

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



STRUT

IN HER SHOES

XYLA TURNER

STRUT: IN HER
SHOES SERIES

XYLA TURNER

AZINA MEDIA PUBLICATIONS

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AZINA MEDIA PUBLICATIONS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To those who have endured difficult times that some will never know. There is hope, there is support and more importantly, there is nothing wrong with asking for help.

ALSO BY XYLA TURNER

Across the Aisle Series:

Book 1: Trent

Book 2: James

Legion of Guardians Motorcycle Club Series:

Just Ride: Legion of Guardians MC (1 - eBook & Audio)

Let's Ride: Legion of Guardians MC (2)

Just Right: Legion of Guardians MC (3)

Just Dream: Legion of Guardians MC (4)

Dream Ride: Legion of Guardians MC (5)

Lady Guardians Serial

Justice: National Chapter - Book 1

Cut: National Chapter - Book 2

Double XX Series:

The Chase: Part I & II

Line of Duty Series:

10:80: Line of Duty Series

10-99: Line of Duty Series

10-24: Line of Duty Series

Stetson Series:

By Chance, No Choice: Stetson Series

Meet Me Halfway: Stetson Series

Far Rockaway University Series:

Love Under Attack: FRU Series

The F Student

Bookstore Chronicles Series:

No Returns: Part I & II

Bookstore Chronicles III

Non-Series Book:

BOMBSHELL

Across the Tracks

Power of the Pen

Extraction

Cole [eBook & Audio]

Take A Knee

Warren

Always Right

NOTE TO THE READER:

Strut is different from my other books and this series is slightly off the beaten path. I choose to take this route because women's issues, equality, and rights are extremely important. Yes, I'm an educator but I'm also a woman and can identify with many of the dilemmas that each woman will tackle in this series. I know that many of my readers will identify with them as well.

What's my point?

It is simply to know that you are *NOT* alone and there is light at the end of the tunnel. No matter which pair of shoes you wear, our goal is to keep walking.

Here is my only warning: Every single story in this series is very short and they might get expanded or interwoven into another series. They will all connect and at the end of the series, you'll have a deeper glimpse into the lives of those that deal with the various issues along with a short love story.

Thank you again and I hope you enjoy!



Walk of Fame

“You liked that baby?” The male suitor for this evening stood with one leg partially in his pants and the other piece of dark blue denim jeans held loosely in his hand.

My clothes were already on as the only thing needed was my dress, panties, and my multicolored, striped shoes that put everything together. His fast determination of getting redressed only reaffirmed that he knew he didn't perform as his mouth boasted that he could.

Another one-night stand. Those were my specialty because I had nothing to offer. Literally, I no longer had fanatical ideas about men and what we could have because I learned a long time ago, we could have nothing.

Not one damn thing.

I grunted my response to him and said, “Okay, my ride is waiting. Night.”

His eyes flashed and then he quickly pulled up the other leg, “Yes, okay. Uh, maybe we could do this again?”

I turned and made my way down the hall towards the front door of the man's brown stone apartment. I think he said he was a doctor. I was never sure and honestly didn't care. He got

what he wanted. A quick lay and that's all I wanted from a man these days. So, it was a win-win.

"No, I don't think so," I said as I turned the front door's knob. "Goodnight."

Sauntering out into the fall evening with the trees blowing, the smell of Philadelphia and its urban and sometimes too vibrant fragrance but also comforting, met me with a gust of wind.

"Yeah, okay." He muttered.

I quickly made haste down the stone stairs and jumped into my waiting Uber ride.

"Camila Doyle?" The driver turned towards me as I hopped in the back of his vehicle.

"Yes, that's me." I smiled.

"Great, you're headed to South Philly?" He asked.

"Yup," I leaned back and closed my eyes. "Take Broad Street."

"Okay." The car pulled off, and I let the one tear that always escaped stream down my face after I'd screwed my anger out on some unexpected man.

I wiped it away like I always did and I forgot. It was time to sleep, but first, I wanted to see the lights of the city. This gave me inspiration and as a freelance artist, the city lights were my specialty. They were the very images that landed me so many awards and secured spots in the galleries downtown. The lights were a reminder that there was a world bigger than me. It reminded me that I was alive and got to be a part of the hustle and bustle of the great city of brotherly love and that I should be grateful. So what, I couldn't have a child. So what, my womb was barren. So what, I was about to be thirty-four

and of child bearing years, and I'd never get to experience the one thing I dreamt, prayed, and planned for since high school.

So damn what!

My name is Camila Doyle, and I am a goddamn woman. Men would hear me roar and then they'd see me leave. What else did I have to give?

Nothing.

Not a damn thing.



BOOK CLUB:

“I loved how the woman wanted greater for mankind.” Lucy said. “It was like she was presented with good and evil, but she chose good. That burst of power at the end was amazing.”

We were at book club and amazingly enough, we were discussing the Wonder Woman movie before we started talking about our book of the month. I hadn't seen it yet, so I had nothing to contribute.

“Camila, what did you think?” Stephanie asked me. “Weren't you supposed to see it with one of your many men?”

Everybody groaned at Stephanie's words because she was the type that when she disapproved of something you did, she constantly brought it up. Hence, my many men. It really wasn't that many. Maybe once every two or three months. Okay, four or five. I still wasn't sure how this made me any different from a man. They could sleep with anyone and no one would bat a damn eye. I go out and have a one-night stand, and it's a crime against all women.

“Stef-ah-knee,” I was certain to pause with each word. “Please let me be great. I don't condone you sitting around flicking the

bean with your lonely ass, but I don't mention that every time I see you. I mean, to each his own but don't come for me, Stef-ah-knee. I didn't send for you. You will know when I do."

The few snickers didn't move me and to be honest, I wished more people would put Stephanie in her place. She was always judging people about shit she didn't know about.

"Girl," Lucy muttered under her breath. "Can we please get this book club meeting started?"

"Yes," I chimed in because I was surely done with this.

Sadly, I had contemplated on not coming to book club because I didn't want to hear her mouth or get her judgments. Then, I thought more about it and decided I could give a fuck.

"Yes, yes. Let's get this going." Denise urged us. "But first, look at my daughter's pictures from her recital. She's so cute."
"

A small pang hit my chest as I thought about watching another picture with somebody else's kid. Yeah, they were all cute and adorable, but I would never have that. I stopped praying about it, stopped dreading the reality, stopped dreaming and just stopped everything. I didn't want to see kids at the park, little babies with their fingers around their parent's fingers, billboards with parents holding their beautiful kids, or the stupid social media post with all the cute shit some miniature adult did.

Bitter?

Sure or I just came to terms with my reality. I could not have a child, and I'd rather not have that shit thrown in my face every goddamn day.

I exhaled and said, "If we're not going to be able to discuss this book that I spent all last night reading then I'll just see

y'all next time."

Throwing my paperback book in my bag, I gathered my jacket and was ready to stand when Denise interjected, "No, no. You're right. Let's do this. Just because I'd rather stay here than go home to my asshole of a husband, don't mean everybody else does."

Everyone started laughing including me, so I settled back down so we could start the official book club meeting. It went like every other meeting. Stephanie and Jewels started arguing over the interpretation, Denise tried to be the peacemaker, and I sat back and enjoyed the club and its takeaway from my life. I enjoyed reading, so it was in my best interest to discuss the many books that I read to escape the mundane truth that plagued my mind on a daily basis.

As we were leaving, Lisa answered her phone and put it on speaker.

"Hey honey, how are you doing?" Lisa asked.

"Good," the little girl said in her premature voice. "When are you coming home, mommy?"

"Oh baby, did Daddy feed you yet? I'm on my way home now, we just finished." Lisa said.

"Yes, mommy. We ate but I miss you. When are you coming home?" The little girl asked.

My heart strung as I noticed the interaction and the love that crossed my book group partner's face. The love she would receive from that child would last a lifetime. She'd remember these moments with her daughter, the calls, the learning how to tie a shoe, riding a bike, losing her first tooth, having her first date, standing and watching her get married. If she had something to give her on that special day, maybe a ring,

broach, vintage car, earrings, recipes or even a special prayer; it would stay in the family and be treasured. That was the life I used to want. That was the life I envied.

Tears came to my eyes, but I quickly made haste to the exit of the house.

“See y’all next time,” I called back before my voice broke from emotion.

It had been nearly five years since my divorce and that damn thing still brought tears to my eyes. Not the actual separation from my ex-husband, but the entire situation around the drama. Calvin was a weak man, but I loved him. We took vows that stated through thick and thin and until death do us part, we would remain each other’s one and only. We made those vows before God and a bunch of other people, but the moment he realized I could not give him what he wanted, he broke them. Gave me divorce papers and told me it wasn’t fair that he could not pursue his dream of having children.

Calvin and I met during my last year in college. My final semester included a senior seminar course that required an internship at one of the local unions in the city. It did not matter which union, but me and my ambitious, man-hungry self, knew that I could get one in the plumber’s union, the UA Local 285. It was providential because Calvin came in one day to make a claim, and I took him to the supervisor on duty. He noted how professional and pretty I was, and I’m sure I raised an eyebrow at the hulking plumber with his tool belt hanging low on his pants. Two years later, we were married, and two years after that, he divorced me. The man had always wanted kids. His damn proposal included, “Marry me so we can make pretty babies.”

Who knew I would not be able to bear children? Years and months of doctor's visits, Calvin worked hard to pay the bills at home, and I worked double hard to screw his brains out, so I could get pregnant. After the fifth doctor declared that I was barren and that my ovulations problems included poor egg quality or female tube blockages and whatever else they said over the course of those two years. The result was that I could not have children. No matter what it was, all five doctors said, it was not happening. So, not only did I fail at bringing my husband children, I felt like I failed at life.

What's a woman to do if she cannot bear kids? Hell, we were made to bear children. Our bodies were genetically crafted to carry a child, except me.

My entire world came crashing down in the doctor's office. It was clear because Calvin had been tested several times as well and the problem was not him. It was little 'ole me. The ride home was eerie, and the nights alone in bed were the same. It was no surprise that months later I received divorce papers at my job.

Of all the places, the bastard sent it to my place of employment. It was in that moment that I knew he was a coward and not the type of man I wanted to fight for. How could he not see that I failed at life and now, the nerve of him to act like I failed him?

For better or worse my ass.

I stayed in the bathroom sobbing for more than two hours with several people trying to console me through the stalls. It had to come out, the wretched screams of betrayal, hurt, pain, sorrow, and mourning. It wasn't private, and in hindsight, I probably should have done it at home, but it needed to happen then.

After wiping my last tear, I inhaled, fixed my damp shirt full of tears and snot, stood up, and walked to the sink, so I could wash my face. I'd come to a decision. Well, several decisions.

- I would never have children.
- Therefore, I'd never get married.
- Meaning, I would only have superficial relationships with men that included nothing more than sex.

There would be no falling in love coming from Camila Doyle.

Blinking out of the tragic memory of when my life changed, I wiped my stupid tears from my eyes and drove home.

I needed to get laid.

ASAP.



The Hippies Stay

I was binge watching the TV show, *The Mindy Project*, because as a semi-single woman with her many dates and loveless life, I could relate. Well, I stopped watching it after she got pregnant because I didn't really want to see all of that. I wasn't a hater, and I was happy for folks with babies. But when I'm denied something that I'd spent well over twenty years wishing to get, for a lack of better words, it seemed unfair.

By normal standards, I was a good person. I didn't cheat on my Spanish midterm like everyone else. Shit, Lisa Denim cheated on every test she ever took in high school. Not me but she had three beautiful children, a doting husband, and they shoved that shit on everyone's timeline at least once a week.

Okay, maybe I am a hater.

In my defense, a hater with a cause. Oddly enough, most haters do have a cause or underlining issue that they refuse to address but find themselves just hating on others' good fortune. Was it jealousy? Sure, I was barren, and I didn't choose to be. As I said, it wasn't fair.

Jonathan, from *Heart Alliance*, told me that I needed to own my feelings and that I also needed to understand that they were

my feelings but that did not make them everyone's truth. Okay, I guess he was right.

I'd been attending the group therapy session at *Heart Alliance* for what felt like years, but it had only been around nine months. They were the ones that introduced me to the book club as another outlet to meet people and utilize my energy with something I loved to do besides thinking of my own misfortune. The group was suggested to me by a friend, who felt like I was in a state of depression after my divorce. I told him that Calvin was a snag-a-tooth motherfucker, who could not even lick the dust off of my boots. Assuming that solidified that I needed to see someone, he pulled out a blue card with the words *Heart Alliance* with a EKG line going through the middle. I decided to give it a try, and once I entered the room of eight women, I realized why he suggested it.

No one woman was in the group for the same thing, which was odd. However, by the time I sat to listen to their stories, on some level, we could relate to the other. It was almost like the matters we dealt with were matters of the heart and not our circumstance. They all connected in a weird way, and those ladies quickly became friends.

A newcomer, Alexis, was there because she was a bigger woman and really let that set the tone for her life. Little by little, I watched her come in, listen, not say much but every week or so, her eyes seemed to get brighter. Her smile a little wider, and eventually, her body a little smaller. When I first noticed it, I said something.

"You're looking like you're enjoying life," I commented.

"Thanks," she answered with a smile. "I feel better."

“Yeah, I agree. *Heart Alliance* has been a real help to me. It’ll probably be more if I actually listened.” We both laughed at my very serious joke.

“How long have you been coming here?” Alexis asked me.

“About nine months.” I shrugged. “Feels like forever.”

“Yeah, it does.” She looked away and smiled more to herself than to me.

“This has helped you, huh?” I asked, transfixed with the content look about her.

She blinked and shook her head quickly, “I’m sorry, what?”

“This place. *Heart Alliance*. It has helped you, right?” I repeated.

“Oh yeah,” she shook her head. “I’m dating, and I never dated. I’m making healthier choices and even when I mess up, I don’t despair and lose my mind or go through the whole guilt and depression like I used to. Like Jonathan always says, ‘I fell, now I got to get back up.’ You know?”

Yeah, I knew but there was no getting up for me. I was down, so I figured I’d just have company since it was my new home.

How do you get up from being barren?

Well, my way, everybody always frowned upon. Having casual sex was not against anybody’s rules. It took the edge off and if it was done right, well...

Sex is a beautiful thing.

“Yeah, I know.” I murmured. “That Jonathan is wise.”

“Yet, you don’t listen to him.” Alexis challenged me, which cause me to raise an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I guess I don’t.” I nodded. “I mean, what’s there to listen to? His advice won’t have me losing weight.” I waved in her direction. “No amount of therapy is going to impregnate me. I mean. He says all the right things, but what is it for me in my case? It’s gone and it ain’t coming back.”

I only wanted to let Alexis know she was doing great, but I was ten seconds from a meltdown.

The woman took a step towards me, placed her hand on mine, and said in hush tones.

“That may not come back but the question is, will Camila come back? The real Camila.” She smiled at me.

This witch.

“I see what you did there. You’re definitely a mentee of Jonathan’s.” I laughed. “Let’s do lunch, so I can thoroughly cuss you out like I do him.”

At first her head twisted as she eyed me warily, then she burst out laughing and said, “Challenge accepted.”

From that day forward, we met up for lunch, dinner or simple drinks, and we talked until we couldn’t. We laughed, joked, and challenged each other. I even met her man. He was quite handsome in a sophisticated sort of professor way. Well, that was his actual profession, so it was fitting. The man adored Alexis, and I couldn’t have been happier for her.

One evening, Alexis and I were at a local bar discussing relationships when a stranger came to buy us a beer with his eyes locked on mine.

“Help you?” I raised an eyebrow in his direction.

