong with him.

“No. Not a nerdy white boy at all.” I stared at the glass doors. “I gotta go.”

She followed behind me, still talking as I waited on the elevator doors to open. “Damn, he has you about to run a forty out of here. Good for you.” She nudged my side. “It’s about time for you to fully embrace the city.”

“The city?” I laughed.

“I mean, can you truly say you love a city if you haven’t fucked in it yet?”

The logic? Where was it? Not in her sentence. But it didn’t matter because I wasn’t going to deny myself any parts of Luke. If he offered, I was accepting. “Here I was thinking it was going to be a single girl summer. Well, it might still be a single girl summer. Can’t say I’m ready to settle down yet.” Especially not when he said he wasn’t looking to date. One hot ass kiss couldn’t switch things up like that. Not for both of us. “And we haven’t talked about much outside the basics. Job, dreams, that’s it.”

Everly frowned as the doors opened and we stepped onto the elevator. “Did he pay for dinner?”

I nodded. “Of course.” No matter how sexy he was or how wet my panties were staring at him, if he didn’t it would have been over. No more dates. The kiss would never have happened. And the sex I was longing for, it would have to plague my dreams only.

“Then you two are off to a good start.”

I scoffed and had to look over my shoulder before stating the obvious. “A good start? Where are we? In the basement with my standards?” I chided, “I know I’m not dating but,” I lowered my voice more, “damn, Everly.”

“It’s been a while since you’ve been on the scene. So, buddy gets bonus points for that.”

I stared at her mouth as the doors of the elevator reopened. She pulled me into her arms, warming me as she hugged me for too long.

“Don’t worry, you don’t have to deal with the riff raff. You have Luke.”

I slid from her arms, a wide but cautious smile. “See you later.” The walk to the restaurant was steady. Slow steps as my body became acquainted with the warm sun. A stark contrast from the manufactured air in the office. *Don’t worry*, I breathed. I shook my head. *I’m not worried*. I didn’t think of the worst-case scenario with Luke. Or the best. I wasn’t imagining white dresses and church aisles. Or heartbreak and tear-stained faces.

I embraced the sun and anticipated the kiss. Only the kiss. Not even the mind-blowing sex he could give me. Because I wasn’t there. Might not ever be there. Me and Luke could decide friends is all we’d ever be. And I was good with that.

The streets of the city were familiar, many of the buildings near my office and apartment were on my radar. But when the address Luke sent took me off the known path, I started to wonder where we were meeting. Where was he taking me? I assumed we’d be sharing another meal, a sip of wine before another passionate kiss ended the night. A lounge for their happy hour special possibly.

“You have arrived.” I looked at my phone, and then to the building. At my phone, and the sign above the door. *Clay Haven Studios*. Not a restaurant. Or a lounge. Music didn’t pour from the door signaling happy hour specials. The large clay pots in the window, and the invitation to *Come in and Clay*, confused me.

The text message had the same address. Maybe he entered it incorrectly. I hesitated before I poked my head inside. Then when I did, the tall Black man, in an apron and a wide smile welcomed me.

“Scared?” Luke asked from across the room.

I laughed. “Here?” I traversed the space, navigated the tables and chairs. Noticed the pottery on the tables in front of the people in the room. Finally, I made it in front of Luke. “I was thinking we’d meet at a restaurant.” I looked over my shoulder. “A bar maybe.”

“Not a pottery spot.” His eyes welcomed every inch of my body before settling on the orbs of mine. “I’m a creative, remember?” His deep voice comforted me.

“Yeah,” I confessed, “I remember.”

“Then come on. I’m ready for that whole *Ghost* scene.”

At first, I thought *ghost*? What was the connection of pottery and the spiritual realm? I could do a lot of things for the sake of dick after a drought, but conjuring spirits wasn’t one of them. “Ghosts?” I held the strap of my purse, waiting for an insufficient response. Ready to turn and run out the door if it was.

“The movie.” There was a knowing smile on his face. Something that took me by a pleasant surprise. It was mischievous. It was sexy. It made me extremely horny. “That scene where they mold pottery together.” His explanation was innocent. More innocent than the scene he described.

“Of course,” I said with a nod. “*Ghost*. The movie.” I pointed to the pottery surrounding us. “Molding clay together.” But if the two of us ended up anything like that scene in the movie, I wouldn’t be able to contain my hands. There’d be no way I could mold anything. Not with the heat rolling from my body destroying anything I built up.

“C’mon, we have a private space in the back.”

Imagined or real. His words, *private space*, felt like an invitation to jump on his lap. But when we got to the back, sure enough, there was a pottery wheel and a heap of clay. His hand outstretched, and an apron dangled from the tips of his fingers. “Put this on.” He nibbled his bottom lip and said, “If it’s your shirt you’re worried about ruining, you can take it off. Nobody will come back here.”

The door we walked through closed. And although the space contained only the two of us, we were not alone. Anyone could walk through, at any minute. Plus, skin to skin, molding clay. My resolve was hanging on by a thread. Crumbling further by the minute.

“I should keep it on.” I grabbed the apron and pulled it over my head. “Tie it for me?” I watched over my shoulder as he knotted the strings behind my back. “Thanks.”

Then like an instructor, he snapped into action. “We can start on your pot first. I’ll grab the clay if you want to get comfortable at the wheel.”

When he said *Ghost* he wasn’t playing at all. He placed the clay on the wheel in front of me then eased himself behind me. His arms wrapping around me caused my breath to hitch in my throat. I don’t know how the wheel started circling, or my hands connected with the clay. I do know his chest leaned into my back, his breath tickled my neck, and his deep voice penetrated my ear as he spoke.

“How was your day today?”

The question was simple enough. It didn’t require much thought, no introspection. I could have responded with ease. If I wasn’t entangled in his arms. If warning bells and whistles weren’t triggering in my head. I could have told him, “It was fine,” if I could think beyond the touch of his hand on mine. Our fingers a mess amongst the clay.

Then his second question, “You good?” with a hint of a smile and a light chuckle, reminded me I never answered.

“Oh. Yes. Good. Concentrating.” And I did concentrate. On the throbbing between my thighs, the beating of my heart, the rushing of my blood through my veins. Every touch heightened my senses and confused my thoughts. “You?” *When someone asked a question, it was common courtesy to reciprocate, right?*

“I’m good. It’s been a busy day, but I’m glad for a little break. I’m a creative. I love to create.” His lips neared my earlobe. “I know you can eat. Our conversation is decent. But do you like to create?”

The clay beneath my fingers crumbled and fell to the side of the wheel. Whatever we were busy molding didn’t resemble anything displayed on the shelves of the store.

He laughed. “We all have a sense of creativity. But we all don’t create in the same way. Don’t worry.” He swiped the clay from the side. “We can fix this.”

I cleared my throat. “I don’t consider myself a creative.” I tried to imagine my arts and craft days. When everyone in elementary made friendship bracelets. As I got older, the forced art classes were my least favorite. If the professor would have given me a paint by number, I would have crushed it. But freestyling was not my thing. “I’m a numbers girl. I keep a careful eye on the DIYers. Thinking one day it’ll be me. Still hasn’t happened yet. What are we making anyway?” My apartment could use some extra décor.

“Creativity has boundaries we give it without careful consideration.”

“Sounds like something a creative would say,” I teased.

“If the creator made us, in His image, then we, too, must be creators in some way, shape, or form, right?”

I could have turned around. Bypassed whatever we were creating and watched his mind formulate his opinions. Listened to his thoughts thread a needle through the atmosphere. “That was deep,” I said over my shoulder. “Never considered that before.” Then I said, “So, does that mean you go to church.”

He wagged his head. “On occasion. You?”

Church didn’t feel appropriate intermingled with the nasty thoughts I had of Luke. His response, about his church attendance, shouldn’t have made me horny. But it did. I hung my head and said, “Not often enough.” *Obviously.*

Our pottery formed and looked like something. Not like an unformed blob of clay, but an actual pot. One I’d gladly display in my apartment. “Look at us,” I boasted.

“Yeah.” He stood from the stool, robbing my body of the warmth and comfort. “Look at us.” He explained, “Next is mine. We can make it the same as yours now that you have the hang of it.”

Did I though? Or was it his careful guidance? “Sure.” I smiled up at him and awaited his return to the stool. My body craved his warmth more than my stomach craved my next meal. And when he sat behind me, I melded into him like the clay on the wheel.

His pot didn’t take as long. Without my mishap, me throwing us off course, it came together with ease. If I would have known the end was near I would have found a way to sabotage it. To keep his arms wrapped around me a little longer.

What is happening? Nope. No. I can’t fall into the trap. Wanting more than he is offering. Racing to the end before the take-off. *Chill*. The destination was nowhere. I knew that. He said it. Hell, I said it.

When he stood, I took a deep breath. Turned my head and composed myself.

“Ready?” His voice called me back to him though. The haughty, sensual, roughness of his vocal cords.

“Ugh. Yeah.” I pointed to our molded pots. “What do we do next?”

“They’ll put them in the stove for us. It’ll be a few days before they are ready. When they are, I’ll pick them up. I can drop yours at your house if you’d like.” His eyes questioned me.

“Sure. If you don’t mind. I’d appreciate that.” The small smile on my face needed to disappear. It wasn’t there because of his kind gesture. But because there was a guaranteed *next time*. I’d see him again.

Again was what always got me in trouble though. I needed to focus on the now. So many times, I tried to learn the same lesson with Chaz and failed. Then when it was time to consider the future, neither of us could get beyond the here. We were stuck in the present. And now, I’m not sure where in the realm of time was safe.

“Your pot’ll need something in it.” He pulled his apron over his neck and my imagination saw a bare chest. A chiseled

abdomen. That perfect V that directed me downward to a bulge in his pants. “How about a plant? There’s a shop across the street.”

“A plant.” Was it time to admit I wasn’t a green thumb? Not creative, couldn’t keep a plant alive to save my life, and God forbid he asked me to cook him a meal. *Shit*. “That’d be nice.” My cheeks warmed though, because no matter how hard I tried to lie to him, and myself, I couldn’t. “As long as they have some faux options. I’d hate to get something that’ll die within a week.”

He sucked his teeth. “A week? Ouch.”

I hunched my shoulders. “Tell me about it.”

“Your pot can be an abstract piece of décor then. Who needs practical anyway?” He reached down and placed his hand in mine. “Dinner then?”

“As long as a chef prepares dinner.” The crinkle in my nose stiffened. “I can’t cook either.”

A loud, hearty laugh rumbled from his chest. “Now that we have all *that* out the way. C’mon.” He led us out of the pottery shop, down the street, and to a nearby restaurant.

And I was okay being there with him. Fine with talking to him about his day. Trading stories about crazy coworkers. Not questioning if either of us had a change of heart. Whether we decided to go in a new direction.

We were in the moment.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

LUKE

Janice should have introduced me to someone more like her. If Journey was annoyingly persistent, and painfully chipper twenty-four seven, I would have ended things after our first night together. I wouldn't be finding ways to spend more time with her. Scouring the internet for date ideas, for our *non-dates*. Because we both claimed we weren't trying to date anyone.

I didn't ask her if things changed. If she was now willing to date someone because that someone was me. I also avoided the question to myself. The answer, whatever it could be, was irrelevant. At some point, I convinced myself chasing my goals with Journey alongside me was more fun. My designs received appreciation and criticism when met by Journey's critical eye. And the mundane tasks of everyday weren't as cumbersome. Life with Journey was, well, a journey.

Finding time between our busy schedules was a challenge. Something I would have talked to Janice about, if we weren't keeping the whole thing from her. Journey went to work early, and stayed late, most of the week. When she did have time, and I wasn't working on a project, we connected.

Then I found out her Neveah City experience included all the known places. Anything you could easily find on the internet, loaded with reviews from out-of-towners. But her experiences of the real Neveah City, where all the locals hung out, hardly existed. So, I was on a quest to show her the other side.

We walked almost everywhere, and I always insisted on meeting at her apartment. But the trade-off was a walk in the park. Literally. The park across from her apartment wasn't the quickest way to many of the places I wanted to take her. She convinced me the sight was worth the detour though.

Each time she'd say, "I don't know why you hate this park so much..."

It wasn't that I hated the park, but there wasn't much appeal to it. I said, "You should come out where I play basketball. That park is much livelier."

Her nose lifted, and eyes shifted side to side. "Is it as beautiful as this though?" She pointed to the lake, the little ducks running after a kid.

"That?" I laughed. "Nothing like witnessing a kid's trauma firsthand."

We continued walking. "I'll check out your park." It was like a concession. Something she was willing to give up, but I don't know what she would take in return. Either way, it was another promise of us seeing each other again. Something that would force us back together one more time at least. Still, neither of us made any declarations. We still weren't *dating*.

"We play on Saturday mornings. Maybe we can grab breakfast afterward."

She'd be one of few ladies at the park watching. "Sounds like a plan." Her hand went to her stomach. "With me, if it involves food I'm one happy girl. Speaking of which..." Her steps slowed. "Where are we going?"

I could have reminded her about our detour. Our walk through the park that added fifteen more minutes to our trip. Instead, I said, "We are getting close. Should be there any minute now."

"I've never been on this street before," she mentioned as we crossed at the light. "This side of the city doesn't look familiar."

"This is the Neveah you must get to know more. The heartbeat of the city. The other side, where you hang out,

doesn't represent us well."

"The other side is what got me here. It's the part I fell in love with."

I watched as she explained her move to the city. Her face changed from excited to something subdued.

"It was that part of the city that made losing it all worth it."

Our fingers graced each other as a crowd of people walked past us. "Losing it all?"

It was like the words hadn't left her mouth. She stared up at me, slowly blinking. Then she turned away.

She bounced back with revived energy and offered, "I'm glad I'm getting to know the city more intimately though. With someone who is from here."

"I'd like to know you intimately." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, slow them down, and rearrange them. Coax them into something not as *intimate*.

Journey's eyes held the brightness of the streetlight above us. A faint twinkle that made her face shine beautifully. "Is that right?"

I looked up and down the street before my tongue licked out over my lips. The streetlights aren't the only thing shining bright, the store beside us held a bold glare too. I tugged Journey's hand until we escaped the light. Standing in the alley, I pulled her body toward mine as I leaned against the bricks. With a hand to her chin, I tipped her mouth up to meet my lips. And we kissed. Something as intimate as us exploring the other side of the city.

Before my tongue wore out its welcome, I pulled away. Clearing my throat, I watched her hand rub across her chest. The tour, the restaurant for locals, the other side of the city could have all waited. I had more intimate exploring to do, and it didn't involve the streets of Neveah City.

"What do you think?" I asked with a smirk. "Does that prove how I'd like to know you?" The words didn't stop. They were on a constant flow I couldn't interrupt if I tried.

Tightening my lips, tensing my jaw, none of that sent a signal to my brain to be easy.

The look on her face though. It was enough to make all the words I ever spoke spill from my mouth at rapid speed. Forming sentences I never shared. Only to see that look again.

And then, her words, “I guess you weren’t lying,” as her eyes focused on the space between us. The bulge I couldn’t hide in the darkness of the alley had all her attention.

I leaned down one more time and pecked the side of her mouth. Then I said, “I better feed you before I devour you here on the corner of Elm Street.”

“Elm Street,” she barked. “It’s not.”

“Elm Street, it is.”

Her head was on a constant swivel until we made it to the restaurant. Although I had her hand in a tight grip, and guarded her side, there was no easing the tension she held in her shoulders. Not until we were safely inside the restaurant, then she sighed. “Do we have to go back that way when we leave?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking of brandishing that corner as ours.” Words... spilling. “And making a stop whenever we cross that street, in that alley.”

She gulped. And I don’t think it was because of the memory I held. But because of the street name.

I laughed. “Don’t worry, there are no nightmares there.”

There was a shift, an ease that came over her. A smile that proved Elm Street was no longer a problem. “I’m sure I won’t have any nightmares about Elm Street.” Her eyes spanned the menu. “The only thing that’ll invade my dreams will be that kiss.”

I wanted her to try the infamous wings. Taste the specialty sauces. Drink the craft beer, the beer that was better than the spot me and my homeboys frequented often. I wanted to fill her dreams with more of those memories of us kissing.

But then she stated, “I could eat forty wings right now.”

An eyebrow lifted. “Forty?”

When the waitress came, we ordered fifty wings. If I only had ten it’d be to watch her down the other forty. “I want to see this,” I said as the waitress returned with a stack of wings. “We should wager something. A friendly bet.”

She grabbed the first wing, a flat, and stuffed it into her mouth. “What do you have in mind?”

Everything. And it all rewarded me in some sort of way. Sexual pleasures that would be equally satisfying. But I finagled my brain, pumped the brakes, and stopped myself from stating exactly what I wanted to do with her. Whether she ate forty wings or not. Instead, I offered, “You eat forty, then I owe you a trip to one of the best dessert places in Neveah City.” I laughed. “Another night, of course.”

“And if I don’t?” She grabbed another wing and nibbled the side delicately. The likelihood of her losing increased.

“We walk back the way we came. Stop on Elm Street one more time.”

There wasn’t fear in her eyes. Her body didn’t shudder. She dropped the bone and nodded. “Bet.”

Journey was nothing if not determined. She plowed through a few more wings all while asking questions about the restaurant. It was like she wanted to know everything about its launch, and growth. How the city kept it a secret from everyone who frequented the *other* side. I told her everything I knew about it.

“That’s cool. So, they are HBCU alum. I like that.” Her eyes scanned the notable pictures on the wall. The framed images of the band, the football team, different HBCU mascots. “I don’t think I asked before, what school did you graduate from?”

The words that had no problem flowing before met their dam. I rubbed a napkin over my saucy fingers. “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t graduate? Or didn’t go?”

The question had different answers, the same result. Either way, it wasn't something I spoke about often. But nothing I ever lied about. "I didn't graduate." I stared at the half-eaten plate of wings. A few more wings, and I wouldn't have the pleasure of kissing her in the shadows again. "I got kicked out."

"Kicked out?" she uttered, and it felt like glass shattered all around us. "What happened?" There was concern in her eyes, skepticism on her lips. "Grades?"

I shook my head. "No. Drugs."

The sauce on her hands covered the napkin. She didn't reach for another wing. Instead, she lifted the beer to her mouth and took a long sip. "You had drugs on campus?"

The biggest mistake of my life. Consequences I suffered still, six years later. "Not on campus, but in my apartment." It was a notable difference, especially when my parents tried to fight the decision. There was nothing they could do against the code of conduct though. "Rules were rules," said the dean of students. "We threw a party that got out of control, and someone called the cops. A sweep of the apartment led them to the stash of drugs in my room."

"Stash?" Elm Street had nothing on *drugs*. The look on her face was more fearful than standing on Elm Street in the shadows.

All I could do was nod. There wasn't much more detail she needed about the situation. She had all the facts that mattered. The ones that *destroyed my future*.

"Do you ever plan on going back to school? Finishing your degree?"

With a job, and starting my own company eventually, there wasn't room for college. "No. When I start a company, what's the need?"

Her shoulders met her ears and she said, "Guess none."

"Does it bother you?"

Judging from the crossed arms over her chest, I'd say it did. "No." She shook her head. "I guess they say college isn't for everyone."

If it weren't for the news I shared she could have won the bet. But after, she didn't take another wing. The remaining twenty stayed on the plate and I asked, "Do you want to take the rest home?"

"How about we split the difference?"

"Works for me." But there was a matter of settling the bet. "And since you didn't finish..."

"Nightmares on Elm Street." And her smile was back.

CHAPTER

NINE

JOURNEY

Elm Street had an appeal to it. It could be because Luke tried to suck my soul through his kiss as he caressed my ass into oblivion. Everything about the shadowy make-out session had me forgetting I tried to down forty wings on a *date*. Even made me forget about the fact that Luke was a small-time druggie. *Dealer? Addict?* I don't know if either applied, but getting kicked out of school for drugs could be serious. I didn't think to ask if he had to do jail time. That wasn't a question I thought of asking anyone in my circle. Ever. Not something that popped in mind, or anything I wanted any details on.

If his past included an orange jumpsuit, I should have cared. But then again, would Janice hook me up with her convict nephew? I'd think she wouldn't.

So, the kiss, wandering hands, and bulging dick I was free to enjoy. I didn't need to consider anything else. Not in the moment anyway. When the kiss ended, there was one question that lingered though. "So..." I cleared my throat. "Are we going to keep kissing in the street, or?" It was taking the now, and sneaking into the future. A little bit.

"My apartment isn't far from here." There was urgency in his eyes, a deep stare that challenged me.

Like the bet in the restaurant, although I knew I'd lose, I took the challenge. "Your apartment then." We didn't stroll hand-in-hand like people I watched in the park. We were the

couple trying to jump in the back of a taxi, to speed to the airport before they missed a flight.

The restaurants and stores we ran past looked like places I'd like to visit. But nothing I mentioned as I tried to keep Luke's pace. As fast as it was, we navigated the smaller crowd still walking the streets.

"Right here." He pulled me through a door, to an elevator, and we waited for it to open. "It sometimes takes a while. Stairs?"

"Stairs?" As if I wasn't still catching my breath from the run down the street. "How many?"

His hand traced the edge of my jaw, and he could have said twenty, or two hundred, I was finding the will power to climb the stairs. "I stay on the second floor."

Thank God it was only the second floor. "Okay." I nodded, convincing myself I wouldn't pass out on the first few steps. "Let's take the stairs."

He licked his lips and said, "Good. I don't know if I can wait on that elevator right now." Our hands were still connected, so I had to keep his pace up the stairs too. Thankfully, he took them one-by-one, although he joked he could have skipped a couple.

Inside his apartment, my body froze. I knew what I was there to do. But it'd been too long since the last time. It had to be like a bike though, right? Climb on and the body would remember what to do. I hoped that was the case because Luke had already stripped out of his shirt. Turning away didn't look like something I wanted to do.

"Come here." The warmth of his body enveloped me. His hands caged my face as his lips navigated mine. Our kiss was more intimate than it was in the shadows, more frantic than our first. Still, it felt delicate. The space between our lips was fragile and neither of us wanted to break it.

His hands found the hem of my shirt, and it inched up slowly. The palms of his hands rested on my stomach as his fingers traced the lace of my bra. The foyer of his apartment

was lovely, maybe, but it was like the alley. I wanted, no needed, to lay down. The first time back on a bike, you didn't start off on a steep heel.

Between pecks I asked, "Where's your room?"

"Right." He turned and I followed. He didn't bother turning on any lights, so I stepped carefully. And when we were inside his room, he closed the door. Our shadows had no space to play.

In the darkness I had to rely on all my other senses. His scent, a faint citrus smell, led me closer to him. His palms, soft and warm, helped me strip naked. The moisture of his tongue urged me off the training wheels and lowered me to the bed.

My legs didn't need a reminder to open wide. They laid flat and waited for his mouth to travel down between. One swipe of his tongue, and I was pedaling downhill, wind blowing through my hair. Eyes clenched closed waiting for what I knew was at the bottom. A sweet relief. An *I made it*.

And when I did, I yelled at the top of my lungs. Louder than any kid I heard on the playground. My hand flew to my mouth, and I held it there until the waves of pleasure stopped rippling through me.

Luke laughed, a low rumble as his head rested on my stomach. A kiss to my belly button. "Didn't realize you were a soprano."

My hand moved from my mouth to my eyes. "So embarrassing."

He scooted my hand to the side, hovered near my ear, and whispered, "Not at all. That shit was sexy. I want to see if I can make you do it again." A hand rubbed between my thighs. "What do you think?"

As a kid I wasn't a daredevil. Didn't attempt anything earth shattering. Didn't look to defy gravity or attempt the impossible. I liked to explore the safer options. But with Luke, I was looking to jump out the plane, zipline across the mountains. "Anything is possible," I whispered.

He lifted off the bed and opened a drawer. The sound of a condom wrapper pulled my eyes open. I squinted, prayed a car would pass in that exact moment. That a glimmer of light would give me a preview of what was to come. Not that I needed anything that would leave me crawling the bed, running from what was next. A little sneak peek would've been nice.

There was no chance of that when his body hovered over mine. After I answered, "Yes," when he asked, "Is this okay?"

If I didn't want actual nightmares, I had no choice but to ease the sexual tension. To knock the cobwebs from my insides. To dust her off and prepare her for *Sex and the City*.

He took his time though. Kissed a trail down my neck, tugged my nipples between his teeth. Caressed my clit with his fingers. *How many nerve endings did the body have?* Pretty sure over half of them activated when I felt the tip of his dick between my folds. He wasn't aware of my two-year hiatus, but his movements were as gentle as I needed them to be. His thrust, the first, lured a soft moan from my lips. And the next, harder than the last, had me warming up my vocals.

His rhythm, slow and long, made me regret waiting two years. My playtime could never compare. Would never compare. How could I ever return to a vibrator or my fingers?

And then, I challenged Mariah Carey to a sing-off. My voice lifted me from the bed, and my arms curled around his back. Clutching him to me, stilling his movements. I needed him *right there*. "Don't move." And when I released my hold on him, he released too.

I adjusted to the dark, and now the silence. His soft breath the one noise filling the room. Until there was nothing—no sound, no sight, only dreams.

A glimmer of light, one brighter than I usually woke to, pricked my eyes. I shifted in the bed, tried to stretch my arms over head, and resistance and warmth greeted me.

"Good morning," his voice was raspy.

“Good morning.” One eye pried open to stare at him. “I didn’t mean to stay till morning.”

“Why not?” There was a smile playing on his lips.

I had no response to that. Other than mentioning the obvious. *We aren’t there yet.* But as I woke in his bed bright and early a night after he fucked me to sleep would beg to differ. “Work.” It was the next best answer. One neither of us could refute.

“We should play hooky.” The words left his mouth with ease. Almost as if he’d been considering it the moments before I opened my eyes.

“Hooky?” I couldn’t remember the last time I skipped a day of work. When I didn’t have something planned on the calendar for weeks ahead. Oh, right. Never. “Have you met your aunt?” I laughed. “She’s a beast. I doubt sexing her nephew gives me any leeway to skip out on her morning meeting unplanned.”

His face twisted, and he admitted, “You have a point. Punctuality, responsibilities, obligations. I can imagine her thirty-minute spiel on it now. But it’s her determination that got us here now, so...” He trailed his finger down my stomach. “I won’t complain about that anymore.”

“What time is it anyway?”

He groaned. “Early.” Then he leaned down and kissed my belly button. “Enough time for us to start the day off right.” My stomach muffled his words.

I laughed. “As amazing as early morning sex sounds, I should get going.”

“Too bad.” He slid to the side and said, “I’ll call you a ride.”

I rested my head and mumbled, “Thanks.”

With the sunshine I could see his room. The art that ordained the walls. Canvases full of color, and shapes. “Nice art.” I pointed to the picture on my side of the bed. “What is

it?” My head tilted to the side trying to follow the curve of the line.

“A naked woman.”

Her chest hung low, her legs spread open, and the curve of her chin protruded. “I see it now.”

“One of my favorite artists.” A line traced along the side of my arm. “But she has nothing on the beauty laying in my bed.”

