



CHAPPEL

B.LOVE

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PROLIFIC PEN PUSHER

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Afterword

About the Author

There was a time, not too far in the past, when Nova looked at me with the same amount of love in his eyes that shined as he stared at Tiffany—his fiancée. The fiancée he cheated on me with. The fiancée he told me about at our final wedding rehearsal, the night before we were supposed to say I Do. As we stood hand in hand, staring into each other's eyes, the love that I'd seen for years at that point was drowned by something else. Something that made Nova's eyes water and eyebrows wrinkle as his chin trembled.

In my naivety, my love, I thought he was overwhelmed with happiness. We were practicing our vows in front of our families and friends that were in our wedding party. It was understandable for the weight of what was going on to consume him. But that wasn't the case. My fiancé wasn't looking at me in awe over our love as he thought over his vows; my fiancé was getting ready to tell me that he'd been cheating on me for the past year with another woman and couldn't stomach lying to me about it for another second.

The craziest part of it all? Relief covered his face and his shoulders caved after he vomited his pain onto me. In a matter of seconds, he'd crushed my heart and shattered my world. And he stood there with a small smile on his face, as if telling me about his infidelity was no big deal at all. I'd pulled away from him, almost strangled by his truth, and he became confused. Confused as to why I could no longer stand there and prepare to marry him.

I ran.

I cried, and I ran.

I ran to a completely different city and state and hadn't seen him or any of my family and friends since that night almost one year ago.

When I left Rose Valley Hills, I didn't just leave my cheating fiancé behind. I left a business that we'd started together with two of our closest friends as well. For about six months, I shut down from the world. No phone, no social media, no contact. People only knew I was alive and well because I'd told my mother and she relayed the message. Imagine my surprise when I finally reconnected and learned that Nova had not only proposed to Tiffany, but she was working as my replacement in the business I'd funded and started from the ground up. Worse, there were pictures of her smiling and looking as if she belonged with my crew—my people.

Had that been her plan all along?

I'd hired her about a year and three months earlier, because she reminded me so much of me. We needed entry-level associates who could help us because business was doing so well. Hiring her to help lighten my load at work was one thing, but positioning her to take my man was altogether different. I could say it wasn't her fault. That if Nova fell into her web, he wasn't mine to have or keep. Both were true, but neither dissolved Tiffany of her role in my hurt, and they wouldn't excuse her when I exacted my revenge.

So much of the past eleven months and twenty-eight days have been spent shifting the blame from one to the other. Him for betraying me in the worst way... her for taking advantage of the opportunity given to her.

Did she want to be me?

I wouldn't blame her if she did. On the outside looking in, my life was absolutely perfect a year ago. My family was healthy and thriving, skeletons in the closet concealed, my business was increasing in size monthly, and my wedding was scheduled for me to say I Do to whom I blindly believed was the perfect man for me.

My how quickly things change.

I can admit, I'd become resentful... maybe even a little bitter. Angry was at the top of the list too. Eleven months and twenty-eight days was a long time to think about the wrong that had been done to you and how you planned to recover and get even. Honestly, I hadn't done a lot of recovering and healing, but I'd done a lot of crying, yelling, and plotting.

Come Monday, my position at Wilson, Cane, Simpson, and Fisher would officially be up for grabs. There was no doubt in my mind Tiffany would want that permanently too. For a while, I considered letting her have it and my man. But something rose inside of me that made it harder to stay away. Something that made me want to fight... fight and regain what was mine.

I would return to Rose Valley Hills to take back control of my position and my company, but I would also take Nova back just to give him what he deserves—the hurt and embarrassment he covered me with just before what was supposed to be the happiest day of our lives.

Setting my phone on the island, I logged out of my Facebook account. The sight of Nova's proposal video had literally turned my stomach. Swallowing back the vile taste coating my throat, I quickly grabbed my bottle of Essentia water and took a small chug. With a heart that burned and squeezed, I pushed back tears. It didn't matter how much I told myself Nova wasn't worth them, they seemed to be the only thing that made me feel slightly cleansed and relieved. Just when I didn't think anything could top him coming clean about cheating the day before our wedding, he proposed to the woman he cheated with around the time of what would have been our one-year anniversary.

Fucking asshole.

Nova had always been self-serving; I just hadn't seen it. Him loving me as well as he did wasn't for my benefit; it was for his, because he knew the better he treated me... the better I would treat him. Somewhere throughout our relationship, what I offered stopped being enough—and I wanted to know why.

“All right, Ms. Wilson. We’ve gotten everything except the stool you’re sitting on. If you’d like to have a look around, we can get your things to the storage facility and be out of your way.”

I forced a smile as I stood from the stool at the sound of Martin’s words, and his coworker, Jose, wasted no time grabbing it and quickly leaving the apartment I’d hidden in since coming to Dallas, Texas. I stopped in Memphis long enough to cry on my mother’s shoulder before I took that six-hour drive, renting a hotel room for a week before finding the apartment that offered as much solace as it possibly could.

“Sounds good, Martin. You guys were really quick.”

He gave me a proud smile as he extended the clipboard my way. “Well, we know how time-consuming and frustrating moving can be. It’s our job to make the transition as quick and stress-free as possible.”

This time, my smile was genuine. I walked through the now-empty space, looking into every room in the process. They’d not only packed all of my belongings but cleaned and swept too. All I’d have to do was turn my key in and I’d be good to go. After signing off on the work they’d done so far, I gave Martin his clipboard back and retrieved the personal items that were waiting for me on the island.

At the door, I looked around the living room area once more. A part of me wanted to stay here and say to hell with Nova and Tiffany. There was a bigger part of me that wouldn’t allow them to get away with what they’d done. That part of me closed the door and filled me with the strength it would take to go back to Rose Valley Hills and take back everything that belonged to me, and I couldn’t *wait* to see their faces at the sight of mine.

Just Winging It had the best wings in Rose Valley Hills, no doubt about that. They were my first stop when I made it back home. Between the familiarity of the space and the anticipation of the good food I was about to receive, my heart felt light as I made my way inside.

The smell of honey hot sauce and the feel of heat that naturally radiated from several items being fried at once was the warm welcome home that I needed. The corners of my mouth lifted as I headed toward the counter to order. Just Winging It was the cutest little hot spot just outside of Domingo Ave, which was considered one of the bougier hoods in Rose Valley Hills. If I had to describe it, Domingo Ave was where you went when you had a little money but didn't want to spend it on bills, opting to splurge on luxury things, trips, and experiences instead.

While the tile was white and black blocks, the walls were red. Several arcade games were on the right side of the restaurant while TVs and an old-school jukebox were on the left. There was a small area to the left of the front door for kids to play in an enclosed space, and all the way in the back were small, square tables where card and dominoe games could pop off at any moment.

Tugging my bottom lip between my teeth, I made a pit stop at the large bubble gum machine that was next to the counter. It was a ritual at this point to grab a piece of gum and cherry vanilla coke with lime while I waited for my food. Once I had my gum, I popped it in my mouth, then headed to the counter

where a young, cheery girl was waiting to greet me with a smile.

“Hey, love! Welcome to Just Winging It. What can I get you?” I eyed her face intently. She was vaguely familiar. My head tilted, causing her to laugh. “Are you trying to figure out why I look so familiar?”

With a chuckle, I nodded. “I am actually.”

“I’m the owner’s granddaughter.”

“Oh, it makes perfect sense now. Where my boyfriend at anyway?”

Her face covered with disgust, and I cackled. Her grandfather was a cute, older gentleman who flirted with almost every pretty woman that came into his establishment. He had a softer spot in his heart for the ones who entertained him, and I was a part of that number. Anytime I came while he was here, I always ended up with double the amount of food I ordered along with his reminder that he’d *love* to be my sugar daddy.

“Ew. He’s in the back. You want me to go get him?”

“Just tell him Chap is back whenever you go back there. I’ll stick around and wait to see him.”

“Wait, *you’re* Chap?” Her arms crossed over her chest as she leaned against the counter. “He has asked about you so many times since I started working here. He’s always talking about how he misses seeing one of his favorite girls. I’m gonna go get him now.”

Hearing that Darron had been thinking about me made my eyes water as my heart squeezed. I covered it, laughing softly under my breath. There was a part of me that knew people would wonder where I was and what I was up to, but I didn’t care. Maybe it was a mix of embarrassment along with my pain that made it hard for me to talk to anyone about what had been going on with me. In my mind, I realized the only thing I’d done wrong was love and trust a man who couldn’t be faithful, yet somehow, I felt like I should have just... known.

Gripping the edge of the counter, I inhaled a deep breath, trying to prepare to see Darron. I prayed he wouldn't ask me how I was and what I'd been doing. How could I tell him or anyone else the truth? That I'd spent the last year crying and licking my wounds?

"There's my girl!" At the sound of Darron's voice, I lifted my head.

His eyes were wide as he gave me a dimpled smile.

"Hey, Zaddy!"

Darron laughed as he rounded the corner, arms wide and waiting for me to enter. "Come here, Chap. God, it's good to see that pretty face. How could you leave me for almost a year? You know I need to see you on the regular."

I grinned so hard my cheeks hurt. Darron held me tight. Close. I hadn't been held in eleven months and twenty-eight days.

I needed this.

My eyes fluttered as they watered, but I refused to let a tear fall. Instead, I pulled in a shaky breath and giggled as Darron gently rocked me from side to side.

"Damn, Chap. I really missed you, girl. I'm so happy to see you."

"You too, Darron. Seriously. I needed this hug."

"I got one for you anytime you need it." Still holding me in a side embrace, Darron turned toward his granddaughter and told her, "Give her whatever she wants on me."

"Aww, you don't have to do that, Darron."

"I insist, and I'm fixing it myself to make sure it's right." After giving me another hug, Darron made his way back into the kitchen.

"All right, so what can I get ya?" his granddaughter asked as the front doorbell chimed.

"Hmm..." I made my way more in front of her to look at the menu that hung above her head, though I was sure I'd get

what I always got. “I’ll take a ten piece, all flats. Honey hot with lemon pepper seasoning for half and dry zesty seasoning for the other.”

“Do you want fries on the side, or would you like something else?”

“Fries are cool, but can I also get an order of fried green tomatoes and okra?”

“I got you. And what would you like to drink?”

“Cherry vanilla coke with lime.”

“Cool. I’ll get this in now an—”

At the feel of a body pressing into me from behind, I gasped. As soon as his hand wrapped around my neck, I instantly relaxed. There was no need for me to fear. I knew that touch almost as well as I knew my own. My eyes closed briefly as I smiled, but when he tilted my head so I could look at him, they opened.

“What took you so fucking long?” Between the desperation in his deep voice and the glossiness of his watery eyes, it became increasingly difficult for me to hold my tears in.

Jerry.

Jeremiah Simpson.

He wasn’t just my partner in business; he was my partner in life. Allegra may have been my best friend, but Jeremiah was my best friend and soul mate. There were things I talked about and went through with him and him alone. He had always been my secret keeper and confidant. Even while he was away serving his time, I felt closer to him than anyone else—including his best friend Nova... who was my man at the time.

“Jerry,” I whispered, almost in disbelief. I shouldn’t have been. Jerry loved this place just as much as I did. We came here at least twice a week for a late-night dinner.

He turned me in his arms and lifted me into the air, wrapping my legs around his waist.

“What took you so fucking *long*?” he repeated as I buried my face in his neck.

I had no answer. How long was it supposed to take to release the hurt, shame, and betrayal inflicted by the one your heart loved most?

Sniffing, I stopped trying to hold my tears in as I relaxed in his embrace. Finally. It felt like I was whole again. Safe again. The past year, it felt like I unraveled with each day that went by. But in just a matter of seconds, being in Jeremiah’s arms felt like God was finally starting to put me back together.

“I missed you,” was all I could think of to say.

Quite frankly, nothing else mattered now that I was in his arms.

“Damn,” he muttered, holding me tighter. “I don’t want to let you go, Chap.”

“I need to finish ordering my food.”

He chuckled as he placed me on my feet, but his arm remained wrapped tightly around my neck.

“You’re good, girl. I’ve already sent your order back.” She handed me my drink. “Do you want to order now so your food can come out together?” She asked Jeremiah, to which he agreed.

After ordering his usual—a twenty piece with lemon pepper and mild, all flats—we walked over to the table we always shared. What he’d said appeared to be true, because he gave me another soul-healing hug before letting me go.

We sat across from each other, and I imagine my face beamed as we stared at each other with goofy grins. Every few seconds I’d giggle in pure bliss from being back with the man whom my soul loved and felt so safe with. The kind of bond Jerry and I had didn’t come around often. I was sure it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. That friendship Tupac and Jada had, I suppose.

“I missed you,” I said again, though I wasn’t expecting Jeremiah to say it back. He’d never been the overly expressive

and emotional type. I think that's why he was able to hold so many of my emotions, because he was empty of his own. Well, over the years he got better at it... with me and our crew, at least.

“You missed me so much you stayed away for a year?”

My smile wavered slightly as I sat back in my seat. “That had nothing to do with you, Jerry. I had to do that for myself. I'm sorry, though, for leaving you.”

His head shook. “You aren't, and you shouldn't be. You did what was best for you in that moment, and you should never feel bad about that.”