Alexis turned around to face the bar and finish her drink. Thus, giving us privacy. She was happily entangled in a

relationship, so she knew not to block, and she only had eyes for Devin.

“Depends...” the man smirked showing off his dark goatee.

“On?” I countered with the cat and mouse game I knew he was about to play.

“Your long-term game,” he answered.

“Nothing long term here, only short term and not too short,” I laughed at my own joke.

His smirk receded into a straight line and then he said, “Well, enjoy the drink.”

Then, the man had the dirty nerve to turn around and leave me at the bar. I saw movement in my peripheral view and realized it was Alexis, who swung around almost falling off the stool.

“Did he just say what I think he said?” She gasped.

My head hadn’t quite caught up to what summed up to be a rejection. The hair on my skin prickled with awareness as the sting of his departure solidified. Before I could fathom the next steps my feet took, I had pushed off the bar and followed the asshole.

“Yes, he did,” I murmured to myself as I stormed through the small crowd on Wednesday night. “Excuse me?”

The man turned around quickly and surprise registered on his face with wide eyes as if I was crazier than a June bug.

“Yeah,” the rejecter asked while tilting his head back as if he were waiting for an impending assault.

His eyes moved to my hand that still had my drink in it as I gripped the tumbler with enough force to shatter the glass.

Damn, I knew I had to look crazy. Despite my deep brown complexion, flawless makeup, full burgundy lips, cropped sister locks, and threaded eyebrows. Cray-cray was probably written all over my face.

“That’s how you pick up women?” I asked in an attempt to bite back my angry tone.

That smirk was visible on his face again and then he said, “I don’t really pick up women. I might buy them a drink, engage in a debatable conversation, and go from there. You seem to be having a debatable convo and your friend was winning...so.”

He shrugged both shoulders as if that was the end of the discussion. In some ways, dismissing me all over again.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re arrogant?” I snapped back at him, took a sip and decided I didn’t want to engage with the asshole. Turning on my heels, I went back to the bar where Alexis looked on with wide eyes.

Engage in a debate?

Who does that?

“Girl, what’s happening to this place. I think they’ve taken this gentrification way too far.” I slid next to Alexis. “What man buys a drink to engage in debatable conversation? I mean, *really!*”

Alexis burst into laughter as I kept talking.

“He literally walked his ass over here to engage in a *convo?*” I used his term. “Please tell me this is not a new thing. When I want a hit, I just want to hit it. Talking though? Now why would...”

A deep voice interrupted me, “because a debatable conversation tells me a lot about a woman. I can hit it but then

what's the fun in hitting it with an airhead or a ditz. I'd rather hit it with someone who can properly put together a sentence on where they want me to hit it again!"

Damn!

He shrugged his shoulders again.

Hell.

"Ugh," I groaned as Alexis laughed.

"So, you were saying something about gentrification. I have thoughts on this." The man continued while Alexis was outright laughing at this point.

Me, on the other hand, had my mouth open, and I was ready to spit all sorts of fire at him.

"I think the hippies need to leave," he said with a straight face.

Taking him in, the man had long blond hair, cuffed khaki pants, with a long brown leather fringed vest, shoes, no socks, white shirt with rolled sleeves. He had an angular face, one that could have been chiseled with its sharp features, a deep set of sea green eyes, and he wasn't bulky but looked like he took care of his body. Probably a runner.

In any event, his appearance in light of his comment made me burst out in laughter.

"You *are* a hippie," I tried to say through my chuckles.

The man looked himself up and down before he said, "Is it that obvious?"

Alexis and I both yelled, "Hell yes!"

He laughed and boy did my heart skip a beat. It was hearty and manly, yet infectious. Under normal circumstances, I probably would have laughed as well, but my most vital organ decided

to skip some more beats. He lifted his glass and said, “Let the hippies stay! The name is Chris, short for Christopher.”

We all laughed at him and continued to chat more about his hippie status. It turned out, he only lived a few blocks from me, which I did not share with him. His family was from the Philadelphia area, but they had moved out of town to be closer to his father’s job with the government in Harrisburg. Chris said he missed the city of brotherly love and had been back for four years.

Alexus asked if he was single because she drunk whispered that she liked him. Chris leaned into me and said, “I like her too.”

My eyes hit his as he winked at me, but I just shook my head. The sting of rejection was long gone, but a scary tingling feeling replaced it. I liked him or at least what he represented. I didn’t want to like him, but the damn man was very engaging and likable.

Around eight o’clock, Alexis’ man, Devin, showed up by kissing her smack dab and full fledged on the lips. It was quite a scene and one, that not only me and Chris witnessed, but almost the whole bar. Hoots and the clinking of glass could be heard around the room.

“I guess the cavalry is here,” Chris leaned and whispered to me.

“Yeah,” I answered as I watched Devin murmur something against Alexis’ lips.

“Let’s get out of here,” Chris said but did not ask.

“And where, pray tell, do you think we are going?” I countered.

“My place,” he answered. “It’s right around the corner, and you can see what a hippie’s apartment looks like.”

I tried not to laugh, but Chris was already standing up with his hand outstretched. Those come-hither eyes had me rethinking everything that happened prior to him coming over for the second time.

My eyes lingered on the man’s large hand, and without another thought, I took it and stood with him.

“Well, Alexis. We’re going to be going now too.” Chris said. “It was nice meeting you and you...” he let that linger for the moment.

“Devin,” the man unwrapped his arm from around Alexis’ body and shook Chris’ outstretched hand.

“Nice to meet you as well.” He smiled and pulled me further into him.

Instead of my friend helping me, she gave me the wiggly eyebrows and smiled big.

Great, there would be no assistance there.

“Nice to meet you as well,” Alexis finally chimed in. “Maybe, I’ll see you again.”

“Maybe,” he whispered in my ear as he ushered me towards the door.

“Hey Devin,” I smiled at my new friends, who were snuggled together against the bar.

“Hey, Camila,” He smiled. “You done corrupting my Alexis?”

“Oh, those trainings have just begun.” I pursed my lips and wagged my finger between the two of them.

Devin shook his head and laughed while dropping it, so their foreheads were touching.

“Have fun,” he called after us since Chris had his arm within mine as we made our way to the door.

“You too,” I yelled back as the brisk air hit my face.

Once we were outside of the noisy bar, I exhaled and turned to look at the man whose arm was interlocked with mine.

His eyes were low but full of wonder as that silly smirk rose on his face.

“You’re going to be a handful, aren’t you?” He finally asked although the question was rhetorical.

“Hmm,” I murmured.

The man did not lie, he was literally three blocks away from the bar, so it didn’t take us long before we reached his place. There was no chance to get a good look at anything because Chris pounced on me as soon as the door closed.

I don’t know what the hell they taught him at hippie school, if there was such a thing, but he sure in the hell knew how to kiss. His kisses had my body on fire, and my panties were so wet that it felt like I was drowning in the Red Sea.

First, he had me up against the very door, he just closed with his foot. That tongue of his had invaded my mouth and damn if I wasn’t fighting for domination. Chris won but he was also a worthy opponent, especially when I felt his elongated member against my thigh.

Holy shit.

My leg wrapped around his waist so I could feel more of his hard cock, right where I needed it. Chris did not disappoint when he wrapped his arm around my thigh, hoisting my entire

body up against him. This led us to the bedroom, which resulted in us getting naked, and after that long and thick weapon of his was covered with protection; he rocked into me what seemed like the entire night.

Three orgasms later, one water break and one stretch to prevent a cramp in my calf, we both fell on the bed, completely exhausted. The man was an excellent lover and those skills were not what I wanted to become addicted to at this point in life.

I just couldn't.



Same Page

I didn't claim the walk of shame anymore. Shit, it was the walk of fame. In my head, I'd like to think I put it on him so bad, he was still knocked out while I was leaving. All I needed was a red carpet, and it was hence, the walk of fame.

With my heels in hand, I strode out the room, down the staircase of his second floor condo, and out into the cool morning as the sun began to show its rays.

It was breathe-taking and utterly beautiful. That was another reason I coined it the walk of fame. The morning dew glistening on the green grass, the orange sky awaiting what has been held for the day, and the reminder that my lack of producing is a small minute thing in the grand spectrum of the universe. Sometimes, that realization helped me center my goals and other times, it makes me cry.

There was no one on the BSL bus, and since my place was only fifteen minutes away, the solitude was enough. Doing my usual "the morning after" routine, I let a tear fall and went to clean off the residue of the night before but stopped when my mind went back to my time with Chris. It wasn't anything that I felt before. The intimacy was off the charts, and I was more of a "wham, bam, thank you sir" type of person. There was

some merit to what the man said. It was totally different after having an engaging conversation and hot as hell. We were in tune and that most definitely never happened. Not even with my ex-husband when I was in love.

We tried and tried to have kids and soon, sex was less about the euphoric feeling and more of a duty. It never got back to that good loving all the songs spoke about. Sex even grew to be nonexistent, when we realized that I was the one that couldn't have the kids.

I knew some people wanted me to get over it and not flippantly throw it in the conversation like a wet towel, but what people did not know was that I was hurting. More than I could ever express to anyone. Shit, more than I would admit to my own damn self.

Later that morning, Alexis texted me, asking how last night was. She almost never inquired about my escapades, but she liked Chris.

I liked Chris too.

Alexis: Soo...he was great, wasn't he?

Me: Yeah, he was okay

Alexis: You know that I know when you are trying to downplay something

Me: I know you think you have that power

Alexis: I do. I know you like him

Me: He's okay

Alexis: Downplaying

Me: Sure, it was good. He was good. Okay?

Alexis: I knew it!!! :-p

Me: Well, it doesn't really matter. You know me. One night!
#Done

Alexus: Booooo..... One day, girl. One day.

Me: Never.

Alexus: Ttyl

She was my girl, but since she had her fairytale, Alexis wanted everyone to get theirs too. I guess that was the mark of a true friend. At least, she wasn't sabotaging other people because she wanted to be the only one with a fairytale. I knew chicks like that too. But, there would be no such ending for me.

That evening, I made a last-minute decision to get Chinese takeout from the local restaurant with one of the few 'A' ratings on my side of the city. Alexis called me *bougie* because I only ate at 'A' rating stores. Anything below that was not a restaurant I risked my health or wellbeing to. Her and Devin joked that they would try a 'C' rating store just to experiment. They were brave souls, but I learned a long time ago, what I ingested in my body mattered. During my days of doctor's visits and leaf and water diets, no meats, only organic fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich food. The list was long and it grew. We were told to even have sex in a certain position to increase our chances.

My head shook as I remembered all the hoops we went through, and in the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar face, but it was just a flash. By the time I turned my head, the person was gone.

"How may I help you?" The cashier asked me.

"Sorry, can I get a number three and five?" I asked. "Also, I would like a bottle of water."

“Make that two...” a familiar deep voice broke into my thoughts.

My head swiveled around to see none other than my one-night stand from last night staring at me like I stole his dog.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Shit is right.” He sauntered over to me. “A man can’t get food in peace without running into the woman who left him in his bed craving her taste the next morning.”

I nearly laughed because ... what the hell?

“Sir, is that to go?” The lady behind the counter asked.

He looked at me and asked, “Is this to go?”

Normally, I had a quick wit about me and could think on my toes, but at that moment, I was lost for words.

“Yeah,” Chris said. “That’s for here. She and I need to get on the same page.”

“Okay. Is that all?” The lady asked us.

“Yeah, give us some water too.” He turned away and took a seat at the table. Then, Chris looked at me and patted the space in front of him, “Come on. Sit down.”

If this story was ever told, for the life of me, I don’t know why I sat down in that seat. That was my biggest mistake and Chris must have known... he had me.



G .O.T. Me

My mind was still reeling as I stared at the handsome hippie sitting across from me. Unlike last night, Chris looked less like a hippie and more like a business man about to settle a deal. He had on a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, black slacks and dress shoes. His hair was coifed back and slightly raised higher at the top. The man was very handsome, I had to give him that, and the whole semi-cleaned up look versus picking up women at bars display seemed very different.

“Chris, look,” I tried to start before he could get on his high horse, but the man held up his hand with the universal motion of ‘save it.’

“No explanations needed.” He put his hand back down. “You told me up front, you were looking for a quick something, and I should have stuck with my first thought and let you be.”

Ouch.

He was right but why did it seem like I wanted to defend my actions and tell him it wasn’t like that. Though, it was.

“I’ve got some...” I tried again and up went his hand again.

He gave me an odd look before he said, “Seriously. I’m pissed but more at myself than you. Guys do this to women all the time. Be vague about the relationship and so when the inevitable happens, we cop out with...the relationship was never defined. Or we never made a commitment.” Chris shoulders went up and he said, “I get it.”

“Oh. Kay.” I answered slowly but not really knowing how to take what he was saying.

Part of me felt bad but then, this was the life I chose. It was what I had become due to my situation. I would never, and I mean never, be in a relationship and have to explain to any man, why they cannot fulfill their dreams with me because I’m half of a woman. A broken woman.

Yeah, that would never happen.

“Look, I’m not sure what your game is but I don’t do relationships, dating or all that shit.” I stood up. “Last night was great but I keep it to one night.”

To my surprise, Chris stood up and closed the distance between the two of us. Effectively putting himself in my personal space.

“Fine, Camila. Give me another night.” He shook his head to stop my open mouth protest. “I know. I know. Just one more night so I can get you out of my system.”

This man was on drugs.

“No!” I exclaimed. “What part of one night, don’t you get?”

He could not be believed.

“I know but here’s the thing. I forgot to do something and I won’t feel complete as a man unless I do.” He moved so his

nose was one inch from mine. “Give me one more night and I’ll be complete.”

“You are so full of shit.” I glared at him.

A presence joined the bubble, which made both Chris and I turn our heads. The cashier stood there with two trays, one in each of her hands and our food on both.

“Your food is ready.” She tentatively smiled, probably knowing that she was interrupting a moment.

“Can you make that to go?” Chris asked her with a bright, knee-knocking smile.

Oh, buddy was good.

“Excuse me?” I interjected but the lady had already scurried off.

“Since you don’t date and shit.” He raised an assessing eyebrow at me. “We can just eat at my place. As you know, I’m not far from here.”

“Chris, you don’t seem to understand...” That was all I got out before his lips were on mine and I was effectively – shut up.

Chris’ tongue soon joined the party and somehow my body was against him, my hands were in his hair, and his were tugging on mine. Arching my mouth, so he could have his way in the Chinese restaurant.

Damn, he was good.

A fire was ignited in me that anything he wanted could and should have been his. When Chris finally pulled away, he said, “I want to kiss some other things too. Just need another night.”

“Sir, here you go.” The lady was back, Chris paid her, and we were off to his apartment without another peep from me.



THE MAN HAD ME IN HIS HOUSE AND THOUGHT WE SHOULD EAT while watching television. I grabbed my food and made myself at home by sitting on the floor in front of the couch. After landing on the most ratchet television show I could find, I began to eat. Manners were out of the window at this point, but I didn't know the type of man Chris was. He looked at me, the show and my food, then sat down with a beer for him, a wine cooler for me and began to eat.

“Yo, my favorite episode was when Cookie was trying to get Andre on her side against Luscious and Juliana. Then, Nessa kept talking shit and Cookie back handed her. That,” Chris said with a shake of his head, “was priceless.”

My head swiveled all the way around to look at this hippie in the bar, Chinese food stealing, handsome, can afford a modern, yet spacious apartment on the east side of Philadelphia, and *Empire*-watching man. With all of the emotions of the day, how I got there, and how Chris had me breaking all the rules, I just burst into laughter. So much so that I started choking because saliva went down my wind pipe.