Our lips connected before I could either confirm or deny, or even accept the compliment. His vibrating phone was the only thing that stopped round two from commencing. The vibration saved me, but I’d need another to ward off the tension he caused with the softness of his lips. I fumbled out of the bed in search of my clothes. He laid watching each frantic movement, each intimate tug and pull of my underwear.

When I finished dressing, he asked, “Do you want to meet up tonight?”

“Another adventure to the other side?” I bit the side of my lip. “I’d like that.”

Fortunately for me, traffic wasn’t a beast, and getting dressed didn’t take forever. I made it into the office and sat at the conference room table before Janice stepped in. It wasn’t without panic coursing through me. A flushed face and sweaty armpits after running into the building.

“So that’s it.” Everly leaned over the side of her chair. “Your freshly fucked face.”

My mouth dropped open. Thankful for the moment to suck in more air, shocked in one look Everly knew my life. “What?”

“You fucked your boss’s nephew last night.” Her eyebrows did a choreographed dance. “How was it?”

Mind blowing. Earth shattering. World changing. Dream defining. “It’s been two years. I don’t know if I’d be a good judge.” And that was the truth. In the shower, I tried to imagine Chaz. Compare their kisses, licks, thrusts. And I

couldn't. But did that mean Luke was that good, he fucked all the memories from my thoughts? Or did comparisons have an expiration date?

It wasn't like I didn't think of Chaz's soft lips often. For months after the breakup, I did, as a matter of fact. Especially when my *alone time* needed a little inspiration. But since the first kiss with Luke, it was like Chaz's touch slipped from my memory.

Janice walked in and I focused on her words. Watched her eyes as they scanned the room. Listened as she detailed the day's tasks. Between the period of one sentence and the start of another, Luke was on my mind. The few hours since I rested in his arms weren't long enough to expire those thoughts. They were fresh. Vivid. And, *oh, God*, I had to clench my thighs together.

"So," Everly whispered, "do you think this could be a thing?"

I waited until Janice walked out of the room before I replied. I needed more than a whispered response, a simple word, to reply. It needed further explanation. "We are having fun..." And we were. I looked forward to finding every hidden gem the city had to offer if he wanted to show them to me. "But I told myself I'd never, ever put expectations on anything again. The situation with my ex taught me a good lesson. So, I can't say."

Everly stood from her seat and shrugged. "At least you got some. Now watch how this excruciatingly busy day will go by much easier."

CHAPTER

TEN

LUKE

If we weren't dating, how'd I explain introducing Journey to my friends? Asking her to join me someplace I knew they'd be. And how would I explain what we were? Yeah, we are both grown as hell, so I could have ignored the questions. Acted like the stares weren't directed at me. Or told them it's none of their business. Because it wasn't. Who I spent time with shouldn't matter to any of them.

My guys knew what the deal was and didn't question the moment I walked in with Journey on my side. They acted like she'd been there all along. A missing piece that somehow found its way back. All, "Hey, Journey," along with hugs I ensured didn't last too long.

But the chicks. Our homegirls? Naw. They weren't going to let my little non-introduction slide. Capri stared her down. Sucked on her straw before smacking her lips. "So... you are?"

Journey looked at her then to me, and I sighed. "I'm Journey."

Capri heard me when I said her name. I'm sure of that. But one of the longest standing girls in our little group had all the smoke, all the time. At first anyway. As soon as she hung with someone new a few times she became their biggest fan. But until then, it was guns ablaze. "And Luke is your what?"

Journey was a confident woman. I hardly ever saw her sweat. Didn't see her squirm under hard questions. But Capri

lit a fire that was a little different. Journey laughed nervously and ended up speechless.

“We are friends, Capri.” I warned, “Chill,” with a look her mama probably gave her when she was a kid.

“Friend my ass.” She pulled her straw back into her mouth before laughing. “You two aren’t fooling anyone in here.” She sat her drink on the bar then said, “But it’s cool, Luke. It’s about time you let someone snatch you up. Not like any of us weren’t trying.”

I choked. The whiskey I tried to swallow almost came out my nose. “Capri.” I coughed. “Quit playing.”

Journey stood wide-eyed until I could tell her, “Capri has a man.” I hooked my finger over my shoulder. “He’s probably somewhere,” I found him at the other end of the bar, “there he is.”

Capri didn’t stop though. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t try.” Her voice lowered, “Not like he wouldn’t be old news if you said the word.”

It’d been so long since the last time I introduced a girl to the group. I forgot how crazy they could be. “Let’s dance,” I said to Journey, stealing her away from Capri and the others laughing beside her. “Don’t worry about them. It’s never been nothing, never will be anything.”

Journey found the beat to the song and turned away from me, her ass rolling in circles. A look over her shoulder and I could guarantee she had nothing to worry about. Not with Capri and the rest of them anyway. “It’s fine. We haven’t established anything, so no big deal.” She hunched her shoulder then turned back and dipped her back a little lower.

I pulled her by the waist until her ear was near my mouth. “So, you counting me out?” *Out of what? Because neither of us wanted anything anyway. Right?* Her ass slid across my dick, and I growled. *Fuck that.* There was no counting me out. I was all the way in.

“Not yet.” Journey turned toward me. Her hand snaked around my neck, and she stared into my eyes. “I don’t want

you to think I'm pressuring you." Her lips spread into a half-smile. "Neither of us is trying to date, right?"

We could continue living that lie. Or we could fess up to what the hell was going on. Be one with reality and face the fact that we were dating, and if she continued rubbing on me like she was, we'd be exclusive. She'd be my girlfriend by fall. Forget what we said when we first met. Back when we controlled our day, our thoughts remained contained and not filled with each other. At least that's what I was on.

"Neither of us *was* trying to date." I emphasized, "Was. Bet Janice put some sort of voodoo magic on us because that seems to be changing."

The music couldn't contain Journey's laughter. It ricocheted off the ceiling beams, bounced between the walls, and filled everyone's ears with its cheer. "Has to be the case, because what is this?"

"This..." I pulled her closer. "Is me telling you that I'm not mad about it. Whatever she did to us. I'm not mad about it at all." I nipped the side of her neck. "I think I need to get us out of here though." The dick strain in my pants wouldn't survive another song. Not with the little space we had between us. I didn't need another drink, or more kicks and giggles with my people. I wanted time alone with Journey.

"Leave? Now? We haven't been here long." Journey protested until I shifted my waist. "On second thought." She pointed over her shoulder. "Think it'll upset your friends if we leave without saying goodbye?" She squeezed past the couple beside us, wedged between a group of women in the middle of the floor, then stood waiting for the bouncer to slide to the side at the exit.

"I'll shoot them a text later." I wrapped my fingers with hers and led us down the sidewalk. "On a Friday night, they'll be there for a while. Probably won't notice we left till it's time to leave anyway."

"Good." Journey grinned. "I wouldn't want to upset Capri. She's—"

“All bark, no bite. Don’t worry about her. Next time you see her she’ll be inviting you to hang with them.”

Journey’s step faltered a little. But I continued to my building. “I don’t know about that.” We waited for the elevator. “Stairs again?”

“You sure? Last time it looked like it might have taken you out.” I tucked her into my side and kissed the top of her head. The elevator doors opened, saving us both those extra steps. “Look at God.” I laughed as we entered the small space. In the corner of the elevator I yawned. “Excuse me.”

“Oh, so it’s you who couldn’t take those extra steps, huh?” She ran her hand down the side of my arm.

“Don’t worry, sleepiness won’t hinder my performance.” I licked my lips and leaned into her ear as the doors opened. “At all.”

She giggled and led me to my front door. Inside, we didn’t rush like our first time. I wasn’t stripping before the bedroom or fondling her against the wall. I walked us to the room. Slid her out of her shirt and watched her toe her pants off. I sat at the edge of the bed and pulled her toward me. I nuzzled her stomach and kissed her hips. I looked up at her and said, “That damn voodoo is serious, man.”

She blinked. “You think?” When her lip tugged between her teeth, it threw all caution to the wind.

I leaped from the bed and growled. “Oh, I know. And keep biting your lip like that and...” The sentence stopped and my lips did the rest of the explaining. Between her legs, up her stomach, around her nipples, down the side of her neck. And finally, when I looked up at her again, I said, “I could have you every day of the week.”

“I might let you.”

There was nothing left to say after that. My lips didn’t need to move any further, she was wet between the thighs, and I was rock hard. I slid on a condom and hovered over her body. Her hands rested on my chest, and I inched in. I watched

the expressions on her face change—closed eyes, lip between her teeth, head back, scrunched nose, and then a moan.

“Let me,” she whispered.

I cuffed her in my arms and pulled her on top of me. “It’s all yours.”

And she took it. Riding me slowly at first, adjusting to her new position. Then bucking her hips wildly until her head fell backward. It felt so good my eyes tried to shut, but I couldn’t stop watching her. Her titties bouncing, her hips winding, the bottom lip between her teeth. *Damn.*

A pulsating pussy and tightening thighs slowed her down. A low guttural moan escaped her mouth before her head fell to my chest. I thought it was over until her hips started to move again. Circling round and round until I found my end. I wrapped my arms around her back and kept us close, and my eyes finally shut.

“I probably shouldn’t stay.” Her voice lingered while her body shifted. “I have to volunteer in the morning.”

Volunteering. A word I despised after the one hundred hours I did years ago.

“I need to be at the community center at eight. It’ll be here before I know it. Sleeping next to you, I know I won’t want to move.”

I didn’t want to move, so I could relate. “That’s good you out here helping the community and what not...”

A cold breeze and a sticky dick wasn’t how I expected to wake up. The empty bed was another surprise. I propped myself up and looked to my side. *Where’d she go?* I squinted my eyes and turned away from the window.

I climbed out of bed to clean up, then to find Journey. The phone was at the bottom of a pile of clothes in the middle of the floor. I clicked her name and waited for her to answer as I stretched out over the bed.

“Good morning.” There was an echo behind her. “Sleep okay?”

“Slept fine. Woke up disappointed though. Where’d you go?” I shifted the pillow under my head.

“Early start. Volunteering soon. Remember?”

Volunteering. Right. “My bad. You were telling me something about it last night.”

She smacked her lips. “Then you fell asleep.”

At least I made it through the important part of the night. “Sorry. Where are you headed?”

“The community center for a financial literacy program. Would you like to join me?”

How on earth she had enough energy to be moving around, and chipper while doing it, I had no idea. “Not really. I want to cuddle my pillow and fall back asleep since I can’t wrap up around you.”

“It’s cool. Early morning starts on Saturday mornings aren’t for everyone.” There was disappointment in her voice. “I tried convincing people in college too.”

“Oh yeah?” I curled the pillow under my head. “Like who?”

“My roommates. My ex.” It rolled off her tongue and for the first time, I imagined her with someone else. Before then, it was as if she existed in the world only for me.

That’s crazy. “Ex? What happened with you two?”

“I wanted to move to Neveah City. He didn’t.”

“And long distance didn’t work?” I couldn’t imagine it. Not being able to hold my woman, kiss her at the end of the night, lay her on her back. Naw. Couldn’t be me either.

“Never tried. We couldn’t find a common ground, so long distance wasn’t feasible... forever.”

“Hmm...” I covered my mouth as a yawn trickled through. “I can’t blame him for not wanting to move to Neveah City though.” That came out with the haze of the yawn. It wasn’t a thought meant for her consumption.

“If you could be anywhere else in the world, where would it be?”

If only I knew where I wanted to be, I’d do my best to get there. “I haven’t put much thought into it, but I know ultimately here isn’t where I want to be.” Then I hurried, “But I’m not moving anytime soon though.”

“That’s good to know.” Her words were slow, thoughtful. Spell-breaking if the voodoo was a thing on the two of us. “I’ll call you later?”

“Yeah, do that.”

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

JOURNEY

One would say, there is no regret, only lessons. I'd agree if I was a fast learner. Somewhere in my DNA, a hard head formed. And the lesson I learned from my relationship with Chaz wasn't completely understood. Yeah, I wasn't diving head-first into my situation with Luke. I wasn't planning the flowers I'd carry down the aisle with him. Or thinking about kids, and the white picket fence. Or skyrise apartment we'd share in Neveah City.

One lesson stuck, to live in the now. But taking heed to red flags, I needed a little more living to fully digest that. Because the idea that Luke could up and move at any point waved in my face. The red flag at the beach when the surf was high couldn't be more obvious. Still, there I was tiptoeing out to the edge to stick my toes in.

Mama warned me about not listening all the time. Not sticking to my gut, which threw red flags after my conversation with Luke. Did I stop talking to him? No. Did I proceed with caution. Kinda. Was I still letting Luke work out every cobweb from my pussy? Absolutely.

So, maybe it wasn't the lesson of heartbreak I avoided. But the lesson of living without. Depriving myself of beautiful, orgasmic experiences. That's the lesson I learned *after* Chaz. And that one I locked in and wouldn't forget. Couldn't forget.

Except, if I was on the phone with my mom, then I didn't know orgasms existed. Didn't want to know about relationships, or dates. Because talking to my mom in her

single-life status erred on the side of awkward. Although she and my dad divorced years earlier, it still felt like I should call her and ask, “What’s Daddy doing?” Like I did when I first left for college. I expected she’d answer with a girlish laugh and tell me something random about their weekend.

I didn’t expect to hear, “You know, I’m loving the single life.” Exaggerating. “Now.”

For many of our conversations, I tried to stay away from the obvious. Mama, a beautiful woman, who I hoped had plenty of years ahead of her, wouldn’t stay single forever. Eventually, a man would cozy up beside her, and maybe one day she’d remarry.

“You know, it isn’t as bad as I feared it would be.” For a year after the divorce, Mama avoided all men. Her disdain for anyone of the opposite sex was evident. “The pool of men could be a little better...” her words trailed off.

Because Daddy, when he was a decent guy, was amazing. He maintained his appearance. Working out often, and hardly looked his age. But in the end that was his downfall. He looked half his age, and all type of women approached him.

Mama continued, “But I’m having fun flirting, and going out with them.”

Even though Daddy moved on. Had someone else. I wasn’t thrilled to hear about Mama finding someone to replace him. I held out hope that one day they could reconcile. Our family could be what it once was. It was crazy. To think Mama would go back to him. That she deserved anything less than someone who adored her. Someone who cherished her and valued their relationship.

I joked, “Mama, I’m not too excited to hear about you dating.” And it wasn’t only her. I hated to hear anything about my dad and the woman in his life. In fact, hearing about his relationship was worse. I wished him only misery and regret in his new relationship. *Wrong. But honest.*

“I could see how it’d be a little strange for you.” Thankfully, Mama didn’t ever force it. “Tell me about you

then. How are things going in *Neveah City*?” The name sounded mystical coming from her mouth. Mama knew exactly how much I wanted to live here. Visited a few times since I moved, and agreed it was a magical place.

“Work is still hectic. I’m working long hours, weekends sometimes.” I snickered. “What is it you always used to say, ‘Overworked, underpaid.’”

“Tried to tell you not to rush growing up. Not looking that hot now, is it?”

I looked out the window of my apartment and sighed. “Not exactly. But I’m still loving the work. And having my own money is a plus. Because there are so many restaurants. Seems like a new one pops up every other weekend. Events in the city are numerous. The other weekend me and the girls went to a vendor fair in the park.” I continued telling her about the new places I ventured out to. “Oh, and I have started to explore where the locals hang.”

“Locals?” she blurted. “Are you not a local yourself?”

“I should say original locals. Non-transplants to the city.” If Luke explained it, there was a great distinction between the two. “I’m still wandering around the city like an awestruck tourist.”

“Two years later...”

“There’s so much to see, it could be years before this place feels like *home*.” If it didn’t feel like home, where would home be? I didn’t talk to Mama about it because the place I expected to be home no longer welcomed me. Our childhood house sold. Mama moved back to her hometown. Daddy, Dre, and Monroe lived in Lake Side still, but none of their houses felt like home either. And my *home away from home*, Hill Mount, surely wasn’t somewhere that felt like home anymore.

“Keep that zeal for the city. As soon as you settle into it being like home, you may find you’re ready to leave.”

My entire face scrunched up. I shook my head side to side, then defended, “Naw. I don’t see that happening.”

But like everything else, Mama issued a warning, “And remember I told you to not rush growing up, and look where we are at. One day you’ll trust I know what I’m talking about.”

The park out the window said otherwise. But I didn’t argue with her about it. “Anyway, I’m still enjoying the city.”

“And how about the man you’re seeing?”

Except I never told her about Luke. It’d been two years since the last guy I told her about. *Who was she talking about?* “Who, Mama?” She could have had our conversation mixed up with her and Monroe’s. She sometimes did that. Blending facts from their conversation into ours.

“Whoever it is you are trying to avoid telling me about.”

My eyes stretched, and I eased away from the window. Away from my glimpse into the park. “What do you mean? Avoid telling you about a man?”

“Oh, I know my kids, honey. If you could tell me about the new paint on the side of the road right now you would. I don’t know why you wouldn’t want to tell me about someone new in your life. Blabbering on about everything but the obvious. I can’t see your face, but I recognize that joy in your voice. It’s been missing for a while.”

I sighed. I didn’t want my joy attached to a man. Single life was treating me well. Everything I enjoyed with Luke, I enjoyed alone. Granted, sex was an added bonus. But still, he wasn’t the center of my joy. “What you are hearing can’t be the result of me being happy all by myself?”

“Oh, it can. But is it?” Over the phone, it was easy to avoid Mama’s death stare.

If I wanted to tell a lie, it wasn’t recommended, but easier. She couldn’t read my face, although sometimes my voice faltered if one started to roll off my tongue. I went with the safer option. The one that wouldn’t backfire on me later. “I got so worked up over Chaz.” I didn’t need to remind her how we ended. She was there to help me pick up the pieces afterward. “I don’t want to make whatever it is with this new guy a

bigger deal than it needs to be. I couldn't stop talking about Chaz when we were together, and look what happened."

Two years ago, nobody could have told me that me and Chaz wouldn't be walking down the aisle together. That our college love story wouldn't blossom into a beautiful family with two kids. That his political aspirations wouldn't have me as his *first lady* at some point during our life. I would have never guessed we would have walked away from something that was so right. Something we worked hard to navigate, but still didn't end up on the same path.

"Journey, honey." Mama had that empathetic look on her face. The one with curled lips and half-lidded eyes. I could hear it in her voice when she said, "When you have something good going on in your life, you dive into it. Don't overthink it. Allow yourself to feel the joy. It may not last forever, it may not be the greatest you'll ever experience. But you must allow yourself to have that moment." Then she concluded, "Even if that means you talk about that man, whoever he is, to whoever will listen, whenever they'll listen. You talk about him. Because, baby, when Mama finds a man who brings me a glimmer of joy." She scoffed. "You better believe you won't be able to tell me nothing about not wanting to hear about me dating. I won't be able to shut up."

"Aw, Mama." A tear pricked my eye. "When it happens for you I'll be ready to hear all about it."

"Good. Now tell me about this man." I imagined her propping herself up, alert, and ready to hear about Luke.

"So, it's Janice's nephew. She introduced us."

"Skirt," Mama screeched. "Excuse me. Janice as in the woman you're always talking about? From work? Your boss?"

"I know. Weird. But she was very persistent. I hesitated because I thought he'd be a white boy."

"Would that be so bad?"

"Wait... Mom, have you—?" It was my turn to prop myself up and listen.

“A few have asked me out, and I haven’t turned them down.” Then the laughter left her voice. “Now could they stick around? Maybe not. But God put a little something extra in some of these white men.”

“Oh, Mama.” I shook my head. “If it works. It works.”

“Tell me more about your HR problem waiting to happen.” Her loud laughter surpassed the speaker of my phone.

I had to wait till she finished to tell her more about him. “His name is Luke. He’s a graphic designer. A creative. Outgoing. Extremely sexy.” Those were the highlights.

“That’s all the good.” She said, “I’ve learned that nobody is perfect. There’s something not that great about him, and all of us honestly.”

Talking to Mama felt like having a long conversation with one of my besties. “Well, he got kicked out of college. Doesn’t plan to go back.”

“Kicked out?” she repeated it again. “I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to tell her the reason but knew she’d ask. “He had drugs in his apartment.”

“No.” Her response was immediate, unwavering, final. “He’s not your guy. But have fun. Live in that joy for now. But you... no, Journey.”

“That’s his past. Didn’t you say none of us are perfect?”

The silence on her end meant she wasn’t going to speak on it further. I counted down the second before she swiftly changed the topic.

“Have you spoken to your father lately?” The most drastic switch even for her. My dad wasn’t someone she spoke of often, or at all.

“It’s been a while. I don’t keep up with him like I should.” Then I started to get that gut feeling like something was wrong. “Have you talked to him? Is something wrong?” I gripped my shirt and then calmed myself. She wouldn’t go the

entire conversation without first mentioning something was wrong. *Right?*

“I haven’t talked to him. A few friends from Lake Side make it a point to give me a summary of his life when we speak. As if I need them keeping tabs on him for me.”

“That must be awkward. But what’d they say?”

“Tell me about it.” She groaned. “Anyway, you should call him. Check on him.” When I was in college she’d say something similar. Not for any reason, so I trusted it wasn’t anything to worry about.

“Okay, I’ll call him.”

“Alright, girl, your Mama has a hot date.” She whispered, “With a white man.” She laughed hard into the phone again. “I’ll tell you how it goes.”

“Love you, Mama.”

When we were off the phone, I started to call Daddy. But first, the missed texts from Luke.

Luke: Meet me for dessert?

I grabbed my purse before responding, “Absolutely.” On my way out the door, I sent Daddy a text.

Journey: Daddy, we should catch up soon.

The text sat unanswered, and by the time I made it to Luke, I stopped checking for his response. On a Saturday night, I could only assume his *little girlfriend* had him out and about. *Oh well, I tried.*

“I’m telling you,” Luke said as he pulled me into his arms, “this is the best place for dessert.”

If the scents rolling from the door were any indication, knowing the place existed was a detriment to my waistline. “I bet. I can smell the creamy butter from here.” I tried to peek past him. “And that display.” The cakes, cookies, and pies had my mouth watering. But the noise coming from up the street stopped me from walking in. “What’s that?” Loud chants

continued. “Is that a protest?” I snaked my head behind Luke to get a better look.

“I can’t tell you how many I’ve seen in the city.” He shrugged. “I wouldn’t doubt that’s exactly what it is.”

“Ever participate?” I asked.

“Not really.” The look on his face was completely unfazed. No wrinkle or worry in sight.

I couldn’t imagine Chaz standing around with unrest nearby. He would have at least walked down to see what was going on. *Luke is not Chaz*. And he’d proven that in more ways than one.

“C’mon, let’s get inside before the line gets long.”

I looked over his shoulder one last time, then followed him through the door.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

LUKE

As badly as I wanted to pace. To walk back and forth across the marble floors of the lobby, I stayed seated. There were glass walls surrounding the space. The receptionist watched me, and the other candidates sat nearby. Nobody needed to see me fall apart. I'd gone over my presentation several times. Pitching to the head of marketing would be a breeze if it went as I practiced it.

The speech I prepared in the beginning wasn't the one I'd deliver. The original changed more times than I could count. The last change happened late the night before. After rehearsing it with Journey, she had a suggestion that made it sound even better. So, I made it. But now that I was in the office, I regretted the last-minute change. The thought was too fresh, and I didn't want to make the mistake of forgetting it. Or stuttering over the words, which would be worse.

My hands bounced in my lap. If I couldn't pace, I could at least do that without anyone noticing. Except the guy across from me couldn't stop staring. His suit, black like mine, a matching tie, and white shirt underneath. He didn't look like a creative at all. Instead of the standard, starched white shirt, I rocked a bright yellow polo. And I nixed the tie. Something else that made Journey a little skeptical when I told her, but the look sold me.

Looking at the guy across from me though, I second-guessed my choice. I should have gone for something more professional. As buttoned up as the receptionist looked, it

might have been the best option. It was too late though. I only had a few minutes before someone would be calling me back into a room. A few minutes to brief the potential client on my website refresh ideas. My logo re-design. Everything I planned rested on my laptop in my bag near my feet. But my feet did everything but rest. They bounced.

I rung my hands around each other. Tried to absorb the moisture on my palms. No luck.

The presentation played in my head. And under my breath I rehearsed the words I'd use to describe my ideas. Then I heard my name and hopped from the seat. An older guy, with a buttoned-up shirt and tie, stood at the door waiting on me. My eyes cut to the guy in the lobby, who looked more prepared than me—at least with his outfit. I straightened my back and proceeded through the door anyway.

“Mr. Ellis, I'm Jake Griffith. I'm excited to hear your presentation today.” His straight teeth glistened, and his thin lips nearly disappeared when upturned. “We could use a refresh,” he lowered his voice, “Leave it to these people and we'd keep the one-page design for decades to come.”

“I wouldn't call it the worst I've ever seen.” I eased into a comfortable stride beside him.

When we reached the conference room, a few of Jake's colleagues awaited us. He made introductions before all eyes were on me expectantly.

The first slide of my presentation mirrored on the big screen. “A company expanding as rapidly as yours deserves an outstanding online presence. It should represent the hard work and effort that happens between these walls.” I clicked through a few slides, demonstrated the website. There wasn't a round of applause, or gasps, but the three people in the room looked satisfied. “And this,” I saved the best for last, “is your new logo.” I remembered Journey's suggestion to compare it to the original. “The current logo has straight lines and various colors.” I flipped to the original. “It's reminiscent of what was. The boundaries you all are hoping to overcome are now represented by the fluidity in the new logo.” I flipped to it

again. “And the minimal color allows more applications. You can place your logo on anything. Therefore, anyone can see themselves with you.”

The only woman in the room, a younger lady who didn’t move her finger from her chin, nodded. “I like it,” she said to her colleagues. “It could work.”

“Tell us about yourself,” Jake said. “Where’d you graduate?”

I heard this company needed design work from a friend. Someone who was working on their product launch and suggested they could use a rebrand. When he recommended me, they reached out. I didn’t send them a résumé. Didn’t talk to anyone beforehand. Didn’t share my start-up story.

If they liked my work, that should have sufficed. But when I said, “I didn’t graduate from college,” the faces in the room turned from me. The other two stared at Jake. It got uncomfortable for a minute and may have been the reason for the meeting ending soon after.

“Okay, we’ll give you a call,” was their line as I exited the conference room. But not a single person in there looked like they’d be the one to pick up the phone to dial my number.

The whole walk to my office stretched that uncomfortable feeling for me. I held onto it for the rest of the day. Each person who tried talking to me received the consequences of that *we’ll give you a call*. Shortened responses and sideways glances were the only things I gave.

Penelope, a woman on my team, didn’t appreciate the side-eye. My one-word responses didn’t calm her nerves about our impending project. And when she asked, “You good?” What could I say?

I didn’t spend the night putting in extra hours for the project. I hadn’t spent the week leading up to it on the business that paid me. I dedicated every spare moment to the pitch. The pitch that ended with a *we’ll give you call*. Besides, I couldn’t tell Penelope I was working on a side project. Something that

would effectively launch my company and end my time with her.

“Yeah, why?” I knew why. Because of the grim look I gave her when she followed me into the breakroom.

She leaned against the counter and shot laser beams at the side of my face till I looked her way. “Why?” she scoffed as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Because you are acting a little *off*.”