This was what I missed about him most. Jeremiah understood me. He always kept it real with me and never held back, but because he understood me so well, even when I was wrong, he had a way of making me feel right. I'm not sure how healthy that was, but under God, the only other person I ever cared about pleasing or having the approval of was Jeremiah Simpson.

“I am sorry that you missed me even though you won't say it, but you're right, I'm not sorry for doing what was best for me. I can admit that I could have communicated more with y'all, but...” With a shrug, I looked out of the window. “I just... didn't have the courage.”

“What gave you the courage to come back now?”

“I came to get what belongs to me.”

Jeremiah's buff frame shifted in his seat. His head bobbed once and tilted as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“And what is that exactly?”

“My position, my business. My honor. Nova...” My hand covered trembling lips. That was the first time I'd said his name in all this time. It almost felt like a curse. Swallowing hard, I gritted my teeth. “He took a lot from me that night. He embarrassed me and broke my heart.” I brushed a tear away quickly. “So I'm going to make him pay. I'm going to come back to my position as the lead designer and make him think I want him again, then I'm going to embarrass him publicly just

like he did me and fire him and his fiancée. I'm going to make sure the whole town watches as I restore his feelings for me, just to break his heart the exact same way he did mine."

Jeremiah's expression didn't change as I spoke and that didn't surprise me. He was never the type to show what he was thinking or feeling on his face. If you got a smile out of him, you were truly blessed. I used to work so hard to get them and seeing that pretty, white smile was always worth it—*especially* when he had in his silver or gold grill.

"That doesn't sound like something you would do, Chapel."

"I don't feel like me anymore."

I saw the moment his heart broke for me. His expression softened and head jerked slightly before he looked away briefly and swallowed hard.

"Will this... make you happy?"

The question was simple enough, but I seemed to hold the answer heavily in my heart. It hurt to think about the answer much less say the words.

"I don't know, but I hope so. I haven't been happy since that night."

This was the first time I'd admitted to being unhappy and that made me sadder. My eyes sealed shut as I released a shaky breath, trying my hardest not to cry.

I wasn't happy.

And knowing that truth made me feel so ungrateful.

How could I allow something as fickle and temperamental as romantic love to have such power over me? There were people in far worse situations than mine and they seemed to be in a better headspace than me. Here I was with a broken heart, and it felt like my world had been tilted and on hold for the last three hundred-plus days. I felt so weak allowing heartbreak to keep me in this condition.

What was it about me that made me value love so much that everything else had taken the back burner? Was that a sign

I didn't love myself enough? No, that couldn't be it. No matter how much I loved me, there was also the desire to be loved romantically. One shouldn't and couldn't replace the other. My time alone had just proven that.

I could hear that light-skinned girl from that video that went viral yelling for me to stand up, but dammit... Nova's betrayal had chopped me at my *knees*. Maybe if he would have told me in a different way, in a different place, it would have been different. Easier. And it certainly didn't help to see him with the woman he'd replaced me with.

Fuck.

How was something that was meant to make us feel so good hurt so damn bad?

Jerry scooted his chair around the table and sat closer to me. He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close while I wiped my eyes.

“Happiness is contentment, confidence, and acceptance of ourselves, what we have, and what we're doing. Who we are. I don't think you can be happy and find healing seeking revenge and trying to hurt others, even if they do deserve it. And they *do* deserve it. Love and hate can't dwell in the same space, the same temple.” He paused and lifted my head from his shoulder by my chin. “Your temple is too sacred to be filled with such strong hate, however, if this is what you have to do to release it, I support your decision. I'm hoping, though, that we can come up with something that'll help you release it in another way now that you're back home.”

I licked my lips because they dried quickly after parting. I'm not sure what I was expecting him to say, but that wasn't it. Leave it to Jeremiah to accept my bullshit unconditionally... Making me feel right even when I'm wrong. For a while, all I could do was stare into his almond-shaped eyes. They were so beautiful—my favorite place to get lost.

Maybe if I had Jeremiah in Dallas with me, I would have been able to focus on healing and closure, but I didn't. And all I could focus on was the pain and how love for Nova wouldn't

let me go. Regardless, I couldn't say I felt like there was a chance I'd change my mind about getting even. All I could do was tell him, "We'll see."

Jeremiah gave me a small smile as he wiped the last of my tears.

"I'm glad you came back in time for the meeting Monday. I didn't want to make her the interim designer, but Allegra and Nova outvoted me. You know I will always be most loyal to you."

"I know, but I appreciate you reminding me of that. Hearing that Allegra was cool with her taking my position does come as a surprise, but I'm sure she did what she thought was best for the business."

"Either way, I'm glad you back. I missed my partna. Shit ain't been the same without you here, Chap. I really did miss you."

Hearing him express his feelings was the boost my energy needed after talking about Nova and my plans zapped me of it. I gave him a kiss on the nose and hugged his neck as I always did, and Jerry chuckled as he placed a kiss to my neck. For some reason, the gesture made me shiver as my arms covered with chills. Releasing him, I cleared my throat and crossed my arms over my chest to hide my hardening nipples, grateful for the distraction of Darron walking over with my fried green tomatoes. At the sight of Jeremiah, Darron sucked his teeth and made me laugh.

I was truly, truly happy to be home... and I could only pray this feeling would last.

The Next Afternoon

JEREMIAH AND I SPENT MOST OF YESTERDAY WALKING AND talking on the beach about everything and nothing in between. Certain topics had been off limits, and Nova, relationships, and work were at the top of the list. I had a cleaning company to clean my townhome in preparation for my return, and I was glad I did. All I had to do yesterday when I got back home was unpack the few bags I'd brought with me from Dallas. On the off chance I wanted to go back, I had my furniture stored in a unit there.

I was careful about letting people know I was back in town. The first person I called was my best friend and told her to pull up on me. She didn't ask any questions, Allegra simply agreed, and I was grateful for that. As time neared for her arrival, I looked around the setup I had prepared once more. There was plum wine and a nice-sized charcuterie board waiting for us on the island that separated the kitchen and my living room. I had a low Jhene Aiko playlist going in the background, because listening to her daily was a part of what had kept me sane.

My favorite chocolate-scented candles from Yankee Candle were lit and emanating the sweetest, decadent scent. For some reason, I was a little nervous about seeing Allegra. Seeing Jerry was easy. Would she be just as happy to see me?

Well, yes, she would... but would she be upset? Of course, she would. We hadn't talked in almost a year. I couldn't blame her for how she felt. I just prayed she was happier about me being back than she would be upset about me leaving to begin with.

The doorbell rang, and I quickly scurried over to the front door to let my best friend in. When I opened the door, my mouth dropped as I gripped it tightly. With wide eyes, I gasped before squealing and reaching for the tiny bundle in her arms.

"Whose baby is this?" I asked, carrying the baby girl deeper into my home.

Allegra's chuckle was soft as she closed and locked the door. "Mine."

For a split second, my breathing suspended. A sharp, soft scream escaped me before my hand rushed to cover my mouth.

"What?" My eyes shifted from the baby to Allegra, and the longer I looked at the baby, the less I was able to reject my best friend's words. This baby was literally her twin. They both had the same light brown eyes, round lips, and caramel-brown skin. Baby girl even had the same diamond-shaped face as her mom.

Forced laughter led to a smile that quickly faded as tears filled my eyes. Heaviness settled within my heart, weighing my body down.

How could I have missed my best friend's entire pregnancy and delivery?

Why hadn't she called to tell me?

My sadness was becoming replaced with anger the longer I held the beautiful baby girl in my arms. I felt like my absence had robbed me of this experience and Allegra of my support, but I had no one to blame but myself. Actually, I had Nova and Tiffany to blame too, and this was yet another reason for me to get my revenge.

"How could you have a baby and not call me, Lay?" I asked, voice devoid of emotion.

Allegra scoffed as her eyes rolled to the ceiling. She released a quiet chuckle as she made her way over to the island and poured herself a glass of wine.

“You left us, and you told us you would contact us when you were ready.”

“That’s true, but damn. You don’t think being pregnant was something I needed to know about?”

Allegra shrugged as she took a sip of her wine. “I didn’t want to bother you. I figured you’d reach out when you were ready, and I would tell you then. I just didn’t expect it to take this long.”

I was prepared for anger, even sadness, but not the nonchalant tone and expression she had... the uncaring way in which she talked about something so significant in her life. We’d talked about this for years. How we’d be the godmothers of each other’s children. How we’d plan and host each other’s baby showers. How we’d pick our babies’ names together.

Releasing a low huff, I kept my anger at bay as my body heated and tried to shake. However Allegra wanted to handle my absence was her right. If she wanted to downplay me not being here, I had no choice but to accept that.

“Regardless, I’m happy for you, Lay. She’s beautiful. What’s her name?”

“Thank you. Her name is Ava. She’ll be four months on the eighteenth.”

“Aren’t you a little cutie pie,” I cooed before kissing Ava on the cheek. She gave me a gummy smile.

“Are you back for good?” Allegra asked, fixing herself a plate as I paced with Ava.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So you’ll be at work Monday?”

“Yeah. I wanted to make sure I was here in time for the meeting. There’s no way in hell I’d miss it and let Tiffany have my position permanently.”

I sat next to Allegra and chuckled at the size of her plate. She ate like a child. Whatever was unhealthiest or the least filling, she filled her plate with most. Pickles and olives covered the bulk of her plate, but she did have a few pieces of cheese, meat, and crackers as well.

“Tiffany has been doing a good job, Chapel. I’m glad you’re back, but I don’t want you to come and disrupt the flow of business. It took a lot for us to find a steady flow after you left. Please don’t mess that up.”

My eyes widened and blinked rapidly. My body tensed quickly and skin tingled. Breathlessly, I massaged my chest, swaying from the impact of her words.

I couldn’t respond to what she’d said immediately, because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She’d said it so casually, but her tone was firm and sincere.

What the fuck was going on with her?

“I don’t give a damn how good of a job Tiffany is doing. It’s my position and my business, and I’m not going to let her run it. The fact that you even okayed her taking my position temporarily is suspect to me, but I was going to let it ride, and you’re sitting here telling me not to disrupt the flow of business like she didn’t do that by sleeping with my man?”

The only thing keeping me partially calm was having Ava in my arms. My voice was low but a bit shaky because of my anger. I don’t know what was pissing me off more—her words or how nonchalant she was acting. This wasn’t the Allegra I knew. It felt like I was genuinely talking to a stranger, and I couldn’t tell if she was acting this way because she was upset with me or because she’d changed over the last year.

“Look, I don’t agree with what she did. I wanted to beat her ass on your behalf, but you left us, Chap, without a plan or replacement. Tiffany had been brought in for an entry level design position and she was training under you. I hated it, but she was the perfect replacement.”

I chuckled and handed her Ava. “Yeah, she was the perfect replacement all right—in my business and my bed.”

“Chapel, I get that you feel some type of way, but...”

“You get that I feel some type of way?” I interrupted to repeat before laughing. “Allegra, what is going on with you?”

“What do you mean? It’s been a year. I’ve moved on.”

“You’ve moved on?” I almost screamed, regretting it immediately when Ava jumped and frowned. “You know what? I think you should leave. I asked you to come over so we can reconnect, but your nonchalant attitude is really starting to piss me off.”

Sucking her teeth, Allegra stood. “What? You want me to be upset? You want me to ride at dawn? The time for that was a year ago when shit first hit the fan, Chap. Not a year after you left and completely shut down on us. It took a lot for me to adjust to life and business without you, and it’s not going to be easy for you to just... squeeze your way back in and act like nothing happened.”

Yeah.

My best friend was angry.

Why couldn’t she just say that so I could apologize and make amends?

“I don’t know how things were for you while I was gone. If you’d like to talk about that, I’m here. We don’t have to agree on my plans for my return, and we don’t have to agree on me deciding to leave. I just need you to know that I love you and I’m here whenever you’re ready to talk about how you feel.”

She stared at me for a few seconds before closing the space between us and giving me a hug. When she started to snifle, she quickly pulled away and walked away.

“Lay...” I called, trying to suppress the ache in my chest.

Allegra ignored me as she briskly left my home. I hated seeing her like this. Up until now, I’d been saying I didn’t care about how my leaving made others feel.

Now... I felt like shit.

As ready as I thought I was for this moment, I'd been sitting in my car outside of Wilson, Cane, Simpson, and Fisher for the past thirty minutes. WCSF was the first and only business of its kind, not just in the South but in the world. I'd created the only enterprise that specialized in interior design and staging, had a real estate broker leading a twenty-agent team, with in-house financing from a brilliant financial advisor operating with a Black-owned bank here in Rose Valley Hills, and a legal team headed by one of the youngest civil attorneys with a 93 percent success rate.

While I handled interior design and staging, Jeremiah was our broker and over the agents, Nova handled our finances and client loans, and Allegra was our legal advisor and real estate attorney. I'd always wanted to have my own interior decorating business. When my grandmother died, she left me and my little sister a substantial amount of money. I used mine to buy my two-level townhome and to start my own business. Because I loved my friends so much and wanted us all to succeed, I came up with the blueprint for WCSF so we all could come up at the same time.

They insisted on putting something into the business, so for one dollar, I allowed them to buy-in as partners. We run the place together, but I am the managing partner and Jeremiah is my second in command. There were certain bylaws we put in place over the years that Allegra was responsible for drafting, and one of those things was a year of time off for any medical, mental, and emotional issues. During that time, an interim partner would be in place, and at the one-year mark, we would

have to come back and either return to work, sign over our partner position, or allow the other partners to buy us out.