Chris quickly moved towards me, while laughing and patting my back.

“Here,” he gave me his beer. “Drink this.”

After getting myself together, I shake my head and said, “You do not watch *Empire*!”

“Uh, yeah I do.” He raised an eyebrow. “It’s based off of *King Lear* and the *Lion in the Winter*. I like the modern and also Hip-Hop approach to the play.”

Well, I’ll be.

“What do you know about *Lion in the Winter*?” I asked as I put my chop sticks in my rice box.

“Luscious is King Henry, the second. Cookie is Queen Eleanor. King Henry has three sons but...” Chris started to say but I cut him off.

“What do you do for a living again?” I asked as if he told me and I was trying to remember.

He looked at me with a slight smirk and said, “I’m a coder, and I work for Dan Field Technologies, but I never told you that because you never asked.”

If I was a tad bit lighter, the blush would have been visible on my face. Chris, I was learning, would call me out every time on my bullshit. He was quick, smart, funny, and very persuasive. More importantly, he was dangerous for me.

My head turned back towards my food, where I picked up my chop sticks and began to eat. I felt his eyes on me, but I kept ignoring him and pretended like I was watching the show. By the time it was over, our food was gone and Chris was throwing the containers away. When he returned, instead of sitting back down, he said, “I’m not sure about you but my butt hurts from sitting on the floor.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I have more cushion than you in that department.”

His eyebrows wagged, before he murmured, “Oh, I know.”

My head shook as I tried not to laugh at him. Chris sat on the couch and patted the spot next to him, motioning for me to join him.

“Come on,” he said. “Are you a G.O.T fan?”

“Who’s not a G.O.T. fan?” I asked him back.

Chris patted the seat again and held out his arm for me to take. “Yeah, I knew I liked you.” He was still motioning for me to join him. “I’m telling you, I knew it.”

Instead of my usual, I just laughed at him but also stood, so I could sit on the couch. As I went to move, Chris swung his leg up, so it aligned with the back of the sofa and his other leg, remained on the floor.

“Okay.” I said. “Very inviting.”

“What can I say? I want a G.O.T. woman between my legs. We’re about to watch my favorite episode.” He flipped the channel to his DVR listings. “Come on, get comfortable. Tomorrow’s Sunday. No work.”

He was right but though my mind fought to leave, every other part of me felt like it was on autopilot as I did what the man asked. It resembled sort of a routine, but it was my very first time.

“Which episode is this?” I asked, but I didn’t really care because I loved Game of Thrones.

“The one when John Snow came back to life.” He answered.

As the show went on, I found that I was physically uncomfortable. When I tried to move to the other end of the sofa, Chris halted my progress. He lifted my body, so I ended up lying on his stomach with my arms folded under my face while he served as my human-sized pillow. My head rested on his chest, so I could feel his heart beat and his breathing patterns, which were fairly normal. It was not until I shifted that I could feel his semi-erection turned to steel.

After we finished watching the episode, Chris clicked the television off and said, almost absent-mindedly, “I love this one.”

“Why?” I asked because he seemed so sincere.

“Mostly because Jon was killed and betrayed by the very ones he’d sworn to protect. Things happened beyond his control, he made a decision, and they killed him. He rose from the grave after their treachery and did as his father taught him, looked his accusers in the eye, and enacted vengeance. Then, he took off his coat and dropped the mic and walked out. Classic shit.” Chris’ voice was slightly higher as he discussed the scene.

“The man said, *his watch had ended.*”

My chin rested on his chest as I listened to the excitement in his voice.

“For me, it reminds me of some shit in my life. Even moving back to Philadelphia.” He looked down at me. “The power of releasing toxic people. Recognizing who in your life is not for you and not holding everybody responsible for their fuck ups. They got me wrong and life, so fuck them. I owe no man nothing. Jon’s walking away was epic. Moving on with his life, despite their treachery.”

Why tears chose that time to come to my eyes, made me utterly mad. I knew why they came. It was because Chris was talking about me and he had not one clue. I was Jon, I was betrayed, but I was still allowing my lot in life to provide the definition for me. Jon left the wall and I hadn’t. Even Chris left Philly for a time and man, did I think I could marry him one day.

“Tell me more,” I said as I buried my face in his chest and blinked the tears away.

“There is also Varys, who is one lethal mother...” I wasn’t sure what else Chris said as my thoughts wandered to Jon and even the group therapy session.

Things that I refused to deal with started to surface and eventually, I think I passed out on top of Chris with my mind jumbled with next steps.

Well, I did.

The next morning, I rose in a shocked ‘*where the hell am I*’ panic. I was met with a wide-eyed Chris, who sported a bare, chiseled chest, wild hair and leaning against his headboard. I looked down to see I had on an over-sized t-shirt and nothing else besides panties.

“What? Wh...” I started.

“Calm down Camila,” Chris smiled. “You’re at my apartment. You fell asleep on the couch, I removed your clothes, put you in my shirt and that was all. Scouts Honor.”

He held up his hand with a twist of his fingers. I was almost certain that was not what the scouts did to show their honor, but I got his point. Nothing seemed amiss, physically.

“Oh.” I kept moving my head around. “I need to go to the restroom.”

“Sure, it’s over there.” Chris pointed to the right of his large bedroom.

This never happened. I always woke up early, left to do my walk of fame but this... I was in new territory.

My breathing struggled to normalize as I took deep breaths like Jonathan had taught me. He said that we needed to think with clear heads and focus on our breathing before making any rash decisions. I sat on the toilet, with both hands on the stall and feet flat on the floor and counted to twenty-five out loud. Jonathan always tried to get us to do this to *clear* our minds. All I kept thinking about was spending the night with a man

who I had absolutely no sex with and on top of that, fell asleep in his arms. Fuck romantic, it was a goddamn nightmare.

The calming strategy wasn't working. I was about to freak the hell out in Chris' bathroom. I needed to get home now.

Suddenly, I felt stupid for mocking the counselor during all those times because I needed to calm down before I lost all of my shit. Then, I repeated the previous steps but this time I counted to fifty in my head. Jonathan would say this was the second step to calming down and sure enough after I thought the last number, my breathing was normal again.

After relieving myself and washing my hands, I rushed out the door, so that I could make my getaway. However, the coast seemed oddly clear because Chris was not in the bedroom. On top of that, my clothes were folded on the bed with my shoes on the floor as if they were waiting for me.

It felt like a trap, but I didn't think too hard about it as I quickly dressed and headed down the hallway, just to be hit with the aroma of strong coffee and bacon.

Oh hell!

My pace slowed as I peered into the kitchen window to see Chris' back was turned and he was over the stove.

"Morning," he called out to me. "I've got breakfast ready or you can take your exit if you want."

Goddammit.

I stood there for a good three minutes before I moved or said anything. All sorts of thoughts assaulted my mind at the same time. He was testing me by giving me a way out. The question was what was I going to do? What I normally did right?

Why didn't I know anymore?

Fuck!

“I don’t want to be in a relationship,” I finally called back to him.

This caused him to turn around.

“Why?” He asked. “Who fucked you over that bad that you’ve just done away with romance?”

“Nobody fucked me over. I just have some shit that I need to deal with. Nobody needs to be a part of that.” I answered without answering.

“Shouldn’t you let them be the judge of that?” Chris countered.

“No, I’m the judge. I say so.” My arms folded over my chest as I guarded myself against his charms.

Chris, then opened up his stance by relaxing his hands at his side.

“Okay, judge. No relationship. I like you and I’d like to spend some time with you. You’re funny, sexy, smart, you’re G.O.T. and I have a feeling you like me too. What say you... judge?” He asked.

No one could ever say this man was not quick, savvy or even slightly romantic. It was a shame I didn’t do romance, but I understood logic. Was there really any harm in hanging out with him? Yes, there was and I knew it. Since Calvin, I never even got close to men. There was not even the idea to entertain the notion but Chris had me second-guessing everything.

I stood there wondering how I was able to get to this place in my life. Especially after everything that has happened. I knew better to even entertain the shenanigans but that did not stop me from saying, “I won’t fall in love with you.”

“Okay, agreed.” Chris said with a slight smirk. “No love.”

“I like my eggs scrambled.” I slipped off my shoes, walked inside the kitchen, and sat down at the island with my head in my hands and elbows on the counter.

Chris chuckled a bit before he turned and said, “Scrambled. Coming up.”

Oddly enough, Chris was a much better cook than I thought a hippie could be in Philadelphia. The eggs were fluffy, bacon was crisp, just like I liked it, and the Belgium waffle was perfectly round and straight from the iron. That took skill. Every time I went to a hotel where they let you make-your-own waffle with pancake batter, I never got it right. Chris, on the other hand, his were perfect.

When we finished eating, I started removing our plates, cups and utensils to put them in the dish washer. Strong hands wrapped around my waist, causing me to fall into a hard exterior, Chris’ chest. His mouth nibbled on my ear as those hands began to flex on my stomach, effectively pushing my bottom into his very hard erection.

“I still want to taste...” His lips trailed down to my neck, causing a knee knocking shutter. “you.”

Oh my!

The man was dangerous and before I knew it, I had allowed him in and did not even know.



P rincess?

Chris was lethal in some of the worse ways. Not only was the man smooth but he was slick as hell. How he got me to stay for breakfast and in essence, spend the day with him and under him was beyond me. We ended up watching more of G.O.T. and this time, it was my favorite episode. Once, I explained why I loved when Cersei got her just due, Chris looked at me for awhile and said, “Yeah, I get that.”

The next day, Chris texted me asking if I was sore in any area, where he could be of some assistance. As tempting as it was, I declined and kept going about my day. It wasn't until Wednesday night, a simple – *I miss you* – text from Chris, had me picking up the phone to call him.

“Hey,” I said. “You can't miss friends, mmkay.”

“Oh, I wasn't aware of that rule.” He was laughing. “Let's get some coffee friend. Tomorrow morning before you head to work.”

Silence met him because I had nothing to say. Once again, he caught me off guard. Which reminded me that my walls were slowly coming down in regard to him. We were friends and nothing was wrong with that but why? What was the point? He was cool, funny, sensitive, smart, and reflective. The long-

haired hippie thing wasn't really something I liked but it suited him. Sexually, the man was a beast and this was something even I couldn't deny.

“Cool, so I'll meet you at the coffee shop on the corner of Seventh and Popular.” Chris purged through like a lion on a tear. “I'll be in the back. Let's say six-thirty.”

“Okay.” I answered.

Goodness.

Why did I say, okay?

“Okay, friend. Have a good night and I'll see you tomorrow.”

He was gone.

Goddamnit.

We met for breakfast the next morning and every morning after that for a month. During that time, Chris started Friday Fun Nights, where we went to the bar and interrupted people's conversations like he did mine. The man even instituted the Mangy Mondays, where he or I would try some crazy ass recipe and eat it for dinner.

By the next month, he was over my place, and I was over his at least two or three times a week. He incorporated lazy Sundays, where he and I would not have the rushed sex that we normally had because we were both needy and sexual beings but laid-back intercourse, where we both explored the other. Why he needed to make a day of this, I wasn't sure but it worked for me.

It all worked for me, and it wasn't until we were in the fourth month of the crazy days, routines of our lives where he seamlessly fit, that he made one comment that brought me back. Prior to this, I continued to go to my therapy sessions,

went to book club, and hung out with Alexis. If she asked me about Chris, I simply shrugged because I didn't want to make it a thing. It wasn't a *thing*, it was just friends with benefits. We could stop at any time, and we'd both be fine. It was clear and we talked about it, so there was nothing to our friendship. Not until we were at his apartment, lying in bed after our sex-induced escapades. We were both near sleep, Chris more so than me, but as he held me, his hands moved to my stomach and he slurred, "Wouldn't mind sharing something in here with you."

My entire body froze as the cold sweat broke out like a fever, and I started to shiver. Chris pulled me closer to him and a few seconds later, his breath evened out. Even the notion that he wouldn't remember what he said in his sleepy delirium, I knew better.

It was something inside of him that made him say that. He wanted kids. He wanted them and *fuck*, he wanted that with me, and I'd never be able to give that to him. Just like with Calvin. That son of a bitch wanted kids more than he wanted me, and it was clear. I wouldn't do that again.

Ever!

However, when I tried to get up to leave that night, Chris had me in a cobra's grip. I must have struggled so hard that it woke him up.

"W-what's up?" His eyes squinted at me. "What's wrong?"

"N-n-nothing." I muttered. "I, uh, needed to go to the bathroom."

"Kay," Chris nodded and moved his arm. "You alright, Princess?"

Damn.

He started calling me that after our *Game of Thrones* conversations because he felt like I was more like Daenerys, Queen of Dragons. We argued that she would be queen but he said he'd change it when she became queen. Officially, I chose not to read too much into that and just hushed him. But just like Chris, he continued to call me Princess, no matter how much I told him to stop.

"I'm fine." I scooted off the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom, closed and locked the door, and stared at myself in the mirror.

There were no bags under my eyes, no weariness in my face, I didn't look older, as a matter of fact, I was damn near glowing. My skin was vibrant, work was going well, and even book club was great. Yet, the panic that rose in me stood at attention on the edge of my nerves.

He was half-sleep. Maybe, he won't remember. Maybe, it was a fluke. Maybe, it was the movie we watched. We were just friends.

Right?

Looking at myself again, I said it out loud.

"I'm not stressed. I'm doing well. I will remain well." I sighed. "It means nothing."

"Princess," I heard Chris call me from outside the door. "Are you okay?"

Damn, I could hear the concern in his voice. He was getting nervous. I looked at myself one more time, took a deep breath, and muttered, "You got this. It's going to be fine."

"I'm good," I flushed the toilet, washed my hands and opened the bathroom door.

Chris stood there with his eyebrows pushed together and frown lines etched in his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” He moved towards me.

“Nothing, Chris. I’m fine.” I tried to smile.

“Who were you talking to?” He asked. “Your phone is on the night table charging.”

This caused me to laugh out loud, then I said, “I had a bad dream and I was talking to myself. Reminding myself that it wasn’t real. Is that okay with you?”

I moved passed him and climbed on the bed to check my phone. There was nothing but a reminder to pick up my dry cleaning tomorrow. When I turned, I saw that Chris was still standing outside the bathroom door.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“I had a bad dream too.” He said solemnly.

“You should probably do some self-talk as well,” I laughed.

“Go to sleep. You have a long day tomorrow.”

“The dream was that you left me. Just up and left without saying a word.” There was a sadness in his voice that I did not want to hear.

We were friends, and I couldn’t bear to deal with anything more complicated than that. Instead of addressing the dream, the bizarre correlation or the truth to it, I rose to my knees, took off my gown, and lay back down on the bed naked.

“Not leaving.” I swung open my leg inviting him in. “Actually, waiting for you to come back to bed. Make my dream go away.”

He remained there for a moment longer, then Chris moved towards me and lost his briefs on the way to the bed. His mouth made a trail up my body until he reached my mouth and then the man entered me in a non-lazy Sunday way. Wrapping my legs and arms around him, I held on as he powered through whatever he needed to get off of his chest. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought he was trying to make good and damn well I did not leave.

Chris didn't say anything, just continued until I released and then he finally let go. He was an excellent lover that way. Not selfish and always made sure I got mine like I made sure he got his.

"You're making breakfast tomorrow." He said as his hard body hit the bed beside me. "You done wore this man completely out."

I laughed while Chris tucked me under his arm like he always did. My eyes didn't stay open for long, but I had forgotten about my earlier pre-panic attack until the next one came, almost one month later.