Penelope was persistent. “I’m good.” I held my coffee cup in the air. Without the extra dose of caffeine, the rest of the day would be hard to maneuver. “Need a little extra today.”

“Long night?” Penelope was a little older. How old was a mystery because she’d never tell. But she acted like an auntie. Always giving advice nobody asked for. Speaking in parables nobody understood. “As if you doubted the rise of the sun.”

I sipped my coffee and told her, “I need to get to my desk.” Because what?

From behind me she shouted, “Hope you are ready for *our* presentation.” The way she stressed the word might have been my imagination being a little too bold. If she knew something about my extracurricular activities it wasn’t because I gave her any hint.

“All good over here,” I assured her before rounding the corner. At my desk though, my project wasn’t something I jumped into. I didn’t pull up the slide deck and rehearse my words like I did for my pitch. I didn’t zoom in on my logo design to perfect every detail. I stared at my phone. In case that *we’ll call you* actually came through.

It didn’t. At least not by the end of that day. When my phone finally vibrated, I wasn’t as excited to see the name on my screen. Not like I’d been every other time Journey called. I also didn’t want to give Journey the same energy I gave everyone in my office. She didn’t deserve that.

But her chipper, “How’d it go?” fortified with sunshine and hope hit me in the gut.

“They said they’d call me.” I failed to meet half the energy she gave me. My words were somewhere in the gutter, surrounded by sewer water and doubt.

Still hanging on to opportunity, Journey said, “That’s great. You must’ve knocked it out the park.”

I bunted the ball, and the pitcher threw it to first before my foot stepped on the base. “Not exactly.”

“But it went well?” Only a corner of her optimism chipped away. Her voice still carried mainly cheer, and lots of hope. “You made it through the presentation? I know I have a hard time talking through slides. Whenever your aunt suggests I be the one to brief the client I damn near freeze.”

“It wasn’t the presentation.” I said, “The questions after.” It was one question. Because they had no chance to ask others. Didn’t ask about my rate, the schedule, how soon I could get started. “Asked where I graduated college.”

“And?”

“Told them I didn’t.”

“But your work speaks for itself. That shouldn’t matter.” She didn’t see the look on Jake’s face when he realized the error in his assumption.

“It’ll forever be the one mistake I can’t overcome. The one thing I can’t get beyond. No matter how hard I’m out here trying. It’ll be the thing that holds me back.” I crossed the street on the way to the lounge. I needed a drink and didn’t care if it was the crappy craft beer Xavier and Jordan lined up for. “Like a degree would make me any better at these designs than I already am.”

“What if that wasn’t it at all?”

I huffed. “Tell me one mistake you made that has changed your life...” She couldn’t tell me it wouldn’t matter. Not if she had nothing to compare it to. Unless she was living in the aftermath of a bad decision, then how could she understand?

An answer didn’t fly out of her mouth. It confirmed what I thought about Journey. She did everything right. Never made a

bad decision and lived up to everything her parents hoped she'd be. New city, job of her dreams, living the life.

“Exactly,” I said, “You have nothing. Never had to overcome anything.”

I heard the gasp over the cars passing by. “I’m far from perfect. Have I made mistakes? Of course I have. Things I wished would have gone differently. No doubt. Didn’t study for a test and failed. A few times. Put too much pressure on past relationships that led to arguments I could have lived without. Naive about things going on around me? I’m still recovering from that.”

Had drugs in your apartment and a wild party? Nope. “So nothing life changing. None of what you said would stop you from reaching your goals. Chasing your dreams.”

“Because you can’t compare it to what you’re going through, is it any less of an experience for me?” A dark cloud crowded the sunshine in her voice. “Why does it sound like you are mad *at me* because I can’t relate? If it was as life altering for you as you’ve described, why would you want me to?”

I clutched my fist beside me. “You’re right. I wouldn’t want anyone, not even my worst enemy, to go through this shit. I should go before I stick my foot further in my mouth though.”

“Alright.”

Lightning could have struck because her single word sent a shock through me as if it did. I hung up the phone and looked through the window of the lounge. Xavier and Jordan were already at the bar. But I turned and walked away. A beer wasn’t going to fix the *mistakes* I made.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOURNEY

There was a *D* I didn't miss in my two years of being single. The dick brought joy, but the disappointment, what could I say about that? Did it contradict all the amazing dick Luke could give me? Was disappointment worth any argument, disagreement, or salty ass attitude?

I'd be willing to go out, far on the limb, and say it wasn't. If I had to kick the *D*'s from my life, and dick got caught up in the elimination, oh well. I spent half the night replaying my conversation with Luke. Trying to find the turn we took from decent to deprived. The moment that he put his *foot in his mouth*. It was the moment he asked what mistake I made.

I could have given him one. Something I questioned only once a month now. A long way from the minute-by-minute contemplation I had when it first happened. Slowly fading out of my conscience. Until I'm hit with a question like his. It was a mistake I questioned the minute Luke asked. Would Chaz have asked me something like that? Would he have been upset with me for something that went bad in his day? I doubt it. I couldn't imagine a time we argued about that. In all the times he had issues with the board, or in his classes, couldn't figure out what job he'd do after college. Not any of those times.

Sitting in my cubicle, I thought, maybe I should have considered staying in Hill Mount. A future with Chaz could have been bright.

"Journey," Everly sang my name, "is it coffee thirty yet?" She bounced into my cubicle and stared at me. "Oh shit." Her

eyes dropped to my lap. “What is going on with you?” Her finger floated in front of my face. “The glow is gone. And this is.” She backed away. “Are you sick?”

Or a future with Chaz could have dimmed every possible hope I had for my future. I smirked. “No, I’m not sick.” Could I call what I was going through an illness? My mind sure as hell felt unwell. The thoughts cycled, and my mind was on a frenzy. The what-ifs weren’t only related to my past, and Chaz, but to Luke too.

“Janice asked you to stay late again?”

I frowned because that would be terrible. But thankfully, it wasn’t the issue either. “No.”

“Okay, I only have three guesses, and this next one I can give you as we walk.” She snapped her fingers. “Come on, let’s go.” Her bob bounced behind her as she walked from my cubicle. “Let me guess,” she looked to her side as I shuffled to catch up with her, “it’s Luke. Guy problems always look like the flu.” She joked, “We be sick of their shit, huh?”

I iterated, “Sick of it,” loudly as we stepped out of the building. “I don’t even know what happened. In a blink we went from bliss to bullshit.”

Everly laughed. “Girl, what has it been, a month or two? That might be a record.”

If whatever me and Luke were doing was still fresh, we were a little early to be hitting the realistic stage. The one where the person shines the true light on themselves. I argued, “Or, maybe I’m not as naive anymore. I don’t ignore the obvious.” I did ignore the fact that Luke hates Neveah City. “Well, kinda.”

“Or, Auntie Janice knew she had a fluke in Luke, and was trying her hardest to get him married off.”

I laughed. “A fluke in Luke. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to not think of that when I hear his name now. That’s if I ever want to hear his name again.”

She cringed before opening the door to the coffee shop. “That bad? What’d buddy do?”

“Have you ever had something bad happen to you, and you wanted everyone around to have the same fate? Like you stub your toe and now everyone must stub their toe too?”

Everly’s eyes danced side to side. “Is that a trick question?” Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure I should answer.” She laughed nervously. “Because sometimes.” She looked away. “Is that bad?”

I rolled my eyes. “Bad example. Point being, he’s had a bad situation happen to him. Yesterday something reminded him of it. And because I never had something similar happen to me, I’m the villain.”

“You?” She pointed her finger as she inched up in the line. “The villain. He said something happened because of you?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Okay, well, how’d you get cast as the villain if you weren’t auditioning?”

I loved Everly and all her dramatics. In a way she reminded me of Monroe. Monroe has been living the drama life since we were kids. I could imagine her being as dramatic with this situation about Luke too.

The conversation with Luke replayed, and I rolled my head. “Exactly. How? That’s what I’m questioning now. How’d I turn into the bad guy in his mess? I don’t understand. I can’t try to understand. And now I don’t want to understand.”

Everly approached the counter, raising a church finger as she ordered. “It’s that *you don’t want to stage* that a man never wants to reach. Because a woman will do a whole lot, if she has the desire. As soon as it’s gone though.” Her head hung as she slid so effortlessly to the side—still on the dramatics.

“I’ll have an iced mocha, please.” I reached in my wallet for my card.

At the sound of “Iced mocha” repeated by the barista, my eyes raised to meet his. Not anything like Malachi from Hillside. But the hitch in the barista’s voice, and the slight

smile on his face, reminded me of him. “I got you,” and that too.

I’m pretty sure the coffee shops weren’t training their baristas to tell customers to say, “I got you.” But those three simple words were better than, “My pleasure.” It held such a significant weight to the person who needed to be *got*. If that made any sense. It was always in my lowest point when those words lifted me higher. It was no different staring at the man as he waited for me to hand him my card.

Everly asked, “Are you paying?” as she nudged my side.

“Of course.” I handed my card over and smiled a little wider. “Thank you.” He wouldn’t know for what, but he deserved extra praise for the sentiment he gave me that afternoon. Not like he could do anything about my situation. He couldn’t resolve men and their ways. Couldn’t cure Luke of his *flaw*. But he could hand me an iced mocha, and a smile. Because it was that simple, right? Life... I didn’t have to deliberate about the shortcomings. The misguided words of those around me. The thesis level dissertation of what I could have said could get thrown in the trash.

“Whoa.” Everly popped her head in front of mine. “What is happening right now in that pretty head of yours?” The crinkle in her nose and close inspection of my face made me laugh. “The glow returned.” Her head tilted sideways and her gaze didn’t leave my face. “Did your boo text? A long-winded, well-thought-out apology?” The door of the coffee shop opened. “Did you catch a glance of him.” Her head snaked toward the entrance. “Looks like all the despair erased from your face.” She fluttered her hands. “That was magic.”

“It’s silly.”

“Do tell. I’d like to know how to banish some of the shit my boyfriend says on occasion that diminishes my glow too.” Her hand bent on her hip.

“The barista. He reminds me of someone. A guy I used to know. I ran into him on some of my worst days. Some low moments. And each time, hardly knowing what I was going through, he’d offer some basic words. Words that didn’t

directly apply but made me re-evaluate the situation and ease up the pressure.”

Everly nodded as she swiped our cups from the counter. “And this guy...” She took a brief sip of her coffee before blowing it. “He wasn’t your ex? Because if not, he sounds fucking amazing. He shoulda been your ex. Or could he be your future? Could he replace Luke?” Her eyes danced. “He should if he made that glow bounce back with only a memory of him. Like damn. What could he do with a little,” her hips swayed, “more?”

Who knows where Malachi ended up after college. Surely, he’s not still a barista on campus. He should have graduated and moved on to something else. Somewhere else. Where in the world he could be, who knows. But the two of us making something happen. “That’d be like finding gold at the end of the rainbow. Very unlikely.”

“I’ve seen a leprechaun or two. Don’t count it out.” She swayed a hand above her head. “The universe has a strange way of making things work.”

“Except.” I lifted my finger in the air. “There’s Luke. Shouldn’t I be thinking about him?”

Everly’s face soured. “Not until he apologizes. As far as I’m concerned,” she declared as if Luke was her man, her problem, “we are moving on until further notice. Which means... the mystery man with kind words is fair game. I can fill you in on my manifestation prayers if you’d like. They’ve done wonders with...” She frowned. “As of today,” her eyes lifted, “nothing. But it’s on the way.” She stopped at an empty table. “Let’s sit.” Her wrist tilted up. “We can take a few minutes for us.”

We couldn’t. But we did. I sat across from her, circling the rim of my coffee cup with my finger.

I’d never sat on the couch of a therapist’s office, but I imagined the look Everly gave me would be much like a therapist’s. I knew she was about to pry open my life, and demand I expose every nook and cranny. “Tell me more about this guy.”

Everly was good at avoiding work. Her obsession with my past was her latest escape route. I didn't mind because for once I didn't care if Janice lingered. Or asked me to stay late in the office. I needed a break.

"Okay, ironically..." I smiled at the memory. Not of the spilled coffee but of that day. I had no idea which guy would become my guy. But I was hopeful. "I met him the same day I met my ex. I went into the coffee shop first where he was the barista, then outside Chaz spilled coffee down my shirt."

"And you ended up with the clumsy one?" Everly's head jerked back. "How?"

I never thought of it that way. Didn't consider that Chaz was the bad choice, if I had one to make. "Chaz pursued me. The other guy, Malachi, he never said much other than his calming words."

"And you make it a point to only accept what's offered often?"

The sleeve on my coffee cup slipped to the table, making a soft clinking sound. I moved it back into position then carefully looked at it before I asked, "What do you mean?" I thought of the times I turned down the many men offered to me. The many *hookups*, I casually ignored. "I turned down all the men thrown my way these last two years." With one small exception. The one who had me reconsidering my choices.

"Okay, fair." She wagged her head and sipped from her cup. "I'm saying, sometimes you have to go after what you want. Not what someone is giving you." She hunched her shoulders. "Even with Luke, if you want more, go after it. If he isn't giving you what you want, go after something else. Don't only take what he's willing to give. Because sometimes people will give the minimum. Even when they have much more." She sucked her teeth and rotated her head. "Especially men."

I eased back in my seat. Settled on the fact we were staying for a while. "I did that. With my ex. I went after what I wanted. Still didn't get it. In the end, he gave what he had to give. Not mad about it, but facts."

Her face deflated. “There’s a reason I didn’t go into the psychology field. It’s hard convincing people of anything.” She huffed. “In short. Answer this single question. Does Luke, especially after this recent incident, have everything you desire in a man? Thinking back to your ex. To this mystery man, Malachi.” She winked. “Does he stand up? Is he worth your time, or hardly worth it?”

The only way I compared Luke to Chaz was sexually. If he pleased me, but that was hard to compare because my memory didn’t hold on to all the ways Chaz pleased me. “With my ex, he stimulated my mind.” A spray of coffee didn’t hit my face only because Everly’s hand covered her mouth first. *Thank God.*

“Girl, that’s something right there. Stimulate my mind and the rest will follow.” She snapped her fingers then wiped them across a napkin. “Does Luke not do that? Is he incapable of spitting a sentence to make your panties wet without a single sexual innuendo?”

My lips pouted. “Yes. No, I mean...”

“Okay, Ms. Intellect. I don’t think Luke is your guy. He can be your right now thing. But that forever love.” She shook her head. “We all need that someone to get us from the ex to the next. And Luke is your in between.”

“My in between.” It lifted the weight off my shoulders. Gave me space to breathe in my chest. I didn’t need to evaluate life with someone like him. If he was doing what he needed to get done in the now, I didn’t need to worry about the later. “I’m going to think of every guy from now until whenever as my in between. It kinda makes it easier that way.”

“Until he becomes your forever.” Her phone vibrated and she sighed. “Okay, guess we should get back. Dawn said Janice is taking roll and found us missing.” She laughed. “Damn woman is always micro-managing.”

As a recap, Everly said, “So what’d we learn today?” No longer wearing her therapist hat and trading it in for a teacher’s. “Men can be our in between. So, Luke the fluke can be your dickmatizer. He can put it down after he talks about

the weather and nothing greater.” Laughter followed us out of the coffee shop.

The hot coffee was not welcome amongst the sweltering heat. The two were fighting to win a battle of who could make me sweat the most as we crossed the busy street. But after all the overthinking I did the night before, the morning of, I needed a little pick me up. So, I tipped it to my mouth gently, and took a lingering sip. “Not the solution to world hunger, but a solution still the same.”

She laughed. “I aim to please, and please to aim.” We exchanged a look. Mine more questioning than her doe-eyed stare. “I have no idea. Don’t even ask. Especially now that I know you are a woman of *words*. You probably analyze every syllable and decompose every sentence. Finding fault or fire in the adverbs and adjectives.” She snapped her fingers and whispered, “Did that make your panties wet?”

Laughter had me bent over as we walked into the building and made our way to the elevator. We climbed off and I was still laughing. Tears leaving my eyes as I made it to my cubicle. “I needed that laugh.” I looked at Everly and the smirk on her face. “Thank you.”

She scoffed and flicked her bob to the side. “Whatever.”

That all ended when I heard the high-pitched squeal of Janice’s voice. “Journey?”

Everly dashed away before Janice appeared at my cubicle. Staring at my coffee cup, she asked, “Needed a break?”

I sighed. “Something like that.”

“Is it a problem with my nephew?” A single eyebrow lifted into the air. She waved her hand when I didn’t respond. “I know everything, dear. You don’t have to say a word. I didn’t come to talk about him. I need you to stay late tonight to help with a report the client needs first thing in the morning. Is that a problem?”

Considering I didn’t have plans with *her nephew*, I said, “Not a problem.”

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

LUKE

Sunday dinner with my family was the perfect way to end any week. Even a week full of disappointment and more mistakes. Other than “good morning” texts between me and Journey, our conversations were light. It was my fault though. I fucked up.

With Janice staring me down from across the table, I thought about how badly everything went left. Me and Journey were in a good place before that meeting. After, I still had groveling I needed to do. I wasn’t used to the 90’s way of pleading with a woman to take me back. So, the words weren’t coming out as easy as they should. Instead of “good morning,” I could have told her, “I’m sorry.” But a text didn’t seem sincere. And calling—I hadn’t worked my way back to that yet.

“So.” Janice placed her fork beside her plate, and Uncle Cori shifted. Nobody was safe when she started a sentence with *so*. “Luke—”

Any number of things could come after she pointed her eyes to me. She could give me news about a client or tell me the latest way I fucked up. But nothing could lead back to Journey, so I lifted my head and waited.

“How are things with you and Journey?” Her big reveal caught a few stares, including mine. Because months after that initial call, why would she think the two of us were even a thing? Why had there been at least ten Sunday dinners since and she never mentioned her name? Because Janice was Janice. The woman had a knack for random shit.

I couldn't respond before Nori and Lyric pounced.

Nori asking, "Who is Journey?" Her name tumbling from her lips like a crumb.

Lyric added, "Journey. Nice name."

The two of them became invested. Anytime someone had a new *whatever*, the women of my family grew interested. Even if to pick apart the dynamics and walk away like nothing happened. They wanted to predict who'd be the first down the aisle. But I played no parts in the predicting, or the challenge. The two of them could be celebrating their ten-year wedding anniversary before I considered joining them in marriage.

Lyric didn't stop with the admiration of her name though. Asking, "Why isn't she here? It's been a while since you've brought anyone to dinner."

I corrected, "It's been never."

She laughed and admitted, "Okay, never. But now is as good a time as any. Where is she?"

"Luke," Mama clapped, "is there someone for us to meet?"

Growing up in a house full of women was a task. I thought it benefited me by knowing how women think, and what they wanted. But I was no closer to solving them as I was to finding a cure for cancer. "No, Mama. There isn't someone for you to meet." There was disappoint not only in her eyes, but Janice's too.

"Janice introduced you..." Dad leaned on the table. "So is she..." He often did that when amongst all the women he wanted me to read his mind. Figure out what he was pitching, catch it, and throw it back. But when I couldn't deliver, he blurted, "Is she white?"

"Trevor," Janice gasped. "I can hear you. I'm right here." Her cheeks blushed. It wasn't rare, her cheeks blushed around us often. "Would it be so bad if I introduced him to a white woman?"

It was a rhetorical question nobody around the table felt inclined to answer.

“Oh, really?” Janice boasted. “Are we that bad?” Her eyes locked onto Uncle Cori, who wouldn’t have an answer either. For obvious reasons, it was best for him to plead the fifth. To dismiss himself from judgment.

Everyone around the table laughed. Everyone except Uncle Cori. He ate his food cautiously. His fork scraping his plate when he was out of peas.

“Journey is cool,” I offered to the staring women. “She’s a beautiful, Black queen.” I tried not to laugh at the smirk on Lyric’s face. “She has a lot going for her. Works with Aunt Janice at the firm.”

Nori blurts, “And she likes you? Janice,” she leaned over the table, “did you bribe her with a raise to talk to him?”

Janice’s appalled face looked a lot like the shocked face she had trying to defend white women. One and the same. “Of course not. That’d be against some sort of regulation, I’m sure.” Then as if she realized the whole situation was an inch away from HR’s front door, she shot a glance toward Cori. She watched as he picked apart his biscuit, crumb by crumb. “But Luke.” She needed to deflect quickly. “Journey hasn’t looked as happy this week. Are you two still—”

“Janice.” I mimicked her shocked face, stretching my eyes as far as they could go. “I don’t think it’s appropriate to talk about my sex life at the dinner table.”

That did it. Janice’s cheeks turned as red as I’d ever seen them. But I caught Mama’s napkin on the side of my head too.

“Luke,” Nori blurted, “you are dumb.” We were all bent over laughing. Well, except for Janice and Uncle Cori. He had a few crumbs of his biscuit left.

I helped the girls clear the table. They left me in the kitchen with Mama washing the dishes though. “Any luck with Janice sending you clients? I thought you had a goal of starting your agency by the end of the year.” She looked at the clock. “You only have a few months left.”

“Mama, it’s nine o’clock on Sunday,” I iterated, looking at the clock myself.

Her sideways glance told me to get serious. Next would be a wayward warning through gritted teeth. I didn't let it go that far though.

“That is still the goal. But so far, Janice has only sent Journey.” Not that I could complain about that. “But I can't be mad about it.” I didn't let her know about the meeting I had that week. There was no need to clue her in on what wasn't working. Until I could give her something that was, I'd keep that to myself.

Mama handed me a dish to put away. “Don't let that little thing in your pants distract you from your goals, son.” Then another dish. “You need to stay on track.”

Out of nowhere, like the voice of God, Dad said, “And out of our pockets. Still paying for a degree you never got.”

The double team? I wasn't prepared to go to battle with them. They caught me off guard and on a full stomach. The fight wasn't fair. “And on that note, I should get out of here.” I kissed Mama's cheek. “Otherwise, I'm sure Dad will read me the exact amount I owe, down to the penny.”

I dapped Dad up, and he pulled me into a hug. “Twenty-four thousand, five hundred and fifty-six. Not including how much your little incident cost us.”

Little incident. I couldn't begin counting how much it cost me. “Alright, thanks for dinner.” I waved on my way out the door.

When I settled at home, “When Will I See You Smile Again” found its way into my shuffle. I sang along with the lyrics before I realized what happened. I was singing, “I apologize,” then hung my head. I looked up to my ceiling and said, “Okay, it's time.” I don't even know how the 90's throwback made it onto my list. I sure as hell didn't put it there. That's what I get for avoiding the paid subscription. Random songs made it to my speakers.

Either way, I clicked Journey's name on my phone and lowered the music. What could be worse? Me begging? Or me begging with that song in the background?

“Luke?” There was tiredness, or agitation, in her voice.

I closed my eyes and took a breath before I asked, “Busy?”

There was shuffling, then a hushed, “No. You okay?”

Maybe she was asleep. It was the first time I caught her in a somber mood. Every other time we spoke at night she was wide awake. “Yeah, I’m good. Were you sleep?”

“Something like that.”

There was a soft laugh and the tension building in my jaw released. Okay, maybe we weren’t starting off below the ground. I didn’t have to bust out the lyrics and *please, baby, please*.

“I was an ass the other day. I want to apologize for that entire conversation.” There was more. “I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on you.”

“Were you upset that I couldn’t completely relate to you? Because that—”

“Was fucked up too. I apologize for saying that you haven’t made any mistakes. For making it seem like a flaw.” *Damn, I did the most.* Maybe I did need the *please, baby, please* after all. “I’m sorry.”

“I accept your apology.” A long yawn she ended with a soft moan. “Sorry.”

“Is there anything I can do to make you smile at work tomorrow?” Okay, so the ’90s had a little something I could reference in a bind. But I was tapping out at begging. “Janice mentioned you haven’t seemed like yourself lately.”

“Oh yeah?” She laughs. “She’d know. With her watchful eye. So nose. Did you tell her we were...” The pause wasn’t accompanied by a yawn this time. And when she spoke again, I realized she was searching for a word to describe what we were doing. “Tell her about us?”

“Nope. Didn’t mention it. But she made it a point to bring up to the family during Sunday dinner tonight.”

“And that’s why you’re calling?”

Shit. “No.” I couldn’t tell her it was Bell Biv DeVoe who deserved the credit. “I’m calling because I needed to apologize. I had to get over myself. Man up.” My chest poking out wasn’t necessary. Not like she could see me.

“And not because Janice is extremely persuasive in everything she does?” She teased, “I could imagine her cornering you at dinner and threatening you to make sure I was good. Last thing she needs is an *unhappy employee.*”

“Someone is waking up.”

“Had to shake the sleep off.” Then she said, “I do have something you could do for me.”

Now we are talking. My lips curved into a smile, and my dick, well it stretched the crotch of my pants. “What you got?”

“There is a festival in the park this weekend. You can take me.”

And limp. “A festival in the park is not what I expected you to say.” That’s what I get for not being specific. “But if that’ll make you smile, I’m there.”

“Good.” The change in her tone was noticeable. “I’ll see you at my place on Saturday.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOURNEY

Dickmatize. As I pulled the yellow dress over my head, the word bounced around my head. I repeated it under my breath as I strapped on my sandals. I chanted it, cheer style, as I packed my purse. “D I C K...” I looked up to the ceiling. “M A T I Z E.”

The in between. It was the only thing that got me beyond the apology Luke gave. Because I was there for a good time, not a long time. His admission to being an ass was cool. Certainly necessary. But a red flag for sure. At least he acknowledged his truth. Respected me enough to apologize. Would he be anything more than an upgrade to my vibrator? It wasn't looking like it.

I twirled to the window. The vendor tents and people crowded my view of the lake. The music flowing from the stage had me excited to join them. Mid-sway, a loud knock made me pause. I looked over my shoulder and laughed at myself. “Luke.”

He looked like a dickmatizer when I opened the door too. “Hey there.” His tongue traced his lips. “Damn, it's been a long week.” He walked toward me, and I stepped backward. “That yellow dress is...” His words faltered as he continued following me into the house. The door shut behind him and he cornered me against the kitchen counter where my purse sat. “Can I kiss you?” His whisper tickled the back of my neck.

“Yes,” I breathed. *Chill.* You've kissed a man before. *Hell, you've kissed Luke before.*

His soft lips reminded me how sweet those kisses were. How intimate when his tongue entered my mouth. How dickmatizing when his arm reached around my waist, and my pussy throbbed.

I rested my hand on his chest and strained my neck away from him. “We better leave before we never do.” I assured him, “We can pick this up after the festival.” I trailed my hand down his torso, and let it rest in his hand.

Instead of moving, he rested his forehead on mine. “Promise?”

I tapped my fingers across the back of his hand, settled my beating heart, and urged my pussy to relax. “Of course.” Then I looked at him and said, “We have a little making up to do.”

“Sure the hell do.”

I led him to the door, and he smacked my ass. *Dickmatize.*

The two of us strolled, hand-in-hand, along the sidewalk. We were the couple I watched from the window two years prior. As we stopped at a local vendor with carved wood, I said, “Isn’t this amazing?”

Luke wasn’t as impressed but still managed a small smile. “Yeah.”