There wasn't anything I was prouder of than my business, until I became Nova's fiancée. I'd allowed him to taint both by making me weak, but that was done now. Enough time had been wasted wallowing in my pain. Whether I was ready or not, it was time for me to reclaim my power.

Six-inch heels hit the concrete as I got out of my Audi. I wanted to make sure I looked good enough to eat, and the form-fitting red dress I had on with matching heels was doing just that. Nova's mouth would always water when I wore red, and this dress had gotten me fucked in public places every time I had it on. I'd taken special care with my makeup, ensuring it accentuated my beauty and gave myself bombshell curls that blew in the wind as I walked.

I'd even gone as far as to five-layer my perfume, using his favorite sweet scent—strawberry. Engaged or not, there was no way this man wouldn't regret fumbling me the way he did when he saw and smelled me. That thought had my shoulders jutting back and chin lifting a little higher as a slow smile spread my lips.

The moment I stepped into the seven-level building, the need to race through the hallways to release my excitement consumed me. My senses felt heightened as lightness filled my chest. With a wide grin, I added an extra bounce to my steps as I moved.

I made my way over to the receptionist's area, grateful everything was exactly the same. I'd chosen a minimalist design for the common areas. The main area was decorated with silver, chrome, and gray to match the chairs, flooring, and elevators. On the second level were several meeting and conference rooms. The third level was for Allegra's team, the fourth level was for Nova's team, the fifth level was for Jeremiah's team, and the sixth level was for my team. On the seventh level were partner offices.

Along with the receptionists' area on the first level, I wanted to make sure I had certain rooms that all employees

could utilize while they were here. We had a small gym, a nap room, a chill room with a pool table and a few TVs, and a small café that served breakfast and lunch.

Though I was proud of what I'd created and brought to fruition with my friends, I also received a hell of a lot of fulfillment from this place too. We weren't just a business, we were a family, and we treated our employees well. I think that's why Tiffany's betrayal hurt so much, too. I'd taken her under my wing and genuinely wanted what was best for her. I just didn't think that would include my soon-to-be husband.

Our four receptionists looked at me as if they were looking at a ghost. Rita was the first to cheer and jump to her feet. She wasted no time rushing over to me for a hug, and the other three weren't too far behind. As they swooned over me and told me how happy they were to see me, I soaked in all the love. I was nervous about how they would feel about my return too, and I was glad the first people to see me welcomed me back with open arms.

My plan was to go to each floor and get all lead associates to pull everyone together so I could announce my return, but my highest priority now was the meeting being held on the second floor. I excused myself from the ladies and headed toward the elevators before the courage and confidence I'd mustered fizzled away.

Nibbling my bottom lip, I rocked from my heels to my toes.

What if Nova wasn't fazed by my return?

What if he was so happy with Tiffany that he barely gave me a second glance?

That wasn't too farfetched of a thought seeing as he'd cheated on me with her.

The ding of the elevator stopping on the second floor pulled me out of my overthinking spell. With small steps, I got off the elevator and made a sharp right. Because the conference rooms had floor-to-ceiling windows, I saw them

before they could see me. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Jeremiah stopped speaking mid-word and smiled at the sight of me. He stood and buttoned the buttons on his dark brown suit jacket.

“Chapel.”

At the sound of my name, necks rolled. Tiffany's mouth dropped, and I had to keep myself from laughing. Nova's eyes scanned my frame as he grinned. He licked his lips before biting down on the bottom one and squirming in his seat.

Mission accomplished.

Regardless of how Allegra felt about my decision to return, she showed me public support by standing and giving me a hug.

“What is *she* doing here?” Tiffany asked meekly.

“I'm here to reclaim my position,” I answered, making my way to the long rectangular table that could seat twelve people at a time. “We can make this quick,” I said, standing behind Tiffany's chair... *my chair*. “The only thing that can keep me from returning to my position is an increase in sales or support during my absence. If that has been the case, you all can vote for me to return, but also allow Tiffany to maintain her current role. Nova, do you have the sales reports and a list of clients retained during my absence?”

“Uh...” He cleared his throat and sat up in his seat. Shaking his head, he stared at me.

“Nova?” I called sweetly with a smile, amused by his speechlessness. I was sure when I first saw him, I'd feel hurt or angry, but between his apparent arousal and Tiffany's brewing anger, I couldn't help but smile. I'm sure adrenaline had a part to play in that too. Once I was alone with my thoughts, there was no telling how I'd feel.

“Hey!” Tiffany yelled softly, hitting him on his arm.

“Oh, sorry.” Nova chuckled nervously and loosened his tie.

Allegra snickered, covering her mouth quickly. I made my way next to where Jeremiah stood, and he wrapped his arm around me. Lowering himself to my ear, he whispered, “You know what the fuck you doin’. You ’bout to end that mane marriage before it even begins.”

My head lowered briefly as my smile widened. *That was the plan...*

“I don’t have that information because I don’t need it. I’ve been keeping up with Tiffany’s progress monthly during Chapel’s absence. She has only brought in three clients for seasonal retainers, all of which listed Chapel as their reason for signing on. Her sales have been decent but she’s not bringing in half of what Chapel does. There’s no need to vote.”

With a scoff, Tiffany shifted in her seat so she could better face him. “How could you do this to me, Nova? You’re my husband. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

Her husband.

My husband.

Hearing her call him that broke something in me. I didn’t think it was my heart because his confession had already broken that into pieces. Whatever it was... it *ached*.

Jeremiah’s arm tightened around me, keeping me grounded.

Did he feel my resolve crumbling?

Was I still smiling?

I couldn’t tell.

All I knew was that title, those two words, took me back to the night my world stopped... and I wasn’t as ready as I thought I was to see *either* of them.

“When it comes down to business, there are no sides. You’re good at what you do, but you’re not ready for such a monumental role just yet. I’d be doing you a disservice and not putting the business first if I did a vote just to appease you.” Nova’s eyes found mine. “Chapel is the best at what she does. I’ll *never* vote her out.”

Tiffany's chair almost fell over she shot out of it so fast. She was about to come in my direction, but she quickly went the opposite way. As she stormed out, Allegra stood and shook her head.

“Welcome back, Chap.”

I just nodded. I wasn't sure how sincere Allegra was. She'd made it clear she didn't want me to disrupt the flow.

Did this count?

Jeremiah's hand lifted and he squeezed my shoulder. “I'm really glad you're back, Chap. Come to my office in a few, a'ight?”

I nodded, coming to grips with the fact that after he left, Nova and I would be alone. I should have followed behind Jeremiah, but I didn't. I couldn't. My feet were planted. Nova stood, and each slow step he took in my direction caused my heart to beat harder—faster.

He made his way in front of me... so close there was less than an inch of space between us. With my heels on, he was just a couple of inches taller than me. I could feel his breath on my forehead as he looked down at me. Licking my lips, I swallowed hard and inhaled a deep breath.

“You're in my favorite dress, wearing my favorite perfume.”

His hand reached out, but he pulled it back, as if touching me was like touching fire, and the heat was enough of a warning for him to not want to be burned.

I looked into his eyes, and mine watered. With flaring nostrils, I blinked back tears. I promised myself I wouldn't cry in front of him and let him see how much his actions hurt me. He didn't care enough to not do it, so he wouldn't care about the pain. But the longer I stared into his eyes, the harder it was for those feelings to not resurface.

My chest started to heave as my breathing grew choppy. He reached for me, but I pushed him away.

“Do not touch me,” I demanded through gritted teeth. “You’re not worthy.”

His head bobbed and hung before he released a shaky breath. “What are you doing here, Chapel? For real?”

With a bit of space between us, I felt like I could breathe. “Getting back what belongs to me.”

His head lifted, and those tight eyes were filled with remorse. I couldn’t ignore the sad expression that covered his handsome cocoa-brown face. There weren’t too many things about Nova that were different. He was dressed in all black, as always. His short beard drew attention to his skin-colored lips. The tapered afro with shaved sides was new, and it gave a rugged edge to his otherwise clean look.

“Does that include me?”

I wanted to tell him hell no, but that would ruin my plan. Though I wanted to get him back just to break his heart, I couldn’t make it easy. If I did, he would value me even less, and I wanted this shit to *hurt*. There was a line I’d need to straddle between making him suffer and giving him access to me. No matter how hard it would be, I’d make him and Tiffany pay, even if I had to play nice.

“Do you want it to?”

The left side of his mouth lifted into a smile as his eyes scanned me from my heels to my eyes.

“Chapel, I...”

Tiffany swung the glass door open widely, looking from Nova to me with a frown.

“I need to talk to you,” she blurted.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Nova gave her a nod. “Okay. I’ll come to your office in a second.”

“Now, Nova. Please. It’s important.”

Without waiting for him to agree, Tiffany closed the space between them and tugged him out by his hand. He left

willingly, looking back and staring at me the whole time she dragged him away.

L ater that Evening

THERE WAS ONLY ONE PERSON WHO WOULD BE AT MY DOOR AT this time of night, and that was Jeremiah. I'd seen his calls and texts and just didn't want to be bothered. Instead of going ghost, I told him I needed some time to process the day's events. Jeremiah wasn't the kind of man who didn't go after what he wanted. He was very persistent and dedicated. If he wanted to make sure I was okay, me asking for space wouldn't stop him. I was surprised he'd waited as long as he did to stop by.

I checked the time again, shaking my head at the sight of 11:59. As irritated as I was that I had to get out of bed, I couldn't help but smile. Jerry was truly my favorite person. Even when I wanted to be alone, I didn't mind having him around because we were like one. After grabbing my satin robe out of my master bathroom closet and tossing it over the satin sleep set I had on, I made my way to the door to let him in.

As soon as I opened the door, Jeremiah was scolding me about the flickering light outside. How my townhome was set up, you had to walk up a set of stairs to get to my front door. While I was gone, something must have happened with the wiring because that light flickered all night.

“Why you ain’t tell me about the light? I would’ve gotten some bulbs on my way here.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, Jerry. I don’t leave much while it’s dark out so it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. What if it goes out while you’re walking down the steps and you fall?”

“You act like I’m clumsy.”

“You’re not clumsy, but you move fast and when you do you pay less attention.”

My eyes rolled as I closed the door behind him. His hands were holding food, which made me even happier to see him, though I hated when he got onto me about things.

“Is that what you came over here for, Jeremiah? To yell at me?”

With a sigh, he handed me one of the two bags he was holding and a drink. “Why you ain’t answer my calls?”

My smile returned as I led him through the living room to the bedroom. I hadn’t been giving much attention to my space, but I was tempted to completely redecorate. There were way too many memories of my time with Nova here. There was always something reminding me of him or a conversation we had... a moment we shared... a place we made love. When I was here, I spent the bulk of my time in the guest room because that’s the place Nova and I never were.

“You sound like somebody’s daddy and you ain’t mine.”

Jeremiah sucked his teeth. He was so easily annoyed. We had that in common. That’s why I loved teasing him so much.

“Keep playing with me, Chapel.”

Unable to hold my laugh in, I looked back at him and winked. If I was crazy, I would swear he was looking at my ass.

“Why aren’t you home resting?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay. Today was a lot.”

I couldn't deny that. "Today definitely drained me. I didn't even get to reach out to any of my old clients. Just reconnecting with our employees was a lot."

"How are you feeling about how that went?" he asked, eyeing me skeptically when we went to the guest room that was closest to my bedroom. "Chap..."

"I'm fine, Jerry. And I think it went well." I cut the light on with my elbow. "I'm cool with Tiffany continuing to work with the clients she has now until those projects are complete. Working with retained clients for the upcoming winter season or any new clients we bring in will give me time to settle in. Besides, my biggest priority right now is making Nova and Tiffany pay, so the less I have my hands full with clients the better."

While I placed the food on the bed, Jeremiah began to undress. He took off his hoodie and kept his crisp white t-shirt on. Underneath the sweatpants he wore was a pair of basketball shorts. I hated when people sat on beds with their outside clothes on, and Jeremiah having half a closet full of clothes at my home was proof of that. I couldn't count the amount of times I'd made him strip down to his boxers when he wanted to get in bed. Eventually, he started bringing clothes over to keep here and I did the same at his place. All of my friends did, actually. Allegra and Nova had closet space here too.

Nova.

I'd need to get rid of all his things.

I left so fast, the pictures of us were still on the walls.

"I still can't believe what you've set out to do," Jeremiah said, climbing into bed. As he continued, we split our brown paper bags in half. "I mean, I get you wanting them to pay, but I never thought you'd do something so extreme. It seems against your character to intentionally do something to hurt someone, even if they did hurt you."

Popping a seasoned fry into my mouth, I considered his statement. He'd gotten us greasy cheeseburgers and fries from

a fast-food joint that was kind of like Dixie Queen called Jasper's. I loved their burgers, but didn't have them often because of how greasy they were. On a night like tonight, they were perfect, and Jeremiah bringing me one was further proof of why he was my soul mate.

"Honestly, Jerry, I never thought there would come a day where I'd want to hurt Nova. Before he was my man, he was my friend. My best friend, just like you and Lay."

"So what are you doing, Angel, for real?"

Angel.

He knew what he was doing calling me that.