No Dating

One month later

If I had to be honest, life was good for me. I had not one complaint and on top of that, Alexis told me that Devin had just proposed to her. I was so proud of her and him but mostly her. When she first came to *Heart Alliance*, she was broken. I mean, there was something that really needed to be fixed internally and my girl worked hard at it. In more ways than one and that was one reason I knew her and I would be great friends. I always tried to surround myself around people that were successful because I was. It was true that I hadn't conquered my own issues, but hey, I was working on it.

I realized for once I wasn't in a rush to do anything in particular besides browse the stores in the mall, located downtown. It wasn't one that I frequented, but I wanted to find something sexy for Chris, since he lost the bet about what would happen after Cersei's killed everyone with the wildfire. His penance was he had to cook dinner for me for two weeks. It was the end of the second week, so I wanted to reward him with something sexy and cute.

The lingerie was easy, but the shoes had to be just right. As I went through a few rows of shoes, I found the perfect pair but

they did not have my size. Who didn't have a size seven shoe? It was the basic of basic on the number system of shoes. I saw a set of pink boots that I absolutely had to have and honestly those just may do the trick. My purse vibrated, then I retrieved my phone and saw it was Chris.

"Hey," I said but couldn't help the smile that morphed without my consent.

"Princess, hey. Where are you?" He asked with an excited but cautionary tone.

"At the mall. Downtown, why?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

There was a pause, then he said, "Nothing. Nothing. Uh..."

"Hello?" I asked.

There were some hushed tones in the background, and I could hear a woman's voice. She had a tone of authority, but it was still a woman.

"Yeah, I'm sorry." Chris interjected again. "Uh, I have to go to the Poconos next weekend for my job."

"Okay, that should be nice." I told him.

"Come with me." He said in a matter-of-factly tone. "It can be a mini-vacation."

Wait, what? Why was he asking me about this over the phone?

"Ur, I'm not sure about that, Chris." I answered. "You know ..."

"Princess," he sighed. "Just come with me. It's no different than what we do here. Just in the Poconos with Jacuzzis, skies and that shit."

"I'll think about it," I answered him.

The man was good, but it seemed random that he would ask me about this over the phone. There was something going on with him but I'd find out tonight.

"You ask her yet?" A woman's voice rang through the phone from a distance.

"Mom," Chris yelled back.

"Go on and ask." She snapped back.

"Fuck," he breathed in the phone. "Princess, my mom wants to meet you tomorrow. She's cooking dinner, and she's inviting you over and breathing down my fucking neck."

His voice was low, so she couldn't hear him but that did not stop me from almost losing my mind.

"What the fuck?" I exclaimed. "No, no. That wasn't the deal, Chris. I'm not meeting your mother. Fuck."

"Princess, calm down." He snapped back. "Calm down. It's just dinner. I had lunch with her today and she wanted to meet you, is all. Nothing major. I'm not proposing. We're good. The same thing."

He was good, but he wasn't that good. There was no goddamn way I was meeting his mother and that was final.

"No!" I yelled back and then hung up the phone.

My next call was to Alexis because I was about to freak all the way the hell out. She didn't answer, but I called right back two more times.

The phone picked up and Alexis greeted me. "Hey girl, you alright?"

"No. No, no." I was shaking my head as shivers ran through my body.

“Camila?” I could hear my friend calling me through the phone.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I answered. “I know this is yours and Devin’s date night and all that mushy shit, but you won’t believe...well, I can’t believe...”

“Believe what?” She asked.

“Girl, a guy that I slept with,” my voice was slow and measured. “Well, you know. Uh, Chris. He’s uh...”

I paused as I begin to think about the past six months and being with him. As friends. Who was I fucking kidding? We might have been friendly, but it was more than friends.

“Well, he wants to date, and I told him ‘no dating.’ I told him ‘just friends.’ No nothing. He doesn’t listen, and I don’t know what to do.” I rushed out.

“Wait... so, let me get this right?” Alexis began to repeat her words back to me. “Ms. Camila Doyle, I only sleep with a man once because I’m not trying to have that talk. You meet a man who wants to be with you, and not only have you slept with him once, you can’t get him to stop? Did I get all that right?”

I blew out a frustrated breath because I should have known she was going to be no damn help.

“Fuck, why did I call your sarcastic ass?” I shook my head.

“Because you know I’ll tell you the truth, is why.” She laughed. “How’d you let this guy in?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Camila sighed loudly. “He’s a damn alpha, and I guess after he put that heat on me, I folded like an ironing board. Girl, I’m so serious.”

I could hear her giggling like a school girl and figured her man Devin thought we were both bat shit crazy.

“Well, then, what’s your next step?” She asked.

“I’m about to call him and break it off. No more fucking, meeting for coffee, Lazy Sundays, and no more of that man’s head between my legs. Holy shit!” I exhaled loudly and with a light whistle as the flashback reminded me how good it really was. “Whew!”

“That will do it,” She laughed again.

“Yeah, I’m going to break it off.” I sobered. “I won’t be sharing my catastrophic life with him; therefore, he needs to go. I’m not meeting his mom tomorrow, and I’m not going away to the Poconos next weekend. Okay, thanks Alexis. You’ve helped me a lot. I’m calling everything off.”

Then, I hung up the phone.

It had to be done.



CHRIS CALLED ME ALMOST EVERY HOUR AND WELL INTO THE night. I kept my phone away from me and on silent. When I finally convinced myself that I could have the conversation with him, I picked up the phone and pressed his name.

“Camila,” he exclaimed. “What the fuck? I’ve been calling you all damn day. I even stopped by your place and nothing. Where are you?”

“Chris, listen!” I interjected. “I’ve been thinking and we can’t do this anymore.”

“No, no. No, no.” He repeated. “No, where are you?”

“Chris.” I called him again. “Listen to...”

“No!” He snapped at me. “Where are you?”

“I’m away for a few days.” I lied. “I just need you to understand, we’re done. Okay?”

My heart ached with every single word. I was the one ending it, but it felt like Chris had ripped open another fatal wound all over. Tears came to my eyes, and I fought to keep them from coming because once the flood gates opened, it was over.

“It’s not fucking okay.” Chris was yelling. “It’s not. Be a woman and talk to me face to face. Don’t do this shit, like that. It’s because of dinner with my mom? Is that it? What the fuck, Camila?”

In all of the emotion, I just lost it on him.

“It’s every fucking thing,” I screamed. “I told you no relationships. None of that shit. We’re holding hand, fucking coming up with routines, cooking dinner, in each other’s bed every other night. I told you, I couldn’t do it. I told you not to do it. You won’t listen, Chris. I’m a broken woman. Okay! I’m not whole. I can’t do that sort of shit. I warned you over and over and you won’t listen. Now you have to. I’m not doing this anymore. I’m done. Don’t call, don’t text, don’t come over. I will block your number. Do you hear me? I don’t need this. You don’t need it. Okay? Find a woman that can make you happy. Like for real. It’s not me.”

Then, I hung up the phone.

That didn’t stop him from calling or coming by. Around midnight, I heard a bang on my door, then again at two in the morning. Hopefully, he’d left before my neighbors called the cops. The tears never stopped leaking from my eyes, and I only left the confines of my bed to relieve myself. With my heart ripped apart, I simply stayed in bed for almost two days until a banging on my door with a “This is the Police” being announced.

In matted hair, sweaty arms, and I'm sure stinky everything, I shuffled towards the door, unlocked it and looked up into the eyes of two officers.

"Can we come in ma'am?" the older one asked.

With no answer, I let them in but a third person slipped in behind them, and I saw it was Alexis.

"Girl!" she exclaimed and ran to give me a hug. "Are you alright? What the hell happened?"

My head nodded but then the tears started to come again.

"Ma'am, we just wanted to do a safety check to make sure you are okay." They were looking around. "Are you here alone?"

My head nodded but their eyes kept moving about.

"Are you under duress in anyway?" The younger officer asked.

I shook my head in the negative as Alexis let me go and said to the officers, "She's fine. I got her from here. Thank you so much."

"Okay, ma'am." They nodded their heads and exited my apartment.

"Come on," Alexis said. "In the shower, I'll get you some clean clothes, fix some food, and we'll discuss what happened."

I opened my mouth to speak but more tears just spilled out.

"Okay, okay." She hushed me. "Let's go."

In that order, Alexis was like a drill sergeant. I showered, put on the clothes she laid out for me, came out to eat the grilled cheese and salad that she made, and drank plenty of water. The

woman almost held my head back to force me to consume everything. Then she said, “Spill.”

My eyes met hers and I told her. From the beginning to the end. I told her why, how, and stupid I was over the past six months to fall for a damn man, who had proven to be more than a friend. Someone I could count on and I just ended things because it had grown to be too much. I couldn't do a repeat of Calvin.

The tears streamed down my face and the more that I thought about it, the worse it grew. Alexis looked at me with empathetic eyes and said the very thing I hadn't even thought of.

“Camila, I was where you are. This exact place where you think all hope is lost, no one will ever take you for who you are, and feeling like you're the biggest failure in the world.” She pointed to me. “I was right there. At a table in my dining room and it was Devin, who gave me a card and told me about *Heart Alliance*. He said it was a place for people like me, where people can go and talk. He hoped that I'd come to him but even if I didn't, that I'd talk to somebody. You know me. I'm no more equipped to handle this sort of break down as I still manage my own, but I know and you know, *Heart Alliance* helped me. So, don't you think it's time for you to start taking heed?”

I'm sure I had mentioned it before but this is why I liked Alexis. It was tight but she was right. I'd had this resource available to me for over a year, and I just did not take advantage of it.

“Also,” Alexis continued. “I'm on a roll now. I think you should tell him. The absolute worst thing he could do is say, *thanks but no thanks*. You're not going to die, you moved on

from Calvin, and you'll move on from him. You can't live your life in fear like this. You just can't. I won't allow it."

My head shook because I was not sure if I could handle the rejection from Chris. I honestly didn't know if I could survive that.

"You got this," Alexis reassured me. "Believe me, if I can get it... Girl, I know you can."

She fed me some more food, we talked for a bit, and promised to meet early at *Heart Alliance*, so I could chat with Jonathan. He, on the other hand, was all smiles and said that he'd been praying for the day that I'd meet my match.

"Won't you bring Chris with you next week?" Jonathan asked. "It'll be good for him to see how the group works, that you've been working on this situation, and how he can be supportive."

"What?" I exclaimed. "What if he doesn't want anything to do with me? Isn't this therapy private or something? Maybe people don't feel comfortable having men up in here."

The man just laughed.

"Devin has been here," he said while gesturing towards Alexis. "Men have been here. I am a man, Camila."

Right.

"Yeah, I know." I nodded. "I, uh, just don't know..."

"You're afraid of rejection, but the thing is, you got to own it. What can he say to you that you don't already know?" He asked me but I knew he wasn't looking for an answer. "Right. Nothing. The thing is, you already know your situation. His words won't change any of that. He either is going to ride this with you or not. Either way, you tell him and keep moving."

You have work to do. With or without him. You don't need him to be a part of this work because that begins with you.”

Hell, I was fine before and after Chris. I grew to be fine after Calvin. I could do it. The sting of rejection might hurt my heart, but I had divorce papers sent to my job. It couldn't get no worse than that.

“Okay,” I murmured as I slowly nodded my head. “Okay.”

I could do this.



G et Some Kids

Instead of calling Chris, I decided I'd meet him at our coffee place in public. Just in case, I was tempted to cry, being surrounded by so many people, my pride wouldn't let me.

Sure enough, he was in our spot, towards the back, and he did not look good. He had about a week's worth of facial hair trickled around his face, his eyes were dark, and the bags were heavy.

Damn.

Instead of speaking, I simply sat in my usual spot across from him. At first, he didn't raise his head, then his eyes grew once he saw it was me. Chris didn't speak, which was probably good because it looked like he could have throttled me for causing the pain that was clearly etched on his face.

"Chris," I started, but he winced like something hurt. I kept going though. "I, uh, can't have kids. I'm barren and because of that, I don't do relationships where I need to share heart-breaking shit like this."

I laughed nervously but kept talking.

"I fell for you even when I didn't want to. I ran because I never wanted to have this conversation with you or any man.

Shit, I never wanted to have you look at me like you are. I,” my hands began to fidget with any and everything on the table. “I just uh, didn’t want to go through it again.”

“Again?” he asked in a deep and dark voice.

One that was very unlike my Chris.

“Uh, yeah. I was married before.” I laughed. “The doctor told us after months of testing, proving it wasn’t him and realizing it was me. My husband of two years sent me divorce papers to my job. Dismissed, huh?”

He took in some air with a quick inhale and released it as he turned his head.

“Well, that’s what I wanted to tell you. If you wanted to know the why, then, that’s why.” I nodded my head.

He said nothing, just stared at me with cold but hurt eyes. Tears threatened to come to mine but I quickly stood and said, “Good luck.”

A cold hand gripped my wrist tightly and Chris seethed, “How could you wish me luck when you single handedly broke my heart into little tiny pieces?”

“Chris,” I breathed. “I was trying to protect you.”

He abruptly stood, almost knocking the chair over, when he said in a sharp tone, “You were trying to protect yourself! You didn’t even calculate me into the equation.”

“Yes, yes, I did.” I pleaded. “You deserve someone that can give you a family that you want. I know you want kids. You told me. You...”

“Don’t tell me what I deserve,” he snapped again, which caused me to look around.

He was livid, and I wasn't sure how to calm him down.

"Chris," I put my hand on his chest, but he flinched backward.

"You broke my heart, Camila." He glared at me with a steel grip on my wrist. "I had a dream you left me and that's when I knew. I knew by my reaction, I wanted you to stay. Stay permanently. I tried to not spook you and tried one thing at a time, but my mom saw how smitten I was with you and forced my hand. We argued about it because I lost you, just like I dreamt that I would. Don't stand here and tell me what I deserve. You don't decide what I deserve. You don't make those decisions for me, Camila."

My head lowered because Chris was madder than I anticipated any man would be.

"Don't get me confused with the asshole who wasn't man enough to love you despite all else." He pointed to himself. "I'm not him. I love you when you're snoring and slobbering on my shirt and when you look like the princess you are. Sick, healthy, broken, or whole. The woman I fell in love with, she's mine in every way. This bullshit. That's not her." Everything stopped.

I couldn't hear the coffee machines, the birds chirping outside, people walking or even me breathing. Nothing was moving and the only people that were on earth and in the same sphere were Chris and me.

"W-what?" I whispered.

"You fucking heard me." He snapped.

His tone caused me to snap right back.

"Do you hear yourself? I can't have any goddamn kids. I'm barren. Like, nothing will ever cook in this oven. You want

kids, don't you?" I snatched my arm away from him. "I know you do."

Chris let go of my wrist, but that only had him maneuvering me with my back against the wall. No one could really see us, since we were hidden in the T-shaped structure.

"So!" He snapped back. "We go and get some kids then. Do you know how many adoption agencies are looking for suitable parents? Hell, I'm adopted. I always wanted to adopt. We get some damn kids, Camila. It's not the end of the world. We can even get a surrogate. I don't care what we do, but you can't leave me again."

The tears that ran down my eyes this time weren't from sorrow but absolute shock. I could not say one word because I was completely in another world. His words replayed in my head, over and over, and it was a moment later that I felt his soft lips on mine.

"Do you hear me?" He asked. "No more running."

The hair from his mustache scraped across my skin but having him so close again made up for the beard burn I was sure to have later.

The kiss turned hot and heavy faster than I expected. Chris pulled back and said, "Let's go before I take you right here."

"Okay." I conceded.

Nothing else in the world could have stopped me from going with this man.