“It’ll look cute on my coffee table, don’t you think?” I held up the carved wood. “Next to the clay vase we made.”

His head tilted to the side and his nose crinkled. There was a no hidden in his eyes. “Next to the vase?” He pointed to the carving in my hand. “Like on the table. Side-by-side?”

“Uh huh.”

He bit his lip and I almost forgot I was holding wood in my hand. My eyes traveled down to his crotch and stayed put.

“How about you move the vase to the kitchen, and put this by itself?”

My eyes snapped back up. “See, it’ll be perfect.” I pulled my wallet from my purse and announced. “I’ll take it.” After the woman wrapped my carving and handed me the bag, we

continued walking. “I can’t believe you’ve never been to this festival.”

“Now that I’m here, I can’t either.” He looked down at the couple of bags we acquired. “Supporting locals. Music. Food. It’s a vibe.”

“A vibe,” I agreed. The smell of teriyaki chicken had me joining the end of a long line. “Gotta have chicken on a stick.” I nudged his side and said, “And energy for later.”

Of all the things we saw in the park. Of the music, of the fresh air, of the kind people we met in passing, it was that reminder that had Luke smiling the widest.

“Yes to energy for later. How many sticks of chicken you need? Five, six?”

I laughed. “You’re silly.”

“You really like this festival stuff, huh?” He stared into my eyes.

“What gives it away?”

“You’re all heart eyed. Looking like the real-life representation of that emoji.” The tip of his finger rested on my nose. “It’s cute.”

Every walk in the park was a reminder of my dreams fulfilled. How could I not enjoy myself? Besides, who didn’t love summer festivals? Community gatherings. Shopping and food. It was a win all the way around. “It’s comforting.”

“What else brings you comfort?” He closed the small space between us as someone squeezed behind him. “Outside of festivals and this city park?”

“A good book. My mama’s lasagna.” I had to think of other things. Things I missed when it was only me in the confines of my apartment. “The holidays. Time with my family.”

“Do I bring you comfort?” The question hardly made it off his lips. Something he thought out loud but didn’t mean for me to hear. But after it was out of his mouth, he waited for an answer.

In the week since he messed up, I thought of him often. At first nothing but overthinking. Then trying to decide if we were ever going to get beyond the morning texts. Or if they'd eventually die off like everything else. After he apologized, I didn't crave the warmth his arms provided until Saturday came. "I'm not sure I've given you the opportunity to bring me comfort."

"Could you give me that opportunity?"

What would that look like? Immediately, I heard Malachi's words. It looked like not knowing what I was going through and offering kind words. Not asking to solve the problem, but not being the problem. It looked like support of what I wanted. It looked like Chaz letting me go to follow my dreams and wishing me well. "If you're willing, it won't hurt."

Without an explanation of what I needed, he said, "Thank you." Then we approached the window of the food truck and he placed an order for four teriyaki chickens on a stick. "Is that enough?"

It was. In more ways than one. "Yes."

We found a park bench vacated by a crying baby and a panicked mom. "Poor lady," I said as we occupied the seat.

"Can you imagine yourself with kids?" He settled back into the bench. "One day?"

Husband. Kids. Happy life. It was part of the formula I imagined for myself. But somehow I skipped one plus one and still got to two. I was as happy as I thought I'd be when I thought I needed the other two. Still, I imagined one day it would happen. "One day." I didn't tell him there was no rush to get there. "And you, do you want kids? One day?"

He nodded around an emptied stick. "One day. There's a long list of things I want to accomplish before they come along."

"Some people argue there is never a *right time*."

He laughed. "There's a righter time." He stretched his arm, the stick pointing in the distance. "Kids right now would cut your walk in the park short."

“You might be right.” I watched the kids in front of us. Each running through the crowd giving me anxiety for the sake of their parents.

“But,” Luke collected the trash from my hand, “there’s no harm in practicing. One day we’ll put those skills to the test.”

Laughing, we stood from the bench, and before we walked away, I asked, “There’s one thing I want to do before we leave the park.”

I could imagine Luke as a kid. His mama telling him he couldn’t play his game until after he finished his homework. The pout on his face noticeable, and kinda cute. “We aren’t finished yet?”

I shook my head and stood on my tippy toes. “Not yet.” My lips landed on his, hands wrapped around his neck, and I leaned in. Since the day I peered out of my apartment window and saw my beautiful view of the park with couples strolling past, I wanted to do this. *Kiss my man.*

When we pulled away he said, “We better get out of the park before I do something these little kids shouldn’t witness at their age.” He pecked my lips and stared down at me. “You good?”

I nodded gently. “Yeah, I’m good.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LUKE

The McDonald's arches—one of the most noticeable logos. Kids of all ages can see it from a mile away and know they want that same logo on a little box. They'll kick and scream to have the basic food and the cheap toy that comes along with it. God forbid their mama tells them they had food at home, or tells them they don't have McDonald's money. It's those arches that bring about all that emotion in a single car ride. A little trip to the store turns into much more if the kids spot the arches.

I should know. As a kid, I was like all the rest. Noticing the arches from miles away. Scoping out the passing buildings until I saw it. Who knew it'd be logos that'd be what I'd spend my time on day in and day out.

I wanted to be behind the emotion that came from a logo. To create a statement piece that could generate a desire to have whatever the company was selling. Even if it's only basic food, and a cheap toy.

Graphic designer wasn't a title I was familiar with when I was in school. I didn't exactly start out wanting to design logos, or help companies brand themselves. But I'd draw all the time. I didn't think much of it until a teacher in middle school looked over my shoulder. One day she told me I should join the art club.

Art club didn't exactly sound like something I'd do, but I heard her when she said my drawings were good. In high school, I took the drawing to the computer and learned how to

amplify my work. When someone asked what I wanted to do when I graduated all I could say was draw. It took a counselor telling me my options before I landed on graphic design. It wasn't until college that I discovered web design.

I didn't take it lightly when people didn't like my work though. What's that Erykah Badu said, "I'm an artist and I'm sensitive about my shit..." Well, that was me in the corner of the conference room trying to figure out how the dope ass logo I designed, the branding material I spent hours on, didn't illicit the 'oohs and ahhs' I expected.

The blank stares from my team, even Penelope with her many expressions, had none. It wasn't what I got from them typically. Most times, it was my design that was the star of a meeting. Amongst us all, mine was always chosen as top three to go before the client.

Hearing, "It's okay," didn't sit well with me.

I looked around the table and felt my blood boiling. The heat rising on my neck. Not one person negated Clark's opinion. Not like his was much better. His design looked the same as all his others. He had one color scheme, a few shapes he worked with, and a font he loved. We joked it was his *Clark* brand he tried to sell to every client.

"What do you think?" I crossed my arms over my chest. Waited on my manager to respond.

He couldn't look at me. Stared at the screen where the logo projected. "It doesn't meet the specs."

The other eyes in the room bounced around and never landed on me. Penelope picked at her notepad, flicking a corner of a page so she didn't have to make eye contact.

"Doesn't meet the specs?" The minimal specs weren't enough to build from. If we left it up to them, they would have a replica of what they had. What was the point of a rebrand if we were rinse, wash, and repeating? It wasn't my agency, and at mine, I'd never sell someone shit and call it gold. But because I was with them, I had to play by their rules. That's why it was more important for me to get my own shit.

“We’ll reconvene tomorrow. Go back to the drawing board. We only have two days before we meet with them.” My manager scanned the room then collected his laptop to leave.

In school, I didn’t do extra credit. I hardly did the required assignments. But in my career, I went above and beyond most times. The love for what I did drove me to be *that guy*. Committed to the outcome. As I stalked behind my manager, following him to his office, that’s what was on my mind. I’m committed.

“Yes?” He looked at me with his eyebrows bunched together. The white guy was cool. Most days he didn’t bother the team much. Didn’t micromanage and require check-ins between projects. He left us alone to be *creative*. We agreed it was best for the flow. “What’s up, Luke?” He settled into his seat.

I closed the door and stood instead of taking the seat across from him. “What kind of shit was that? My design was one of the best in the room. What do you mean it doesn’t meet the specs?” I huffed. “Did you see those specs? What’d they want us to do? Take their logo through the copy machine and hand it back?” I could have pumped the brakes. But I was going full speed ahead. “I’m not with giving them the bare minimum and expecting them to grin.”

“Do you want to come again? This time with a little less bass in your voice.” He stood, squaring his shoulders.

It was laughable. The passion I had for the project was real. But not real enough to knuckle up with my manager. “Am I lying though?” It was a valid question in my eyes. He could go on all day about specs. But when the project ended he’d need to justify the client’s satisfaction, or dissatisfaction. “Am I?”

“Luke,” his chest fell flat, “you’re a great designer but you can’t be out here designing what the hell you want. The customers have specifications. If the end product isn’t something we deem worthy, that’s not our business. Our business is ensuring the client gets what they paid for.”

“That’s not our business?” My voice raised higher. “So, you’d be proud for them to say we produced some bullshit?”

“Luke...”

I flipped my hand in the air and announced, “I’m going to lunch.” I could hear him laughing behind me as I opened the door.

“It’s 9:30,” he said as I left the room.

I walked past Penelope and the rest of my team straight out the door. Once the sunlight hit my skin, I realized they probably thought I quit. Stormed from the manager’s office. Or got fired. But then there’d be much more fanfare. An escort from security at least. It’s happened once since I joined the company. A man who hardly did shit. Turns out he was doing shit, gambling on the company computer. That wasn’t me. They couldn’t compare my passion to do what’s right to doing something wrong.

I needed time, a little space from my team, a sweet face, and optimistic voice. I could really use something else, something like we had the night after the festival. But at 9:30 in the morning I settled for, “Journey, you want to grab something to eat?” Our offices were only blocks away from each other. I was on my way to a spot between the two.

“Eat?” Her voice was neither cheerful nor optimistic. “Aren’t you at work?”

I failed on that part. Taking her out for lunch dates during the week. I’d need to change that. “I had a little tussle with my manager, and I walked out.” That sounded much worse than what happened in reality.

“A tussle? You walked out? You quit your job?”

“I’ll explain,” I offered. “Have time?”

“How about a coffee? I can run out for that.”

I agreed and made my way closer to her so she wouldn’t have to come far. “I’ll meet you at the coffee shop on the corner near your building.” When she walked in, I already had an iced mocha waiting for her.

“I got this for you.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for coming. I needed a sweet smile to shake off what happened.”

She delivered on the smile, but it didn’t stay long. When she asked, “So, you quit?” it was more like panic in her eyes.

“One thing about working for a design agency, everyone has an opinion. And I didn’t agree with theirs. I told my manager they were selling themselves short by doing the bare minimum. But no, I didn’t quit. I walked out after *talking* with him.”

“Talking with him? So, you didn’t quit, and will you have a job if you go back?” Her side-eye was almost as cute as her wide smile.

“Could be questionable. But I don’t think they’d fire me for telling the truth. I’m sure there’s someone higher up who’d agree.”

“So, going back, not agreeing with the way they do business. Doesn’t seem like a place you want to be. What’s next?”

“I wish I could go back and tell them I quit. I don’t have it that easy though. I have to go back. Until I can find clients of my own.” I smirked. “I’ll have to put up with their BS in the meantime.” I reached across the table and interlocked our fingers. “Don’t worry, I won’t be out here jobless.”

She laughed. “Oh, you can, if that’s what’ll bring you joy.” Her eyes peered over her coffee cup. “It wouldn’t bring me joy. But you gotta do you.”

“Thanks for meeting me.” I wagged my head. “Remember that comfort we talked about at the festival?”

“I do.”

“I understand that. When I was mad, you were the only person I wanted around me. Your smile. Your voice. Your warmth.” I lifted her hand to my mouth. “Some other things,” I looked over my shoulder, “I won’t mention in public. But I wanted to be around *you*. And only *you*.”

“You get it.” Her thumb rubbed the inside of my wrist. “There’s nothing like it.”

“Nothing like it.”

She tilted her wrist then frowned. “I should get back before Janice sends out a search team.” But she didn’t move. “Are you going to be okay?”

I stood from the seat to walk her out, and get back to the office myself. “I’m good. Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it.”

Her smile turned to something sinister. “Do you?” Her lip dipped between her teeth. “You appreciate me *coming*?”

I tugged her into my side and whispered, “I could show you if my auntie didn’t have a tracking device on you.”

On the sidewalk outside, I gave her another hug. Let it linger for a minute before I smacked her ass and told her, “I’ll see you later.” She hurried across the street, but I took my time getting back to my office. I sat at my desk with my ear buds tucked in my ear, not wanting to talk to anyone. To hear anyone. All I wanted to do was work on the damn design that would take minutes to trace and repurpose.

A hand waved in front of my face, and the nails extending from the fingers gave her away. “Luke,” Penelope said with one eye squinted, “you good?” She got a little closer and said, “Thought you finally did it. Walked up out of here and said eff these folks.”

I removed an ear bud and said, “My bills think otherwise.” I sighed. “But yeah, I’m good.”

“Good, because you’re a good designer.” She wagged her head. “Most of the time.”

“Man, get out of here.” I waved my hand and put my ear bud back in my ear.

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

JOURNEY

“Sometimes people are in your life because they need you.” The quote flashed across social media. I took a screenshot before my page refreshed and stared at it. Of all the people in my life, of all the people I’ve needed, I never considered someone needing me. Being a cheerleader on the sidelines had a whole new meaning.

If nobody else could understand that analogy, I knew Nia would. We spent years on the sidelines together. Cheering and chanting, encouraging our team to score more points. Entertaining the crowd so they’d cheer too. When I left college, I thought my cheer days were behind me. But as I sat on the phone with Nia I looked at the world in a different light. Or at least myself. I saw what I was doing differently. Saw how I approached people in a new way.

“You are a cheerleader. *We* are cheerleaders. Still?” Nia’s smack on the phone made me twinge. “You think that’s your thing? It’s not mine.” She laughed. “I don’t know if I want to walk through life cheering on everyone I meet. That’s a whole task. Especially when folks have a losing spirit like our football team did. You know how draining that was game after game...” Nia was on a rant I didn’t mind listening to as I thought about Luke.

“What if it isn’t for everyone? Only for the one assigned to you.”

“Journey?” Nia’s gentle voice cut through my thoughts. “You been smoking?”

I laughed. “No, why?”

“Those thoughts getting real deep over there. Might need to call someone to have eyes on you. Make sure you aren’t eating ‘shrooms or some shit. You know city folks like to experiment. Trust me, I know.”

I chuckled. “No, I’m just saying. I didn’t expect him. And although I am not sure where this is going, I’m starting to feel he needs me.”

“Now listen.” Nia’s voice mirrored somebody’s grandmama. “Don’t you be out here sacrificing yourself for some man.”

“Never that.” I explained, “He’s different. Nothing I expected at all, or ever. And still, he’s not someone I’m sure I need. But he might need me.”

“That was the point, right?” She reminded me, “You wanted to be out here with no expectations. Living life. No boundaries or whatever. Now you’ve messed around and found a purpose in life through him. I don’t know. Sounds like we are working backward.” Then she blurted, “Have you been watching Whitley and Dwayne again? Let me hear the background.”

“No.” The screen on my TV hadn’t been on in a while. Instead of staring at it, I had a full view of the park. The people walking, exercising, kids playing. It was as good as any show I could watch on TV. “I’m not watching TV. Haven’t watched the re-runs in a while,” I admitted.

“Good. We can’t return to those days. All those expectations you had for a bright future with Chaz. And now no expectations, well,” she smacked again, “thinking Luke can’t pull out a win because he isn’t someone you’d typically go for, is also setting up expectations. Expectations that nothing could proceed.”

Shrooms would have helped me decipher what she was saying. “Go with the flow.” I emphasized, “No matter where the flow leads. Is that what you mean?”

Her clap was as loud as it was on the sidelines. And when she said, “Exactly,” a bullhorn magnified her voice.

I had to tell her, “He’s a wild card though, Nia.” At least he wasn’t blaming me for the incident that led to him walking out of work. “The man walked out the office today after going off on the manager. And planned to return like nothing happened.”

“He’s passionate.” Her words didn’t skip a beat. I imagined she shrugged and continued digging into whatever snack she ate.

I needed a dictionary definition of passionate because what Nia claimed wasn’t what I thought it was. Irresponsible was more like it. Easy to anger fit his flippant attitude more. “Girl,” I said, “what can I do with that passion if he ups and quits his job?” Not like I needed his money. Not now. Present day. But say I did go with the flow, and the flow kept us together. The flow found us living under the same roof where his lack of money would affect me. “No, I like to keep my passion between the sheets and not in the office where I need a paycheck.”

“If that man quits his job, what does that have to do with you?” Nia should have been a lawyer. Her desire to debate weighed heavy on many conversations. I could see her in a courtroom, battling the plaintiff, defending her client.

I thought it was an obvious point. “It has everything to do with me.” I mumbled, “Duh.” What more was there to explain?

“Except...” the word drug on, echoing in the speaker, “not if you don’t have expectations. The word of the day is expectations. And we concluded you *are not* over there thinking this man is your Dwayne. He’s not your Mr. Big, or whoever you’ve been fantasizing about these days. If you are going with the flow, him having a job when you are paying your own bills has *nothing* to do with you.”

“No, of course not,” I stuttered. “I’m not thinking about him being my Dwayne...” I wasn’t. Not completely. “I mean, there’s thoughts of him being jobless and what that would mean—”

“Then you aren’t in the now.”

Fuck. “Okay. You’re right. The shit is hard. Very hard. But I’m not going to dwell on that.”

“Good. Stop tripping and let it be. Whatever this situation is going to be or not be. Whether the captain of his cheer squad, pumping his ass up as he moonwalks out of his job. Or if tomorrow you decide to say fuck this shit and throw in your pom poms. It is what it is.” She laughed. “Do yourself a favor and keep that kitchen stocked though. Learn how to cook.”

“What? Why?”

“In case the man ends up jobless and can’t take you on a date. The two of you can chill at your house with a good meal. Stream a movie and cuddle.”

“I hate you.” I laughed into the phone. “Cuddle... and you sound so serious.”

“And am.” She coughed, almost choking on whatever.

“You good?” I asked, knowing my only option would be to call an ambulance if she didn’t recover. “I’ll call 911 if your ass doesn’t stop choking over there.” I shout, “Drink some water.”

“Wait.” Her breathing heavy on the phone. “Turn the TV on. The news. National news.”

I searched the couch for the remote and clicked the TV on. “Why?” I flipped through the channels.

“I think your ex is on TV.”

None of that registered until the channel landed on the news. The chevron across the screen announcing, “Governor Bradford for Congress.” I read it aloud. “Governor Bradford is running for Congress?” None of it made sense. Two years after being governor seemed too soon to move on.

“Yeah, whatever, but isn’t that Chaz. Standing behind him?” She whistled. “Looking at that Bobcat showing out for us. Looking mighty fucking fine too. Shit.”

My eyes did their best to avoid the side of the screen. Tried everything to stay trained on Bradford. There was no avoiding Chaz when his hand outstretched to shake the governor's. The wide ass smile on his face confirmed what I saw. "That's him."

"See. This is you. You cheered that man all the way to the national fucking news. Look at him. Hold on to Luke, who knows what that passion will brew. Might be looking at the next..." She paused. "What is it he does again?"

Her words landed on my ears. I registered the syllables, her strong accent as she pronounced certain ones. I couldn't understand what she was saying though. Not with Chaz on my screen. Or leaving my screen as he and Bradford moved from the podium they stood on.

"I can't believe it." I was in conversation with myself. "He's doing it." Chaz never wanted all the attention on him. He wanted to support someone who was making an impact. I didn't agree with everything I heard about Bradford, but he had something Chaz found admirable. Otherwise, I know he wouldn't still be standing behind him. "I'm proud of him."

"I'mma give you a charm bracelet."

I looked at the phone, realizing Nia was still talking. "What?"

"To represent all these men you usher into greatness."

I sighed. *One day my dreams will come true too.* "I think I'll pass." A soft knock at the door kept me from dwelling on how many charms I'd collect before the man of my future arrived. "Hold on, someone is at the door."

Knocks at my door were rare. A neighbor occasionally brought over something random they wanted me to try—a brownie, a cake, fresh bread from the bakery. Because the gifts were always pleasing to my appetite, I answered. But when I pulled the door back, I didn't expect to see Luke standing there. *He's pleasing to the appetite too. But...* "Luke?"

"Busy?" The way he rubbed his hand over his mouth, lingered on his beard, and revealed his smile made me want to dig through boxes to find my pom poms.

“Ugh.” I held up my phone. Then uttered, “Nia, let me call you back.”

“Is that charm number two...” I could hear Nia trying to shout through the speaker of the phone.

“I brought these for you.” He held up a bouquet of sunflowers.

I reached my hands out for them. I did the same for my neighbors—with greedy anticipation for whatever they offered. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“Figured yellow was your color, and these reminded me of you and that yellow dress the other night.”

“Hmm,” I hummed as I led him to the kitchen. “I do love yellow.” *And unexpected visits from sexy ass men. Apparently.* “I didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“Hope you don’t mind me dropping by without calling first.” The serious look on his face had me worried.

Was that entire conversation with Nia a waste of our time? Was he about to put an end to our flow? *But with flowers?* “Is everything okay?”

His hands shoved deep into his pockets. “Can we talk?”

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

LUKE

The songwriters of the '90s must have had a Journey of their own. Someone who had them on some, "I really want to know your name." They penned songs about getting to know a woman; begging to be back in her graces; telling the world every dirty thought they had of her between the sheets. And I could relate. Because Journey had me wishing I could write the lyrics to the next Grammy-winning song. The way her coming to me earlier that day had me feeling afterward. It had me wanting to change up my skills. To use lyrics instead of art to conceptualize the thoughts I had of her.

I couldn't. Because I could neither write nor sing. The most I'd done was in a shower, reciting the lyrics of my playlist. I could have drawn a logo that represented what I was feeling. But that would have been more complex than a logo could contain. It would have had curves, and lines, and unidentified shapes. I'd need a color palette created for me. The standard variation wouldn't do.

What I'd do instead? I found myself in a flower shop after work. *A flower shop*. To buy this woman flowers to show up at her doorstep unexpectedly. To express what was going on in my head. Or better yet, my *heart*.

But seeing her face, the concern in her eyes, the thin line created by her nonexistent smile. I couldn't think of the words to express myself. Then fumbled over the ones to ask her how she felt. To gauge if she was feeling me, or if I was on an

island by myself. I settled for, “I appreciate you coming earlier today.”

“Sounded like you could use an ear. In person.” The smile started to break the barrier.

“You know I said I didn’t want you to count me out.” I cleared my throat and looked toward the small window. “Would it be fair to ask if you can count me in?”

“You know...” Her hand rested on my knee. Her fingers soft and delicate. “I enjoy spending time with you—” She turned toward the couch, searching for something.

“What happened?”

“It’s my phone.” She said, still searching, “It’s been vibrating for a few minutes. I better check it.” It lingered in her hands before she announced, “My sister,” with a creased brow.

The phone was to her ear, and her head nodding. The glow in her face leaving with each second that passed. Till finally, her eyes stretched, and she said, “I’m coming. I’ll figure out how I can get there soon.” She was on her feet before she hung up the phone. “Call me if anything changes before I get there.”

“Is everything okay?” I stood in front of her. Reaching out for her hands. “Journey, what’s going on?” The desperation in her face meant something happened. A call from her sister, the commitment to *get there*, I could only imagine the worst. I waited for her to give me details.

Her hand went through her hair, and she blinked heavy. Shaking her head then breathing hard, she said, “It’s my dad. He’s in the hospital.”

I didn’t venture out into the ocean often. I swam in pools mostly. But there was this feeling that came over me. Waves crashing over my head, taking me under with the tide. “Shit. Okay.” I tried to think of words. Solutions. Find a way to help her. “Where? I can take you,” I offered without knowing how far he was. How we’d get there. If she needed to be there though, I was willing to do whatever it took to get her there.

“Lake Side,” she said as she moved around the apartment grabbing her laptop. “It’s not close. I’ll find a flight.”

“Last minute. It might be a grip.” What I wouldn’t do to pull out a credit card with no limit to tell her to buy the next flight out, whatever the price. Put it on *my card*. But I didn’t have it like that. Not yet. The next best thing I could offer was, “I can drive you there.”

Her hands went to her face as it shook back and forth. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Good. Because you didn’t. I offered. I can be back here in an hour ready to leave.” For an emergency, it took her too long to decide she’d accept my offer. “Pack a bag,” I said to her blank stare. “I’ll be back.”

I told Journey I needed an hour, but I did my damndest to throw shit in my bag as quick as possible. Collecting my toothbrush, I called my manager. After walking out the office, getting *a little* loud with him, it wasn’t the best timing. But an emergency is an emergency.

“Hey,” I scrambled when he answered, “I have to get out of town tonight. An emergency. I won’t be in the office tomorrow.” I threw everything I needed in a bag and grabbed my work laptop. “I’ll try to get online when I get settled.”

“Luke.” There was a loud, exaggerated sigh. Not what I needed as I tried to rush from my house. A, “I hope everything is fine,” would do. But who was I kidding? My manager wasn’t the type to care. “After today Luke, I’m starting to wonder if this is working for you.”

“Man, it’s an emergency. Bad timing, I know, but—”

“Okay. When you’re back let’s revisit today.”

“Let’s.” I wanted nothing more than to forget it all. Returning to work after a drive to *Lake Side*, the situation would likely feel less important to discuss. But if it got me off the phone, whatever. “Thanks.” I hung up before he could request anything else.

Standing at Journey’s door again reminded me why I showed up the first time. I wanted to know if she felt anything.

But with her dad in the hospital, that didn't matter. I raised my hand to the door, but she pulled it back before I could knock. A bag over her shoulder, keys in hand.

“Going somewhere?”

“Was going to wait downstairs for you.” Her hands went up. “I couldn't stand still.”

“C'mon.” I grabbed the bag from her arm. “Let's go.” I didn't want to state the obvious about the long car ride. How hours in the car would feel like an eternity we inched toward slowly. “I wish our first road trip together was on better terms...”

She laughed nervously, if that's what I could call it. “Yeah, me too. Not to mention you meeting my family for the first time.” Her jaw tensed. “Will you be okay with that?”

“Meeting your family for the first time?” As we climbed onto the elevator, air escaped my lungs. “I didn't think about that.” Her dad is in the hospital. Her sister called. *What would I expect?* To get her to the hospital and sit outside? “I mean, you work with my people every day.” I meant *people* in the lightest term possible. I wouldn't consider Janice someone I'd introduce anyone to. In the event we were meeting families or what not. But it felt like the easiest comparison to make the situation not feel as heavy. “They can't be any worse than Janice, right?” Could anyone be worse than her?

“God no,” she huffed before shaking her head. “Sorry. I know that's your *auntie*.” We both exchanged a look. “Speaking of your auntie, I didn't exactly call her.” She bit the side of her lip then asked, “Did you talk to your manager?” Her words walked across eggshells, an attempt not to crack a single one.

“Yeah, told him it was an emergency.”

“An emergency.” Since taking the call from her sister I didn't see her shed a tear. Not until that moment as we stepped off the elevator. “Gosh, I hope he's going to be okay.”