Every time he called me that, I softened.

Jeremiah started calling me his angel when he went to prison at eighteen. He said it was because I was his angel after everything I'd done for him. I could understand his perspective, but what I did felt like light work because I loved and cared about him so much.

To me, it was nothing.

To him, it was everything.

"I don't want to talk about this," I grumbled as my eyes watered.

I'd messed myself up not healing while I was gone, because now, it felt like everything was coming back so fresh. The pain felt so raw... so new. I felt just like I felt when I first heard those words come out of Nova's mouth—maybe worse because they've settled so deeply within me.

Allegra and I have been friends since we met our sixth-grade year of middle school. At thirty-one years old, there's no other woman I've ever chosen and felt this close to. We met Nova and Jeremiah our ninth-grade year of high school. Both were a year older than us. Nova was from Domingo Ave, and we played his school first when football season started. He was at the game with Jeremiah, and we all linked up and watched the game together. That turned into us hanging out on

weekends, then daily after school, and the rest as they say is history.

It hadn't been my intention to fall in love with either of my best male friends, but time changed my relationship with Nova. In college, we started looking at each other differently. We flirted here and there and even hooked up during our spring break my junior year, but we promised not to do anything that would ruin our friendship. After I turned twenty-five, we stopped fighting it and agreed to date. We dated for a year before committing, and then we stayed in a committed relationship for three years before he proposed.

Had I known he was spending our entire engagement cheating on me with Tiffany, I would have gone to the ends of the earth in search of a time machine to go back to that football game and never make the mistake of dating him again.

Jeremiah agreed and we ate silently. When we were done, we brushed our teeth, and I washed my face since I'd already showered.

"Are you staying the night?" I checked. I didn't want to be alone anymore. Even if I did, I'd still want him here, alone, with me.

"Do you want me to?"

With a nod, I headed out of the room to get my phone charger. When I returned, it was to Jeremiah taking off his shirt and shorts. This wasn't the first time I'd seen him in just his boxers because we slept together in the past, but with so much time passing, I couldn't help but stare at him. Jeremiah was tall, wide, and muscular. He had a football player's build. The tattoos that littered his chest, arms, and back were so damn sexy against his nutmeg-brown skin.

There was no denying just how beautiful Jeremiah was. He had naturally arched brows that hovered over dark, almond-shaped eyes. The mustache-goatee combo he rocked enclosed thick, juicy, blunt brown lips. He had the cutest pointy ears that I loved rubbing as he went to sleep.

And I loved his style. He could switch from urban wear to a custom-made suit effortlessly, and almost always, he had on a cowboy hat and boots or a snapback and Jordans. While I was born in Memphis and moved to Rose Valley Hills, Jeremiah was born in Mississippi, then came here. He often spent his free time in the country part of Rose Valley Hills, swimming in the lazy river, drinking moonshine, riding dirt bikes, and line dancing until he passed out.

The several chains that adorned his neck remained as he placed his phone and wallet on the nightstand. Before I could cut the light out, he told me, “Com’ere, Angel.”

My steps were small and slow as I walked over to him, because I had no idea what he was about to say or do to me. I made my way in front of him, heart thudding against my chest. To me, even with his flaws, Jeremiah Simpson was everything good in this world—in *my* world.

He took my hand inside of his and squeezed it three times. That was his way of telling me he loved me. Jeremiah never spoke those words to anyone. I remember the day he struggled to tell me. Because I knew about his past and how hard that declaration was, I told him to just squeeze my hand three times and I would say it back.

Feeling those three squeezes after a year made me realize I didn’t need a year of space; I only needed him. I looked away, but Jeremiah used my chin to turn my head back in his direction. “Don’t ever leave me again, a’ight?”

Our eyes remained locked as I nodded my agreement. “I won’t, Jerry, and I love you too,” I almost whispered, swallowing back my emotion.

His hand went to the back of my head, and he pulled me into his chest for a hug. I held him tightly, releasing a breath of relief, so grateful he didn’t let me spend the night alone.

I felt the kiss Jeremiah placed to my forehead, temple, and cheek before he left. It took all of my self-control to not smile... especially when he whispered, “Sleep well, my angel,” before he left. After I heard the door close, I checked the time, and it was just after seven in the morning when he made his exit to get ready for work. I planned to go in, but not until nine. Word had already begun to spread that I was back, and a lot of my clients had started to reach out by phone and email. It was a bit overwhelming, but thanks to my receptionist and associates, I was confident my transition back into work would be a breeze.

I slept for another fifteen minutes or so before getting up to start my day. After handling my hygiene, I started on breakfast, opting to work out this evening instead. My eyes landed on the Bible in the corner of my coffee area. Every morning, I used to have a cup of coffee or a matcha latte and read at least a chapter of my Bible. Since my return, I had yet to open that Bible. I wasn't mad at or blaming God for what Nova had done, but I did feel... let down.

If God didn't spare His own son from the pain of the cross, who was I to think I'd be spared of pain here on earth? Still, being hurt in such an intentional way was jarring. I looked to God for protection from all things, and not having that protection for my heart made me feel exposed and vulnerable.

True enough, I chose to be with Nova, but still. I prayed to be spared from cheating and abuse. Even if I chose wrong, choosing a man that cheated felt like a horrible punishment.

I kept telling myself maybe Nova telling me about the cheating was my protection. Maybe that was God showing me who Nova, the husband and not my best friend, truly was before I married him. Who knows how many times he'd cheated and if he planned to continue when we were married? I'd been working on my perspective and trying to find my way back to God, but I didn't think that would happen while I was on this path of revenge.

My doorbell rang, forcing me to stop staring at the neglected Bible. This time, I had no idea who was outside of my door. When I looked out of the peephole and saw Nova, my heart skipped a beat. The audacity of this man to show up here. Resting my forehead on the door, I shook my head and chuckled. I didn't want to let him in, but I was curious about what he had to say.

I opened the door, taking in the black V-neck t-shirt he had on with matching jeans.

"What?" I grumbled.

"Can we talk?"

"If this is about business, it can wait until I get to work."

"Chapel, please." His tone was low as he took a step inside of my home. "We haven't really talked since that night."

"Quite frankly, I'm not sure what else you think needs to be said."

He closed the door while I held on to it. Once it was closed, he stepped directly in front of me. Every time he got close, I warred with smacking the shit out of him and hugging him. To keep from doing either, I pulled my hands behind my back.

"A lot needs to be said. Can we talk... Please?"

I looked into his eyes for a few seconds before sighing and giving in. My heart palpitated as we walked over to the gray, black, and cream marble island and sat down.

Emptiness filled the pit of my stomach. My knee bounced as I waited for words that I was sure would make me want to

flee. True enough, I wanted answers, but I wasn't expecting Nova to want to give them to me so soon. So soon for me, at least. This was probably a conversation he'd been rehearsing for the past year. Out of all the questions I had, none of them were coming out of my mouth. As my leg shook and jaw clenched, all I could do was stare at the man I was sure I'd spend the rest of my life with.

His large, veiny hand took hold of my thigh.

It stopped shaking instantly.

"I'm sorry." He chuckled silently, running his tongue over his cheek as his eyes watered. "I know that's not good enough, but I am. I regret telling you about Tiffany the way I did. That wasn't the time, and it certainly wasn't the place. I just... couldn't marry you holding on to that. For some dumb reason, I thought me being honest would mean something to you and you'd marry me anyway. I fucked up when I cheated, and I fucked up by telling you at our last rehearsal. I'm hoping now that you're back, you'll be able to forgive me."

"You fucked up when you cheated yet you're going to marry her."

Nova remained silent, blinking as if the statement didn't warrant a response. With an irritated chuckle, I tried to stand, but his hand gently sat me back down.

"If we're going to work together, I want to make sure we can do so peacefully, Chapel."

Oh, so that's what this was about?

He's not here to get me back; he's here to make sure I won't want off with his and her head at the office?

"I won't sit here and say the sight of you with her won't make me sick to my stomach, but I know how to be professional. At the end of the day, that's my business, and I'm not going to let what you and your fiancée did bring me out my character."

As soon as I said the words, guilt filled me, because that's *exactly* what I was allowing by going after revenge.

“I’m happy to hear that. I can’t imagine how hard it is for you to see either of us, especially together. I can understand if you want Tiffany to leave, but I’m grateful for you trying to work through this.”

I kept my mouth shut, afraid of what I’d say in response. This was going to be a hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be.

“I miss you,” Nova continued. “I know I shouldn’t, but I do. I’ve thought about you every day and...”

“Nova, please. Don’t.” Standing, I walked over to the refrigerator, though my appetite was getting smaller and smaller the longer he stayed. “You don’t get to sit there and tell me you miss me like you’re not the reason we’re over.”

“Then let me fix this and be the reason we get back together.”

My eyes squeezed shut and I gripped the handle on the refrigerator as my body swayed. I was less surprised by his words and more surprised by how quickly they were coming. I figured I’d have to work a little to get him open enough to want to leave Tiffany, but from the sound of it, he’d do it today if I told him to.

I felt the heat from his body behind me, but he didn’t touch me, and I wasn’t exactly sure how I felt about that.

“I love you, bae. I always have, and I always fucking will. Cheating on you was the worst mistake of my life. If you tell me I have a chance, I swear to God Tiffany or no one else will be able to stop me from doing whatever it takes to fix things with you.”

Turning, I faced him. “Was it this easy for you to pursue her while you were committed to me?” His mouth opened, but no words came out. “Will you please leave, Nova?”

“I’ll leave, but I’m not going to stay away.”

I watched him saunter out of my home, conflicted about what my next move would be. When I concocted this plan, I didn’t prepare for how I’d feel if Nova came after me.

What the hell was I going to do now?

My plan was to drop off the things I'd gotten for Ava and leave. Things were still a little awkward between Allegra and me, but that wouldn't stop me from being there for her and the baby whenever she allowed me to be. I placed the bags and boxes on her porch, then returned to my car. Before I could close the door, Allegra was calling my name. I considered if I even wanted to go inside.

Would this visit end with another disagreement?

There was only one way to find out.

I locked up and helped her take the items into her home. When we were done, she gave me a hug and greeted me.

"How are you?" she asked, closing and locking the door behind me.

"I'm good, how are you?"

"Good. Thank you for this. You didn't have to get her anything, but I really appreciate it."

"Of course, you're my best friend." Allegra gave me a soft smile. "Is it okay that I'm here? Is her dad here?"

"Yeah, it's cool, and he and I aren't together."

"Oh." I followed her into the living room, holding the questions I wanted to ask. I wanted to know who the father was and if they were in a relationship, but I figured Allegra would tell me with time. As much as I hated the static that was between us, I accepted that it was my doing. Best friends or

not, if she needed time to adjust to me being back, I'd give her that.

"Where's my baby?" I asked, sitting on her blue couch. I'd designed her entire home for her except her master bedroom. The living room had a blue, gray, and white color scheme to match the eight-hundred-dollar rug she'd seen and fell in love with. It was fun working the room around a single item, and I was glad she loved what I'd come up with.

"She's taking a nap but should be up soon."

"How's her room set up?"

Allegra chuckled. "You want to see it huh?"

"Yes," I replied quickly, and we both laughed.

"Okay, you can when she gets up, but don't laugh at it. It's simple in design. I didn't really have a lot of creative energy after finding out about her. It's literally baby pink and princess-themed."

That seemed like a good opening to ask questions, so I did. "So... she was unplanned?"

Allegra gave me a snort of a laugh as she nodded and relaxed further on the couch. The TV was low, so low I could barely hear the words. I wondered how she'd been entertaining herself before I arrived because the TV certainly wasn't it. Maybe she was on her phone because it didn't look like she was asleep. Why did I feel so uncomfortable asking her even the smallest of questions now?

"For sure. Not in the picture at all. It was a one-night stand... a drunken one-night stand."

"Are you... Do you know who her father is?"

Allegra's mouth twisted to the side. "Yeah, I know. He's not someone I would ever be with, though."

"But he's in her life? If not, I'll be her stepdaddy."

That made her laugh like I hoped it would, but her eyes were still watery. "Chap," she whined, catching tears that made me sit closer to her so I could embrace her. "I messed up

—bad. I love my little girl and wouldn't change having her for anything in this world, but I regret who I made her father. It was truly a mistake, a dumb, drunk mistake.”

“We all make them. No judgment here. The most important thing is that Ava grows up loved and cared for, and that's going to happen whether her father is in the picture or not.”

She cried harder, held me tighter, and though I hated she was hurt... I was glad I was here to console her. Allegra cried for a little longer before excusing herself. When she came back, she was composed and looking like her normal, laid-back self.

She asked if I was hungry, and I told her no. I'd grabbed a smoothie while I was out shopping and that would keep me full for a while. Besides, I had a taste for a specific salad that I planned to make when I got home. Since Friday, I'd been eating so unhealthy now that I was back home, but I'd need to get my meal prepping going again. That way, my breakfast and lunch would always be taken care of, and I wouldn't have to eat out so much.

“How does it feel to be back?” she asked, surfing through Hulu for something new to watch.

“I don't think I've fully processed being back yet honestly. It's a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, especially with you immediately coming back to work. I can understand why you did though.”