Not one damn thing.



WHEN WE FINALLY REACHED HIS APARTMENT, WE SAT ON THE couch and we talked. About Calvin, my group, my life and my

thoughts about us.

“You do know I would have hunted your ass down, right?”

Chris’ eyes leveled with mine.

My bare feet were in his lap while his strong hands massaged them.

“You don’t give me enough credit,” I replied. “I’ve been running a long time.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” Chris said as he pulled me so I was straddling him. “You wouldn’t let yourself believe in us. I did.”

A tear came to my eye as I looked down on the hippie of a man. He was everything I ever wanted in man, besides the long hair, those moccasin shoes, and that beard but I wouldn’t trade him for nobody. I moved down to meet his waiting lips and let one thing lead to another.

The next day, I went to book club even though I only read half of the book. It didn’t capture my attention, so I figured I’d just let the ladies tell me about the rest.

They were doing their normal, sharing of photos, talking about their kids, and today Stephanie didn’t have much to say. The woman actually looked like she was in the depths of despair.

“Stephanie, you alright?” I whispered after we actually talked about the book.

As I thought, it was not worth my time to read and everybody else thought so as well. It seemed like it was written with a young adult in mind but listed under main stream women’s fiction in the bookstore. We were not impressed, at all.

“Yeah, um.” She looked down at her feet. “I’m just dealing with some stuff. Well, *not* dealing with it is more of the

operative term.” Then, she raised her eyes, gazed at me, and said, “You got a hot date or something like that?”

She winced and then looked me in the eye. “Hell, I’m so sorry Camila. That’s just not nice and maybe, I just for once in my goddamn life could focus on my own mess and not point out others.”

I almost choked at her words but knew that look in her eye all too well. It was the feeling of being out of control.

“It’s fine,” I assured her, even though we weren’t the closest.

“Um, don’t you go to that group clinic thing?” Stephanie asked.

“Group Therapy. Yes.”

“It seems to be working for you. I mean, you’re practically glowing, and you just live your life. No matter what people think. I, uh, don’t think I can do that.” She cleared her throat. “I mean, I want to, but I don’t even know how.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool.” I found a card in my purse. “You should stop by. The first day is free, and they have payment plans too.”

Her eyes brightened but then she muttered, “I think I’m beyond repair. Not sure what good it would do.”

I pulled Stephanie to the side, so no one could hear us. She was a short thing but very pretty with a large bush, impeccable makeup and even the fake eyelashes. I wasn’t sure why the woman was so judgmental, but I assumed it had to do with her upbringing or just shit she never dealt with.

“Stephanie, I can’t have kids. Like ever. So, I’m not sure what your issue is and I ain’t into comparing who has the worst life; but if I can get help for that, you can get help too.” I smiled.

“Nothing wrong with getting some guidance. We all need some. You know?”

Tears came to her eyes, then she nodded her head and said, “Yeah, I know. Um, thanks Camila. I really needed to hear that today.”

Something about what she said did not sit right with me, so I asked her again, “Are you okay?”

“No,” she answered with wide eyes. “My mentally abusive mother just moved in with me. She’s sick and uh...I thought I got away from it all. I thought I had passed it. I’m grown right, but the shit is coming back to me like I am that little girl all over again.”

Stephanie started stuttering but I just cut her off and said, “Hold on, your mentally abusive mother just moved in. Why?”

“She’s sick and no one else will take care of her. My sister said it would be a cold day in hell, and it’s the Christian thing to do, right? But if she says I’m ugly one more time or what I can’t do despite the business that I successfully own or ...”

I cut her off.

“Girl, stop. You are hurting my heart right now.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I’m coming to,” Stephanie looked at the card I gave her. “*Heart Alliance* tomorrow.”

“Good. Sounds like it’s needed.” I nodded as Stephanie holstered her bag on her shoulder. “Stephanie, call me anytime. Okay? Sometimes you just need someone to talk to, so I’m here.”

She looked at me while nodding her head. Then she said, “I appreciate that Camila. Really. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

As I rode home, I thought of what Stephanie said about her mother. That was the most absurd shit I’d heard. A mother was supposed to protect, defend, and nurture. Not tear down. I must have had my feeling plastered on my face because Chris kissed me after I walked through the door. He took a step back and asked, “What’s wrong? That girl Stephanie starting her shit at book club again?”

“Naw, not this time. She needs some help. You know, like me and she’s going to come to our therapy session tomorrow.” I pulled off my coat and put it on the rack.

“Ahh, look at you. Being the bigger person.” Chris pulled me into his arms. “Looks good on you.”

“Shut up.” I kissed him again. “You owe me dinner.”

“Why?” Chris asked.

“Because, I told you Jon would do that from G.O.T.” I sauntered over to him. “Plus, I’m starving and it’s Winning Wednesdays.”

“That’s not a day,” he laughed as he met me in the living room.

Chris was in reaching distance now and his hand was behind his back. A smile was on his face and sincerity in his eyes.

“I meant what I said yesterday.” Chris said as if he was reading my mind. “I want this. *Us*, to work.”

His hidden arm came around into my view with a long chain with something that looked similar to army tags.

“What’s this?” I asked as I reached for the chain he held out for me.

Taking them in my hand, I saw the dog tags with the words engraved, MOVE IN WITH ME, and a single key next to it.

“What?” I asked absentmindedly as I processed what was happening. “You want me to move in?”

Chris pulled his long hair from his ponytail and said, “Yes. Move in with me. I told you when we first met to let the hippies stay. Now, this hippie is asking you to stay with me.”

When the hell did I become so emotional? I was without a clue, but laughter and tears seemed to escape me at the same time.

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed.

“That’s not an answer.” Chris pressed.

I wanted to ask him if he was sure or he could change his mind. I couldn’t give him any kids, and I’d rather deal with that now than before he broke my heart. It was already torn but then I stopped myself from all those stinky thoughts.

My mind drifted to *Heart Alliance*, then Alexis and her transformation. Then, her words came back to me about being enrolled in the program and not listening. I nearly laughed out loud. Now, here it was, the one time I needed to use the tools I’d been acquiring.

Taking a deep breath, centering myself and thoughts, I smiled at the man who made me fall in love with him and said, “Yes, silly.” I nearly jumped on him. “All my stuff is here already.”

“Yeah, how did that happen?” He had a deep smirk on his face.

I simply shook my head because he knew damn well how my stuff made it to his place. He was slowly but surely bringing it over.

It didn't bother me but much of what Chris did to advance our *friendship* ever did. It was so natural and seamless, but more importantly, it was right.

Everything was right.

Even with no kids coming from me physically. I would be alright. With or without Chris, with or without kids, the power to be alright was already within me. I just needed to tap into it.

Later that evening, Chris and I were sitting at the kitchen island eating strawberry sherbet. Discussing G.O.T. and setting more wagers he was going to lose. Then he asked, "Do you think Stephanie is going to be like Cersei's and have to do the walk of atonement? Well, at least an emotional walk."

"That's not my book to write," I shook my head. "But it goes to show one thing. Understanding where people come from helps to piece together why people are the way they are."

"That's a fact." Chris nodded and we continued to eat together like an old couple about to put away another day.

THE END OF CAMILA AND CHRIS'S STORY.

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS VERY SHORT BUT PACKED STORY about the second issue that some of us women face. *Infertility* and everything that comes with that. This story was not meant to diagnose or trivialize what we face nor have a man to be our savior. It was meant to bring awareness and add a cute little love story as a bonus. This is a true story for many women and I'd love to hear yours. Even if this does not apply, I want to hear from you. Feel free to leave your review and share some of your own tips about any of the issues mentioned.

Next up is Stephanie's story.

But for now, read the first three chapters of ***BOMBSHELL***
and more!

BOMBSHELL: NO COFFEE



SAMANTHA:

“Can I get a tall macchiato caramel? “ I asked the Starbucks barista.

“Is that all?” she asked.

I nodded and opened my purse that was hanging off my shoulder and rested on my left hip. I needed to call my best friend Roslyn. She was my sister from another mother (not by blood or marriage, but we are tight) that I just met five years ago at ‘the dunce.’ Roslyn worked in another department and had been at the firm one year longer than I had. She was a Dominican-American woman with a brown complexion, long flowing hair and a smile that stopped most men in their tracks. She was married to her high school sweetheart, Hugo, and he has spoiled her rotten. They do not have kids yet because Roslyn wants to be made partner first, so she can cut her hours and delegate, as she often said. She is no delegator, so I have no idea when she’ll have kids. I also questioned whether they will make her partner because they are sexist pigs at ‘the dunce.’ She and I have had this conversation over and over, but she is determined. My hat goes off to her because those people there were too much for me.

Roslyn always said I have no tact and there are better ways to address my concerns. She felt like I blew that thing out of proportion starting with my response to the junior executive. She and I went round and round about this. I kept explaining how it needed to be said, and she kept explaining that it didn't need to be said like that. She said I needed to use more tact. I told her that was me using tact. She ended our disagreement by stating that this was why I didn't have a man. I sat there looking at her with my mouth open that she would hit me below the belt like that.

Granted, it was partly true. Over the past ten years, I dated three guys. One smoked marijuana a little too much for a grown man. One was a Rastafarian wannabe, who tried to convert me every time he got a chance and the other one was married. He hadn't bothered telling me this, but some things didn't add up. So once I verified that he didn't graduate from college and that he co-owned his business with his wife, I let him have it. These were all valid reasons for dumping those guys. However, Roslyn argued that I didn't need to tell the weed head that his smoking impacted his stamina in bed. Or tell the Rasta wannabe that just because his great-great-grandfather was half-Jamaican didn't mean he had to talk with a fake Jamaican accent. She also said that I shouldn't have shown up to the married guys business to explain to his wife that she was with a cheating, lying no-good dog. Roslyn thought this was over the top and since word got around that I had done those things, guys stayed away from me.

Besides Roslyn, I didn't really have any other friends, except my buddy Elliot. My parents moved to Florida to retire and I moved out of my old neighborhood so I was more accessible to the airport, trains and bus. Which meant I didn't see most of the people I grew up with and most of them were associates

anyway and not friends. Elliot was a colleague of mine that I met a few years ago. We were almost instant friends. I contacted him about starting my business because he was recommended by another colleague of mine. It was said he was the best when it came to new startups. Elliot and I worked very close those first few months. He never hit on me, could take my verbal blows and give them back just as quick and right on cue. He didn't think like Roslyn who thought I needed more tact when communicating. He was of the same thinking as me, I already exercised my tact. That's probably why he and I hit it off, our sense of humor and wit were very similar. The things Elliot and I got into it about were based not my approach, but our differences in business models, execution of projects, etc. So, I guess between Elliot and Roslyn – I'm balanced enough.

"Make that two," a deep voice said from behind me.

I whipped around and almost hit him with my head because he was so close. He was leaning over me to pay the barista for the drinks.

What the hell?

Here's the thing, I'm 5'9 and I had on 3" heeled boots, so I'm a pretty tall lady. This guy was leaning over me, so he had to be around 6'5 or taller. When he stood up to his full height, I saw it was the guy from the elevator.

What the hell?

"Sir, what are you doing?" I was annoyed.

His eyes slid down to mine. "Treating a beautiful lady," he smoothly responded.

"I didn't ask for this," I shook my head at the barista and went to hand her my card.

She looked confused, but went to grab my card. He snatched the card out of my hands and commanded, “I got this.”

Well, I'll be.

At that point, the barista took his twenty dollar bill and deposited it in the register, gave him his change and asked, “Your name?”

“Joshua,” he replied.

I could play this one of a few ways, I thought as I stared at him with my mouth open.

Option 1: I could be a total bitch and tell him where he can go, how I can pay for my own coffee and how dare he have the nerve to try and bend me to his will.

Option 2: I could thank him politely, get my coffee and go home.

Option 3: I could smile and say thank you.

I couldn't tell if he was good looking or not because I was now thoroughly pissed. He no longer had the scowl on his face, but a smirk. I felt like he walked over me and disregarded my wishes, but that didn't mean I needed to act on that feeling. I didn't want to make a scene at the Starbucks because I frequently came here as many of my clients were in this area. However, I did want to make it clear to him who he was dealing with. As I was preparing myself to go with Option 1, but a more civilized and modified version, he reached his hand up to my mouth and closed my lips with his thumb and index finger. Then he slipped my card back in my purse with his other hand.

WHAT THE FUCK!

I jerked back from his hand and he quickly moved into my space, which caused me to step back out of the line. I gasped and could not believe his boldness. He started directing me towards the corner near the restrooms. His two fingers were now over my mouth, like he wanted me to be quiet. My back hit the wall and he was in my personal space, leaning over me with his fingers gently on my lips. Then I really looked at him.

He had gray eyes, medium sized eyebrows, tanned skin, short-cropped black hair and faded facial hair. He also rocked a dark navy tailored suit, a yellow striped shirt, and a blue spectrum patterned crisscross tie. He was muscular, not on the lean side, but more like a quarterback. Hmm, he could have been a quarterback with how fast he moved me to the corner. The smirk on his face was gone and now his face was wiped blank. I was still too stunned to respond to the entire scene. Fully aware of my current state, he decided to take advantage by first placing his fingers on my lips and then keeping them there. I stared at him in shock, but my mouth was closed.

“My name is Joshua,” he said with a low voice.

I continued to stare.

“Have coffee with me,” he stated. It wasn’t a question, but a demand.

I continued to stare. He removed his fingers slowly from my lips and brought his hand down to his side, as if this issue had been settled.

“Joshua,” one of the barista’s called. He looked up and then looked back at me. Like he was trying to communicate “stay” with his eyes. He smiled, turned and went to retrieve our coffee.

I, on the other hand, am not a dog. So I took this as my opportunity to make my exit and made it quickly. Thank goodness that place was crowded and right near the subway because my escape was flawless. I left, ran for the subway stairs, and the Red line train pulled right up as I passed through the turnstile. My scarf didn't get caught, I didn't fall and I was safely on my way home, away from crazy good looking men. Especially ones that followed me to local coffee shops, barricaded me in a corner and put their hands on my lips. My lips were still tingling from his soft touch. I probably have more cooties. Did he wash his hands? What in the world?

I walked to my apartment thinking about the man with the tailored suit. I ordered my take-out salivating about the man with the short-cropped haircut, I took a shower fantasizing about the man with the gray eyes, and I went to sleep dreaming about the man who touched my lips. What I didn't think about was my diagnosis or how even if I stayed for coffee, once he found out that major tidbit, he probably would run to wash his hands and pray he wasn't infected.

BOMBSHELL: I DON'T DATE



... **O** *ne year later...*

SAMANTHA:

Roslyn looked at me like I had two heads. She has known me to do spontaneous things before, but I guess this was enough for her.

“Roslyn, don’t look at me like that. You don’t know what it’s like. I haven’t been on a date in one year, which means I had to buy another vibrator because mine ran out of juice.” I held up my hands in the air and emphasized my helplessness. “Ran out of freaking juice. It just died!”

“So, you are going to let this thing condemn you to a life of hell?”

“No, I’m going to go another route,” I replied.

Roslyn shook her head and gave the blow, “That’s your problem Sam, you walk around like you’re this strong independent woman, but in actuality, you’re a scared little girl. And when something frightens you, you run, escape and hide in the closet. You did it at ‘the dunce’ and you are doing it now.”

I could not believe her!

“And you say I’m the one that needs more fucking tact,” I fired back and walked out of the coffee shop.

“Sam, wait” she called back, but I was gone.

She’s got all the fucking nerve to tell me I’m scared and I run. Who the fuck does she think she is? I’m not scared, I’m a realist and I do not run, I create and innovate.