Journey didn't speak much about her family. They were somewhat a mystery to me. But a six-hour car ride was as

good a time as any to get to know more about her. *Come and talk to me...*

“Mama told me to call him. I texted.” Her eyes clenched closed. “Why didn’t I call?”

We didn’t have time to waste. But the last thing I needed was her spazzing out in the passenger seat as I navigated the highway. “Hey.” I pulled her into my chest. “Breathe. We are going to get there, and you can talk as much as you need.” I wasn’t one to pray often, but I said something quick, something that’d let God know I needed Him to show up for her. Even if he wasn’t showing up for me how I wanted.

I kissed her forehead and said, “Get in, let’s get you there.”

She sat in the seat, and her feet shuffled against the floor mat. Her ass shifted in the seat a few times, and she couldn’t find a place for her hands to rest. “I have all this nervous energy.”

If it were a different time, not an emergency with her dad, I’d suggest something for her to rid that energy. But I couldn’t. I pulled the car from the parking spot and said, “Find some music that’ll relax you.”

She shuffled through my phone before saying, “Oh, and the address, I should enter the address to the hospital.” Her words sputtered out.

Six hours and thirty minutes is what the screen told us it would take to travel from Neveah City to Lake Side. “Thank you, again, Luke.” She stared out the window.

“It’s nothing.” I stared at the road ahead as the city lights behind us began to dim.

Journey played a R&B playlist. Something smooth, but recent. She didn’t venture back decades to play some of the forever hits. The songs playing had us both singing along, under our breath of course. I would have loved to hear her sing a little louder. From the hums and soft melody, I wanted to hear more. But the relaxed way she eased into the seat and rested her head, I didn’t want to disturb her.

An hour into the ride, I asked, “Need a break? Restroom? Food?” Considering we didn’t pack the car with snacks, my stomach started to grumble. “I could use a snack. Or something.”

It must have caught Journey off guard because her head raised from the seat. “Food. Right.” She fitted her hands in her lap. “I didn’t eat dinner tonight.” It was an afterthought. “I should eat.”

“Let’s eat.” The next exit, I pulled off and announced our options. “We have fried chicken or hamburgers.”

“Either works for me.”

“Can’t ever go wrong with fried chicken.” I navigated to the drive-thru of the Lucky Cluck. “Wherever we are,” I looked around at the people in the parking lot, “I hope they know how to season the meat.”

That made Journey laugh a little. A small smile as she said, “Now that’s a risk we are taking.”

I rolled to the front and would swear the woman at the window looked like someone who served me food in the high school cafeteria. She looked like she had at least a dozen grandkids at home, and she ensured all had a meal to fill their bellies every Sunday. Me and Journey exchanged a look when I handed over my card to pay. When the woman handed me the bag, the smell of fried chicken filled the car. Grease leaked through the bottom and Journey placed the bag on the floor.

She warned, “Either this will be the best meal of our lives, or we’ll need a bed next to my dad when we arrive.”

Speaking of her dad. “Your family.” I grabbed a wing and took a bite. “What are you going to say when they ask who I am?” It was the best damn chicken I ever placed in my mouth. “Damn, this is good. Remember the Lucky Cluck on our way home.”

“It is pretty good. And my family...” She chewed slowly. Either enjoying the taste or avoiding the answer.

“I mean, I don’t think your dad would want to hear we are fuck buddies.” The moment it rolled off my tongue I wanted to

retract it. The sunflowers, the surprise visit, it was to get us beyond the sex-only situation. But because she didn't have a chance to answer that question, we were stuck in fuck buddy territory. "Unless Pops is cool like that." I frowned. "But what dad would be cool with that?" I questioned myself, and any future children I'd have. "I wouldn't be. Even if I lived life as a rolling stone. I wouldn't want *my daughter* to be with one. Or one herself."

Journey laughed. "You want my answer?"

"Yeah. Maybe the further down the road we travel the more nervous I'm getting about meeting your dad."

"We tell my dad and nosey siblings that we are getting to know each other." She wiped a napkin across her lips. "No need to mention we've had sex. Or how often. Not that you've made me moan on more occasions than I can count."

I should have listened without chicken in my mouth. The Lucky Cluck drumstick, seasoned to perfection, almost took me out. I coughed then let the remnants travel down my throat. "Oh. That's good. We keep it simple."

"Keep it simple." She winked.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

JOURNEY

Stretching my feet forward and my arms over head should feel more relaxed. But as I tried to get comfortable, I bumped my arm against something hard. My eyes opened slightly to find what had snuck into my bed. I opened my eyes a little more when I saw the darkness of the night—up close and personal. Not through the blinds covering my window. *What?* I shifted again, and when I couldn't move further my hand felt along the strap over my chest. *Huh?*

I blinked a little harder. Then turned my head and saw the profile of Luke's face. *Luke?* The steering wheel reminded me we were in his car. He was driving us to Lake Side. The facts rolled in like a tsunami. Thoughts crashing like the waves. "Shit. I fell asleep." On road trips, I always kept the driver in mind, never wanting to leave them awake alone. When we were kids, and my dad was driving, Mama always made sure one of us stayed up with Daddy.

Daddy. That phone call from Monroe threw me. I knew one day my parents' health would start to fail them. I assumed I had decades before that became a problem though.

"Yeah, been over there snoring for hours." Luke laughed. "I can hardly hear the music over the rumble from your nose."

I wiped a hand over my face. "Has it been that long?" The GPS didn't have hours remaining. "I can drive us the rest of the way," I offered. "You can get some rest." I imagined tiredness started to kick in for him too.

“The last thirty minutes.” He covered his yawn then shook it away. “I got it.”

I blurted, “Oh my goodness. Why didn’t you wake me up?” There was an ache in my chest. “I feel so bad.”

“You’re headed home to visit your dad in the hospital.” His voice was calm, a little edgy. “I assume that’s a lot of stress. A good nap was necessary. What’d I look like waking you up?”

I scoffed. “Ensuring you didn’t fall asleep. That’s what.”

He shook his head. “I offered to drive you. Not to be driven.” His hand rested on my thigh. “Relax, I’ll get us there.”

My body wasn’t good at taking commands. Resting when told didn’t come without push back. But Luke’s words had my shoulders sinking and my face easing. “Wow,” I announced, “I don’t know if my body has ever responded that easily to rest.”

“You saying my words did that?”

“I guess they did...” I stared out the window. My mind needed a similar command. *Chill*. I swatted away thoughts of meeting Luke down the aisle. In six hours, he went from being the in between guy I cheered for, to the guy I could imagine at the end of an aisle. That whole hero for the damsel in distress must have had some type of magic. My mind didn’t chill. She picked sides, and it wasn’t mine. Then as if she needed Luke to know she was on his team, a true ride or die, I blurted her allegiance. “You know, you’re pretty amazing.” *Oh, God*.

His shoulders lifted to his ears before falling back down his sides. “I think it about myself all the time. But it’s nice to hear from you.” His tongue licked across his lips and another body part joined team Luke.

Fuck. I crossed one leg over the other. I had to keep her under wraps before I blurted something obscene this time.

“Tell me something about your dad.”

My heart melted. It wasn’t completely frozen before but needed a little warming up. As the drops of water dripped

from the chambers of my heart, I asked, “You want to know about my dad?”

“Of course.” His eyebrows inched together. “Why wouldn’t I?”

I hadn’t thought about his dad, or his mama either. Didn’t ask too many questions about his childhood or their current relationship. It was obvious what happened though. In my fear of rushing toward the future, I failed to learn about Luke as a whole person. I didn’t dig deep into him, get to know what made him the person he is. “Crazy question,” I admitted. “My dad...” What could I share about him? “He’s pretty chill for the most part. But I have to admit,” a lump formed in my chest, “I don’t know much about him these days. Since the divorce, we don’t talk often.” It wasn’t something I was proud of. Over time the wedge grew between us, and I didn’t do my part to remove it. “It was hard to deal with seeing my mom so hurt.” I shared, “My dad cheated on her.”

I imagined sitting in the circle at AA was difficult. That describing your challenges out loud were hard. As hard as talking about my dad’s scandalous affair. It was hard. Something I wanted to reject as part of our family narrative. “Talking to my dad, at first, felt like betraying my mom in some way. Then over time, it became easier to not talk to him at all.” Or for him to not talk to me. Because he wasn’t blowing up my phone either.

Luke was quiet, and the admission echoed through my mind as I waited for him to ask more questions. To get to know my dad through me. Because my dad wasn’t all bad. He had a good side. He had redeeming qualities, *right?*

Then Luke shared, “My parents divorced when I was young.”

How’d I not know that? A simple fact I would have learned if I cared to ask. Or to listen.

“Since my mom re-married, my stepdad filled the role my dad wasn’t trying to support. He still comes around occasionally. And when he does, I feel bad for not being as close to him as I am to my stepdad.” He covered the small

yawn that escaped. “I stopped blaming myself as I got older. If my dad wanted a better relationship he had the opportunity to show up more.”

I whispered, “True.” Then I announced, “It sucks, right? That they don’t do more. I wish in some way my dad tried to make up for the hurt. Not sure he realizes how bad he’s hurt us. His kids.” I clicked on my phone and scrolled to the last message I sent my dad. “I hope I have the chance for this all to get resolved.” I didn’t want to think of the worst-case scenario. One that’d leave me with a stack of regret.

“You’re doing your best now. You didn’t have to get to him. You could have stayed back. But you’re an amazing daughter.” His finger strummed the cloth of my leggings.

I sighed. “Yeah, I still love the old man with everything I have.”

Luke’s smile was wide as he said, “That’s admirable.” He nudged his head toward the side of the road. “Our exit is close.”

“About our *situation*...”

He chuckled. “Situation. Makes it sound forbidden. Unwanted. Something we have to get rid of, or hide in the depths of a deep, dark cave.”

I shook my head. “That bad?”

His shoulder lifted. “A little.”

“I don’t think we’ll be able to convince them you are only someone who is getting to know me. Not when you hopped in a car and drove me six hours one way to get here.”

“Think the other guys you are sexing wouldn’t do the same?” His eyes were on me, but I couldn’t read him. I didn’t know if he thought that seriously, and if he was digging for information, or he was joking.

I cut out all suspicion and said, “I couldn’t guess because you are the only one.”

“So, what’re you thinking a better intro would be?”

My fingers fidgeted like I held onto a little spinner or something. I couldn't keep them or my fast-beating heart still. I didn't know what to call him, but knew we stepped beyond *getting to know each other*. No matter if I was captain of his cheer squad, or if he was my in between, if we lasted for a few months or a lifetime. We were more...

But I couldn't find the words to describe what we represented.

"Can't say it?" He had a sly look on his face as he pulled into a parking spot. "Let me help, so we don't waste time out here." He leaned in closer. "Tell them I'm your man."

I bit the side of my mouth and nodded. Staring into his eyes, I said, "Okay. I'll tell them you're my man." *My man, my man, man...* After two years since the last one, I thought the upgrade would fill me with more excitement.

His lips met mine, and as we separated, I blamed the lack of excitement on our location. *The hospital*. That had to be it.

CHAPTER

TWENTY

LUKE

I drove *my girl* six hours to visit her dad in the hospital. Couldn't nobody tell me shit as we walked into the hospital. The size of my chest on extra-large, as I held my shoulders back and head high.

A man rushing toward us wrapped Journey in his arms and I jerked my head back. I held my tongue and watched wide-eyed as the hug came to a quick end.

That sudden upgrade from fuck buddy to *boyfriend* had me on high alert. Anyone getting close to Journey had me feeling some type of way. Especially a man. But I had to check myself and remember we were in the hospital. Maybe he was a cousin, uncle, friend of the family.

As she said, "Luke, this is my brother, Dre..." I stalled on the word *brother*. I didn't know much about Journey's family. I learned of her sister that night when she called to give the news. The divorce of her parents on the long drive. Were there other siblings I wasn't aware of? I didn't mention my two sisters to Journey either. Was that a flaw in our early relationship? Should we know more about each other? Would someone in her family quiz me? Would mine quiz her? I knew for sure my sisters would be on some dumb shit if given the opportunity. They were always on dumb shit.

"Dre, this is my boyfriend, Luke..." She looked up to me with a small smile. "He drove us down here when Monroe called last night." Journey stretched her neck as her brother stared me down. "Is she here?"

Her question went ignored, and I still had my chest puffed out ready to fight for her honor. Brother or not, she asked a question. It deserved an answer.

Instead, Dre sized me up. Looked from my sneakers to my fade and asked, “Boyfriend?” With a hint of disbelief in his voice.

I looked over my shoulder because he must have been talking about somebody else. Questioning the person behind me and their relationship status, not mine, of his sister and *me*. Naw.

I cleared my throat and said, “Nice to meet you,” with my hand outstretched. He had one opportunity to course correct.

His hand landed in mine extra tough. “Nice to meet you.” His face looked eerily like Journey’s when he smiled. The genes in their family were strong. “Thanks for getting her here.”

The bubble had burst, and I let my chest deflate. “She wanted to be here.”

“Monroe’s in the room.” Dre walked ahead of us. “We can sit in the waiting room.” We sat close to each other, huddled in a corner of the room away from other waiting families, and sick people.

Journey’s voice was low when she asked, “Dre, what happened?”

“You know he thinks he has to keep up with the young dudes at the gym. Think he was taking some shit and sped up his heartbeat.” Dre’s face was somber.

I wished I would have kept mine the same. But my eyes stretched, and my mouth opened before the words came tumbling out. “Some shit?” I leaned forward, getting a better glimpse of Dre’s face. Giving him a full view of mine. “Damn. Really?” I couldn’t imagine my dad taking some *shit* to keep up with nobody at the gym. I assumed he’d be around the same age as Journey’s dad. I’d never take anything to boost my muscles. I made what I had work. Twenty years from now, I’d hate it for myself if that view changed.

Journey and Dre didn't take too kindly to my comment. Both not saying a word in response but giving me one mean ass side-eye that mimicked each other's.

I threw my hands up and reminded myself quickly that I was the *boyfriend* and just gained that title in the parking lot. I needed to tread lightly. I know me and my sisters would have similar reactions if somebody talked about our dad that way, either one of them. "My bad. I should have kept that to myself." Better yet not judged.

"Yeah," Dre said with smug look, "That would have been a good idea, my boy."

Shit. I wasn't making a good first impression on the brother. Hopefully there was still hope with her sister.

"This is a bizarre situation. I know," Dre admitted. "It's not the most ideal way to meet your *girl's* family." Dre shot Journey a questioning look. "Thought I would have learned of a boyfriend by now though. Did we not learn last time—"

Journey cut him off before he could continue. "My bad. Haven't found time to give you a rundown of my life lately."

I wasn't excited about Dre not knowing about me. But I was glad Journey didn't let the complete truth slip. It'd be hard to explain our sudden status change. From the looks of it, Dre was skeptical of Journey's relationships. We didn't need to give him more fuel for his doubt.

Dre grunted. "Uh huh." Then stared at me.

It was the stare down of the century. Considering my lack of sleep, blinks were few and far between anyway. I could watch him, in my sleep-induced trance, for hours. If he expected me to look away, it wasn't happening.

"Journey," I heard someone say over my shoulder, "you made it."

Dre looked away, and so did I. The woman, a little taller than Journey, had to be her sister. There was no way in hell she could be anything but her. The two could pass for twins.

“Wait.” Her sister looked toward me. “Who is this?” Her question wasn’t as alarming as Dre’s response. Maybe because we established Journey wasn’t sharing details of us with her family.

“Monroe.” Journey stood. “This is my boyfriend, Luke.”

Monroe flashed a beautiful smile. “Nice to meet you, Luke.” My name rolled from her tongue as she acquainted herself with it. “Daddy will be happy to see you.” She directed the statement toward Journey, and Journey only. But she didn’t leave me out and offered, “I’m sure he’ll be excited to meet you, Luke.” That time she played with my name. Toying with it at the tip of her tongue.

“What’d the doctor say?” Journey moved on to more pressing questions. The reason we were there having the meet-and-greet in the first place.

“It wasn’t a heart attack.” Monroe’s words hit me in the chest.

A relief I didn’t know I needed. But I learned from the first time I responded about their dad. I kept my words to myself and watched Journey and Dre signal their own relief.

“It’s angina, they think. He’ll stay for a couple of days for monitoring. We’ll need to stay on him though. Whatever he was doing that got him here will need to stop ASAP.”

Monroe reminded me of Nori—taking charge when given the opportunity. In our family, we let her take the lead. If she wanted that extra responsibility, she could have it. I didn’t want to imagine if either of my parents needed to be in the hospital. But if they were, I know for a fact Nori wouldn’t hesitate to put her foot down. If it was something she could do to help, she’d be front and center ready to do whatever. Then anything she didn’t want to do, she’d delegate to me and Lyric.

“Come on, Journey, come see him.” Monroe wrapped her arm around Journey’s shoulder. There was no doubt that despite looking like twins, Monroe was older. “Luke, you and Dre get to know each other.” Her smile served as a reminder that I had to play nice with their brother.

“Yeah, let’s get to know each other.” Dre’s hands fell between his legs as he leaned forward in the seat. “Got nothing but time and opportunity.”

Never had I ever wished I had my laptop and a stack of work to get to. I needed an excuse to run to the car and grab my machine. *To get to work*. But the dark skies outside would be a dead giveaway to my lies. The sun was still down, and any work I needed to do could wait until normal business hours. I was stuck with Dre and whatever questions he wanted to ask of me.

“Luke.” His tone sounded like an invested interviewer. He had stake in the questions he asked, and my answers would be the determining factor to me getting accepted, or not. It was familiar territory. Something I’d done a few times with my sister’s boyfriends. Or dudes that took them to their high school dances. “What do you do for a living?” He started off light.

I didn’t let my body get fooled though. My shoulders remained inched up my back, and my jaw tensed. “I’m a graphic designer.” Then I waited for the more demanding questions that I knew would follow.

“Graphic designer,” he repeated then stared at the door across from us. “An artist? Okay. How’s that going for you?”

I wanted to laugh to myself. If I told Dre I walked out of the office, I’m sure he’d quickly move my *resume* to the *pass pile*. “It’s going. I’d like to start my own agency soon.”

His lip curled up. “Hmmm... okay. Soon? How soon?”

Shit, I should have omitted that little fact. I hoped it would be an impressive tidbit. But the lack of details I had made it seem a little *pie in the sky* instead. “As soon as I’m able to pick up a few clients.” I didn’t frown at his smirk. If one of my sisters’ dudes would have said something similar, I would have laughed it off.

“An artist and a *dreamer*.”

It wasn’t the insult he thought it was. What’s life without dreaming? It’d be worse for me to say I was at a company and

content with being there for forty years, happy or not. I wouldn't knock anyone for dreaming. For wanting more, or better, or different.

It was time for me to turn the tables though. I needed to know a little more about the man drilling me. Put him in the hot seat for a minute. "What do you do, Dre?"

He pulled at the collar of his shirt before announcing, "I'm in technology."

That was a broad answer. He could be the person manufacturing a computer, or the man behind the latest hack against a foreign country. I didn't pry. If he felt it was an adequate answer, whatever. But I didn't follow up quick enough with my next question.

So, he took his chance. "Where'd you graduate college?"

"I didn't."

A smile flashed across his face, but when I didn't return the expression it faded. "Oh, you're serious? My bad. Didn't mean to assume you had to go to college." He was off balance. "Thought graphic designers went to college. Had a program to attend or what not. But then again, you are an artist so—"

"I was in college. But didn't finish." There was no way in hell I was introducing the other piece of that story. He'd have to have me bent backward with a bucket of water hovering over my head.

"Got it." He shifted his weight forward. Blocking his mouth to cover a yawn before he asked another question. "And your intentions with my sister."

Of all the questions he asked, it was the most important. It wasn't something I dwelled on in the parking lot before I proudly declared I was *her man*. I didn't think through what that meant. How it'd change our dynamics, or if it changed our dynamics. It meant that I cared for her. More than a man who wanted to fuck her and carry on. I landed on, "I want to keep her happy." There was no other side to that, no plans, or details I cared to share, or had tucked away. It was as simple as it sounded but meant something to me.

Dre's hand rested on my shoulder. "And that's all that matters, my boy." He grinned. "That's all I want to hear. And when I talk to her, I'm going to confirm you're doing that."

"I wouldn't expect anything less." My shoulders eased, and my jaw started to loosen. "I have two sisters of my own." In that moment, I related to Dre on a different level. We had a common responsibility. "I'd expect nothing less from the men in their lives."

"I'm glad we can understand each other."

I wiped a hand across my forehead when I felt the pressure from my shoulders leave, literally. "Should have been better prepared for an inquisition." I joked, "Wasn't exactly worried about it driving overnight to get here."

"My bad, man. You did us a solid getting her here. Thanks for that. But like you said, you can relate to having sisters. I'll wreck shop for those two." He watched the doors where Journey and Monroe disappeared earlier. "Anyone in my family really. I gotta make sure anyone trying to be in their lives understands that. You sound like a cool dude though. I won't ask what you have in mind long term because it's none of my business. But I do want to make sure you aren't about to waste her time." His head hung. "Last dude could have cut her loose when he realized there was no way they'd work out."

Last dude? "Cut her loose?" That wasn't the version I got from Journey. "Didn't they break up because she wanted to move though?" *And didn't want to work things out long distance.* I couldn't understand how they let go so easy. How the option didn't include at least trying. But then again, if they were doing that I wouldn't have had room to move in.

"She did." Dre's answer was firm. Then went a little further with, "Still, he knew he didn't want to move. He could have let her enjoy those last months of college single." He raised his hands. "Not sure why people try to maintain relationships in college anyway."

I couldn't argue that. I was only there for two years, and in those two years I didn't have a serious relationship. I wouldn't suspect two more years would have changed that. But the

difference was Journey. She made me want a girl when I *didn't want one*.

I uttered, "Let the right woman come along and things change."

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

JOURNEY

“So... your *boyfriend*?” Monroe’s question was a good distraction. Not good enough to block the sterile smell, the coldness, and machines beeping in the distance. No matter what she asked it didn’t change reality. That we were in the hospital with our dad. That he had a heart issue that who knows what it’d result in long term.

I breathed deeply before whispering, “Yes.” I turned to her and said, “But I’d rather not talk about that right now. Monroe, Daddy is in the hospital.” The tears that were teasing an appearance all night, finally decided it was their time to shine.

“Journey,” she blurted while wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me to an open space in the wall beside us. “Okay, I know this is a lot. Not something we’ve had to deal with before.” Her words were either coming slow, or everything around me was. I felt like we were in a warped reality. “But he’s going to be okay. The doctors do not suspect anything major will come of this.” She pulled me into her chest. “He’s going to be okay.” She straightened her arms out. Mama’s common pout was on Monroe’s lips. “But are you okay?” Mama would look at us the same way if we got hurt as kids. Before she applied a Band-Aid, a soft kiss to our *boo boo*, she’d give us that look.

“No. Why couldn’t he be with mama? She’d take care of him. You know that, right?” It wasn’t something that I thought of often. How their life would be as they got older without each other.

But Monroe's arched brow made me question if the thoughts were mine alone. "Let's go see Dad."

I walked beside her, unable to stop the constant flow of tears from my eyes. And when we walked into the room, Daddy laid on the bed made the tears came faster. A sob escaping my mouth before I could cover it with my hands. It wasn't something I tried to imagine before arriving. I didn't want an image of Daddy in a hospital bed.

Daddy's eyes popped open, and he started shuffling around. "Journey?" His eyes narrowed. "Who hurt you?" His bicep flexed as he tried to remove the monitor from his arm.

"Chill, Daddy." Monroe stood beside the bed.

Daddy huffed. "I can still whoop somebody's ass." He frowned. "Whose ass do I need to beat?"

I smacked my lips. "I'd like to see you whip yourself..." I wiped my hand across my face, flicking the tears away.

Daddy said, "Girl, whatever." He eased back into the pillow. "This got you here to visit me. So that's a win." His eyes closed but I knew better. He was listening.

"If you'd reply to my messages I could have come to visit without being here in this hospital."

"You know I don't like being tied to that damn phone." His eyes opened and he searched the room. "Speaking of which. Where's it at? That man in the ambulance better not have stolen it."

Monroe shook her head. "Don't worry, everyone who needs to know you are here knows." She tapped her pocket. "I'll hold on to your phone for now."

Everyone who needs to know. Outside of me, her, and Dre, who else needed to know? I didn't think to call Mama. She likely already heard from one of her oversharing friends anyway. "What do you mean, Monroe? Who else would need to know?"

Monroe crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at Daddy like he disobeyed one of the Ten Commandments.

“Do you want to tell her or shall I?”

Daddy shifted in the bed, pulling himself up to a seated position. “Always trying to tell somebody’s business.” His faced soured as he stared at Monroe, and then softened when he looked at me. “Let me talk to my girl. Alone.”

Monroe chuckled, and then said, “I’m bringing her little boyfriend back so make it quick.” Because, of course, she had to have the last word. She wouldn’t be Monroe Nicole Thompson otherwise.

“Boyfriend?” Daddy’s head jerked back. “Who has a boyfriend?”

I remember him saying something similar when I was in high school. The first guy I wanted to introduce to my parents. Daddy and Dre were not kind. Trying to pull off the *Bad Boys* scene went terribly bad, especially when the guy didn’t understand the reference. They clowned him and me for the rest of his visit. My eyes bulged thinking about Luke and Dre alone together. I looked to Daddy and said, “She had to tell somebody’s business.” I rolled my eyes toward Monroe. “Save him from Dre, please.” Then I placed my hand over Daddy’s wrist. “It’s still new.”

He rested his head back as Monroe left the room. “New or not, when you know, you know. A man can look at a woman and know if he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. That man, this little boyfriend of yours, he knows if it’s you.” He looked up into my eyes. “The same applies to you. You know if it’s him.” His eyes narrowed. “Or not.”

What he said was a lot. I had to break it down to digest it. Taking each sentence as small bites so I didn’t choke. “Rest of his life...” I repeated that as the small bite circulated my mouth. I smirked then finally swallowed. “Or only the first half?” Daddy was sick, but there was still and always would be *that*. Him and Mama should have been forever and after. But God willing, he hadn’t seen the end of his life yet, so that little comment didn’t hold a whole lot of weight. Not coming from him.

“Look,” his voice was stern as he said, “you’re grown. You know shit happens. Look at you and that boy you were dating in college. Chad. Brad. Whatever his name was. Didn’t last. Shit happens.”

Of course, he didn’t remember Chaz’s name. When he had the opportunity to meet him, him and Mama were amid an epic knockdown, drag ‘em argument. On my graduation of all nights, they couldn’t find common ground. So, I saved Chaz from that diabolical mess, and didn’t introduce the two. I spoke even less to Daddy about Chaz. So how he had details of what did or didn’t work, or if I thought it would... *Monroe must have told him.*

I argued, “We weren’t married.” I could have gone on about how the two relationships didn’t compare. If he once thought Mama was it for him, what changed? Their divorced messed with me for months. If the two people in my life who were an example of a long, loving marriage fell apart, then what should I expect? Not much.