I didn't respond. Before I came back, I planned to tell Jeremiah and Allegra about my intentions. Though I didn't have to, because we were all friends, I felt they deserved to know before it happened. Now, I wasn't really sure I trusted Allegra with my truth. I didn't think she'd go behind my back and tell Nova what I was up to, but I did think she'd try to talk me out of it.

There was a time Allegra would be down for whatever, just like Jeremiah, if I'd been done wrong. Now, it seemed she wanted peace more than anything. Maybe it was because being

a mother had settled her and she wanted no drama in her life. Whatever the case, I didn't want to talk to someone who would tell me I was wrong for wanting revenge, and I felt like that was exactly what Allegra would say.

As if she knew I was holding back, Allegra eyed me skeptically. "What are you up to, Chapel?"

Covering my face, I found it impossible to hold back the mischievous sniggle that wanted to erupt, which only made me sound guiltier.

"Nothing," I lied in a sing-song voice.

"Oh, heck no!" she whispered loudly. "I need all the details... now!"

"Allegra..." I groaned.

"Spill it, Chap."

Not speaking right away, I considered how much I wanted to tell her. Allegra had already made it clear that she didn't want me *disrupting the flow*. Every time I thought about that I scoffed. If she truly cared about the flow, she should have fired Tiffany's ass on my behalf a year ago.

"I did come back to work for a reason," I admitted.

"Which was?"

"I'm really not comfortable talking about this with you, Lay."

"Why not?"

"Because you're going to judge me and tell me not to do it."

"Well, if it's something bad, you should want your best friend to be honest with you, right?"

That was true... but still. In this moment, I didn't need someone telling me I was wrong and to not go through with my plan. I needed a best friend to ask me how she could help me put in work!

"I already talked to Jerry about it, so..."

“Oh no.” She laughed with a shake of her head. “He doesn’t count. The two of you could be on a mission to burn the entire town down. Now I *really* need to know.”

All I could do was laugh because she was right. Regardless of what the situation was, Jeremiah and I always had each other’s back... even if we complained about it the whole time. He was such a bad influence at times, and I was the same for him, but we protected each other fiercely.

He was the only person in my life that gave me true, unconditional love and acceptance. Even when he wanted to ring my neck and do away with me, he was still there for me. Allegra would always talk about how unhealthy that was, but I didn’t care. I believed everyone needed someone willing to go along with their crazy if it helped them feel sane. For me, Jeremiah was that person.

“Fine,” I agreed, realizing I didn’t have that much of a choice. If Allegra didn’t get answers from me, she’d go to Jeremiah and try to get them from him. “You have to promise not to say anything.”

“Promise,” she agreed, wrapping her pinky finger around mine. We kissed our thumbs, then pulled away.

“Okay. My plan is to make Nova and Tiffany pay for what they did to me.”

Rubbing her chin, Allegra’s tone was uncertain as she asked, “How?”

“Well, I’m going to make Nova think he has a chance with me so he will break up with her, then I’m going to embarrass him publicly just like he did me. Then, I’m going to fire them both.”

With a slight shudder of her head, Allegra scratched her cheek. Her eyebrows squished together as she frowned. “Jeremiah knows about this, and he hasn’t tried to stop you yet?” My head shook. She released a low chuckle, but it turned into a shaky, vocal breath. “Why am I not surprised? No, Chapel, you *cannot* do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because it will not only ruin the business, but it will ruin our crew too. It’s bad enough that things have been weird between us all since you left—”

“You’re not going to blame my absence for whatever has been going on with the three of you. Nova is responsible for that.” I rubbed my thigh, trying to remain calm. “He’s the one who cheated and chose to tell me the day before our wedding in front of our wedding party, which included family and friends who were recording the moment. If you hold anyone responsible for this, it should be him, not me.”

“I hear you, and you’re right, it is his fault, but a year has passed, Chapel. The time to make Nova pay was a year ago. It’s taken a lot of work to try to find a new sense of normalcy and I just don’t want you to do anything to jeopardize that. You might not be thinking about the hard work you put into your business and how much we all helped you, including Nova, but I am. What happened between the two of you was personal, leave WCSF out of it.”

For a second, I avoided her eyes. My nerves released in my laughter. Cocking my head, I took in a small intake of breath.

“Was it just personal when he had an affair with my associate?” With a huff, she sat back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “Was it just personal when you all gave her my position at WCSF knowing my relationship had just ended because he slept with her!”

“Okay, you know what...”

“No, Allegra, that’s it.” My pulse quickened and body twitched as it heated. “I appreciate you trying to be a leveled, calm voice for me, but you’re wrong. You’ve always had my back and at least tried to understand where I’m coming from. With this, I feel like you’re trying to make me the bad guy and I’m not exactly sure why.”

I stood, preparing to leave. This was the mistake I was hoping it didn’t turn out to be. As long as we didn’t talk about Nova and Tiffany, we were okay, but as soon as they were brought up, things always went left between us.

“I’m not trying to make you the bad guy; I’m just trying to get you to see the big picture. You didn’t just punish Nova by leaving; you punished all of us. If you do what you have planned, you’re going to do the same thing all over again.”

“Wow.” My lip curled as she averted my gaze. “You think me leaving was to punish Nova?” Though she remained silent, her brows lifted, and head tilted, telling me all I needed to know. “I left because I was so hurt, I couldn’t face any of you, Allegra. I left because I thought I was going to lose my mind. I’ve spent the last year crying and trying to figure out how someone I loved could hurt me so bad. You think me not wanting to work with Nova and Tiffany is the worst response in the world for how they treated me? I think I’m letting them both off way too easy. Nova wasn’t just my fiancé; he was one of my best friends. My heart should have been safest with him. He jeopardized our union and my health by sleeping with someone else. I don’t give a fuck how you feel about my decision, I’m getting them both out of WCSF, and there’s nothing you or anyone else can do to stop me.”

As I headed for the door, she followed behind. My mind raced with question after question. Had things always been so black and white for Allegra? Did we always not agree, or was it a sensitive subject because it was Nova? Was she always so outspoken and judgmental?

“Chap, wait,” she called softly as I opened the door. I turned to face her. “You put Nova on a pedestal of perfection because of your friendship with him, and I get that, but that was your fault. He’s a man, just like any other man, capable of cheating or doing whatever else he wants because he isn’t perfect. I think you’re overreacting, and you should really reconsider all of this. Maybe it’ll be best if you go back to wherever you’ve been for the past year if you’re only here to cause trouble.”

My heart felt like it was shrinking. Lips pressed together tightly, I briefly lowered my head.

I didn’t think I’d have to explain my hurt to my best friend, of all people. Maybe she was right... a year was a long time. It was clear she’d detached from the situation. This pain was

mine to bear alone. There was no reasoning with her, and I was okay with that.

“This is the last time we’re going to discuss my relationship with Nova,” I told her, keeping my voice as low as I possibly could. Her words were like tiny swords piercing my heart and my face, and it was taking everything in me not to retaliate. Did I think she was intentionally trying to hurt me? No. But that didn’t make her words hurt any less.

“I didn’t... put Nova on a pedestal of perfection.” I laughed as soon as the words left me because that was so far from the truth, and Allegra knew that. “I was more careful with him than any other man I’d been with *because* he was my friend. I *know* anyone can cheat, but because of my parents and my values, Nova promised he wouldn’t do that to me.” My body heated and shivered, making me more upset. I didn’t want to cry in front of her. Not now anyway. My tears felt safe with no one except Jerry.

“He knew how much that shit would hurt me, and he did it anyway. So he has to pay. You may never understand that, and I don’t care anymore, Lay. But what you’re *not* going to do is downplay what I went through because of how I chose to handle it. That was foul, and you’re better than that.”

I opened the door, stopping to tell her, “And I may be better than what I’m planning to do, but at least I can use my hurt as my excuse for going after the man I love. What’s your excuse for treating me the way you have since I’ve been back?”

I didn’t bother giving the words in her mind time to connect with her mouth before I left. A glutton for punishment is what I appeared to be. It was clear my friendship with Allegra had been damaged, and until she was ready to admit that so we could repair it, I needed to stay away.

Memphis was my destination for the weekend. I needed to be around my family and feel their love. It didn't surprise me that my father wouldn't be home. Doctor Steve Wilson was hardly ever home. I thought he'd be more present in his older age with my sixteen-year-old sister Tierney but that hadn't been the case. At least with her, he allowed her to visit him at the hospital so they could have lunch together daily.

The vibe was lighter without him here anyway. Mom was happier and more present. She wasn't concerned with serving him and trying to be a woman worthy of his love, fidelity, and provision. She made my favorite lunch, rotisserie chicken sandwiches, homemade fries, and a side salad, so I told her dinner would be on me. We were outside watching Tierney run a few laps around the yard. Tierney was far more athletic than I was at her age.

I tried out for the majorette and cheerleader teams and made both, but didn't have the dedication to go to all the practices. Tierney, however, took being on Ridgeway's basketball and track teams seriously. She was the cutest little thing in her uniform. Tierney was tinier than me, but she was fierce and a force to be reckoned with. Every time I went to her games, I had to stop myself from covering her face with kisses and taking millions of pictures. Me and Jeremiah were always the loudest cheering in the stands.

Missing a year of her life probably hurt the most, but Tierney loved me too much to hold it against me. Like Jerry,

she was just happy I was back and told me not to stay away for that long ever again.

“Has Tierney started talking about what college she wants to go to yet?”

Mom nodded as she took a sip of her homemade sweet tea. The southern belle was the epitome of class. I believe that’s why I was so heavy on my angry Black woman shit with Nova. I’d seen the effects of my father’s cheating on my mother, and I refused to let that be me.

“She wants to go to the University of Memphis.”

“Really?” My heightened voice displayed my surprise. “Why?”

Mom chuckled with a shake of her head. “I think she doesn’t want to be too far away from us, but she does want her independence. She wants to stay on campus.”

“Well, that’s good. UOM is a good school. I just want her to have her independence and experience life while she doesn’t have to worry about bills and being an adult who takes care of herself.”

“Same. Do you regret not going further away for school?”

I didn’t. Going to school in Rose Valley Hills was the time of my life. We moved there right before I started middle school, and I hated that, but I ended up meeting my crew, so it was worth it. Plus, Rose Valley Hills was a smaller and more fun version of Memphis. I loved having so many cool places to go and things to experience during my teenage and college years.

Dad ended up getting an opportunity to be a head surgeon at a hospital in Memphis, so they moved back right before my sophomore year of college. That must have been God, because shortly after, Grandma got sick and transitioned.

“Not really. I regret not traveling more and dating more, but I don’t regret going to college there.”

She looked over at me. “Is this about Nova?”

I'd be lying if I said it wasn't. Since my conversation with Allegra, I'd been trying to find more responsibility for what happened. Holding myself accountable would dissolve the desire to make them pay—at least that's what I told myself. Today's narrative was that, if I'd traveled and dated more, I wouldn't have fallen for my best friend. Even with that scenario, what happened had happened. I *did* fall for Nova, we dwelled in that love for a while, and now... it was over.

“A little.”

“How did he respond to you being back?”

“He wants me back.”

Mom squealed, and I wish I could say I was surprised. “Are you getting back together?”

“He's engaged to Tiffany, Ma.”

“Oh, poo. I know Nova, and he's only with her because he couldn't have you.”

“Either way, he cheated on me and I'm not okay with that.”

“You think I was?”

“Obviously so, you stayed with Dad.” I hadn't meant to say that, but the words slipped out before I could catch them. Regret filled me instantly. “I'm so sorry, Ma. I didn't mean that.” *Well, I meant it, but I didn't mean to say it.*

I love my father, but I hated him as a husband. It seemed he cheated almost every year of my life, if not, every other year. In the beginning, Mom would be so hurt and upset. She'd threaten to leave but eventually stay. I don't know if it was because Dad took care of her or because she loved him and didn't want to break up our family. Either way, it was a toxic cycle that I was glad to be out of when I left for college.

A part of me prayed my mother would leave him after Tierney left for college, but I was no fool. She'd gotten comfortable in this life and was used to his cheating. If she left, I'd be extremely surprised.

“Men cheat, honey. You just have to find one that makes staying worth it.”

My eyes rolled. I did not want to have this conversation with her. I didn't really believe all men cheated, but after being cheated on and watching her be cheated on, I was starting to wonder. To avoid the conversation going deeper, I just remained silent. This was not the time for her to try to convince me to make things work with Nova just because she loved us together.

I loved us together.

Nova didn't—that's why he cheated.

Actually, I'm not sure why he cheated. But it doesn't matter. He cheated, and there's no coming back from that.

“When are you going to start decorating for fall?” I asked, needing to change the subject. “I know you have your candles and flowers stocked already.”

Mom gave me a small smile as I watched Tierney. She was hunched over with her hands on her knees catching her breath.

“I want to start whenever you're ready. This year, I want a different theme for each room. We'll be having a lot of gatherings here at home and I want the house to look amazing.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and at the sight of a text from Jeremiah, I agreed before excusing myself to go inside. He'd sent me hotel information, which only meant one thing—he was spending the weekend in Memphis too. I called him to confirm my suspicion, hoping I was right. If so, we were going to have a lot of fun tonight.

“Chap,” he answered.

“You're here?”

“Yeah, pull up after your folks go to sleep. I left you a card to my room downstairs.”

“Okay. I'll text you when I'm on my way.”

“A'ight.”