Fuck her.

I stormed towards the church, where the Herpes Anonymous meetings were held twice a month. It was in walking distance to the coffee shop and I met up with Roslyn to tell her that I was going to meet up with someone else who had herpes, well other people who had the disease. That’s when she started in on her ‘what was I thinking, how could I, I’m blowing this out of proportion, etc.’ She has no idea. She is fucking married to a hottie and has been forever, he dotes on her and she doesn’t have to worry about meeting a guy, telling him she has an incurable disease and have him look at her like she just said she was from outer space.

The past year had been hell in my love life. I dated two guys and one of them I told up front, after he kissed me on the third date, that I had herpes. He all but wiped his mouth and stuttered, “R-really?”

I told him that I wouldn’t joke about something so serious and he gathered enough sense to finish his good night outside my apartment door by patting my shoulder. Patting my freaking shoulder and that was the last I heard from him. Roslyn said that I shouldn’t have told him outside on my steps, but that I should have explained to him in a more intimate setting. Elliot thought I should have waited until he got to second base at least. However, I’m one of those people that second base

means we're coming home. If a man gets to second base, he will have to finish what he started was my philosophy.

The second guy that I dated, I told him about my issue when we were beyond second base, which meant it was time to get the condoms. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was our fifth date and we were at his townhouse in Suitland, Maryland. He was a real-estate broker and easy on the eyes. I started the conversation off by asking him if there was anything sexually that he needed to disclose before we moved further. I kept kissing and grinding on him. At that moment, I was on top of him with my skirt hiked up around my waist, blouse open and shoes were off. He was in his t-shirt and pants, grabbing my butt to pull me down on him harder. He was big too. I couldn't wait. I was wet and ready.

After he shook his head in the negative to my question, I told him that I did have something I needed to share. Abruptly, he stopped and asked if I had HIV. I told him no, then he asked if I had AIDS. I said no. Then he said, well what? So, I explained that I had herpes. After my explanation, he asked if I had any bumps on my vagina. I told him no. Then he asked if I got bumps on my lips, I told him no. He asked where I have seen the bumps, I told him on my back. Then he made a face, like he smelled an odor. I took that as my queue to leave.

Quickly, climbing off his lap, I pulled my skirt down and put my shoes back on. He tried to get me to stay, blocking the door, apologizing, and whatever. However, I calmly buttoned my shirt, slipped on my suit jacket and asked him to move out of my way.

He called and texted for a whole week after that, but I blocked his number, so he kept using an unknown number and leaving messages. He eventually got the hint and so did I. I started looking online for Herpes Anonymous groups in the DC

metropolitan area and to my surprise there were a lot of places. That was comforting. Not according to Roslyn, who thought all this wasn't necessary. She said it was like dating your own race and it wasn't diverse. Whatever Roslyn. I'm all for dating outside of my race, but honestly, sometimes you want to be around people that will accept you, everything about you and where you don't have to explain anything. I'm not saying you can't find people outside your race to have that, but sometimes it was harder. That is how I felt about herpes. Dating someone with herpes would allow me to just avoid the awkward revelation part and just be me with the disease and all that came with that.

I was so caught up in my thoughts, I walked right into something hard. I bounced back and focused my eyes to see I had run into someone. I started apologizing, "I'm so sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

I looked up to see a familiar scowl. Wait, I know this dude.

"Ah, I was wondering if I'd ever see you again," he said with a smile.

"Where do I know you from?"

"You ran into me in the elevator and left me in the coffee shop."

Oh shit.

"Uh, umm."

He smiled wider.

"Oh, she's speechless."

I had my mouth wide open again because he lifted his hand to my face, took his index finger and thumb to gently close my lips. I stared at him, not knowing what to do or say. What is

with this man and touching my lips? Well, he must have read my mind because he said, “You have such succulent lips.”

Well.

He then took those same two fingers and put his index finger in his mouth and sucked on it. My eyes became huge and my panties grew moist. What in the hell was going on with this man?

“So, you’re plotting to run from me again, road runner? Especially before I can get your number.”

“W-what?” I stammered.

“Are you plotting to run from me again before I can get your phone number?” he repeated slightly slower.

I couldn’t say that I didn’t run from him because I actually did run.

“I don’t date.”

“Good because neither do I,” he replied as he pulled out his phone. It was some sleek black phone that I’d never seen before. It wasn’t like the rest of the smartphones, but it had a touch screen.

He looked at me and I could see that he wasn’t playing, so I asked, “Well, then what do you do?”

“Would you care to find out?”

“It depends.”

“On what?” he asked.

“On what you are offering.”

“How about for now, I just offer dinner and movie.”

“I don’t date,” I responded.

“So, let’s just call it dinner and a movie.”

I adjusted my bag on my shoulder and sighed.

“Look, Joshua, you seem nice and forceful and all, but I really don’t date, I have a meeting to go to and I’m running late, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Forceful, huh? You remember my name?” he smiled slyly.

“Uh, I guess.” Oh crap, I misspoke.

“Yeah. Well, since you won’t give me your number, can I get your name?”

“Look, I really have to go,” I said as I walked around him.

He started to follow me, so I turned and asked him, “Where are you going?”

“Wherever you are going. I lost you once, I won’t lose you again. So, I’ll just wait until your meeting is over.”

What in the world. This man is crazy. Why do I attract the crazy ones?

“Look...”

He cut me off and said, “I’m not crazy, I just don’t think it’s a coincidence that I ran into you twice, not once but twice. I really wanted to talk to you then, but you ran from me and now a year later, you run into me again, literally.” He moved into my space again, licked his lips and continued, “You are very beautiful, but you still have sad eyes. A woman with your beauty shouldn’t have sad eyes. Let me take you out. It doesn’t have to be a date, but the best way to get to know someone is by spending time with them.”

My shoulders relaxed. He must have noticed, so he continued, “Okay, what do you do for work?”

“I’m a consultant,” I replied.

“Oh, well then we definitely should talk because I know a lot of people.”

“You don’t even know what field I consult in? Plus, it’s not good to mix business with pleasure.”

“I know all types of people. What field?”

“Media and Marketing,” I replied.

He reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a black card. It was a business card, but it was vertical and had a light gloss over the front and a felt-like texture on the back. I immediately put it in my purse.

“Can I have your card?”

I pulled out my card and slowly gave it to him. He took it with a smile on his face.

Wow, he really did look good, like a young Tom Cruise or George Clooney.

“Now, was that so hard?” He laughed.

“Yes, you could be crazy, deranged, a stalker, killer or anything. I just let you know where I work and how to contact me.”

He looked at me intently and said, “I’d never hurt you.”

I stared back at him. Why was he so intense now? He was laughing a second ago, but now he was so stern. He looked at my card and said, “Samantha Wilde, Founder of S & W Consulting in Marketing. An entrepreneur, I see. I knew there was something about you that I was drawn to. You have this duality going on inside and you are looking for balance.”

Really?

“How do you figure that?” I asked.

“You display your strength with power suits, pinned up coiled hair, heels to use your height as more of an advantage when you are already tall. You also have a seriousness about you that is always displayed on your face, except the times that you’ve literally run into me. The first time you had been crying and this time you seemed upset. Always guarded, except for those moments.”

“How would you know that, if this is only the second time you’ve seen me?”

“Oh, I’ve seen you plenty of times especially when you enter my building.”

“W-what?” I stammered.

“Look at my card.” He gestured towards my bag.

I opened my purse to retrieve his card. His name is Joshua Kelly and the CEO/Founder of Kelly International. What the hell? This couldn’t be. I stared at his card and then looked up. “You aren’t the founder of Kelly International? That guy is a recluse and older than dirt.”

He chuckled, “A recluse, yes, but I don’t consider 40 to be older than dirt.”

“You own the Kelly Building?” I exclaimed.

The Kelly Building is a 40 story high rise for small businesses, branches, facilities, etc. My doctor’s office is in there, I have several clients in there and even thought about having my offices in there, but I couldn’t afford it at the time. My business is doing much better in its fifth year, but room for expansion is always welcome. However, having a space in the Kelly building was just out of the question. Prestige comes with being in that building. Anyone can’t just rent space there,

you need to show a steady stream of income, be a part of a larger network, or have enough capital and references.

“Yes, it’s mine,” he said proudly.

“Wow, that’s nice for you. I have to go now. Have a good evening,” I said and started to scamper away. I turned to see if he followed me, but he just watched me and took a picture of my business card. A second later, I heard my cell vibrate. I pulled it out and saw I had a text from a random number that read, ‘*this is Joshua, have a lovely evening road runner.*’

What have I done?

BOMSHELL: THE ANONYMOUS MEETING



S AMANTHA:

I was one block away from the Herpes Anonymous meeting that I was now ten minutes late for. So much for punctuality, now people will see me coming through the door. Great. I was very nervous about this because whoever saw me would know that I had herpes. I couldn't go in there and act like I was there supporting a friend or that I was representing an anonymous friend. However, Elliot helped me understand that everyone in there had herpes too, or so it would be assumed, so it wasn't just me. That only helped a little. I guess I was a little conceited when it came to my reputation. I have fired people who I felt tarnished my name or company. I have stopped being friends with people for the same reasons. It meant something to me. The truth is, people are going to think whatever they are going to think and there is really nothing that can be done about that. I know that, but I'm an avid believer in not wanting to give people a bat to hit me over the head with.

I turned around to make sure he didn't follow me and the coast was clear. Walking up the steps, I saw a sign for HRA, which I'm assuming had something to do with herpes. I followed the arrows until I came to a room that had people roaming around

eating crackers, brie and olives. They all looked normal and none like aliens. The chairs were set up and not in a circle, which was great because all I could think about was the AA groups, "Hi, my name is Samantha and I'm an addict." I did not want to do that or share the story of how I got it and how I cried and didn't go back to the doctor until three months later.

I found a seat towards the back and sat down in a row that didn't look occupied. One lady turned around with a mouth full of crackers and waved for me to move up. I smiled and politely shook my head. She did it again and I raised my hand in the universal way of saying, I'm okay. Then I felt someone touch my shoulder. I immediately turned and looked up. It was a guy who bent down and whispered, "That's my wife, feel free to ignore her. She wants to know everyone."

I smiled at him and said, "Thanks, but I'm good here."

He waved his wife off as if to say, 'leave her alone' and then said, "Enjoy yourself." His wife frowned and he walked up to her and put his arm around her shoulder. They were bunched up together and whispering to one another. They looked cute. After a while, someone stood up to start the event. People sat down and filled in the front rows first, but there were some stragglers like me, who sat away from others and towards the back. I guess we were the newbies. In total there were about thirty people in attendance.

There was an introduction by the host, who explained why they chose to start the group, how long it was in existence and that they are more than just a group, but how many people have become like family. The woman that was trying to get me to sit up front was the first to volunteer to speak, when the host asked if anyone needed to "air."

“Hi, my name is Lisa, and I just want to say welcome to all the new faces. As most of you know my husband and I have been coming here for several years now after I was diagnosed with herpes. I thought my life was over, but in some ways it just got started. I was so scared to tell Jared because I thought he would think that I cheated on him, but after several months of holding out sex, he cornered me. I don't want to repeat myself because most of you know the story of this sweet man, but my point is that we've been married for nine years and our marriage is stronger now than it ever was. So, for you newbies, keep the faith. It's not the end of the world, it just might be the beginning of something new.”

Tears stung the back of my eyes, but I looked up and around to get my mind off her words. That's good for her, but I was batting zero for two in the dating category. Is anyone here going to talk about how to tell someone you have herpes and when? Or should I just search the room and set my eyes on someone here? There were people of all different races, gender and sizes. Talk about a diverse room. Some looked like business women and men, blue collar workers, mothers, fathers, singles, married or partners. The doctor's words came back to me about how common this disease actually was. In all my readings and research, that was definitely confirmed, but it was something to see how these people here were unashamed. That was liberating.

Some more people 'aired', there were some married folks who actually did cheat on their spouses, so they were looking for support on that level, some were single and struggling like me. One guy even said 'hit me up if you're interested.' That was funny, but he was dead serious. He wasn't my cup of tea. A little on the slender side and not really strong enough for me. He had a mousiness to him, which was a turn-off. Good sense

of humor though, but no matter what Roslyn thinks, I know that I'm strong and will run over a weak man. *Bitch.*

The remainder of the meeting was quite good. More people spoke, some people broke down crying and others supported them. Kind of cool, so I think I may try it again. I left the meeting and caught the train home. The events of the day started to play through my mind, Roslyn, Joshua, the meeting, the year, the diagnosis, so I needed some comic relief. I turned on my TV, scrolled to Hulu and watched an episode of Key and Peele. They are hilarious and after laughing out loud several times, I started to feel a little better and decided that tomorrow would be the day that I would start my new beginning. Or at least figure out what that was.

I took a shower, completed my Yoga stretching exercises using the FitTV app on my SmartTV. I set my alarm for 9:30 AM because I wanted to get an early start to my Saturday by walking around the city and thinking. This was how I usually made my final decisions, walking and thinking. My phone buzzed and I figured it was Roslyn trying to talk, but I didn't want to hear it from her tonight. I was in a good mood and didn't need that drama. I picked up my phone to turn it off, but there was a text from an unfamiliar 202 number. I opened the text and it was from Joshua.

Lunch tomorrow @ Nandos, on Mississippi Ave. 1pm

Sweet dreams Road Runner.

My thoughts from earlier just came back to haunt me. This man had to be some sort of millionaire, to own the freaking Kelly Building, but was it insane for me to turn him down? I said I was strong and wanted someone strong, but what I didn't want was someone ordering me around. If this thing between me and him progressed, I didn't want the billionaire

playboy to know I had herpes. All I could imagine was my picture, name, occupation and the words – *She has Herpes* – plastered on the New York style billboards in the Kelly Building. Also on the elevator monitors, in the halls on the displays. Everywhere. I couldn't risk that. So, I texted back.

Sorry, I have plans.

Also, I'd rather you not pursue me,

because I'm not on the market.

Good night.

I thought that was clear. Despite Roslyn's belief that I needed more tact, I've come to learn that you need to be clear with people because when you sugar coat things, people don't seem to get the message. Or people just don't want to get the message, like Mr. Kelly here. Incoming text:

Cancel your plans,

I'll see you at Nandos.

Business is always on the market.

Oh boy. I can't argue with this man via text and I dare not call him because he'll say something crazy. Why, oh why did I give him my business card? This is what having tact gets you. Unwanted attention. I texted back:

Fine, but strictly business.

I saved his number in my phone and reset my phone alarm for an earlier time. I checked the rest of my emails, wrapped my hair and lay down. I started to mentally check off what I need to do tomorrow, besides meet Mr. Kelly at my favorite chicken restaurant and walk around the park a few times. I needed to wash clothes, take some to the cleaners, and dust. I usually had someone come in once a month to clean the place, but I felt

like it would be therapeutic to do this myself, since I was contemplating so many things and getting ready for a new beginning. My phone buzzed.

Scouts honor.

growl

Oh shit.

I got the feeling that I entered another level of trouble.

TO KEEP READING BOMBSHELL, [CLICK HERE](#).

EXTRACTION: CHAPTER 1



P hoebe

“...LOST AND ALONE. I’M HERE BUT I’M NOT.” THERE WAS A slight pause, the hesitation allowing the radio caller to collect his thoughts. The music played softly in the background. I started to hum with the tune as the DJ waited for the guest caller to finish. “I guess...things are different.”

The caller exhaled loudly, causing his breath to blow across his mouthpiece and echo through the speakers.

“Have you seen anyone or reached out to your local VA?” the DJ asked in a light and concerned voice.