The beeping from the machine beside the bed came quicker, a little louder. Daddy’s face contorted into an expression that I hadn’t seen often. His eyes closed briefly and when the beeping stopped, they reopened.

“I’m not here to dwell on you and Mama, Daddy. What do you need to tell me?”

He wiped a finger across his eyebrows, then let it linger on his face. For a man nearing sixty, he hardly looked a day over forty. And that was reaching. I couldn’t count how many times younger women approached him thinking he was close to their age. That was back when he rocked a wedding ring though. He’d eagerly flash the ring and smile a little wider. *When did all that change?*

“Journey, I’m engaged.”

I blinked several times. The six-hour trip from Neveah City was long. I took a nap, but maybe sleep was trying to return. The foggy haze in my mind that fought to find a corner of the room and return to sleep must have taken over. Could it be a dream? Was I asleep? I braced the cold railing of Daddy’s

bed, clinging on till my eyes popped open. Hoping they would pop open and awaken from the dream. Better yet, the nightmare.

“If you stick around for a couple of days, I’d love for you to meet her.”

My hand released the railing, and I paced the small room. Counting the tiles beneath my steps as I moved. Finally, I turned to Daddy and said, “What’d you say?”

I needed him to run it back. Repeat it all. There was no way I heard him say what I think I heard. I needed him to push pause, rewind, then play again.

He didn’t. He wasn’t going to repeat it. “You heard me, Journey.”

I counted backward, the months and days since my parents’ divorce. Barely two and a half years. “This is the woman who...” I couldn’t bring myself to say the words. But if he’s already engaged, I couldn’t imagine he met someone else within the two years, dated, and was ready to marry her. She had to be the woman he cheated on my mom with.

“Is it important?” Daddy had a bored look on his face. “Or would you like to know more about her. About us? The wedding?”

No. Why would I want to know anything about any other woman. Let alone the woman who tore our family apart. The one who’d try to make another version of it with him. “Excuse me if I don’t.” The tears from earlier, the ones I despised for invading my space, returned. This time accompanied by a pain in my chest. *Did I need a bed too?* I clutched my hand where my heart should have beat a steady rhythm; instead, it thumped double time.

Daddy sucked his teeth. “Eventually that’ll change. Journey, your mother and I have moved on.”

Lucky for him, the statement was partially true. Mama was dating. Getting her feet wet, but she was still at the shore. Daddy had dived on in there. He was floating amongst the waves, having a jolly ol’ time. I didn’t see what he was doing

—remarrying—and what she was doing—dating—as one and the same. So, *moving on* only applied to him.

My head shook side to side, and I found a spot near the window to stare at the parking lot below. Cars passing, an ambulance out front, kids playing in the courtyard. Life out there was going on as usual. Inside our room, despite my daddy trying to *move on*, I wanted to revert. The hands of the clock could turn back.

“Come here.” I heard strength in Daddy’s voice. Although I wanted to stay in my spot near the window, I walked to the bedside. “I’m sorry me and your mama didn’t work out. There were things we never shared with you kids. Things children don’t need to know about their parents. I know how terrible cheating looks. Regardless of what I did, I want better for you. For Monroe. So don’t think this gives any man who deals with you a pass. Your daddy fucked up. And I’m sorry.”

Where’s the nurse? I looked toward the door, hoping one would come in and save me. I needed CPR, the way my daddy was snatching my breath away. The way the tears rolled non-stop, and the pounding in my head increased.

Daddy’s hand rested on top of mine, over the cold railing. “Forgive me?”

How could I reject the man on his *dying bed*? Not dying, thank God. I looked up to the ceiling. *Please give him many more years.* But then the thought of who’d he be spending those years with stopped me short of that request. I swallowed then said, “I forgive you, Daddy.”

“Mr. Thompson,” Luke’s voice was softer than I’d ever heard it.

Monroe had not-so-perfect timing. She looked between me and Daddy and mouthed, “Sorry.” There were enough apologies going around to store up a jar of them.

“Journey, you okay?” Luke crossed the room to stand by my side. Placed a hand to my lower back.

I nodded slowly, trying to examine how I felt. *Was I okay?* I wasn’t terrible, and I wasn’t amazing. Somewhere between I

guess I'd land on *okay*. I cleared my throat, wiped my face again, and said, "Luke, this is my dad. Dad, my boyfriend, Luke."

My dad's bored expression returned, and I knew if he was at home he'd be trying to mimic Martin Lawrence. Run it back for good measure. But there in a hospital bed, how much could he threaten someone?

He held his hand out to shake Luke's, eyeing him properly before saying, "Nice to meet you, Luke. Wish it was under better circumstances." His chest puffed out and he said, "I might be here now, but know, I could still whoop your ass if need be." Daddy stared at me. "Journey'll tell me if that's ever necessary."

Luke stuttered, "It never will be." He bravely kissed my forehead and said, "All I want to do is make her happy."

"Good. Keep that energy." Daddy nodded.

"I'll let you two finish catching up." He asked me, "Do you need anything? Something to eat? Coffee? Candy?"

Before I could answer, Daddy said, "I like candy. I could use something to eat." We laughed and Luke agreed to bring us something back.

After he left, Dre walked in. He eased onto the other side of Daddy's bed. The three of us surrounded him, and I wanted nothing more than to erase that image. To never encounter it again. To only surround my daddy in good times, not those times. I guess *in sickness and in health* was inherent for kids and parents. But it was that *in sickness* part that'd destroy me. Thank God, he was going to be okay.

"What you think about him?" Daddy looked at Dre squarely. "I can only assume you did your duty while the two of you were out there, right?"

I shot a questioning look to Monroe, but she was no more aware than I was. "Who are you asking about, Daddy?"

Dre and Daddy ignored me effectively and continued their conversation. It needed a skilled interpreter to understand their

back and forth. “He’ll do,” was the final words Dre gave on the subject.

“I need more time to get to know him,” were Daddy’s. Then he looked at me and said, “It’s this one who isn’t there yet.”

My eyebrows stitched together. “I’m not where?”

“In love with that man. He’s not the one,” Dre said with a shoulder shrug. “The way he looks at you isn’t the same way you look at him.”

Monroe defended, “Sometimes it takes longer to be on the same page. She’ll get there if he treats her right.”

“So much judgment passed around this room,” I said with a smirk.

“Got a few of their sandwiches,” Luke said with a bag in the air. “Wasn’t sure which one any of you would like.”

“Well thank you,” Daddy said with a grin. Completely ignoring what he said to me, and the fact he threatened Luke’s life fifteen minutes prior.

I shook my head and dug into the bag. “Thanks, Luke. I haven’t called Janice yet. I should do that.” I held a sandwich in my hand, and asked, “Want to join me in the waiting room?”

“Of course.” His smile was genuine as he reached for my hand. Over my shoulder, Dre, Monroe, and Daddy shared the same look as we left the room.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

LUKE

Day three of being with Journey's family was nowhere near as bad as day one. It took us time to work through the kinks, for her brother and father to not feel the need to threaten my life. It was nice to watch them interact with Journey though. It was like how we treated Lyric when she returned home. Everyone gushed over her for hours until that wore off. By the time we pulled out of the hospital parking lot, I could tell Journey's excitement wore off too.

As excited as Journey was to see her family, she sat in the passenger seat with a grin on her face. "I'm ready to get home and take a hot shower."

"I know that's right." We didn't leave the hospital much. And when we did, it was only for a quick shower at Monroe's house, a short nap. But Journey wanted to be with her dad. And if she was at the hospital, so was I. "And hours of sleep in the bed."

"Yes, more of that. Lots of sleep." She stretched her arms in front of her. "I should have told Janice I'd be out all week. I don't know about going in tomorrow."

I groaned. "I wish." I had no choice but to return. My team was nipping at my heels while I was away. As much as they tried to give me space, they were questioning my return a few times a day. "I'll need to go in tomorrow. Besides," I reminded her, "before I left, it wasn't exactly the best of terms for me." I chuckled.

Journey nodded. “Right.” She cringed. “Thanks again for this. I know it was probably the worst time for you to leave.”

“Or the best. It gave me a little space from the situation. I can go back ready to focus.”

We didn’t have much time left in our drive. Most of our ride was in agreed silence. Simple questions here and there, but nothing requiring long responses or much thought. I appreciated that because as much as her family questioned me, I could use a break from talking. But there was one thing I wanted to know. Something that nagged me from the moment we walked into the hospital.

“Can I ask you something?” I glanced her way then back to the road.

Her head rested on the seat, but she lifted it to say, “Sure. Anything.”

“Your family seems to know a lot about your ex.” A lot could be a stretch, but at least they knew buddy’s name and some details about their relationship. “Doesn’t seem like they ever heard of me. Was that intentional?”

She couldn’t keep her hands still in her lap. Playing around with the ring on her pointer finger. Circling it round and round.

“You two graduated together, right?” Operative word, *graduated*.

The ring stopped circling. “Yeah, but since him I haven’t dated anyone. Decided with you I’d take a different approach and not apply too much pressure.”

Too much pressure must have translated to I won’t say shit about you to my family. I tapped the steering wheel. “But it’s not because I didn’t graduate college? Or because I’m unsure about my career or when I can launch my own company, right?” Her ex was somewhat successful according to the little tidbits Monroe dropped into random conversations.

The lights of Neveah City came into focus. I could see the skyline on the horizon, and it wouldn’t be long before we were near her place.

But the wheels could have stopped moving the way Journey screeched, “What? Of course not. Is that what you think?” Her voice never left that high-pitched squeal. “Listen, you have to let that go.” Her voice quieted *a little* when she said, “It seems a bigger problem for you than anyone around you. Nobody is walking around checking for degrees and transcripts. As long as you are doing what makes you happy, who cares what anyone thinks?”

Except her brother asked where I graduated. Got pretty uncomfortable when I told him I didn't. I wanted to believe her version of the truth. The version that meant, if they cared, she didn't. But I wasn't completely confident in that. We were together, but I'd be lying if I said Journey felt all in. Sometimes she was in, others, I thought one slight change in the wind, and she was out.

Still, I said, “Yeah, I guess,” as I pulled up to her apartment. I helped her carry her duffle to the front door. After she swung her door open, I said, “I should go home and get some rest. I have a lot to catch up on when I go back to the office in the morning.”

In that moment, she was in. And the look of disappointment on her face was disheartening. “Okay, I get it.” Her lip pouted slightly. “I have held you hostage for days.”

I tapped her scrunched nose and said, “Except, I had keys, the car, and the means to leave you in Lake Side to come back home. So, hostage?” I shook my head. “Not so much.” Then I teased, “If you ever consider kidnapping me, I'd prefer ropes and blindfolds.” I leaned in to kiss her forehead. I pulled back and watched the wonder crowd her face.

“Let me find out you have a few kinks.” She licked her lips, and I leaned closer to her. “Might have to explore those sometime.”

I pulled her lips to mine and kissed her more passionately than the last few days. The few pecks and light kisses in Lake Side Hospital were cute. But what we were doing outside her apartment had me wanting to change my mind. To follow her

through the door and remind her what we can do when we have time, space, and opportunity.

She hummed a soft moan before releasing the kiss.

I watched her through heavily lidded eyes then said, “I should go.”

“Call me later?” It was a question that wasn’t as sure about the response as it should have been.

“I’ll call you,” I promised before walking away.

On the way to my car, I considered going home. Because an early start was true. A busy day guaranteed. But everything on my mind would likely end with a restless night of tossing and turning. And on a Thursday night, I knew one place where I could at least burn some of that energy. So, I pulled up to the lounge. I found Xavier, Jordan, and the girls surrounding the bar. Loud talking and laughing distinguished them from the rest of the crowd. And somehow it eased all the angst I had built up inside before arriving.

I nodded toward the bartender before greeting them. “Let me get a bourbon, please.”

She tilted her head to the side. “No craft beer tonight?”

I smirked and shook my head side to side. That’s before Xavier turned toward me.

“Oh shit,” he yelled, “the prodigal son has returned.” He never was one to have any sense. “What do we owe the pleasure?”

I looked at the bartender and said, “Make it a double.”

Xavier’s head jerked back. “Damn, is there trouble brewing?” His arms crossed over his chest. “I know that look. Ol’ girl messed up.”

Jordan stood beside him. “Naw, that’s the *I fucked up* look. You know if she messed up he’d look a little mad.”

His comment drew Capri’s attention, and within minutes they were all surrounding me. The whole crew wanted to

know what happened. I didn't speak a word till I had a few sips of my bourbon down. I needed it.

"Nothing happened." I wagged my head. "Per se."

"This dude up in a bar talking about *per se*." Capri laughed. "Must be serious." She made a big deal of stretching her neck behind me. "Where's Journey?" Her lips twisted to the side. "Hmmm?"

"Dropped her off at home." I explained, "We went to her hometown. Her dad was in the hospital. Got back tonight." It was a simplified version. Missing all the key details. The ones making me feel like a bourbon after a long drive was necessary.

"Oh, damn." Capri's tone changed. "Is he okay?"

I nodded. "Thank God."

"Wait." Xavier's arm flew across my chest, and I should have known it would be him to pick up what I tried putting down. "So, you met her people?"

Jordan's eyes stretched wide. But Capri's response took me by surprise. The smirk and tilt of her head didn't look shocked or excited about the revelation.

"You two have been kicking it for what..." She rolled her eyes up then blurted. "Like the summer? That's it. Is it time for meet and greets already?" She asked, "She met your people yet?"

I shook my head. "It wasn't intentional. She needed to get to him. I offered to take her. The rest was a default." Said like that, should I be mad for the response her family gave me, not knowing who the hell I was?

"And?" Jordan took a swig of his beer before staring at me. "You two getting married soon? Do I need to be ready for my best man duties?"

Him and Xavier argued back and forth about my non-wedding, and their assumed duties. But Capri snuck in beside me. She lowered her lids and contemplated something.

"It didn't go how you expected, did it?"

“I know how women are...” probably wasn’t the best way to start a statement to Capri.

She smacked her lips and rolled her head. “What you mean?”

I laughed and raised my hands. “I’m saying, if you have something good, the world hears about it, right?”

“Of course. Hard for us to keep it to ourselves...” Her mouth formed a lower case *oh*. “They didn’t know about you?”

I shook my head. “Nope.” Then I told her the excuse Journey gave me. “She told me with her ex she applied too much pressure. Didn’t want to do the same to me.”

Capri’s expression matched how I felt. *Bullshit*. “Damn, Luke.” Her hand rested on my shoulder. “Took us forever to get you out here, and now you might curl back up and never return.”

I huffed. “Who you telling? She’s going to ruin me for the next one.” The thought of her not being *the one* had me taking the rest of my bourbon down in one gulp.

Capri’s face curled up and she stepped closer to me. She placed a hand to the side of my face when she said, “Aw, Luke, you really like this woman. Give her time. If it’s meant to be, it’ll be.”

“Not my boy out here all messed up over a woman,” Xavier yelled from behind me. “Can’t be.” He curled his arm over my shoulder. “We need to save him.” He nudged Jordan’s shoulder. “Get this man back on track.”

On track. That’s what I needed to do. Focus on starting the company. Back where I was before I got wrapped around Journey’s pinky.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

JOURNEY

The fall and finance were not two peas in a pod. It was like oil and water, and the hours we spent in the office was a reckoning of sorts. Trying to wrangle our clients' finances and prepare them for their last quarter. Because three quarters were never enough. They needed to do what they couldn't do nine months of the year, in three.

It was a headache of epic proportions when the first of September rolled around. Much worse when Janice tried her hardest to push year-end on us, her own team. If we were crossing T's and dotting I's before, we were circling back again to ensure we did it with finesse the first time. The number of meetings we had only increased. The days I came early and stayed late already kicked off and we were only one week into the month.

"We have to prepare. We cannot let anything slip through the cracks," Janice said with a boisterous voice. I don't know a single time our team let anything slip through the proverbial crack. Not a single time. Yet here we were in the middle of the madness listening to her warn us about what wouldn't happen anyway.

I kept my head down. Counted the sixty lines on my lined paper, at least three times. Because it was habit in finance. Count everything twice, then one more time for confirmation.

Instead of counting lines, beside me, Everly scribbled across her blank page. Either of us could have taken notes. Acted like what Janice was rambling about held some

importance. Neither of us cared that much. Not when it was Wednesday, and already the fifth meeting we had with the woman.

“When is she going to finish?” Everly mumbled loud enough for me to hear her.

I shushed her without opening my mouth too wide. “The sooner she gets through it the better.” And that meant no distractions, comments, or questions from us.

The reminder was for me. And the phone I forgot to put on silent but placed on the conference room table in front of Janice. When it rang, I wanted to face palm myself, but not until I fumbled the phone trying to silence the ringer. Janice’s eyes glanced down as it frolicked across the table. Both of us noticed Luke’s name before I swatted the phone into my lap.

I cleared my throat and announced, “I’ll have my reports ready for review by the end of the day.” It was totally irrelevant to whatever Janice was talking about. In the end, that’s all Janice needed though. She needed an update on the update we gave her the day before.

“And you’ve included Everly’s latest changes?”

Everly’s latest changes? Not the girl doodling on her blank page beside me. “Sure, of course I will.” I forced a smile onto my face. “Anything else I need to include?” If there was more I was going to scream.

Janice shook her head. “No, but ensure it’s peer reviewed before sending it to me. No room for even the slightest mistake.” Her eyes judged me.

I nodded with my lips tucked tight. I wasn’t going to throw anyone around the table under the bus. “Got it.” It was only my second year going through the fall frenzy. The first was a whole delusion. Each long ass day excited me, and I came back the next day ready to pour through more numbers, create more reports. Second year around? I’d trade it for the regularly scheduled program.

Janice grabbed her tablet. “If I have anything else I’ll send an email.”

The number of exasperated sighs before she could walk out of the room was comical. Everything she said in the meeting could have been an email. In fact, it could have been an instant message. Of course, we couldn't say anything because it was Janice. We were all mum, except the sighs, groans, and eye rolls. She got those.

I looked at someone I could give feedback to though. Someone who needed to hear all the words I had to speak. I wanted to start with the four-letter ones first but decided to keep my calm. "You have an update for me?" My eyelids rose to my brows. "Everly, when were you going to tell me?" I hung my head to the side and stared at her.

Her pen never left the pad and her eyes stayed focused. "Thank you for not throwing me under the bus. I'm wrapping it all up. I promise I'll have it to you in two minutes."

"Two minutes?" I laughed. "Clearly you haven't moved from your drawing pad." I mouthed, "How?" when her eyes met mine.

"By getting up." She stood.

All the air in my lungs drained out of my mouth. "Guess it's going to be an extra-long night." Staying past five was a guarantee, with her updates I'd need to have dinner delivered.

"Sorry." Everly cringed. "Did you have plans?"

The plans weren't official. There was something I needed to do though. I knew my response would throw Everly further off the path to getting me the updates and hesitated. I stood and walked out of the conference room with her beside me. "I've been putting Luke off all week. I don't want him to think I'm avoiding him."

Everly stopped walking. As I expected, she cared more about the details of me and Luke, and less about the updates she owed me. "Have you been avoiding him? Was the car ride a bit too much?" She laughed. "Or was it him," she looked over her shoulder and whispered, "him making it official?" Her arms crossed over her chest, and she looked comfortable

in her stance. Like she had no plans of moving until she had answers.

I squinted my eyes. “I haven’t been avoiding him. The car ride was fine. And no, it has nothing to do with us being *official*.”

“Were there air quotes around *official*.” If we had another meeting led by Janice, it’d be due to Everly. Queen procrastinator. She would discuss the amount of air on Mars if it would keep her away from her desk.

“No.” I laughed. “There weren’t air quotes around it. There was an emphasis to designate the importance of me getting my ass out the office on time. Before Luke snatches my official title.”

“Hmmm...” She tapped her chin. “There is something you are not telling me about this trip. But I’m going to let you have it for now. Let me get you these updates.” She eyed me as she backed away, all the way till she made it to her cubicle a few rows over.

Was there something I hid from Everly? I didn’t tell her about Dre and my dad. How they claimed I wasn’t in it to win it. That’d it be *I* who would be breaking hearts in the end. It’s something that haunted me all week. But it wasn’t the reason me and Luke hadn’t seen each other since we returned. My busy schedule consumed me. But I needed a break from it all. From the overthinking, from the fall frenzy, from the dickless nights. I needed time with *my man*.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

LUKE

I convinced myself to focus on finding clients. But between every search I did, I thought of Journey. I didn't expect for things to fall apart after the trip. I thought for sure I'd see her at least a couple times that week. My texts had one-word responses, and our phone calls were quick. The time we spent together was nonexistent.

I tried to brush it off. Blame it on her catching up after being gone for a few days. It was busy in the office for me too, so, it'd only make sense. But the more I tried to justify it, the unanswered text sitting on the coffee table made me question if there was another reason.

"Damn, she's ignoring me," was the only plausible answer. Instead of pulling me in she was pushing me out.

After hours of no response, I wanted to call her, make sure she got the text, but decided not to. Instead, I called Nori. Of everyone in my life, she'd be the one to tell me to move the fuck on or to dig in deeper. There wasn't much gray area with her. She saw everything as black and white. Sometimes to a fault. But in most cases it benefited me because she wouldn't sugarcoat shit and make me eat it. She'd be straight up and set me straight. But she'd do it in the most diplomatic way to not make me curl into a ball and wish we'd never discussed it.

I took a deep breath though, because to get to where I needed her to be, I'd have to listen to her rant about *something* first. She had a motto of, "Don't call me about your shit

without asking me about mine first. Who knows if I'm in the headspace to take on yours *and* mine."

I clicked her name and waited for her to answer. It didn't take long. But she sounded winded on the line. Nori wasn't one to exercise on purpose so I teased, "Did your ass run to answer?"

"Do you want me on the line," she huffed, "or not?"

"I do. How you doing?" I listened carefully because with Nori she'd throw in a ten-question quiz at some point to be sure I listened.

"Today was a good day. Work didn't destroy me, I connected with a man on this dating app." There was a hint of joy in her voice. Something that wasn't always there. "And I have this decadent meal waiting for me to devour in the kitchen."

I had to call her on the last part because Nori wasn't a cook. "Which restaurant cooked it?"

"Asshole," she blurted. "I did."

"Since when do you cook? And who besides yourself would label it delectable?"

"Punk," she huffed, and I eased up because I needed her advice. If she hung up in my face there was no chance she'd answer again. "Your mama would find it delectable."

I laughed. "She ate our pancakes when we were kids, come with someone else."

"Whatever, *Luke*." Then she knew I must have wanted something, so she cut through the other nonsense and asked, "If you are calling me mid-week you must need something. Spill it. I'd like to eat in peace before my food gets cold."

I had a line for that. But decided to keep the 'you sound like an entitled old person' to myself. "It's Journey." I waited for her to recall the name. She'd only heard it the time Janice dropped it a family dinner. "We are official now."

"And oddly enough, that sounded real official." She cackled into the phone. "You're calling for a round of

applause? Gift suggestion? *Sex advice?*”

“No.” I shook my head. “And no. Why the hell would I call you for sex advice?” My entire face crinkled. I couldn’t get the thought of my sister sexing anybody out my mind. I wanted to scorch the brain cells that conjured the thought. “I pass on talking about anything sexual with you. Thanks.”

She laughed harder into the phone. Then she said, “I want to make sure my brother isn’t out here throwing around mediocre peen.”

“Wow.” I looked up to the ceiling and wondered why I thought of my two sisters, and of everyone I had in my phone to call, I dialed Nori. “Here I was thinking you’d give me advice and you over here running sideways.”

“Okay, I’ll need to reheat this steak if I don’t get serious.” She groaned. “What is it?”

“She’s ignoring me.” I kept it simple, omitted the circumstances and hoped she’d rub her Magic 8 Ball to confirm or deny my assumptions. When we were kids, she’d carry one around. Swore it held the answers to life’s most challenging problems. Somehow, she found it in a box from storage and never let it go.

“You think she’s ignoring you.” She scoffed, “Sir, someone ignoring you isn’t a thought that pops out of thin air. And typically comes from some form of guilt...so.” Nori should have been a therapist. She would have done well with it. She was wasting her time at the store she managed.

The way I laid back on the couch and thought through what she said was enough for me to shell out an hourly rate. Only if she asked though. “Guilt?” Something I did to cause Journey to pull back? “We went to see her dad in the hospital. I drove six hours.” I thought that deserved a trophy but didn’t even get a *good job* from Nori. “On our way back, I asked her if her family felt some type of way about me not graduating.”

“Hold on.” Glasses clank in the background. “I was waiting on my meal for wine, but I need it now.” Her favorite was a sweet red wine she discovered traveling to Spain. It

sounded like she poured half the bottle into the glass before exhaling. “Ah. Okay. So run that back. You think her people had a problem with you not graduating. And why?”

“Her brother asked what college I graduated from. After, it seems the family didn’t warm up to me. You know how I feel about that.”

The joy seeped out of Nori’s body, and what remained, she gave me. An exasperated, “This again? Listen, Luke. If a guy I was dating dwelled on his mistake and couldn’t get over it, I might be seeing red. Back off a little to see if it’s worth the trouble of trying to *coax him through his trauma.*”

“Trauma?” I sat up on the couch and defended myself. “It’s not trauma.” The worst mistake I made in my life. *Yes.* Unresolved trauma because I didn’t want anyone throwing it in my face. *No.*

“If you can’t let it go.” She smacked her lips. “I’m not a qualified professional, but it might help for you to talk to one. To let that shit go. The BS about you not having, well, a BS, you need to get over it. Mom and Dad are the only two people in this world, outside of *you*, who are salty about that. You can’t keep self-sabotaging everything because you think people care about it.”

I frowned but remembered I wanted what she was giving. The unfiltered truth without the gray area.

“And if that was your takeaway from meeting her family, during a crisis, then it wouldn’t surprise me if she was like *naw, fuck him.*”

“Fuck me though?”

“Feels pretty selfish.” She sucked her teeth. “Of all the things, you are worrying about them welcoming you with a warm embrace while her daddy is in the hospital. Come on.”

“Nori.” I hesitated because it was more of the same, but I said it anyway. “Journey has a degree, a decent job, her ex works for someone running for Congress...” I shook my head. “Congress, Nori. And here I am trying to start a design agency but can’t get a single client.”

“Hold on. Her ex is working for someone running for Congress?” Her sentence was slow, deliberate, focused on the details. “How would you know about her ex? She told you... or have you been snooping?”

I should have kept those details to myself. When I got home from the trip, I couldn't search her ex quick enough. I knew his name was Chaz, based on her brother name dropping him at some point during our visit. Lucky for me his name wasn't Brian, or John. It wasn't hard to find a Chaz from Hillside University. All the facts I needed displayed on my screen. His story read like the resume of someone privileged.

“I might have his name in my search history,” I admitted. “But who wouldn't do the same? I needed to see what I was up against.”

“Except he's an *ex* for a reason.” Okay, her logic didn't align with mine. Then again, I wasn't thinking logically when everything filled my mind.

“Except the only reason is because he didn't want to move to Neveah City. If not for that, they'd likely be walking down the aisle soon.”