Excitement filled me at the thought of going downtown with Jeremiah. We definitely needed a break from work to have some fun. My return was a little awkward with certain people, but more than anything, it was the workload that was doing me in. Even with me allowing Tiffany to keep working on her current contracted clients, I still had my hands full. I loved it, but it was certainly an adjustment. Besides, now that Allegra was a mom and acting weird, Jeremiah was like the only friend I had left. I was truly grateful that he'd come to Memphis so we could enjoy ourselves before the work week started back up.

I couldn't help but text Jerry that I loved him and thank him for coming. His response was what it always was—that he'd do anything for me.

Jeremiah's upbringing was slightly similar to mine but with stark differences that took him down a path that could have ruined his life if he'd let it.

Jerry's father cheated too. He wasn't blatant with his. He waited until Jeremiah was in his senior year of high school to prepare to leave. Because he was the provider of their household, the financial weight fell on Jeremiah's shoulders after his father left. Unlike my mother, his hadn't gone to college, and she didn't have any work experience. When Jerry started bringing in enough money to pay the bills, though Olivia knew he was doing something illegal, she didn't ask any questions.

While Nova, Allegra, and I spent our days in class, Jeremiah spent his nights in the streets. He ended up getting arrested and being sentenced to fifteen years about a year after he started. Jeremiah was smart with how he moved, but he hung around people who weren't, and they got him caught up. I think that had a lot to do with why his circle was so small now.

After he was sentenced to fifteen years, his father realized the error of his ways. He tried to return home, but Olivia wasn't having any of that. She allowed him to help her with the bills until she found a job she liked, but she never took him back. Jeremiah ended up doing eight of his fifteen-year

sentence since he was a first-time offender, and he probably wouldn't have done that much time if they hadn't been caught with so much product in the house.

The whole time he was gone, Olivia and I took care of him while his father, Brandon, took care of her. I think he regretted leaving his family to enjoy the single life and wanted to fix it, but the damage had been done with his son too. Though Jerry forgave his father for his infidelity, their relationship has been strained ever since Jerry was released.

Their relationship wasn't the closest before Brandon left, either. He was one of those men who believed their sons shouldn't cry, express themselves, or spend too much time around women. Not once had Brandon ever told his wife or son that he loved them. Brandon was the reason Jeremiah had such a tough exterior. It wasn't until he saw the pain his cheating and leaving caused his mother that he realized it was okay to be emotional, to love, and to hurt.

Olivia healed and moved on beautifully. She, to me, was the perfect example of how God can give a person beauty for their ashes. Now, she was being loved by an emotionally available Black man who showered her with love and anything else she wanted and needed. His stepfather, Seth, was helping to undo a bit of the damage being raised by Brandon had done, but I believed Jeremiah kept his feelings to himself as an act of self-preservation as well.

All throughout Jeremiah's sentence, Olivia and I made sure he had commissary, money to talk, and we sent him care packages at least twice a week. I wrote him letters faithfully and went to see him as much as he'd allow. When he got out, I paid to have his record expunged and for his Real Estate license. His hustler nature allowed him to bring in six figures as a real estate agent three months after he got his license. Though I told him he didn't have to, Jeremiah paid back everything I gave and then some.

Now, he was a multi-seven-figure real estate broker who had Rose Valley Hills on lock. There weren't too many areas he hadn't touched. Outside of operating as a commissioned agent for the buying and sale of properties, Jerry flipped them

for his own profit and had rental properties as well. I was so proud of the man he had become and was confident there was so much more in store for him.

I used to tease him about how he needed a woman to share his success with, but maybe he had the right idea by staying single. He entertained women on the regular, but I couldn't remember the last serious relationship Jerry was in. Now that I think about it, I don't think he's been in one in the last four years since he's been out. I wondered if it was because he worked so much or simply had no desire for that. Maybe I'd talk to him about it tonight...

I laughed hysterically as Jeremiah told me about his run-in with Allegra. He was so serious about me getting him in trouble, and him using a feminine voice for Allegra as he told me what she said only made me laugh harder. Apparently, after I left her place, she went to his and yelled at him for *condoning* my bad behavior.

Jeremiah sucked his teeth as I wiped fresh tears from my eyes from laughing so hard.

“She straight up tried to mother me, Chap, talking about I should be ashamed of myself.”

“Oh my God.” I covered my mouth and held onto my seat as I laughed. “Has she always been like this, Jerry? It seems like she’s different. Is it just me and the fact that I haven’t talked to her in a year’s time?”

Jeremiah’s hand slid over his waves before he scratched his head and put his snapback back on. “I think it’s a little worse now, but she’s always been the judgmental one of the group.”

“Even with me?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t really matter because you didn’t care, so you didn’t talk to her about certain things. You just came to me.”

That was true. I’d forgotten about that. Allegra was my best friend, and we hung out together all the time, but we often talked about basic things. Jeremiah was the one I went to about vulnerable topics or when I needed to talk to someone

who would be honest but also gentle with me. Naturally, I talked to Nova a lot too, but even with him, there were certain topics off limits because I didn't want to say anything that would create tension between us. That should have been a sign that he wasn't the one, but I figured all couples kept certain secrets.

“You're right. I don't usually engage with her like this. It's been so long, I find myself wanting to bring her even deeper into my life, but now I know that can't happen. I have to keep her on the same level she's always been on, or she won't be on any level with me at all.”

Silence found us, and I was okay with that. We'd come to TJ Mulligans for drinks and pizza, and I was sure we'd play a few rounds of pool before we left. Well, he'd play pool; I'd just shoot the balls around.

My eyes shifted from one TV to the other. They usually had one on those channels that showed funny videos on a loop. That was typically what I watched if no one was playing pool. TJ Mulligans was the average neighborhood bar. What made this place so popular was the cheap drinks and heavy-pouring bartenders. Plum or strawberry wine and whiskey were most popular in Rose Valley Hills, but here, I loved having top-shelf tequila with a Red Bull.

When Jeremiah began to speak again, I shifted my attention to him. He looked great as always. There was something about a Black man wearing black with gold chains that did something to me. Took me down every time. Our days weren't cool just yet, but nighttime breezes made it feel a little more like fall. He'd worn a thick black and white flannel that matched his Dunks but he'd taken it off. Now, muscles bulged underneath his form-fitting black tee. Between the tattoos and chains, women of all races had been eyeing Jeremiah all night, and I didn't blame them one bit.

“How are things going with your folks?” he asked before taking a sip of his beer. He'd been alternating between it and a glass of whiskey.

“Tierney was happy to spend some time with me. Dad wasn’t there as usual. Things are cool with Ma, but we did have an awkward moment. She wants me to give Nova a second chance.” He released a laugh from his belly, but it wasn’t one of amusement. “She told me all men cheat and that I have to find one that’s worth staying for.”

His nostrils flared and expression hardened.

“Mama Farrah really said that bogus ass shit to you?”

I nodded, not surprised by his reaction. If anyone could understand my frustration with Nova cheating, it was him.

“Yep, she did, and she was serious too.”

“You know that’s bullshit, right? All men don’t cheat. I never have, and I never will, and every other man in my life outside of my pops and Nova don’t either.”

“I know. In my mind I know, but my heart...” I shrugged, not really wanting to talk about that. We were having a good time and I didn’t want thinking about cheating to ruin that. “And I know you’re faithful. You’re going to make a great husband.”

Jeremiah’s brows raised. His head shook as he chuckled. “Nah, that’s not for me.”

We’d talk about everything under the sun and not once had he ever mentioned not wanting to get married.

“This is new. What makes you say that?”

The bartender placed another shot of tequila in front of me without me having to ask. That’s why I loved it here. I thanked him as I allowed Jerry to have time to process my question. He took a sip of his whiskey before crossing his arms on top of the bar.

“I’m not willing to change who I am to please a woman. She’ll tell me I’m not soft enough, not expressive enough. And I don’t want to raise kids like I was raised. I would want them to be better than me and have better than me. Since I’m still working on me, I can’t confidently say I want marriage or kids... not any time soon.”

“I’m glad you said not any time soon. You’re evolving, and I’m so proud of the man you’ve already become. I don’t want you to close yourself off to something as beautiful as love because you haven’t found the right woman yet.”

“Even after what happened, you still believe in love?”

Now it was my turn to pause and reflect. His eyes were playful, though his expression was serious. I was sure he expected me to say no with the way I’d been acting lately, but the truth was, I *did* believe in love. Even if I never had a healthy romantic love for myself, I knew of people who were in healthy relationships.

“I do, which is why I want it for you. You express yourself with me.”

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re you.” He paused, careful with his next set of words. “I love you.” I couldn’t contain my smile, but I was able to keep myself from squealing as warmth spread throughout my entire body. This was the first time in seventeen years that Jeremiah had ever said those words to me... but he didn’t stop there. “Loving you is more than enough for me.”

I’m not sure why I didn’t have more control, but at the sound of his declaration, my heart and lips had a mind of their own. I had the strongest awareness of my heart. For the first time in my life, I felt each healthy beat. Maybe because for the first time in my life, my heart longed for, beat for, a being outside of myself. The longer he stared at me, the more my heart shifted in response.

I leaned forward, devouring the softness of his lips. The kiss wasn’t urgent, but it was exploratory. Because this was the first, because he was my best friend, because we should not have been kissing. Pulling away, my mouth formed an O and eyes widened as the weight of what I’d done sank in.

“Oof, I’m s-sorry,” I muttered, jumping off my barstool.

Before I could run away, Jeremiah grabbed my wrist and stood. Pressing my hand into his chest, I trembled as he pulled me closer.

“I am so sorry, Jeremiah. I don’t know wha—”

“Chapel.” The husky tone of his voice caused my pussy to throb. “Shut up.” His fingers slid through my hair, and Jeremiah cupped my jaw and chin. I saw him tilting my head back, and I saw those juicy lips lowering to mine. Still, nothing prepared me for our lips to connect. His kisses were slow, thoughtful... and hungry. Hungry as if only I could satisfy the craving. I cupped the back of his neck, relaxing into his firm embrace as he laced me with drugging nibbles and slurps of his lips. The swirl of his tongue... I shivered, nipples hardening as Jeremiah set my insides aflame.

At the sound of whistles and cheers behind us, I snapped out of the trance kissing Jerry had placed me in. My God. I can admit I wondered what his lips would feel like on mine because of how good they felt on other places on my body but Christ. Kissing him felt better than it ever felt in my daydreams.

“I have to go,” I announced quickly, almost jogging out of the bar. I looked around the parking lot as my heart raced. Stomping my foot, I whined. My car was at the hotel. “I can’t believe I forgot I let him drive. Shit!”

Pacing, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened the Uber app. I hated using it outside of airport transportation, but desperate times called for desperate measures. At the sound of the bar door opening, I didn’t have to look back to know it was Jerry. Instead of saying anything, he took me by the hand and led me over to his Challenger. Staring at the side of my face, Jeremiah opened the door for me, and I plopped down in the seat quickly. Jeremiah casually made his way to the driver’s side... as if he hadn’t just given me the best kiss of my life.

“What the fuck?” I whispered, running my fingers through my hair. My body shivered as my anxiety increased. Did I really just kiss my best friend? My soul mate? “Oh, God.”

Jeremiah opened the door, and I snapped my mouth shut.

“Are we going to ignore what just happened in there?”

“Yes, please,” I replied, and his light laugh only frustrated me more. I couldn’t be mad at him though. I kissed him first, and maybe him kissing me back was just a normal lust-filled reaction. It didn’t mean he had any feelings for me or that he wanted more.

We rode in silence, which was good because we didn’t have to talk, but it was bad because it left me alone with my thoughts. For twelve minutes straight, I thought about what the hell I’d just done and the consequences of it. My life was already on a slope. I couldn’t do anything to ruin my bond with Jerry.

Was I more vulnerable and in need of affection than I realized? Was it because I had gone a year without the erotic touch of a man?

“Fuck me,” I grumbled to myself, looking out of the window with a shake of my head.

“I can do that.”

My head jerked in his direction, as if the words had touched me physically. His thumb and pointer finger were sliding down the corners of his mouth before he laughed.

“I’m so glad you find this amusing, Jerry.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Because!” I yelled frantically, gripping the armrest. We kissed!”

“Did you not like it?”

I loved it. “That’s not the point.”

“Nah.” His expression turned serious. His eyes left the road as he gripped my chin and forced me to stare at him.

“Jeremiah...”

“Did you not like it?”

“You need to watch the road.”

“Then answer my question.”

With a groan, I tried to free myself from his grip, but it didn't work. "Yes," I admitted. "I liked it. A lot. It was the best kiss I've ever had."

He licked the corner of his mouth as he stared at me for a few seconds before returning his attention to the road.

"Okay." His head bobbed and my eyes lowered to his Adam's apple as it did the same. "So why are you over there going crazy fighting your mind?"

"Because that shouldn't have happened. You're the only constant in my life right now and I can't do anything to ruin that. To ruin us. I was just... in my feelings and you telling me you loved me for the first time..." My head shook and eyes watered. I'd waited so long for that. Even if the words never came, Jeremiah showed me he loved me daily. "That was a beautiful moment for us, but it was just that—a moment."

"Hmm..."

He massaged the hair on his chin, piquing my curiosity.

"Hmm, what?"

"Nothing."