He exhaled again and said, “Yeah, I’ve been to the VA. They said I don’t have PTSD but showed signs of depression and withdrawal. That’s what happens when you don’t feel a part of anything around you, right? Nothing’s the same and I was only gone for six years.” He let out another frustrated breath and continued, “Man, I just wanted to call up and ask you to play *Down* by Mat Kearney. It’s soothing.”

“You got it, my friend,” the DJ answered, “and just know that you are in our prayers.”

“Thanks, man. Thanks, man. I wanted to tell you that all the guys over there at the various army stations listen to you on the internet, no matter what religion or culture or anything. You play inspirational songs and I’m sure those have saved us and provided hope many-a-day.”

“Wow, that’s just awesome. It’s our mission to give folks inspiration. This one is for you.”

The song cut in and the words seemed to jump from the old radio.

*“It took his breath away, holding the bank page
He got the letter, they’re gonna take their house away
...Feeling the weight of a world that just don’t care”*

I felt something on my cheek and quickly turned, focusing my eyes to look for some type of flying insect, but there was nothing. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and felt moisture.

It was wet.

I was crying.

The radio caller’s words, the lyrics to the song, and the stark pain in his voice had penetrated my bubbly exterior.

*“Can you hear when we call
There where we fall”*

Tears had been few and far between ever since I left.

I made a decision a while ago to live my life to the fullest. My dad almost lost his mind when I called him to let him know that I was quitting my full time, nine-to-five job and had decided to make jewelry. He called me everything from irresponsible to immature.

It wasn't one of our best moments, but I would not be deterred.

My entire life had been devoted to working and being successful. I was not lazy and I never minded the work; it was simply that I had to make major changes and make them fast. After high school, I remained in school for six additional years, excelled to the point where I was offered to join the board of directors and the company offered me the opportunity to open a branch in the corporation. That was the American dream but I decided to put my business degree to work and not have to work for other people until retirement.

I sold my condo, paid off my car lease, and any other outstanding debt. Fortunately, I earned scholarships that helped put me through school and the few loans I did have were paid off while I was enrolled.

It was time for me to make some changes, and I moved from the busy Chicago business district to Lily, New Jersey. Lily is a small town, total population of less than ten-thousand citizens and only one Walmart within a forty-mile radius.

My rent was cheap and low enough for me to make it on my jewelry earnings. The building was clean and the landlord lived next door to the premises. The town was almost like a time capsule; there was not a stainless steel appliance to be seen in town and nothing about the place had been updated. Not like Chicago or my last apartment, which had wall-to-wall carpet, marble counters, and stainless steel everything. Despite the differences, I was just fine with Lily; the gas appliances worked excellently, there was plenty of room for me to make jewelry and store all of my other crafts projects.

My father thought I was bat shit crazy. That was alright by me since I had lived his dream for so long; that American one. It

was his and no longer mine.

The money I earned was enough for me to live comfortably. The only luxurious thing I owned was my car and I kept it because I loved her. Ann, my vehicle, stayed intact while I traveled across the state lines, through road mishaps, and transitions. She was a great car so she stayed while everything else had to go. Donations, yard sales, and Craigslist were the methods I used to downsize.

“We’re back on the air at WDNJ, your number one source for inspirational music. Call us up if you have a song you are itching to hear...”

I turned the radio down and wiped my face with the back of my hand. The man’s story was sad, but I wasn’t sure why it brought me to tears. The song was a good one and I often played it on my MP3 player but I had never cried about it.

My grandfather was a veteran. He passed away when I was young. Besides going to see his grave site from time to time, that is the extent of my experience with a veteran. I didn’t know any personally, and it was a huge possibility I didn’t give a person enough of my time to learn this fact.

My mouth tended to get ahead of me because my brain was always running a mile a minute. Ollie, one of my neighbors, always said that I was his daily entertainment. He was an older man and his kids never stopped by to check on him, so I did. He was a little flirty and that was alright because at seventy-eight years of age, you’re allowed to be anything you want. This is what Ollie would say to me when I told him not to be rude to his chess partners at the center. I have another neighbor, but she worked 24-7 and prided herself on that fact. For me, that would never be my badge of honor again.

Our other neighbor just moved in a few months ago, and we still hadn't seen him. We figured he must put his trash out in the middle of the night.

Ollie told me to mind my business, so I did for the first three months. Now it was time to plan my ambush.

The wood counters in my kitchen is where I laid out the tools for my ambush. These included wake-me-up coffee shots, binoculars, latex gloves, and my bandana. I also had my trash bag prepared.

After the sun went below the horizon for the evening, I parked myself near the window facing the street. The building was only two stories, but had four apartments that tended to be spacious. Ollie lived downstairs underneath my unit. My workaholic neighbor lived across from me and the phantom guy lived on the first floor beneath her unit.

Ollie said he'd seen him a few times and from the looks of it, he was a fairly young guy but did not seem approachable.

Not that any of that mattered to me, I was on a mission.

There was no movement for hours and I was tired of playing Sudoku on my phone while listening for the creak of his door. The only reason I knew it had a creak was because the people that lived there before him always chose odd times to leave and the rusty hinges caused a loud creaking as they flexed against the metal door frame plates. Ollie said the neighbors were losers and to stay away from them. I left a note anyway, but the hinges were never fixed.

Something passed by outside causing me to drop my phone and look down.

Shit.

When I looked back up, I noticed a guy dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of shorts making his way to the dumpster.

Quickly, I grabbed my phone, my gloves and bandana and proceeded to leave my apartment.

Shit, I forgot the trash. Running back inside, I grabbed my bag of trash and flew down the stairs.

The guy had just reached the dumpster, so I quickly speed-walked to catch up then slowed down so he would not see me rushing towards him.

“Hey, hey,” I called.

He turned around and holy cow, he was hot. So distractingly hot that I didn’t realize I had come to a stop.

“Yeah,” his voice seemed to rumble over my body.

Even his voice was hot. It was smooth, not husky, but it definitely glided over my skin. Almost like he could be a singer or radio show host.

“I’m so glad you’re out here,” I said as I recited my rehearsed lines. “I didn’t want to come out here by myself at night, but I cooked fish for dinner, so I had to get it out. Know what I mean?”

He grunted and turned back around to open the dumpster for me.

“Oh wow. Thanks so much,” I exclaimed.

He nodded as I walked closer to him. The man was tall compared to my five-foot-seven-inch frame and he was fair skinned. His dark hair was longer than I expected and unkempt. His beard was also out of control but with or without it, this man was hot.

“I’m Phoebe, your neighbor.” I held out my hand. “I’m in 2a upstairs. Right above Ollie.”

He nodded again but didn’t take my hand.

I extended it further just in case he couldn’t see my hand in the well-lit, small parking lot that consisted of our four vehicles.

“Are you really not going to shake my hand?” I asked. “I washed my hands after making the fish.”

He looked down at my hand and still didn’t take it.

O-kay.

“Well, will you tell me your name?”

He looked back towards the apartments and took a step towards them.

“Okay, then,” I quickly stated. “Since you won’t give me a name, I’ll have to make one up for you.” That comment stopped him in his tracks but he did not turn around. “Let’s see. How about Ted or Carl. Wait, maybe Zou.”

I was silent for the dramatic effect. His right foot picked up and he took another step towards our building.

Quickly throwing my trash into the dumpster, I closed it and said, “Wait.”

The tall man did not wait, but he did say, “If you don’t want to be out here alone, I suggest you get going back inside.”

I did the very thing that always got me in trouble as a teenager; I erupted in laughter.

This stopped him again and he turned around with his eyebrows raised and his lips slightly parted.

I kept laughing because according to his expression, he thought I was bat shit crazy too.

My feet started moving towards him as I tried to gain my composure. He was still staring at me like I had two heads, but he waited until I passed him before he started moving.

“Whew, I needed that. You’re funny. I think I’ll make you my new friend.”

I kept chattering as we made our way back to the apartment building. “You gotta have laughter in your life. You know?”

The man remained silent, but that did not stop me.

“Well, Zou, I’ll see you tomorrow. I hear you don’t get out much, so pack your gloves.”

“What?” he asked as he held the front door open for me.

This time one eyebrow was raised and his thin top lip was curled upward with confusion.

Before I could help myself, I started to laugh uncontrollably again.

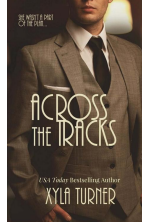
“God, Zou. Do you ever stop?” I managed to say as I climbed the stairs. “You’re hilarious.”

When I turned back around, he was shaking his head. More laughter threatened to escape me but it was three in the morning and I didn’t want to wake Ollie, since the lady next door was probably not home.

The man was funny! We’d get along swimmingly.

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ACROSS THE TRACKS: CHAPTER 1



PROLOGUE: LEAVE IT ON THE COURT

15 years ago:

Ouch!

Danny tackled Lisa near the grass, running her over like a freight train. She probably should not have been playing tackle football, but tackling her that hard was simply uncalled for. Josh, Lisa's brother, told him to knock it off on many occasions. It was the end of August in the city of Philadelphia and they were all playing in the Richard Allen Projects or as the broken sign on the sidewalk used to read, The Housing Development. It was normal for them to be playing sports in the middle of the patches of brown grass and the hard black concrete. Lisa's dad forbade them to play anywhere else because there was so much broken glass and used needles laying around the development. Nothing was ever cleaned and even if it were, within the week, the streets would be filled with more trash and the results of a broken community.

The sun was high, causing Lisa to be temporarily blinded as she attempted to run the football through the mob of boys, she failed to see Danny coming for her again as he tackled her on the hard concrete. There was no patch of grass for her to land and like always, Danny seemed dead set on bringing her pain. Even though she was a skinny girl, who had not yet developed into the full physical stage of womanhood. The other guys, including her brother, got mad at Danny for hitting her so hard. After some minor pushing and trash talking, they cooled it since they were all neighbors, it would be squashed by dinner time. They always let her play because she was fast, she was a girl and nobody really wanted to tackle her except Danny.

Lisa hopped right back up and yelled, "I'm alright."

Danny waved his arm in her direction and said, "See, she's fine. Quit bitching."

"Lisa?" Josh was asking without asking.

She nodded her head while the other guys scowled at Danny. He was always rough with her. He didn't care whether she was a girl or not, Lisa was his enemy if she was not on his team. As it usually happened, she was never on his team and he made sure of that.

Lisa's father and brother were so overprotective when it came to her. She was surprised that they let her play any sports at all. Their father, Aaron Johnson, was fine with almost anything, but she had to be with Josh. He conditioned his son to always take care of his baby sister, so that meant she was with him at all times. This resulted in Lisa being referred to as a tom-boy, but the Johnson's did not care. She was safe, staying busy and Aaron did not quite care what other people thought of how he raised his kids. Josh and Lisa's mother passed away only a

year after Lisa was born. Their father said she died from an aneurysm. This was unexpected and tragic, but Aaron raised those kids the best way he knew how and if Lisa played tackle football and basketball, yet stayed out of trouble, this was fine with him. She was actually quite good at both sports since she was so fast. Then basketball became more than a sport for her, but a game that she loved to compete.

Once they finished their game of football and Josh signaled for Lisa to gather her things so they could head home. They lived in an area where many low-income families had resided for decades. The place was crawling with crack heads, girls with cuts on their faces and drug dealers. They never heard the term gangs, but they knew whose corner belonged to which group. Her dad didn't trust none of these people, which was another reason he made Josh stay with Lisa at all time. Aaron would use the N word often, but when he talked to Lisa, he tried not to curse or use derogatory language. Her father was a construction worker and this particular month he was laid off. He said that they (white guys) always laid off the black guys first. She was only eight, so she didn't always understand what he was saying or how these things he mentioned impacted their lives. They had food on the table, clothes on their back, although Josh often complained that he wanted certain kinds of sneakers. Nevertheless, their dad made them focus on their education. His mantra was, nobody can take that away from you. Have your own, so you will not ever be laid off. He constantly drilled that into them, which seemed like it was on a daily basis.

Her father often worked with his friend and County Chairman Wallace Pinkney. He and Wallace grew up together and they seemed to have a mutual understanding and respect for one another. Pinkney had this ambition of helping with the change

of the *New Philadelphia*, helping low-income people, merging racial divides and attacking hard issues like education. The community loved him because he was from the same hood. He just happened to also be a politician, which meant he did some questionable things, like the upcoming community event. Her dad would shake his head at him when he saw Wallace on TV talking about the rich and poor working together. Aaron thought that was the politician talking, not his friend. Lisa's dad always said that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. White people made sure of that, so this notion of them working together to eliminate poverty, change the education system, or help to keep these kids out of jail was ridiculous.

One of Wallace initiatives was the *Over the Tracks* community event that included food, games, sports, vendors and a celebrity appearance. Wallace had people canvassing all of north and south Philadelphia, to ensure that there were as many people as possible in attendance. He even had elected officials from other districts involved, black and white. This was supposed to be a spectacular event, so the police were ready for any sort of commotion. They had been there to keep the peace because they were like her father, who didn't believe in that '*kumbaya shit*' as he would say, but not in front of her.

The event was beyond spectacular, there were people everywhere, black and white alike. They ran out of food, so Wallace ordered 100 pizzas because he didn't want there to be any issues. They had community speakers, gave out awards, and held a basketball tournament and still people were out and about having fun. They were not necessarily having fun with each other, meaning mingling outside of their friends, but they were all there with no trouble. After the basketball tournament, Josh and friends all started to play a pickup game with Lisa. On the other side of the court, there were several white boys

playing a game as well. Wallace must have seen this and saw it as an opportunity to begin the mending of the racial divide starting with the youth because the adults were not budging. He stopped both of the games and said they should just play each other. Lisa looked at her brothers who had smirks on their faces. She knew they thought white people were not good at basketball, so why not. She looked at the white boys and saw they had similar smirks, but she couldn't decipher what theirs meant.

Lisa was nine, Josh was eleven years old and so were all of his friends, except Danny, who was twelve. They flipped a coin and the white boys got the ball first. Danny muttered that would be the only time they got the ball. Josh had taught Lisa how to play basketball and he always stressed that defense was critical because anyone could score, but to stop someone else from scoring was what mattered. Josh, sometimes, could be a real sage. The boys put Lisa on the point guard who brought up the ball, so she guarded him from afar at first. She didn't know him and was not sure how he played. Danny yelled at her to get on him. So she moved closer with her hands extended on her sides. The white boy went to cross her over, but she anticipated the switch, stole the ball and laid it up on their side of the court, scoring the team's first point. Her team cheered and to her surprise, all the black people cheered. There was a huge crowd watching the game. After she had made the layup, she felt a little more confident, so she pushed the ball out of bounds towards the glaring boy who she just stole it from and stood there. It might have seemed innocent to a non-ball player, but that move was a challenge. It said, 'I just scored and I'm not running back, I'm going to stand here and guard you so I can score again.' The boy picked up on the challenge and chest passed the ball to her really hard. He

looked shocked when she merely caught it with quick hands and checked him.

He started dribbling the ball, with his hand guarding it now, as she slid sideways to keep up with him. He glared at her, then muttered something. Lisa looked from his hands to his face and asked, “What?”

He kept dribbling while saying through gritted teeth, “Y’all always cheat.”

She looked at him with confusion etched on her face. Who was y’all and who cheated? He dribbled past her quickly, so she ran to catch up as he threw the ball to his teammate, who sat at the three-point line and sunk the three, scoring for his team. This time, the white people cheered and the black people groaned. Wallace had a look on his face that could have been read, maybe this was not a good idea.