“Damn, bro. You sound pathetic right now. *Is this what love looks like from the male point of view?*” Her bottle of wine refilled her cup. “I feel like I could watch a documentary on it. It's a lot darker than I expected. Women are all roses and butterflies, trips down the aisle. Meanwhile, dudes be like, *how could I possibly live up to her ex?*” Her impersonation of a male sounded nothing like any man I knew.

“Forget you, Nori.” I rubbed my hand down the top of my head. Remembering I could use a haircut soon. “How'd you know what the other side of love looks like if you've been blocking every dude after the second date?”

“Whew, you on one now. Let me back up before you try to hurt *my feelings*. But for real. How can I help you? My food is past the point of no return.” A fork scratched across the plate. “I'll need to reheat it anyway.”

“What do I do to get us back on track?”

“Have you told her how much you like her?” It was a quiet question, and she didn’t wait on the response. “I’d start there.”

“How if she’s been ghosting me?”

“Has she really though? Auntie Janice says this is the busiest time of the year. You know we’ll have a break from her on Sundays for a few weeks because of it.”

I forgot. “How do you remember this?”

“I listen.” Then she said, “And that’s your answer right there. You need to listen more, talk less. If she’s caught up with work, too busy, and you are calling, bothering her with nothing to offer other than your raggedy penis, see what she needs. What could help her feel less stressed.”

“Huh?” I lost her at *raggedy penis*.

“Find out if there is some way you can make this time less busy for her. Women love a man who takes care of her. We don’t always have to be the ones doing the nurturing, the caring. We’d like the men in our lives to do some of the giving sometimes.”

“That sounds personal.” I raised my eyes. “How can I help you, sis? Sounds like you need something.”

“If you were listening, I told you I want to eat my food in peace.”

I failed the quiz. *Damn*.

“Listen more. Talk less.” Didn’t realize that applied to my own damn sister. “Got it. I’ll find some way to make her life easier.” Thoughts didn’t flood my mind like I hoped. “I’m a graphic designer. I can’t help with her work. How exactly will I make this happen?”

There was a loud slap on the counter. “Luke, you can’t be this dense.” Her loud breaths filled the phone. “Get her dinner delivered. Ask if you can help around her house. If she’s busy at work, the house gets neglected. Act like you care about her whole life, and not only the part that concerns you.”

I rubbed the rubble forming on my face. My beard needed an edge up too. “Okay.” I nodded, thinking through a plan. “I

can send dinner to the office.”

“That’s a start.”

Then I said, “And for you, I can let you get to your *delectable meal*.”

She hollered, “Thank God.”

We laughed before I hung up and went to work on ordering food for Journey. I had a decent meal, with dessert, and a drink in my cart, but before I submitted it, I reached out to Janice.

Luke: Auntie, would it be okay if I sent dinner to Journey in the office?

*Janice: *heart emoji* That’d be lovely, she’ll likely be there late tonight. Oh, and I have someone I want you to talk to. Someone who needs a graphic designer.*

My eyes bulged at her reply, and I couldn’t type a response fast enough.

Luke: Auntie Janice for the win.

Then I hit submit on the dinner order. If Journey needed me to show her I cared, I would. If she needed me to pick up her panties around the apartment, dust the coffee table, I’d do that too. I felt bad for assuming it was me, and not her that was drowning in work. I repeated, “Listen more. Talk less.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

JOURNEY

Fall frenzy was no walk in the park. Lame, I know. Was it true though? Absolutely. And did I feel the only way to recover was an actual walk in the park? Yup. I needed the sunlight, light breeze, and leaves crinkling under my feet. And I wanted it with Luke by my side.

After all, that man, my God. He came through for me in more ways than one during his auntie's hostage era. Dinners, house cleaners, random pop-ups to collect my laundry. I don't know who he was and how he learned, but that person deserved a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

But me requesting another trip in the park, I knew he was going to tell me to kick rocks. I waited for his response to tell me he'd catch me after I frolicked in the leaves. But he was there, with a warm jacket, and twos cups of hot chocolate at my apartment. Because that's exactly what we needed to complete our walk through the park—hot chocolate.

“Thank you.” I slid onto my tippy toes and kissed his cheek. Our hands interlocked comfortably, and we made our way down to the park. Although it was a school night, there were a few kids running past us. Joggers getting their exercise in, and others reading under the now barren trees. “This is the perfect way to end those tumultuous few weeks.”

“Your favorite spot in the city.” He looked down at me with a smirk. “Can't wait to show you a few more places. I think we can scoot this out the number one spot.”

“I don’t know about that.” I bit the side of my mouth. “But I’m open to exploring more. For sure.” And I was, since our ride to Lake Side it felt like we exited the little cocoon we built. I wanted to get back to the before, to allow us to build, to nurture, to allow something beautiful to flourish.

His hand left mine and wrapped around my shoulder. “This park is growing on me though. Especially with you.” He placed a kiss on my forehead.

It wasn’t November. Thanksgiving wasn’t drawing near. I still wanted to express my gratitude toward him though. He deserved that, and so much more. “I’m thankful you stuck it out. I didn’t do an adequate job of communicating. I could have warned you we were entering fall frenzy when I got back from the trip. I got caught up in everything going on with my dad, then catching up with work.” My shoulders hunched. “The days got longer and longer, and I didn’t have room to breathe.” I smiled. “Somehow, you knew.” I wagged my head. “Or maybe Janice shared. Either way, I’m happy you stepped in.”

I said, “These last few weeks reminded me of long nights studying, testing the next day, and cheer practice following. It was downright dreadful. And I’m glad college is behind me.” The words came out before I could catch them. I knew very well that college was a sore spot for Luke. “Sorry.”

He ruffled his shoulders then said, “It’s cool. I’m learning to let all that go.”

I watched the profile of his face—ease, comfort, calm. “I’m glad to hear that.”

But then it twisted before he asked, “How’d you and your ex make your busy schedule work in college?”

My feet slowed, until they refused to continue. “Can you tell me what’s bothering you? I have an idea, but I want to hear it from you.” His question wasn’t innocent. Not the way his face contorted like it pained him to mention my ex. Chaz wasn’t a problem for Luke though. In the two years since our break up, I hadn’t talked to him once. Seeing him on TV was nice, in the way I still wanted the best for him. I wanted him to

accomplish every goal he set out to accomplish and more. I was still his *cheerleader*. Anything more than that was out of the question.

Luke's hands rose to his temples. A fresh fade beneath his fingertips. His head fell back before he said, "My bad, Journey. I didn't mean anything by it." His head searched over his shoulder before he said, "C'mon, let's sit over here." The bench at the edge of the park was free from noisy kids and joggers.

"This situation. Us." His hand lingered in the space in front of me. "It's thrown me for a loop. You know I wasn't trying to find a relationship. I wanted to focus on my work, my career, and goals. But in comes Janice and her persistent ass." He sucked his teeth. "I wish I could say I regret her minding other folks' business, but I can't. Still doesn't make all this a surprise I wasn't prepared for."

The sound of Janice's name made my stomach do an unexpected flip. "Persistent she is. I'd be good if we don't have to mention her for a while though." I blinked heavy. "I've seen so much of her over these last few weeks. I need a couple of Janice-free days."

Luke nodded. "Makes sense. Two-hour-long family dinners are hard with her once a week. I can't imagine working eight hours a day, five days a week with her. You won't hear her name from my mouth anytime soon." He placed two fingers in the air and I laughed.

I could never imagine him as a scout. With a hand on his knee, I said, "You were saying..."

"I let a lot of external noise get to me. You didn't give me a legit reason to doubt what we had going on—"

"You had doubt?" I scrolled my memory faster than I scrolled social media. "What external noise?" I know my communication was lackluster over the last few weeks. I totally missed that he had any issues.

"Mostly self-inflicted. Nothing worth rehashing." He smirked.

“I’m glad you were able to push past it then.” I rubbed my hand along his knee. I remember those days, with Chaz, when I thought everything was doom and gloom. The coin could flip to the other side, and I thought he hated me suddenly. It’s crazy what love can do to you... *love?*

“I need to tell you how I feel.” His chest rose and fell, and his hand inched closer to mine.

More than words could express, his actions showed me how he felt. And that was the most important in the end. I interrupted before he could continue. To let him know he did what needed to be done already. “Luke...” I let our fingers intertwine. “You’ve shown me how you feel about me. It’s evident.” Were my actions evident? Was I showing him how I felt? If he judged my actions, I could understand why he had doubt.

“I need to say it.” He stressed, “Journey, I’ve never felt this strongly for anyone in my adult life. There was this girl in elementary school who I swore up and down I loved—”

I gulped the spit formed in my throat. “Loved? Are you saying—”

His eyes softened. “Would that scare you?”

My legs weren’t shaking, and I wasn’t trying to hide. My heartbeat was calm for the way my thoughts scattered across my mind. And when I opened my mouth to speak, I did it with ease. “No. It doesn’t scare me. But—”

“You aren’t there yet?”

I hated that he could sense my thoughts. Fill in the words before I made it to the period. My eyes fell to my lap. To the connection of his fingers with mine, and the little space we left for them to breathe. My head shook side to side softly. “Not saying I don’t care about you, or that it won’t grow to more, but right now we are still figuring out how we work together.”

“We?” He waited for my eyes to reach his. “Or *you?* I told you how I’m feeling. I can take all the time we need to figure out how we *work together*. But I know how it doesn’t work

when we are apart. I can only assume being with you is better.”

The brain is a tricky muscle. Before Chaz, hearing someone speak those words to me would have had me falling into their arms. Picking out rings and calling my besties to prepare for their bridal party debut. I laid it out on the line with Chaz, offered him everything I had. And in the end, it left me with little left to give. The crumbs I had remaining, I tried to piece together. Meeting Luke unexpectedly, I hadn't pulled it all together yet. And if I was honest with myself, I wasn't ready to pull something together for it to get broken again. And maybe deep in the folds of my brain I knew that. Without me playing a part, my brain built an impenetrable wall around my heart. Luke plucked at it brick by brick. But until it fell completely, there wasn't enough space for him to crawl through.

With my hand within his, I gripped his fingers a little tighter. “I hope this doesn't change the way you feel about me...” I searched his face for any sign that I ruined us. That he'd grown weary from breaking apart my wall and wanted to walk away from the job before it finished.

His head shook side to side, and his gentle smile comforted me. “No. Unless you don't want to see if you can get there. Then that's a different story completely.”

“I want to see where things go.” There was a wide smile on my face, and a glimmer of hope in my heart. I wanted the wall to crumble. Somewhere in the rubble I'd find the pieces I needed to move on, to feel love, to allow it in, and for it to flow out freely.

“Let's see where things go then.” He leaned in and kissed me gently, cautiously, and the glimmer inside grew a little wider.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

LUKE

Telling Journey how I felt was the right thing to do. *Light as a feather...* Nori was right. But not hearing her reciprocate it knocked the wind from my lungs. *Tumbling down a mountain...*

I wanted nothing more for her to stand on that bench in the park and scream, “Luke, I love you.” It wasn’t the day, nor the time, and Journey wasn’t ready.

I hoped to hell that one day it’d be the time, and she’d find the place. Because I wanted to hear her say it as much as I wanted a client for my agency. In a perfect world where rainbows littered the sky, and gold paved the roads, I’d have both.

But in reality, where the roads were littered with potholes, I had neither. And I was working my hardest to get at least one.

My computer, stacks of papers, and books laid in front of me on my coffee table. I worked on the design presentation for the company Janice introduced me to. I spent hours studying their current logo, website, branding material, and products. This time, instead of getting caught up on what I didn’t have, a degree, I focused on what I did. I had the ability to take what they had and understand the direction they wanted to go. Then I could flip that shit on its head until it looked like the best version of the company they wanted to be.

The first slide read, “Luke Ellis, graphic designer of over fifty projects.” It didn’t need the addition of, “Graduate of such and such school,” to prove I was that guy. And slide two further showed that. Their updated logo stood out. Compared to their current logo, the one I created wasn’t an update, it was a rebirth.

And rebirth was what they were going for. The London Group wanted to be born again. I followed the thought throughout the slide. Considered any questions they could have afterward. If I didn’t walk out of their office with an offer to represent them, I’d never close a client.

I stood, paced the floor of my apartment, and rolled my shoulders. “I got this.” The phone vibrated across the table, pushing a piece of paper to the ground. “Alright, God, tell me that’s a good sign and not a bad one.” I reached for my phone and saw *Journey*. “Okay, God, thank you.” I winked before answering. “You were the sign that this is going to be all good.”

She giggled into the phone. “Then I can keep this luck I was about to pass your way?”

“Naw,” I snickered. “I’ll take that too.” I said, “Because this is it. This could be the break I need.”

“Well then, I hope everything goes well today. From here, everything could change.”

My excitement quickly climbed to ten, but hers stayed on level two. I imagined she’d be happier about me reaching my goals. I could be wrong though. “Are you okay?” I leaned against the edge of the couch.

“Nothing is wrong.” She tried to convince me without a change in her tone. “I want you to have everything you are hoping for... and this could be it.”

I fought the questions flooding my mind. Blamed it on my self-sabotage and self-inflicted doubt. Whispered, “Okay,” then asked, “how about we do lunch after?”

“If I can sneak away from the office, absolutely. I’d love to hear how it went in person.”

Other offers came to mind—happy hour, dinner, dessert if she had a late night. But I settled with, “Alright, I hope so. If not, we’ll work something out.” I didn’t want to push too hard, stress something that was on the verge of breaking. If she couldn’t meet me where I was, I’d have to be okay with that.

“We will.” Her voice was a little more optimistic as she said, “I’ll talk to you later.”

I love you was on the tip of my tongue. Instead, I uttered, “Talk to you later,” before hanging up. The papers on the table, my laptop, and my phone all needed to come with me. I swiped them up and stuffed them into a backpack for the trip across town.

On the way out the door, I felt unstoppable, and stuck. A cloud was beneath me carrying me along the way, and I sunk beneath a pile of trash. That feeling lingered with help of the city’s terrible sewage system. In one hand I had my goal within reach. And the other, I had the stench of the sewer. Or a love that was one-sided.

I walked into the London Group offices with my head held high and my shoulders squared. Janice’s wide grin across the lobby matched mine. A sigh of relief to be honest. I knew there’d be at least one person in the room who fully supported me no matter what.

She plucked the collar of my shirt and said, “You look amazing.” Although her eyes were a lighter color, their warmth reminded me of Mama’s. She had an endearing look on her face as she said, “I hope you are ready.”

I assured her, “More than ready. All I needed was a foot in the door.” I tapped my hard bottoms against the marble floors. “And here it is.”

Janice dusted my shoulder off and said, “Here it is.” She started toward the receptionist’s desk, and I walked alongside her. “I’m assuming my Christmas gift this year is going to be amazing. I got you a girl, and a client.” She nudged her elbow into my side. “Who is the best aunt ever?”

In front of the receptionist I announced, “We are here to see Gary Underwood.” And as the woman picked up the phone I told Janice, “Of course, the best Christmas gift ever. You’ve come through this year.”

The smile on her face was both knowing and satisfied. The receptionist told us the doors would open for us. I walked to them ready to take on what welcomed me on the other side. It was a tall man with dark brown hair and olive skin. He looked like he could be from the Mediterranean somewhere. I expected him to have an accent. But it surprised me when he sounded like he was from a West Coast beach town. His hand outstretched and he said, “I’m ready for this presentation.”

“So is he.” Janice was my personal hype person. I wondered if finance was her passion or if she’d consider a role as VP of sales at the agency I started. She was laying it on thick with the smiles, fake laughs, and blinking eyelashes.

As we sat and got settled into the chairs, the rest was all on me. I projected my slides onto the screen and began. “And this rebirth,” I highlighted the logo, “doesn’t need a refresh of what is, it requires something new. Something distinguishing you from the crowd.” I held my smile. “And this,” I switched to a new slide, “will flow into your online presence. Not only on your website but your social media accounts too.” It was like the person who developed their current site and the one who was over social media didn’t talk. “It’ll be one cohesive design.”

As I ended, I sat back. Although I finished speaking, I was far from done. The energy coursing through my veins electrified me. I could have gone outside and ran the five miles back to my apartment.

“We admire Janice for all the hard work she and her team have put into our organization.” Gary shot a glance toward Janice. If it wasn’t for the silver adorning his ring finger, I would think he might be trying to snag more than a re-branding. “And the way she spoke highly of you...” Our eyes connected, and I realized those looks weren’t reserved for Janice. “She was not wrong. This proposal exceeds my expectations.”

Would it be wrong to laugh with glee? That's what I felt bubbling on the inside. A rumbling chuckle needed to flee my mouth. I couldn't let it out. I nodded through the feeling instead. I didn't ask what was next, didn't jump the gun. I listened carefully for Gary to continue.

"I need to share it with my partners but in the event they side with me, we'll be contacting you." His eyebrows bunched together as he turned toward Janice. "We didn't exactly share the location of this project. Our headquarters are moving to the West Coast in a few weeks."

Janice's eyes bulged. "Gary, I had no idea the company was moving."

Considering Gary was Janice's client, that could impact her business with him too. Still, she looked my way with a cringe on her face. If she was my mom, or sisters, I'd try to guess what she was thinking. Janice was a little harder to read though. She was either extremely excited, or about to shit a brick. I could have projected my feelings onto her though.

"Would it be an issue for you to be out there for a few months?" Gary spoke with apprehension. It was a small fact, but one worth noting, maybe at the start of the meeting. "It could be more time if we are able to launch the other products."

The collar on my shirt tightened, and it felt like the worst shirt option. I didn't want to unbutton my shirt and appear nervous. I needed Gary to know I was down to do what it took to get their work. To kick off my agency with my first client. Especially if it meant follow-on work. How could I not?

With my hands steepled in front of me, I said, "I'm looking to launch my own company. If we can get our numbers to align, I could make it happen."

Gary's wide smile could have represented Colgate well. "Ambitious like your aunt. I can only imagine this partnership will work well. You'll be hearing from us soon." He stood and outstretched his hand. First to Janice, lingering a little long for my liking. Then to me. "It was a pleasure meeting with you today, Luke."

“Likewise, Gary. I appreciate your time.” I shook his hand firmly then followed him from the conference room. In the lobby, I turned to Janice.

“Wait until we are outside,” she spoke through a thin slit in her mouth.

Outside, I blurted, “Moving to the West Coast?” Finally, I unbuttoned my shirt and shook my head from side to side. “You didn’t know about this?”

“Had no idea. I’ll have to follow up with Gary because clearly, they haven’t discussed that with the firm.” She raised a hand. “But right now, let’s focus on you.” She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Luke, you made me proud. I can’t wait to gush to your mama.”

The excitement I had remained back in the conference room. In the bright sunlight, everything wasn’t looking as peachy as before. “Janice, the *West Coast*?” I closed my eyes and shook my head. “What if I get the client and lose the girl?” I didn’t explicitly tell her the grand Christmas gift would be off the table, but it was strongly implied.

“It’s temporary.” Janice didn’t share in my worry. “Luke,” her voice softened, “This is your dream. Journey would understand if you had to leave for several months. A short-term long-distance relationship isn’t ideal, but you two could make it work.”

I didn’t imagine Janice knew much about Journey’s ex-boyfriend. The reason for their breakup. Or any of the details of her move to Neveah City, outside of getting hired at the firm. She also didn’t know Journey and I were hanging on by a frayed thread. Long distance if she loved me could be possible for a short time. But if she wasn’t there yet?

I sighed. “I don’t know, Janice.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

JOURNEY

There are times in life when my belly held the truth. A small knot that formed, at first like it was something I ate. Then it grew until I couldn't ignore it. Bent over a clutched fist eased some of the pain, but there's a thought that fluttered to my mind. *What is wrong?*

The older I get, the less I ignore it and shake it off as *nothing*. I try to relax into the feeling and recognize what my body is telling me. It'd been so long since the last time I had that gut-wrenching feeling. I couldn't remember what the cause was, or what I ignored. But that morning as I woke up to call Luke, the pain started.

I made it into work with gritted teeth and sharp pains. Sat at my desk and allowed work to distract me. But as it neared time for lunch, and I waited to hear something from Luke, the knot grew larger. The sharp pain shot through my insides more. I was in agony wracking my brain for what could be going on.

A client for Luke would be monumental. Life changing. Then the pain grew sharper. *That's it*. The stomach pain was my nerves. I was nervous for Luke and wanted everything to work out for him. That had to be it. *Right?* It was me on the sidelines cheering, hoping my team scored and my cheers and chants weren't in vain. I nodded. "That's it," I whispered softly.

A text message came minutes later to ask if we could meet. I smiled and replied, "Yes, where at?" quickly. Lucky for me,

Janice was out of the office, and no surprise meetings popped up on my calendar. I could meet with Luke, hear the good news, and relieve the belly ache. I grabbed my purse, ready to walk out of the office when Dawn stepped in front of me.

“Headed out?” she asked with an excited grin on her face. “I need lunch too. I could join you.”

My face crinkled and I let her know, “Actually meeting with Luke.” I reached for my belly to stop the pain.

“Dammit. I’ll find Everly.” She looked at my hand as my face soured. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I have this stomach pain.”

Her eyebrows danced. “Pain, or...”

“Pain,” I confirmed. “Like hurting not hurling.” I warned, “Because anything else would be a negative.”

She raised her hands in the air. “The look on your face isn’t giving those vibes anyway.” She snickered. “Need to shit?”

I tried to laugh and shook my head. “No.” I took a long steady breath then said, “I think it’s nerves. It should go away after I hear about Luke’s meeting.”

Dawn’s smile returned and she nodded. “Oh, cool,” she said without having any detail about the meeting. “See you later.”

I left the office walking as fast as possible to get to the café. If the pain needed the news, I needed to get there quick. When I walked into the door, I spotted Luke at a table in the middle.

A warm feeling cascaded over me, and the pains eased a little. In his arms, his scent crowding my nose, it wasn’t recognizable. The huge grin Luke had when I sat across from him helped to keep it away.

I didn’t need the pleasantries, or greetings, I wanted to skip to the good part. “How’d the meeting go?”

“As I hoped.” He reached across the table for my hand. “But first, are you good? This morning something seemed off.”

When the stomach pains started that morning, they caught me off guard. “I have this feeling that something is about to change.” I didn’t want my feelings to overshadow his news though. “I can’t pinpoint it, but I feel it in my gut.”

His face went blank, and his lips twisted to the side. “Change?”

I nodded. “I’m hoping it’s nerves about you getting this client. And your news will make that feeling disappear.” I tried to smile through the pain reemerging. I rested my hand against my stomach and leaned across the table. “Tell me more about the meeting.” I was desperate for any good news.

“Good news is they loved my pitch. The main guy, Gary, has to show his partners. If they agree they’ll want to work with me. Feels much different than the last meeting. It has hope, and promise.”

Through the hope and the promise, I could sense there wasn’t something as appealing. “That’s amazing news. You said, ‘good news’ does that imply there is ‘bad news’?” *With Luke working for another company, could an outside client cause issue? Would he find enough clients to keep him booked and busy?* Each scenario I imagined made my stomach clutch a little tighter.

When the color drained from Luke’s beautiful mahogany skin, I gripped the table. The bad news would rock me, I could feel it. Like the moment me and Chaz made our final decision, there were so many reasons for each of us to be happy. Our individual lives were going great, our future looked bright. But together, our hope dwindled until it was nonexistent.

“I’d have to be on the West Coast for the project.”

The words ricocheted off the walls of the coffee shop. Each one landing on my ears simultaneously. Two of the words sliced through me as I repeated them. “West Coast?”

“Not permanently though.” Luke was quick to clarify. “The project would be temporary.” He wagged his head. “There could be follow-on work. So not sure how temporary it’d be. But it wouldn’t be forever.”

The only word that stood out of his entire statement was *forever*. I tried to stay away from that word always. At least since Chaz. The word was dirty in my books, cleansed from my vocabulary. But with Luke mentioning it, I thought about what it meant for me and him. Could we make it to forever? Could we have a different starting line and still end up at the same destination together?

He was speeding there, and I was slowly trotting along. The guiding hope was that we were on the same path. But if he left Neveah City for an *unidentified amount of time*, could we stay on the same path? It was no secret long distance was the other dirty phrase in my dictionary. For obvious reasons, it triggered the worst of my emotions. It reminded me of the loss, of the heartbreak, of the possible regret.

Whether the team was losing or not, when they scored we still cheered. And so, I mustered the courage to tell Luke, “I’m extremely happy for you. Like immensely. But—”

His head jerked backward. “There’s a but?”

If I could have ignored the but, I would have. It wouldn’t be fair to leave it dangling between us though. “When faced with a long-distance decision before...” I didn’t need to explain, Luke was familiar with the situation. He knew all the high-level details. Still, I said, “It wasn’t because long distance would be hard. It was because we didn’t know where our paths would align again. You’ve said before that you’re looking to leave Neveah City. What if the West Coast turns out to be your place?” Neveah City was mine. I thought it was fair everyone could have theirs. I only wished it could be ours together.

Luke didn’t give up easy. He plastered on a smile and said, “The West Coast would be temporary. If I love it, I can’t guarantee it wouldn’t become a favorite. But there is a love on the East Coast that...”

And there was the other problem. Our starting points. I omitted the obvious. When me and Chaz had to stand in the middle and decide if we'd continue together or apart, I was madly in love with him. Only time could tell if I'd end up there with Luke, but I wasn't yet.

His hand reached across the table and waited for mine to join it, then he gripped it tightly. "What if we wait this out and see what happens?"

"I want more than anything to see where this goes."

"But?" His grip loosened.

"Because there's always a but." My chest heaved. "I don't want to go further, fall in love with you, then we decide long distance isn't something either of us wants." *Was the love worth the potential heartbreak in the end?*

"So?" The word hardly left his lips. If anyone around tried their hardest, they wouldn't have heard it.

I could barely hear it, but I read his lips. I closed my eyes and hoped he could read mine too. "I don't know."

His head fell forward and landed on our clasped hands. "I know you have to get back to work." His eyes rose to meet mine. "And I need to get to the office." He stood and pulled me up with him. "Journey, I'm hoping *I don't know* is only for this moment. After you have time to consider everything, you'll know for sure you want to make this work. You'll know what we have is worth a temporary adjustment. And no matter what, we can overcome it." He smirked. "It's only been months, but I can see much more with you."

His head dropped to mine. "If you don't see it, I won't fight for more."

The knot in my stomach turned into a ball. It rolled from side to side, wreaking havoc along the way. "Okay," I said after my chest tightened. The tears threatened to fall, and I needed to hold them back. It wasn't the end; instead, let's figure this out. Moreso, I needed to figure it out.

After a kiss to my cheek he asked, "You coming?"

I shook my head and told him, “I need a minute. You go ahead.”

There was pain in his eyes when he said, “Alright, I’ll go.”

I knew the tears wouldn’t withstand the wind, or the brightness of the shining sun. There was no way I’d be able to walk back into the office yet. To return to business as usual. I needed time.

I sat at the table and watched Luke walk past the window. Tears trickled down my cheek one after the other. I let them fall until my breathing returned to normal and the knot in my stomach stopped rumbling. I stood ready to face the sunshine.

“Iced Mocha?”