My eyes rolled. He was so open and expressive at the bar, now, he was shutting down again. I didn't bother asking him what was on his mind because he wouldn't tell me until he'd worked it out within himself. We returned to silence, and he didn't speak again until we were pulling into the hotel parking lot.

"Are you coming up to my suite?"

"No."

The chuckle he released made me huff and roll my eyes. I never thought he'd take something so serious, so lightly, but I shouldn't have been surprised. That kiss was driving me crazy, and it probably meant absolutely nothing to him. Jeremiah parked next to my car, and I was glad he didn't give me a hard time about leaving.

As he cut the car off, I asked, "Can we just forget about this ever happening?"

“I can’t. That was the best kiss I’ve ever had, from the best woman I’ve ever experienced. That’s not the kind of thing a man forgets, Angel.”

By the time I worked up the courage to look at him, Jerry was opening the door and getting out of the car. He opened the door for me, and before I could walk around him, Jeremiah was pressing my body into his car and holding it hostage with his solid frame. No matter how bad of an idea the kiss was, I was still turned on by it. My pussy was soaking wet, and having him this close to me wasn’t making it any better.

“Jerry,” I whispered, gripping my neck.

“Are you never going to kiss me again, Angel?”

“I...” Clearing my throat, I licked my lips as my mouth dried. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. We shouldn’t do this again.”

I counted five Mississippis as he looked at me before he finally nodded his agreement. He pushed my hair out of my face and lowered himself to me, saying, “Then let me get one last kiss if it’s going to be the last kiss,” against my lips before connecting them with his.

There was no part of me that wanted to deny him, deny us, of this. And so I didn’t. And we kissed. And what a kiss it was. When he moaned into my mouth, I pulled away. On weak knees, I pushed him away and hopped into my car. My hands shook as I drove away, and the cocky grin on his face unnerved me more. I can’t believe I’d kiss Jeremiah of all people.

Why in the hell did it have to feel so damn good?

M onday Morning

“SHE’S SUCH A FUCKING JOKE,” TIFFANY SAID WITH AN animated tone. “She has balls, though, I’ll give her that. To show her face after I took her man *and* her position? I would’ve left and never come back.”

My eyes rolled at the sound of the conversation she was having in the coffee room. How it was set up, there was a long hall before the opening that connected it to the café. Because it was carpeted, you didn’t know who was around the corner until they made themselves known. As much as I wanted to pop off on her silly ass, I was more curious about who she was confiding in and what they had to say in response. I understood there would be some people who preferred her over me when I returned, and I was okay with that. As far as I was concerned, my employees didn’t have to like me, but I commanded all of their respect.

“From the looks of it, she’s actually taking back what belongs to her.” I didn’t recognize the voice right away, but their words made me smile. “I heard she was getting her position back, and if you’re not careful, she’ll be taking Nova back too.”

Brook Lynn. She was Nova’s receptionist. *I wonder if it was time for her to get a raise.*

“Whatever. If Nova was happy with her, he wouldn’t have cheated with me.”

“Now that’s true.” That was Vana, no doubt about it. She stayed in everyone’s business.

“No, it’s really not,” Brook Lynn countered. “Men with no respect or discipline will have sex with literally anyone who lets them. Him cheating doesn’t mean Tiffany is better than Chapel; it simply means she was easy.”

The legs of her chair screeched, so she must have been getting up from her seat.

“What the hell are you even here for?” Tiffany asked.

“I’m not sure, but I won’t be here for long. If all you plan to do is talk shit about Chapel, please don’t invite me to have lunch with you again.”

At the sound of heels clacking against the tile, I leaned against the wall with a smile. Brook Lynn’s eyes widened at the sight of me. I lifted my finger to my lips to silence her and gave her an assuring smile. Once she was close enough, I gave her a soft hug and quietly thanked her for having my back.

“Always,” she whispered before heading down the hall.

After pulling in a deep breath, I made my way into the coffee room. At the sight of me, Tiffany and Vana’s laughter immediately silenced. I looked from one to the other. My posture was strong, and I walked with wide, confident steps. Before I went to fix my coffee, I walked over to the round, white table where they were seated. Leaning forward, I placed my hands on top of the table.

“Vana, get out.”

She stood and quickly left, holding her head down in the process. I had a feeling she was waiting in the hall to hear what I would say, but I didn’t really care. As long as Tiffany heard me clearly and understood my stance, that was my only concern. Out of professionalism, I sent Vana away, but if Tiffany kept trying me, no amount of professionalism would keep me from showing her who I truly was no matter who was around.

“I’m only going to say this once,” I started. Tiffany chuckled and rolled her eyes before returning them to mine. “The only reason I haven’t beat your ass is because I don’t fight over a man. Now you’re lucky to even have a job. If you choose to spend your time here disrespecting me, not only will I fire you, but I’m going to give you the ass-whopping you *truly* deserve.”

“I—”

“Keep my name out your fucking mouth,” I ordered through gritted teeth a little louder, and that was a sign for me to get the hell away from this girl before I hurt her. “Do you understand me?” When she didn’t answer me, I walked around the table and stood directly in front of her. “I said do you understand me, Tiffany?”

Standing, she nodded. “Understood.”

“Is... everything okay in here?” At the sound of Nova’s voice, I huffed and pinched my lips together. With a high chin, I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to relax my posture, which was the opposite of how irritated I was feeling on the inside.

“Everything’s great,” Tiffany answered after plastering on a smile. She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around him from the side. “Chapel and I were just... getting some boundaries in place I suppose.”

As amused as I was, I remained silent and kept my expression neutral.

I busied myself with making a cup of coffee, not giving a damn if they stayed or left.

“Hey, Chap,” Nova called, gaining my attention. I looked back at him over my shoulder, and I couldn’t help but smile. “Can you fix me a cup too?”

“Sure,” I agreed, just to get under Tiffany’s skin.

“I can get you a latte from the café, babe,” Tiffany offered.

“Nah. I want Chap’s. She makes the best coffee. You can go and get you one though.”

Tiffany's fists tightened and she gave him a curt nod. As she stomped off, I held in my laugh. Nova smiling as he walked over to the espresso machine didn't make it any better.

"She's so scared to leave me alone with you," he admitted quietly.

"I don't blame her." I shot him a playful wink that made his smile widen.

He smelled good.

I missed flirting with him.

I missed being with him.

A year away may have deepened my hate, but it certainly didn't erase my love. Good thing was, I was fully aware of the fact that love wasn't enough. And that fact was what would keep me from falling in love with this man all over again.

"I miss you, Chap. I'm glad we can talk like this."

"Yeah, well... we have to work together, and I do want us to be able to get along. As long as we all have boundaries in place and show each other respect, I think we'll be okay."

He stared at me, and I wasn't sure if it was because he was impressed or because he didn't believe me. Either way, I wasn't going to look at him to figure out which one it was. While I fixed his coffee, we talked about our weekends. I didn't bother telling him that I'd spent mine with Jerry or that we kissed... three times. That was a secret that had my cheeks lifting to my eyes as I grinned.

Those kisses played repeatedly in my head. Mm. His juicy lips were as soft as they looked. His tongue was thick, and he *definitely* knew how to work it. Just thinking about how it swirled around mine and how he sucked my lips and tongue... Jesus. And when he moaned... I never thought Jeremiah Simpson would be the vocal type.

I didn't realize how deep I was in my fantasy until Nova gently squeezed my shoulder. My fingers were over my lips, wishing Jeremiah's were there.

“You good?” Nova checked as I cleared my throat and put some space between us.

“Ye-yes, I’m fine. Close your eyes while I get my secret ingredients.”

Though Nova chuckled and shook his head at my antics, he did as I said. When I was sure he couldn’t see what I was doing, I grabbed what I added to his coffee and lattes to make them taste so good—a little bit of cinnamon and raspberry syrup. His go to for his coffee had always been sweet creamers, but in his lattes, he liked spice. With the combination of these two things, it didn’t matter what creamers he added, they were always perfect.

“Okay, here you go.”

He opened his eyes and accepted the mug. We’d been drinking coffee since our college days and had tongues of steel. Nova didn’t bother to let it cool down before he was taking a sip. His eyes closed and his body swayed before he leaned against the counter and moaned his pleasure.

“Mm, damn.” With a chuckle, Nova took another sip. Pure bliss covered his face as his eyes glossed over while he smirked. “I haven’t had a cup of coffee this good in a year. No matter where I went or what I tried, nothing has ever been this good. Thank you, Chapel.”

“You’re welcome,” I agreed earnestly.

“It’s crazy how this coffee is just like you. Something that can’t be duplicated by anyone else. Losing you is truly a loss, sweetheart. Truly a loss.”

“Well, you’ll get along without my special ingredients, just like you’ll get along without me.”

Our eyes remained locked longer than I wanted them to. He stepped closer, assaulting my nostrils with his intoxicating, spicy scent.

“Chapel, I…”

“Nova, please,” I begged softly.

“Let me make amends.”

“You can’t. There’s nothing you can do to fix what you did. You know about my parents, my past. How could you think I would be okay with you cheating?”

“I wouldn’t have done it if we were married.”

Scoffing, I clutched my chest, fighting back a laugh.

“Oh, okay. So it’s fine to cheat while we’re engaged but you draw the line at marriage?”

“That’s not what I’m saying...”

“Then what are you saying?” Tiffany asked, resting the weight of her body on her left side.

Nova massaged his temples and released an irritated breath.

“Can you please give us a moment, Tiff?”

“You have got to be out of your mind if you think I’m going to let you finish any conversation alone with her privately.”

Done with the conversation, I walked away. “Chap,” he called, reaching for me, but I pulled away. “We need to talk about this.”

“Just let her go,” Tiffany said.

“We need to talk. I need closure,” I heard Nova say, and I was surprised he was being so honest with her. That was good. At least he didn’t keep secrets from her. Maybe they would survive after all.

“Your closure was cheating on her with me.”

“My cheating was a mistake. Telling her was an even bigger one. I’ve accepted that I lost her, but I need closure, Tiff. If you can’t understand that, I’m sorry.”

Tiffany sighed. “You promise that’s all this is about?” I leaned against the wall, wanting to hear the end of their conversation. “Closure?”

“Yeah. I owe her that, and I want to clear my conscience for you.”

At the sound of that, I chuckled and walked away. That was total bullshit and Tiffany would be a damn fool to believe it. Somehow, I ended up at Jeremiah's office instead of mine. After the night we kissed, things pretty much went back to normal. The rest of the weekend, we saw each other twice and talked as if nothing happened. Closing the door behind me, I sat in the chair on the opposite side of his cherry oak desk.

"What's wrong?" he asked, sitting up in his seat.

"What makes you think something is wrong?"

"Your eyebrows bunch like that and you nibble your bottom lip when you're upset or in deep thought. I know you're upset when you don't grab your neck. That usually means you're struggling with what you said or something you want to say."

"You swear you know me so well."

I mirrored his smile. "I do, so what's wrong?"

I ran down everything, from listening in on Tiffany's conversation with Vana and Brook Lynn to what had just happened with Nova. As always, Jerry's expression remained blank as he listened. When I'd imploded on him and released it all, he stood and walked over to the large window that faced the downtown area.

"Because your intentions aren't pure, this isn't going to be an easy and peaceful journey, Chap. You have to be prepared for Tiffany and her minions to talk their shit."

"I thought you agreed I should do this?"

I walked over and stood beside him as he said, "I agreed because I know you're going to do this either way. I also told you I wanted you to focus on your healing and happiness." He looked down at me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "I'm just saying, you have to have thick skin if you're going to go through with this. I'm not going to let your temper ruin what you've created here. When you're at work, be on your best behavior. I don't want you fighting that girl here or anywhere else, you hear me?"

That was the difference between him and Allegra. While Jerry may not have agreed with what I was saying and doing, he still handled me gently, with love and respect. That was why I felt so comfortable with him. My body relaxed against him as I nodded my agreement.

“Yes, sir.”

Jeremiah chuckled and placed a kiss to my forehead. He took my hand into his and squeezed it three times before walking me to the door.

“Go get ready for your meetings today. Have a good day, Angel. Don’t let Tiffany or anyone else pull you out of yourself, okay? You’re bigger and better than that.”

“Okay,” I agreed softly, lifting my arms for a hug. He held me tight—close. He always smelled so good. Clean, crisp, fresh. After pulling in deep lungs full of his scent, I released him. “Thanks, pooh.”

Jeremiah sucked his teeth and I laughed instantly. “I told you about calling me that.”

“And I told you I’m not going to stop.”

I lifted on my heeled toes and planted a kiss to his nose before hugging him again. As much as he claimed to hate the name and affectionate gesture, Jeremiah never wasted any time returning it with a kiss to my neck. After releasing him, I made my way to my office with a huge smile on my face.

I loved how he always had the ability to put one there.

That Wednesday

I WAS STARTING TO THINK I MADE THE WRONG CHOICE.

Jeremiah was right. I needed to focus on my happiness and healing. So much of my life revolved around my friends and my work. Now that my crew wasn't as tight as it used to be and work was a little tense, it seemed nothing in my life was going right. I needed to find peace and happiness alone, and that was easier said than done. The last year of my life was spent feeling insecure and unsure of myself as a person... a woman. As lonely as I was, I had no desire to be around people. Now that I was, not having a healthy relationship with Nova or Allegra was harder to digest than I thought it would be.