The game went on with the same sort of intensity. The tension could be cut with a knife and the emotions were extremely high over a quick game of pickup with kids. Now, it seemed like everyone was watching, with cheers and groans each time a team scored. The score was tied 22-22 with one minute left. There was no referee because, in a game like this, everyone called their own fouls. Fortunately, there was someone to keep the score and time. Lisa was tired because the boy she was guarding was fast like her. He scored on her twice, but other than that, he directed his entire team and set them up to score. And they executed this flawlessly and mostly behind the three-point line.

After her team had lost the ball, Josh tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, “Take it from him again.”

Lisa nodded and got closer to her opponent as he dribbled the ball up the court. He must have known she was going to try

and steal it from him again. His elbows were out, so when he was getting ready to pass the ball between his two hands, she reached for the ball, but he elbowed her and she fell from the force of the blow. Outrage erupted from her teammates and the viewers on the sidelines to the point where Wallace got up and started pacing in front of the crowd with a lame attempt to pacify them. "It's just a friendly game with kids." He forced a nervous smile.

When Lisa got up, she saw her dad staring at her. He did not audibly say anything, but what she felt he said was, 'Get that damn ball.' She didn't call the foul because only babies did that, but she did nod towards at her father in acknowledgment of his silent demand. She picked up the ball since Wallace had just separated Josh and her opponent. Mentally, Lisa was ready to steal the ball again, so she pushed the ball towards the boy with a hard chest pass. He quickly grabbed it and started dribbling towards her again. She swatted at the ball several times to throw him off, but then he tried to do an around the back cross over and she had him.

Lisa stole the ball from him and took off dribbling to their side of the court. She could feel him on her heels. Her strongest arm was the right hand, but with 20 seconds left, she couldn't switch the ball to her right hand without losing time or him stealing the ball. His breath felt like it was right on her neck, to the point that she cringed. Lisa was a pretty good basketball player, however with the anxiety that was building in her stomach she feared that she would miss the lay-up. As she reached the inside of the paint near their basket, she felt a strong push on her right shoulder, but she had just released the ball with her left hand for the lay-up. The next thing she knew, she was on the ground with her opponent on top of her. He glared at her and whispered, "You'll pay for that blackie."

The crowd erupted, then they groaned as he was pulled off of her and punched in the face by Danny. Followed up by Josh. By the time she got up, people were pouring out of the bleachers because that one incident turned into an all-out brawl. Strong arms pulled her out of the mix, moving her away from the stampeding crowd. She looked up and saw it was her dad, who was shaking his head. The police were at the scene on bullhorns telling everyone to stand back. Wallace just looked at the commotion with confusion and disappointment. Other people of all ages and colors were hastily leaving. Gunshots were fired in the air, but she was not sure if that was from the police or from the drug dealers. It did the trick because everyone scattered.

When they arrived back home, it was the talk of the neighborhood. How little Lisa stole the ball from the white boy across the tracks twice, then scored on him to win the game. Lisa didn't even know that she scored that last basket. All she knew was she got pushed hard. Her dad tended to her scrapes and bruises while Josh tended to his own, which were mostly from his fist. She did not even want to know what that boy looked like, between Danny and Josh, they hit him hard. As they were headed for bed, their dad spoke, which stopped them both so they could hear. Aaron took a swig of his amber liquid and said, "Proud of you both for sticking together." He looked at Josh, then looked at her, "Baby girl, that's what I want to see. Never back down." He held up the drink towards her, "Way to win that game today."

He took another mouthful of the drink as Josh nodded towards her and smiled.

He was also proud of her.

15 YEARS LATER –

RICH:

Why his father felt the need for him to be a public defender was beyond him. He hated representing low-lives. Mostly hated representing the same drug dealers who were caught over and over again, then had the nerve to feel like the world owed them something. Hello, stop selling drugs, dumb ass. Get an honest fucking job. His father was a Philadelphia State Representative and he represented parts of South Philly, where they grew up. The plan was for him, Rich Jr., to become a State Senator and represent other parts of South Philly, to keep it *‘together’*. The best way, according to State Representative Richard Wells, Sr., was to be a public defender because a lawyer working in the private sector would be frowned upon. Especially if he decided to run for the Senate seat or any seat for that matter. South Philadelphia was made of hard working people and specifically blue collars workers. They did not always embrace white collars and especially those that rubbed it in their faces. So even amongst your own kind, one could be considered an outcast.

Richard Wells, Sr. was a smart man and knew the best way to work the system. He sent Richard Jr., now Rich to the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) to study Political Science. Once he finished undergrad, his father paid for him to go to law school at the University of Pennsylvania (U Penn). These were the best schools that offered the most elite programs, according to Richard Sr. They were also his alma maters. It could have been perceived that he received special privileges and if a party was busted or things got out of hand, he was a politician’s son and his father contributed

significantly to both universities. Rich didn't get into much trouble because while his father was accommodating and would use his power to make things go away, he also would provide serious punishment to his son when he was young. The punching stopped when he got to college, but the other disciplines started if he messed up. Cutting off his credit cards, disabling his car, having it towed, showing up after his classes to tell him he was a failure and didn't deserve the family name or legacy. Rich tried to stay on the straight and narrow because his father was more lethal than anyone would ever know.

He often wondered how his mom dealt with him or if the father he knew was a result of his mother's death. Rich often thought he was that way because his mom died so early leaving him with a son to raise alone, therefore he would take his frustrations out on him. He had only seen pictures of his mom at his aunt's house because his dad did not have them posted anywhere. The older he grew, the more he realized how much of a problem this was. The only thing he knew about his mom was what his Aunt Anna had told him. She was beautiful, humble and a world changer. Her passion was education, but she stopped working when she married his father. She had no siblings and her family was from North Carolina and migrated to Philadelphia, which was years before she met Richard Sr.

His father never talked about his mother. Rich could not recall a time, when he uttered her name or even acknowledged that she existed. When he was young, Rich made the mistake of telling his father that he wanted to visit his mom's family in North Carolina. He had bruises for two weeks after that suggestion. That meant he also never recognized that his mother existed. At least in that house. Rich's only hope was

that, his mom, Margaret Wells, was at peace and no longer in pain from the cancer that took her so soon.



Court Room 5

Rich put his papers in a folder and stood tall, waiting for his next client. This boy was picked up for stealing food from a corner store. He mentally shook his head. Some things just did not make sense to him. Rich thought he probably took some candy when he just did not want to spend the dollar. The judge picked up the gavel and banged it on the desk.

“Next,” he croaked.

In walked a Hispanic looking teenage boy, who did not look any older than 14. He was accompanied by a tall black woman with brown skin, full lips, arched eyebrows, long lashes, and shoulder length straight hair. Rich estimated she was around a size eight or ten, had an impressive rack and a round ass that looked perfect in that pencil skirt. Everything on her looked good; the stockings, high heels, off white blouse that loosely fit her and a red scarf wrapped around her neck. Her spring jacket was draped over her arm and she walked in with purpose. She probably wasn't related to the boy, but he could see that the boy trusted her because he reached out for her hand, which she quickly grabbed as they walked down the aisle of the courtroom.

Rich looked down at her hips, which despite that loose blouse, he could see swaying back and forth flawlessly. The woman looked like she was floating down the aisle. They finally reached him and he pulled his eyes away from her hips. What was wrong with him? He held out his hand and said, “Hello, you must be Ricardo?” The boy nodded. “I'm Mr. Wells, your lawyer.”

He felt the woman's eyes on him. "So, petty theft, corner store, what do you plead?" Rich said in a low voice.

The boy looked at the woman and asked, "Guilty?"

"You need to explain the circumstance," she nudged her head towards Rich.

Rich chimed in, "No, I don't need the details, right now I just need to know what to tell the judge. Guilty or not?"

The woman's eyes had focused on him, before she said, "What? You do need to hear the circumstance because the judge needs to understand the case, so he can receive some leniency."

Rich's patience, at that moment, started to run short with the combination of her questioning him on how to do his job and realizing she was a sympathizer. "Listen, ma'am they all have excuses why they did what they did. However, right now, I'm going to assume he did it because he has an excuse and right now, you are going to let me do my job."

She reeled back as if he had smacked her in the face. Then she pulled Ricardo behind her and scolded, "You must have lost your damn mind. One, for thinking you could talk to me like that and two, for *not* taking your clients," she emphasized, "concerns and situations seriously. You will not be representing him and," she picked up his card from the table and said, "I'll be sure to spread the word about your bias about anyone like him. Since *they*," she held up both her hands to make air-quotes, "all have excuses."

He grimaced at her words. Who the fuck did she think she was talking to, was his question. Then she walked passed him and said to the judge, "Your honor, my apologies, but Ricardo here," she pointed to the boy, "is going to need other

representation. Mr. Wells needs to attend to his other clientele.”

“Who are you?” the judge asked.

“My name is Lisa Johnson, I’m Ricardo’s teacher,” she said.

The judge looked at Rich and asked, “Are you not able to represent the accused?”

Rich was so shocked by the last two minutes, he was not sure what he should say. “I’m able to represent this client, if HE,” Rich emphasized, “would like me to. However, I will respect their wishes and pass this case along.”

The judge nodded. “Fine, let’s reschedule for next week.”

He banged the gavel on the desk and said, “Next.”

The lady grabbed the boy, as she turned to march out of the courtroom. Rich knew he was bright red now, how dare she embarrass him like that in the courtroom, in front of his superiors and peers. That was one thing he didn’t stand for, so he stormed after them to confront the crazy black bitch.

The doors banged closed behind him and he said through his teeth, “Listen here, you –”, he caught himself.

She whirled around, glaring at him. Lisa motioned for her student to go towards the stairs. He immediately obeyed because he must have sensed it was about to get ugly. She kept her glare and spoke through her teeth in a low menacing voice, “What, I’m a what? Blackie, Darkie, Nigger bitch? Which one were you going for today?” she asked.

He was shocked at her candor. Then he said, “Well I was just going to say bitch, but you finished the others for me.”

She walked closer to him and he could smell her perfume. She smelled delicious like he could eat her, but she looked

dangerous, like he should cover his balls or his face. “Wow,” she laughed, “some things never change. You are still the same ignoramus you’ve always been.”

What the hell was she talking about? He didn’t know her from anywhere. She looked faintly familiar, but he could not place where he could possibly know her.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he asked with a scowl on his face.

“I’m talking about you and your prejudice ways. You are still ignorant. Why the hell would you be a public defender? You are setting these people up for failure because you don’t care one bit about them. This is just a step for you to something bigger.” She looked utterly disgusted with him.

Rich had seen that same look many times from his father, when he messed up. What she thought about him should not have mattered, but the way she read him like a book during a five-minute interaction made him feel vulnerable.

Was he so transparent?

“I don’t give a fuck what you think about me, I do my job and I do it well –” he started.

“No, Richard,” she emphasized his name like he was a boy, “You do a job, but you don’t do it well. You will never do it well until you give a fuck. But don’t you worry. I will make it my life’s mission to make sure you do go into private practice because this.” She circled her finger around the air then pointed to Ricardo, “isn’t for people the likes of you.”

Ten minutes ago, he couldn’t have agreed with her more, but now he was upset that she just called him out. Who the hell was she? He glared at her and she turned her lip at him like she smelled something bad and slowly sashayed away. It was

like she knew he'd be looking at her ass. Which he was, mesmerized by each sway of her hips.



LISA:

She knew exactly who he was when he opened his mouth. *15 years ago*, at the *Over the Tracks* community event, he had pushed her down at the end of the basketball game which started the brawl that was heard around Richard Allen. Lisa was known as the fierce up and coming basketball star who put boys to shame. Josh and her dad were committed to making Lisa better and better at the sport. She went on to play in high school, then she was recruited to play for Drexel University. Everybody around the neighborhood was so proud of her because they felt like they were a part of her process. Some of the girls didn't like her because she always had the guy's attention or admiration. This caused her not to hang out with many girls, but she had a few loyal friends. Jessica and Michelle were the closest to her since she knew them since high school.

After Drexel, her father did not want her coming back home to live. He said she should be out on her own. Therefore he and Josh had set to revamp a house that was on sale for nearly nothing, but needed a lot of repairs. Dad suggested that she and Josh buy it, so they would own property. It made sense because Josh owned a hardware store and Dad was a construction worker. Her dad also worked as a plumbing technician instructor at a local trade school and had his own private business that Josh helped him with on the side.

Education was Lisa's major, so right after school, she started working for her old high school, where she was welcomed with open arms. After a few years, she joined the board of the

No School to Prison Pipeline Foundation (NSPPF) and now she served as Chair of the Board. She received the journalist job because Lisa would always comment and ‘write the editor’ about various topics that related to education, social justice and the community. This included long letters, debatable comments and post that impressed someone, so the Philadelphia Daily Newspaper made her an offer. She gladly accepted and had been writing as a freelancer for a few years. Her column was called, ‘*Real Talk with Lisa.*’

On the ride home, Lisa was in deep thought. Mostly about the prejudice son of a bitch. She was still livid. That arrogant lawyer, Mr. Richard Wells, Jr., was going to pay. She could not believe she lost her temper and messed up Ricardo’s case, but she could not allow him to represent the boy. He didn’t give one fuck about Ricardo or anyone else. If he thought that his entitled attitude, that Armani tailored suit that fit him perfectly or his perfect smile was going to help, he was wrong. She had a board meeting tomorrow evening and this was going to be the topic that she contributed, not only at the meeting but to her column in the paper.

When Lisa arrived at her townhouse, she went to her entrance on the first floor and slammed the door. Josh lived on the second floor and had a different entry way. Her phone beeped, but it was only Josh asking if she was alright since her door slammed. He must have been home to hear that. She said yeah, just a terrible day. He asked if she wanted company, but she didn’t, she wanted to start writing her article about the racist, prejudice bastard. She would have to look it up to see which he was, racist, prejudice, or both.

Lisa did not realize how mad she was until her stomach growled and she heard how loud she was banging on the keys of her ergonomic keyboard. The keyboard had not done

anything to her, but that man, Richard Wells, did. She reread her article and smiled. She thought she should probably wait until another day for submitting it, but she knew her anger might kindle a little and she would probably change it. She wanted to send it now so he could feel the full weight of her wrath. This was probably not wise, but she did not care at the moment. Hoping it would be a significant backlash, she hit send, which emailed the article to her editor.

Finally, she re-heated her spaghetti from last night, grabbed a bottle of wine and ate in silence. Her phone chimed again, but this time it was Danny. He was saying that he missed her and couldn't wait to get home. She slightly smiled as they had been dating seriously for over a few years now. She thought he would be proposing soon, but that seemed to be the furthest thing from Danny's mind. He was currently in California, working on a book with a USC (University of Southern California) professor. Danny was a research guru, which was good when she was taking the quantitative method's class and he helped her passed with an *A*. Lately, she was not feeling his profession, nor his commitment to research and definitely not their future.

Lisa was thinking about going back to school for Community Planning and Urban Development, but she was not definite nor did she think she would be able to do this and continue to teach. Temple University had a new program that she thought might be a good fit, but she wanted to get more information first.

Finishing her wine, she received another text from the editor that read, "Ouch."

She knew she had hit her mark.

You can order *Across the Tracks* on by clicking [here!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xyla Turner is a *USA Today* Bestselling & award-winning, bestselling romance author. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, an avid reader of romance novels and a sucker for sassy women and dominant males. She is a high school educator and an awesome Auntie. Outside of reading, Xyla likes to spend time with her family and friends and travel. She writes different genres, but her favorite is romance.

Xyla is the founder and proud member of AuthorGo. The network that brings readers and authors together.

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