My head spun around, out of habit. The iced mocha was my drink, but I wasn’t in a coffee shop. The deli, as far as I knew, didn’t serve coffee. And not an iced mocha for sure.

I swiped at the tears that cascaded down my face and narrowed my eyes. Through the blur I saw him. “Malachi?” My feet moved toward him before I finished wiping my face. “What’re you doing here?” Seeing him in Neveah City, in the deli, had to be an illusion of some sort. My mind and blurred vision tricking me.

He pointed to the menu board above my head and said, “Getting lunch.” His narrow stare observed my face. “Better question.” He swiped a finger against my cheek. “Why are you in this fine establishment crying? Is the food that bad? Or the service?”

I shook my head and said, “Long story.” I cleared my throat and asked, “Do you live in Neveah City?” It wouldn’t be crazy for him to be there visiting. Enough tourists came in and out on the daily, he could be amongst them.

Malachi had a signature smile. One I wouldn’t remember in my memories of him, but seeing it again reminded me how nice it was. Since the last time I saw him on campus, not much had changed with him. His beard filled in a little more, his eyes were brighter, and his skin well nurtured. I let my eyes scan his body. The tailored suit he wore contrasted with the

polo and apron he rocked at the coffee shop on campus. It looked good on him.

“I do live here.” He wiped his hand across his beard. “Do you?”

“I do.” I blinked. “I had no idea you lived here.”

After laughing he said, “If someone would have kept up with her favorite barista, she would have known.” The door chimed and Malachi stepped to the side, bringing me along with him. “I’ve been here for a few months now. What about you?”

“Since graduation.” There were hundreds of thousands of people in the city. Malachi being one of many shouldn’t have been such a surprise. *A pleasant surprise.*

His hand went into his pocket before he said, “Okay. Well, I should order.” He studied my face a little longer. “As long as you promise those tears weren’t because it was the worst meal you’ve ever eaten.”

The smile on my face not only lifted my lips, but my spirit. The knot of agony in my belly disappeared, and for a moment, hope replaced it. “I promise.”

“It was nice seeing you, Iced Mocha. I hope you have a better day. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s only *temporary*.”

“Hmph.” I nodded. “I’m sure you’re right.” Before I left out the door, Malachi walked toward the counter and started his order.

The path to my office wasn’t riddled with what I’d do next. And if *I don’t know* could rearrange itself into *I absolutely know*. I didn’t consider if a long-distance relationship was on the horizon. If a temporary adjustment meant avoiding the ultimate hurt in the end. Or if there was a happily ever after between me and Luke.

No. The crazy brain of mine wanted to avoid the future. The present wasn’t where it wanted to be either. It was the past. And all the times Malachi, my favorite college barista, had been there during hard times. *Did guardian angels speak?*

Was he the person God sent when the tears were too heavy for me to carry alone?

With Malachi ultimately in Neveah City, I could only wonder if what Everly said was true. I accepted what Chaz offered and avoided what I truly wanted. What if instead of Chaz, I went after Malachi?

I shrugged before snatching the door of our office building open. None of it mattered. It was Luke and not Malachi I was in a relationship with. It was our future on the line. Ours I needed to consider. *Okay, brain?*

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

LUKE

If the guys asked, I'd lie. I'd take what I was doing to the grave. Not a single soul outside of Journey would know the hoops I was willing to jump through to make our situation work. To end up with the client and the girl was my goal. A new goal established itself and was making me work hard as hell to get there.

I wasn't giving up.

If it took wining and dining her, I'd be that simp for Journey. Because in the end, she was worth it. She was worth all the extra effort I had to give. And for her, I'd bubble over in abundance so she could return only half, if it'd get her to where I was.

At the end of the night, I wanted her to be confident that it was her and me. I wanted her on board for the adventure, for as long as it guided us, wherever it took us. I had my ticket, but I needed her beside me.

But I didn't need the guys judging me for showing up to her apartment with a bouquet in one hand and a box in the other. So, I didn't share with them. I did snap a picture and drop it in the group chat with my sisters. I liked seeing all the emoji fill the screen. Nori was the most appreciative, telling me, "Your ass is finally listening."

"I'm trying," I responded before walking into the lobby of Journey's apartment. I ended our text thread with, "Wish me

luck,” then turned my phone to do not disturb. I couldn’t risk any interruptions for what I planned.

I didn’t tell Journey I was on my way though. After our *lunch date* it didn’t sit right with me how she looked. How unsure she seemed. I didn’t want that feeling to linger, to manifest into fears that we could fight off by faith that the two of us could be more.

I had to show her that faith. I raised my fist to the door and knocked. It took a minute for her to answer, and I started to think I should have called first. Made sure she was home at least. *Was she out with her girls? Taking a walk in the park?*

I looked over my shoulder and considered retreating, but the door opened slowly. A bug-eyed Journey stood on the other side. Her eyes judged me before her lips turned into a small grin.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I have one request.” Practicing pitches started to be my vibe. I practiced this one on the entire ride from my apartment.

“Okay?” Her eyes narrowed. “What’s your request?” She moved from in front of the doorway, and I followed.

“I’m not ready to let this go.” When I rehearsed it in the car, the words came out slow and steady. Not like the dam that broke releasing all the words at once in front of her. “Can I take you out tonight? And if at the end of the night you want to let go, I won’t hold you. But if for some reason you are hanging on by a thread, we hang on.” I took a breath, allowing my lungs to refill. The flowers and box still weighed heavy in my hands. I sat those down on her kitchen counter and waited for Journey to respond.

The air between us was unmoving, the thickness making my neck sweat. I plucked at my shirt and shifted my neck around.

“You sure about everything you said?” Her eyes questioned me more than her words.

“I’m more than sure.” I said, “And I want you to be too.”

When she nodded I sighed. The air started to move, and despite the cool fall air outside, her apartment was warm.

“What’s in the box?” She pointed a finger toward it.

I lifted the top and said, “This,” as I pulled the yellow dress from inside. It wasn’t bright like the dress she wore over summer. A little darker, more of a fall color. According to the saleswoman it was more appropriate. Along with the long sleeves, she told me, it’d be *in season*. “Like it?”

She fingered a sleeve and said, “You’re going all out.” Her smile indicated none of that. It barely reached her eyes.

I assumed the project being on the West Coast was the hold out. It was the deal breaker. But there had to be something else. “Other than me leaving temporarily, is there something else I’m missing?” I tried to read between the lines. Examine her expressions and pick up what she didn’t say. As Nori said, “Listen.” But if she wasn’t using words, how could I?

Her hand wiped across her chest, and I tried not to let my eyes linger there. “Can I be completely honest?”

Despite the lump forming in my throat, I nodded.

She reached for my hand and led us to her couch. We sat with space between us. I suspected the conversation wouldn’t go as I hoped. Not with the look on her face. “I don’t know if it’s my reservations from my last relationship lingering. Or me trying to protect my heart and not letting you in. Or it could be something truly I’m not getting from you that I need. Whatever it is, each step forward I try to take, it feels like I’m sludging through wet concrete.”

It was so much more than the move, and nothing she could pinpoint. In a way, that made it worse. If there was one thing she could put a finger on, we could work on it. With a laundry list, I had no idea where we could start. “I sensed there was something holding you back.” My head hung before I said, “Meanwhile, I’m running across a track built to go full speed ahead.” I tried to think of the words to tackle any of her concerns. “Is there any way we can reconcile any of it?”

Her eyes examined my soul. “For tonight, I’ll do my best to get over myself and all the shit I can’t figure out. I’ll let the night unfold as it should. If there’s something here, it’ll reveal itself.”

I could only hope there was something there, and whatever it was wouldn’t remain hidden. Journey plucked at her shirt, and the loose threads dangling at the hem.

Her beauty attracted me to her initially. But the sheer amount of optimism, positivity, and good energy elevated her above anyone I’d met. “Whatever happens tonight, or after, I want you to know you are amazing. You’re sexy. You’re someone I enjoy being around. Not to mention how you make me feel when you kiss me...” I couldn’t help licking my lips. “When you sex me.” My dick fluttered in my pants, and I remembered what else could happen at the end of the night if we could dig deep enough.

Finally, her smile reached her eyes. “Thank you for that.” Her hand rested on my thigh. “I want you to know that you’ve been enough. The way you treat me, consider me, respect me, it doesn’t go unnoticed.” She stood from the couch and looked down at me. “I better not let this beautiful dress go to waste. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t know if I was more anxious then or waiting for the client to call me after the meeting. I expected Gary to take a few days, and for the angst to linger. But when I got back to the office, my phone rang. And he made an official offer. I hadn’t reviewed all the details, but from the first look, it was promising. I had the client.

After years of waiting for it to come, I thought it’d make me happier. But that same angst returned as I sat waiting for Journey to come out in the yellow dress. I didn’t know what the end of the night would entail, but I prayed it was me pulling her out of the dress. Her promising to keep pushing forward beyond the many bumps that were stopping her.

The gasp that left my mouth when she did a little spin in front of me said it all. But I needed to tell her again, “Journey, you’re gorgeous.” Makeup or not, it didn’t change how

beautiful she was. Hair in a bonnet or flowing down her shoulders, she was still hands-down the prettiest woman in my books.

And as she twirled, there was no doubt, I'd do anything for it to be me and her in the end.

“Ready?” She stretched her hand out toward mine, and I took it, interlaced our fingers and held on tight.

Outside of her apartment, I suggested, “Let's take the scenic route.”

Strolling through the park made Journey giddy. Like a little kid on Christmas, she was all smiles. And by the time we made it to the restaurant, her smile remained.

I tucked her into my side and whispered, “I love it when you smile.”

She looked up to me and ensured I saw how big and wide it was. Her teeth sparkled, and so did her eyes. I let it all soak in before I announced my name to the hostess for our reservations.

“Right this way,” the woman said.

At the table, I pulled out Journey's chair. Waited for her to settle then scooted her in. Across from her I asked, “Have you been here before?”

Her eyes scanned the room, taking in the dark wood, the opulence mixed with an ode to hip-hop. “I haven't, but I don't know how I've missed it. This is luxe hip-hop, if luxe hip-hop was a thing.” She gushed, “It should be a thing, right?”

I laughed. “They are making it one.” As much as I'd grown to despise Neveah City, I enjoyed exploring it through Journey's eyes. A new perspective on what it could be, if given the opportunity. It wasn't only the place that birthed me and nurtured me, it was a place with potential. So much potential. I traced the edge of the menu and said, “And the food is better than the décor.”

She smirked. “Like that's possible.” The menu rested open in front of her as I suggested my favorites. “Jerk salmon with

plantains,” she repeated, and I could see her salivating.

I wanted to kiss the moistness from her lips.

She declared, “I can’t go home without that in my life.”

After ordering a few selections from the menu, we sat across from each other in an awkward silence. I wanted to talk about us, and the future, but didn’t want to remind her of the challenge ahead of us.

Her eyes were still starry when she uttered, “I really enjoy exploring with you...”

And I jumped to the conclusion I wanted. I let myself believe she loved exploring *life with me*. Those weren’t the words that actually left her mouth though. Instead, it was, “Everything this city has to offer.”

It wasn’t the seal of approval I needed, but it was something to break the silence that grated my nerves. “The city has a lot to explore.” It was a promise, and an offer.

Without an acceptance, she asked, “Think the West Coast will have as much to offer?”

I didn’t put much thought into what being in another city would entail. Discovering places to eat, lounges for happy hour, friends to accompany me. It wasn’t something I even started to explore. I’d navigate all that when the plane landed. Until then, I was in Neveah City, rediscovering a love for my city. Expanding my love for Journey. Still, I said, “I’m sure if I’m open to it, wherever I am, will offer something worth exploring.”

Her head tilted to the side. “Feels like there is more to that statement.”

“Such as?” I challenged.

“That if we are open to it, there’s something worth exploring.” She traced the rim of her water glass. “Applied to a city, it’s simple.” She winced, “But to a relationship, could it be that easy?”

I wedged my hand between the glasses, pushed past the napkin on her side, and reached for her hand. I rested our

interlaced fingers in the middle of the table and said, “We don’t have to make this hard.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

JOURNEY

A full belly and a cool breeze was the recipe for a peaceful night's rest. But walking hand-in-hand with Luke, I knew there was more that needed to happen that night. More words left to say, more actions to take. But more of us? A huge puzzle laid in front of me, and all the pieces fit into their appropriate place. But there was one straggler, a piece that had no home. The puzzle was incomplete without it, yet it wouldn't fit. No matter how many times I turned it, flipped it, tried to force it into the hole. It didn't fit.

I'm not a master puzzler. Or whatever they call the person who spends hours piecing together masterpieces. As a kid, I may have completed a 20-piece puzzle with the jumbo pieces. The easy kind that kids with chubby fingers, and low dexterity could work with. I never developed the strategy or patience for anything more complex.

Complex like the relationship between me and Luke. That was a thousand-piece puzzle. As much as I wanted it all to come together, I couldn't get there.

Flowers? A gorgeous dress? Dinner at a hidden gem? If you would have asked college me what constituted a perfect night, it would be this one. A near perfect man? Luke. So then, why for all logic's sake wasn't I feeling bubbly and cheery inside as his hand rested in mine?

What'd I feel? I felt apprehension. Fear. Unease. Nothing I'd expect after a night sitting across from him. Our conversation flowed at times. Others it got lost in the

soundtrack of the hip-hop pouring from the speakers. We got caught up in hazy stares of each other across the table as we sipped wine.

What was the hold out? How'd I become the stalemate in a deal of a lifetime? I could blame it on Chaz. And the inability of my brain to forget that major let down after the amazing love I experienced with him. But truthfully, was that it?

“Are you okay?” Luke’s voice through the thick of the night’s breeze startled me.

“Huh?” I wiped a hand across my ear. “I mean, yeah.” I let my head shake side to side. “I’m okay.”

We took the *scenic route* from the restaurant. And again, the little gesture alone was notable. Luke hated the park, and in all his years of being in Neveah City he avoided it like the plague. For me? He was willing to stroll hand-in-hand with me as many times as I asked. Was there something he wanted that I’d compromise in return? A sacrifice I’d be willing to make to see him happy? I’d like to say there was. Say I’d go to whatever end to see the sparkly smile of his. To see his nose crinkle, and his eyes narrow as his lips raised. I’d like to think I’d do whatever it’d take to see it.

But he never asked. Not for anything more than my heart, for a whispered three words. For a declaration of my desires. And yet, I couldn’t give it to him. I couldn’t meet him in the middle and listen to him say, ‘I love you,’ then repeat it back with a hurried ‘too’ trailing it.

I breathed heavy and could not indicate that everything was okay. Not as we approached the door, and I knew what lied ahead. He’d want an answer. *Did our night change things for me?* I was buzzing on the inside. All my nerves and synapses, or whatever it is causing your entire body to feel tingly, fired. I could hardly fish my keys from my purse and hold them steady to unlock the door.

Luke stood close behind me, the warmth of his body doing the opposite of what I needed. I didn’t feel calm, or ease, or peace. I felt anxious.

Then when he whispered, “I hope like hell this isn’t the end,” against my neck, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open. Standing in the doorway, I said, “Tonight was beautiful.” *Did it move the mark?* I was no closer to uttering the three words. “I don’t know if more time would make a difference.” Another day, or three-sixty-five, I couldn’t see myself getting closer to where I wanted to be. Where I needed to be. To give him the love he absolutely deserved. Why hold him back from finding it if I knew it may never be me?

But the look of disappointment I saw on his face cut me to the bone. It made me want to reconsider the law of love, and how the pieces had to fit together to make it work. I wanted to rearrange my thinking, judgment, and apprehension to come to a different outcome. *Was that the sacrifice? The compromise I’d make?*

“I should go.” His eyes closed and I could feel his walls crumbling down.

“If I asked you to stay. For tonight...”

“Would it be the last?” There was a hint of hope in his eyes.

It disappeared when I responded, “I can’t make any promises.” We shared in a stare. Me searching for something to heal his hurt, if only for the night. To send him home with a bandaged wound instead of a gaping hole. It was the compromise I was willing to make.

“Guess there are no guarantees in love. Right?”

As I tried to nod, I could feel a wound opening in my own body. But it was self-inflicted. I had no right to ask him to bandage me up. To ensure he left me whole.

“I’ve put everything on the line. And in the end, if all we have is tonight, I want tonight.”

Still, he did, he bandaged me up. “Me too.” I reached for his hand and pulled him into the apartment behind me. I closed the door and waited anxiously for our next move. He approached with quickness, and had my chin wrapped in the

palm of his hand. The taste of sweet plantain on his lips mixed with the jerk made for a sweet and savory connection. He kissed me like it was the last time, and I caressed his chin like there was never a first.

We fell into each other's arms, holding on to whatever was available. His shirt, my dress, his bicep, my ass. We grappled, stumbled, and finally fell through the door of my bedroom. The gorgeous mustard dress with the frilly sleeves didn't stand a chance. The stubborn zipper ripped at the seams under his hulk-like move. I had to laugh a little. "Guess this was only for the night."

His eyes beamed down at me as he said, "It served you well. I, for one, will never forget it." Our lips crashed into each other again, and I felt his dick poke at my bare belly.

I wanted to rip him out of his clothes too, but I took my time. Unbuttoning his shirt, button by button. Seven in total, all undone with precision and care. Something I wish I could do with his heart. Handle it with care and give it to him undamaged.

With his shirt unbuttoned and on the ground, his undershirt over his head, the only thing remaining was his pants. I dropped down to half my size, squared up with his waist and unbuckled his pants. I undid his button, then slid his zipper down with ease.

The moistness not only pooled between my legs, but in my mouth too. I licked my lips before staring up at him. Then as I opened my mouth wide to accept every inch of him, the nerves I had all night began to settle. His moans and the touch of his hand on my shoulder relaxed me. The groove of my head bobbing was as comforting as walking through the park.

And when he released, I knew he'd always have a piece of me. Even if it was a piece that didn't fit a single puzzle. Not even the one with jumbo pieces.

"Come here," he said, placing his hand on my chin.

I stood and followed him to the bed with my legs stretched wide by his hands. His head dipped between my thighs, and

the first lick against my lips couldn't compare to anything else I'd ever felt. It was fierce, passionate, a lion's roar, but held compassion, gentleness, and care. Each lick after elicited the loudest moan and struggle for my legs to remain open. His hands held onto my thighs, until one went rogue. A finger traced the rim of my pussy, then entered slowly as his licks continued. My eyes rolled toward the ceiling, and my lip tugged between my teeth. My hands scrambled for a pillow, to conceal the scream that was building in my chest.

Once the pillow rested over my mouth, I let my body have the release Luke coaxed from me. The room was silent, but outside the window I could hear the laughter of people in the park. Crickets chirping their nighttime praise. An appropriate melody for what happened in my room, on that bed, for what could be the last time.

Luke's hand rubbed up the side of my thigh, until it rested over my chest and slid the pillow from my face. "You okay?"

I nodded slowly. "Yes."

My smile held a mirror to his. And as he slid from the bed, the condom wrapper ripping open made mine grow even wider. He hovered over me and when his lips touched mine, the sweet taste of plantain and the spicy flavor of jerk couldn't hide the hint of *me*.

We kissed, and kissed, until there wasn't enough moistness in my mouth or breath in my lungs to breathe. Then he slid inside, and I inhaled sharply. As my body adjusted to his, he took his time. Slow, intentional strokes with soft grunts in my ear.

When, finally, my body melded to his like a glove, his strokes came faster, harder. The bed rocked, and the headboard crashed against the wall. I didn't care if the neighbors heard the symphony we created—with the bangs, the grunts, the moans, or his name falling from my lips. Before Luke, it was a non-occurrence, and after... not something I wanted to consider yet.

The final crescendo that sprung from my mouth was a close deserving of a standing ovation. It matched a groan and a

stiffness in Luke's body. His stillness indicated the end.

Neither of us moved. The heaviness of his body didn't bother me. The heat rolling from his skin didn't discourage me. If he was okay with it, so was I. And when he rolled to the side and rested his head on my chest, I didn't worry. We stayed right there till shards of sun sparkled through the window. "Luke—"

"Don't say it. I already know. There isn't a thread for you to hang on to."

I sucked in all the air I could. I needed it to sustain me as I uttered, "I'm sorry."

Whatever air remained in the room, Luke protected for himself. Then in a whisper I heard clearly, he said, "Don't be sorry. We all deserve that something that makes life worth living. If nothing else, I know it's possible." His eyes trailed the center of my body until they met mine. "I hope, from me, you'll at least take that away. Be open to love again, wherever it comes from in the future." His hand rested on my chest, near the loudest thump of my heart. "Allow yourself to love and be loved."

I didn't expect the tear that fell from my eye. An intrusion during our sacred exchange. Felt like an unwelcomed guest to our party of two. "I'm going to try," I managed to say around the lump in my throat.

He leaned up on his arms and stared at me one last time. From the floor he collected his clothes, and the pieces of me I let walk out with him. At the front door, there wasn't another kiss. Not an uttered goodbye. It was him walking away, and me staying.

I found my way to the window. Overlooked the sun piercing the sky, and the empty sidewalks.

How was Luke not it? What was missing? Why couldn't I find it in him? He wasn't my Dwayne. But Dwayne wasn't what I wanted anymore. Thankfully, we weren't my parents. Because their love didn't last.

I wanted something of my own. Was this uniquely me, and I couldn't recognize it because it wasn't Dwayne or my parents? Do I not know *real* love? I'd been so hyped up on this fantasy of what love should be. I could let it parade in front of me then sashay out the door because I didn't know it existed in a different form.

Or was there something missing? Something I would have disguised, dressed pretty, and called love eventually so I didn't miss out on it.

No. I know love. I've shown it to myself in abundance. It's love that allowed me to walk away from Chaz to follow my dreams. And now, it won't settle for something missing. Because if there was a missing piece, the picture wasn't complete.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER...

JOURNEY

Imagine walking down the aisle—beautiful flowers surrounding each side. Not my favorite cala lilies, or the tulips I would place there, but the most delicate pink roses. An arch surrounded by leaves and more pink roses. Under the arch, my father. Not because he walked me, or Monroe, to the end of the aisle, but because he was once again getting married.

The younger woman who caught his eye, stole him away from Mama, she ended up being *the one*. Or like I whispered to Monroe as we walked up the aisle, “The one for now.”

She elbowed me in the side for that. Told me to sit down and shut up, essentially. The two of us, instead of standing as bridesmaids, were in the crowd with everyone else. Dre included. Kamara, my dad’s wife-to-be, only wanted the two of them at the end of the aisle. All eyes on them. It was a cute gesture. Something I would take into consideration if I ever made it down the aisle.

I leaned over to Monroe and said, “How’d Daddy end up down the aisle *again* before either of us?”

She shot me a sideways smirk. “I mean, you were closer than me. Let him slip through your fingers.” Her hand splayed across her knee. Her manicured nails dangling as she said, “This coulda been you.”

My eyes rolled and I huffed. “No, not me.” I looked around at all the smiling faces. Eyed the decorations that cost an arm and a leg, and almost the third gym, if you let Daddy tell it. It was gorgeous, but as gorgeous as it was, I didn’t envy

Kamara. I didn't envy my dad either. Whatever they had was special to them, and there was no rush in me finding it.

Until I found an everlasting love, I was okay observing the *love* Daddy and Kamara deemed worthy of *till death do us part*.

I wasn't upset Daddy found love in someone other than Mom. I gave up holding out hope they would make a comeback, have their second chance romance. Now I only hoped they both were happy. Wished whoever entered their life would be everything they desired and more. Prayed nothing was missing, nothing was insufficient, and the love they gave returned to them.

"Do you think she has everything he needs?" I whispered to Monroe as Kamara took her place across from Daddy.

Despite a few hushes from Dre, Monroe responded. Under her breath she whispered, "I mean, look at that face. I can't remember the last time Daddy looked that happy. I wish more than anything he had that with Mama still, but here we are."

I laughed. "Yeah, the old man does look stupidly happy up there."

Daddy hadn't stopped smiling since he walked into the church, showing every single one of his teeth. He must have used whitening for months prior because there was a spectacular shine to them. When Kamara walked down the aisle, when everyone's eyes were on her, mine were on Daddy. The lift of his lips even further, made something ripple in the middle of my chest.

"I haven't seen that cheesy smile since we were kids." I could remember the time when he tried teaching me how to ride a bike. Mom doubted he'd be able to do it. Because, as she said, unlike Dre and Monroe, I was a little stubborn. I didn't want the training wheels but couldn't balance the bike to save my life.

Daddy told her, "If it takes all night, she'll get it," with enormous confidence. Confidence that melted my stubbornness and instilled a will in me to do whatever Daddy

instructed. So, when he told me to keep looking forward and pedal without stopping, I did it. And when I felt his hand release from the back of the bike, it was a still soft voice that kept me moving forward. He said, “You got it, keep pedaling.”

When Mom came back outside, he stood on the edge of the driveway and pointed up the sidewalk toward me. His smile was the biggest I ever saw. And the way Mom ran and jumped into his arms afterward, the kiss they shared, it was what started the dream I had. The dream to find a love like theirs. One that despite their differences, they could cheer each other on in the end. Because, a win, is a win.

As Daddy and Kamara took the rings, I leaned over to Monroe. “It’s something about not settling for someone who brings only half a smile to your face. You need that one who will make your insides glow. Who will make your soul shudder, and your heart find new purpose in beating. That someone who will make the ordinary feel extraordinary. The mundane not only tolerable but enjoyable.” A weight felt like it rolled from my shoulders, and I sighed.

Dre hushed me again, and Monroe stared at me wide-eyed.

“What?” I blurted, and that gained me a pluck on my knee. Dre had it with me and Monroe’s shit. I rolled my eyes at him. I don’t know who deemed him the quiet police anyway.

“Was that your rendition of your own vows?” Monroe was no longer interested in Daddy and Kamara at the front of the church. She stared at me waiting on a reply.

I hunched my shoulders. “No. I hope I’d be much more *inspired* when the time comes.”

She smirked and snaked her head around, observing the hundred-plus audience. “Think one of these guys could bring that level of satisfaction to my life? Be *my inspiration* for some bomb ass vows?”

Over my shoulder, I didn’t see anyone who’d be that for me, and I said, “Maybe. Whoever it is, it’s worth holding out until you find him. Don’t settle for that little glimmer. Wait for a burst of blinding brightness.”

“Blinding brightness.” Monroe’s hand clutched her chest as the officiant deemed Daddy and Kamara *husband and wife*.

I pulled Monroe’s hand into mine and gripped it tightly. “Don’t worry, I trust one day our happily ever afters will be,” I lowered my voice more so Dre wouldn’t smack the back of my head, “fucking amazing.”

This still isn’t the end...

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Now that you realize Chaz and Journey didn't continue, I hope you understand this story is about Journey. It's about the love she encounters along her path to finding herself. Thus, finding her true love.

I hope you'll continue to Finally Ever After where you might assume what's next—a long awaited happily ever after for Journey.

I appreciate you taking this adventure with Journey. And if there's one thing I hope you take from her story, take this: In the end, you are the most important person in your love story.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. Nichole is an HBCU graduate, a wife, and a Black mama. She is in love with love, especially Black Love.

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