Truth was, I wasn't the badass, coldhearted, vengeful woman I wanted to be. I wanted revenge, more than anything, but trying to get it was going against my nature. Nova asked if we could meet up to talk this weekend and I agreed. I wasn't sure if he was sincere about closure, seeing as that was the opposite of what he wanted when he visited my home, but he was right... We needed it. An entire year had passed since we last saw each other. I wanted to be able to walk around WCSF and act as if he didn't exist, but I couldn't. This man had been an integral part of my life since I was fourteen years old. I

couldn't just... ignore that—ignore him—no matter how much his choice hurt me.

Because that's all it was, a choice. A choice to do what would please him even if it hurt me. Because he made that choice, it was my responsibility to choose to protect myself, heal, and keep myself safe and happy. The more I thought about it, the more I could understand why my mother stayed. The life she had with my father meant more to her than his cheating. It wasn't that easy for me. No matter how happy I was with Nova, I could *never* go back.

Yesterday was weird.

One of my older clients had learned I was back and wanted me to team up with Tiffany to work on her current rental properties. Tiffany was prepared to go against every idea I had. I was so frustrated by the time the meeting was over, but I maintained my cool and remained the bigger person. Audrey wanted to go with my ideas anyway, and that frustrated Tiffany enough on its own.

We all were at the weekly Wednesday wine-down mixer with the entire WCSF staff, and the room wasn't as thick with tension as I thought it would be. My first thought was to dress with Nova in mind, but I didn't even feel like playing that game. Instead, I dressed in a custom-made olive-green pantsuit. I had no shirt underneath, just a lace bra that was exposed at the top. My relaxed hair was pulled up into a slick bun, and my face was free of makeup, except for a little blush and mascara with lip gloss.

I knew I looked damn good, and Nova did too. He couldn't keep his eyes off me, even when he was with Tiffany. It seemed as the days went on, she hated me more, like *I* was the one that had betrayed *her*.

Funny how that worked.

Allegra was here too, but I hadn't bothered to try to talk to her. We hadn't talked since that day at her home, and I was okay with that. I was tired of trying to fix things between us when she didn't even have the courage to admit something needed to be fixed.

I made my way over to the bar for a new glass of wine. Every week we went to Charlene's for the wine-down mixer and Mia would close the place for us.

“You look beautiful, but that’s no surprise.”

At the sound of Nova’s voice, I smiled. He made his way next to me at the bar. He looked at me with a pained gaze as his brows wrinkled.

“You look sad,” he continued.

“I am.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You can tell me how we got here.” Turning, I leaned against the bar with my wine in my hand. My eyes scanned the room for Allegra and Jeremiah. They were in separate areas of the room and that crushed my spirit. We were all supposed to be seated together, talking shit, having a good time. “The crew is just... done, Nova. Look at us.”

Nova looked away briefly, gulping air as his shoulders sagged.

“That’s on me,” he admitted. “I didn’t take into consideration how deep a poison my cheating would be. How far it would spread. I hurt all of us and I ruined our bond. I regret this more than anything in my life.”

I wanted him to pay and feel remorse, but I could tell how sincere he was. For some reason, I wanted to ease a bit of that weight.

“We’re all grown adults, Nova. We could have survived this with effort. I left, and I have no idea what happened between you and—oh, God.” At the sight of Tiffany heading in our direction, I became more jaded than I already was. “Can you please go? I am not in the mood to go back and forth with your guard dog.”

He rubbed his fist against his chest, and I was familiar enough with his gestures to know exactly what that meant. I wished I could fix the aching within his chest, but this was his doing. Our doing.

“Yeah, of course. I’m really sorry about this, Chap.”

“Stop apologizing. What’s done is done.”

With a nod, he gave my hand a light squeeze and placed a kiss on my cheek. “We’ll talk this weekend, right?”

“Looking forward to it.”

He gave me a soft smile before walking away, pulling Tiffany away in the process. At this point, wine didn’t seem strong enough. Before I could ask for a shot of tequila, Jeremiah’s presence instantly began to calm me as he stood next to me.

“What happened between you and Nova?” I asked. “It’s clear the two of you aren’t close anymore. I don’t see you talking outside of business.”

“I beat his ass that night.”

Between his nonchalant tone and serious face, I choked on my drink. As I coughed, he patted my back and tried to lift my arms in the air. I pushed him away and patted my chest since the liquid had gone down the wrong pipe.

“You *what?*” I choked out, gripping his arm for support as I sat on the barstool.

“I beat his ass,” he repeated, sitting next to me. “When Nova came to me and told me he was going to ask you to be his woman, I made him promise me that he wouldn’t hurt you. I told him if he did, I would hurt him, so I did. I beat his fucking ass.”

“Jeremiah…”

He lifted his hand to silence me. “I don’t want to hear that shit. We had an agreement, man to man. He broke his promise and squared up to pay for it.”

“Well, that explains why the two of you barely talk to each other. I feel so bad.”

“Don’t, that had nothing to do with you and everything to do with him. Plus, that’s not the only reason we aren’t close anymore. We tried to be friends after that, but I couldn’t

respect him. I couldn't be friends with someone who could do that to you. You were the closest person to him. I'm the kind of man, if you can't treat your woman well and she can offer you way more than I can, I can't trust you to be a good friend either."

"Even if it was a one-time thing?" Realization filled me and my heart squeezed. "Unless it wasn't a one-time thing."

"I'll let you have that conversation with him. She was the only one, but they were definitely in a relationship. It wasn't just about sex the way he tried to make it seem at the rehearsal."

I'm not sure why, but hearing that made the wound hurt all over again. Sniffling, I swallowed hard and turned away from the crowd of people.

My heart burned.

My eyes watered.

How long was it going to be this way?

"I'm gonna go," I told him, wiping a quickly fallen tear.

"Chap," he called with a strain in his voice.

"I'll be fine, I promise."

We both stood but I kept my eyes on the floor until I was sure they wouldn't release another tear.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, you have nothing to apologize for." Cupping his cheek, I gave him a genuine smile. "You've always been and will always be my protector. Thank you for standing up for my honor and being a man of integrity that I can trust. I love you so much for that, Jerry."

I'd meant to give him a kiss on the cheek, but my aim was a little off and it landed on the side of his mouth. Jeremiah didn't seem to mind. His eyes lowered to my lips as he wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close.

"I'll let you go so you can have your space, but call me if you need me, a'ight?"

I agreed before heading out. I couldn't miss the glare Nova sent my way. Though it hadn't been my intention for him to see the exchange between me and Jerry, I honestly didn't care. Nova could think whatever he wanted at this point. It wasn't my responsibility to explain anything to him, especially after what he'd done to all of us.

T hat Weekend

I STILL LOVED NOVA. THERE WAS NO DENYING THAT. EVERY time I saw him, I missed him more. It felt like I was in an alternate universe when I saw him with Tiffany. This was a testament to how much things could change in such a small amount of time. As I sat outside of JD's, I wasn't sure if I could handle seeing him this evening. I told myself it was time to get everything out in the open so I could move on, but was I truly ready?

There was only one way to find out.

No matter how nervous I was, this needed to be done.

Getting out of the car, I pulled in what I hoped would be calming breaths as I trembled slightly.

As soon as I stepped inside of JD's, my nerves eased a bit. JD's was Nova's favorite restaurant. He always came here for a drink and to clear his mind. It was next to The View on the beach. What made JD's so special was that the restaurant doubled as a dancehall. Right in the center of the main floor was a dancefloor. Dinner tables lined the walls with the perfect view of the beach on three sides. Even if you didn't want to dance, the view alone was worth the expensive prices.

I loved JD's décor... and it could have had to do with the fact that I'd designed it. To go with the glass theme, I had

glass flooring installed with a resin covering that showcased waves and different kinds of ocean creatures. The tables were glass as well, and so was the bar. My smile was wide as I took in the space, and there was only one table empty in the otherwise full restaurant. As the hostess greeted me, I looked around for Nova. I spotted him rather quickly because he was the only person sitting alone at a table. I let her know that I saw my party, and she allowed me to go over on my own.

I took in what I needed to be calming breaths as I walked over to his table. His eyes were on me, like always. I was nervous under his stare, which was odd. This man had seen me for half of my life. Why was I nervous as he looked at me?

Nova stood, giving me a gentle hug. He pulled my chair out for me, and I couldn't help but admit it was nice to be around him without having to worry about Tiffany showing up.

"Thank you for coming," he said as he sat down. He was dressed casually for a change in jeans and a white t-shirt. Even in that, the man looked good. "How are you?"

"I'm good, how are you?"

"Better now that I'm with you." My eyes rolled playfully as I crossed my ankles. "I ordered your food already so we wouldn't have any interruptions. Is that okay?"

"Depends on what you ordered me."

The cocky expression that covered his face made me smirk.

"The house salad with steak, medium well, extra croutons."

That was the *perfect* choice.

"I approve."

His laugh sounded like a favorite song that I hadn't heard in a while.

"I miss you, Chapel. So much."

“I miss you too. I miss our friendship. We never should’ve dated.”

“I’m glad we did. I just... hate how it ended. I want to fix things, Chap. You said I can’t, that I shouldn’t, but I want to. Our crew is broken, but not beyond repair. Even if I have to start with Lay and Jerry and work my way up to you I will, but I’m going to fix this.”

His words went straight to my heart, filling me with pride.

“I can’t stop you.”

“I’m glad you know that.”

I took a sip of my wine, pleased to taste the plum flavor. “So how did we get here, Nova? How did this happen?”

The comfortable smile he wore fell. “The wedding. Its planning. It destroyed us.”

That was a different perspective. One that I wasn’t expecting or prepared for. “How so?”

“It felt like you cared more about the wedding than our relationship. You were always so busy and stressed out, which put you in a bad mood. We weren’t intimate with each other in the ways we were before we got engaged and started planning the wedding. For a year and a half straight, our relationship suffered. It didn’t help that work was kicking both of our asses. I was busy with just my associates, but you were over everyone, so I knew your load was twice as heavy as mine.”

“Why didn’t you say anything, Nova?”

“I felt like a bitch. I didn’t want to complain about you working too much or planning our wedding and being stressed out or moody because of it. I know now that I should have helped you more and lightened your load instead of feeling neglected because of it. If all I get out of this is that life lesson, to be a better partner and speak up about how I feel, I’ll never cheat and make this mistake again.”

“So what? Tiffany gave you the attention you wanted from me?”

“Yeah, and I know that sounds cliché but it’s the truth. She had been flirting with me since she started working for you. In the beginning, I let it ride. It didn’t faze me because things were good with you. Then you stopped complimenting my haircuts and telling me I looked good. The I love yous seemed like empty words between us. We weren’t going on dates and traveling, and the sex was quick if we even had it at all. And it’s not all on you. I could have put forth more effort, but I didn’t. I wasn’t used to having to put in the work, you feel me? When things started to get boring with a woman, I would just move on. I couldn’t move on from you.”

“So you were in an actual relationship with her? It wasn’t just sex?”

He nodded, taking a pause like he didn’t trust himself to speak. “Yeah. We didn’t have a title, but we spent time together, went out, and had sex. She made me feel good, as selfish as that sounds. I got my fill from her before I came home to be discontent with you.”

“Wow.” My head shook in disbelief.

“I’m not trying to make it seem like this is your fault, bae.” Nova reached across the table and took my hand into his. “I should have spoken up and worked to bring the fire back. And if I felt like that couldn’t happen, I should have ended things. Regardless of what you were or weren’t doing, that is no excuse for me to have cheated on you, especially with Tiffany.”

“Do you... love her?”

I pulled my hand out of his as my eyes watered. I wasn’t sure what he’d say... if I could handle his answer. But I had to ask.

“I love the way she made me feel but I don’t love her. Things between us aren’t good.”

“Then why are you with her?”

He released a heavy breath and looked out of the window toward the beach. “Because if I’m not, losing you feels even

less worth it. What I had with her is the reason I lost you. I guess I felt like I had no choice but to be with her.”

I didn't respond.

I couldn't.

Hearing his truth made me feel better. I could admit the wedding planning was stressful. With our reputation in Rose Valley Hills, I wanted everything to be perfect. What was supposed to be a wedding with those closest to us turned into an extravagant party with a guest list of three hundred and fifty people. And he was right, work *was* stressful as hell. Even with having him, Allegra, and Jeremiah as partners, I still ran everything. I operated as our human resources department all on my own because that's what I'd majored in while in college.

My goal was to get a small staff for that which would lighten my load and allow me to focus solely on designing and partner issues.

“I'm sorry, Nova. I wasn't the most present partner. We weren't committed to doing the work in that moment. What you did was wrong, but I can see how you felt neglected. For that, I truly apologize.”

The longer we stared into each other's eyes, the softer I felt. The harder it was to hate him. The easier it was to understand why people tried to make their relationships work.

“I do love you, Chapel. I always will.”

Always... such a funny word. With Nova, we never used that term. It was an assumption our always was automatic.

With Jeremiah, we were intentional with always. Always *and* forever. That intentionality had effort behind it. Effort that displayed what we believed our bond was worth.

Was that something Nova and I should have done too?

His eyes softened, filled with regret.

“I love you too. And I... I forgive you.”

Nova's body relaxed, and he gave me a relieved smile.

“So High” by John Legend started to play and we both chuckled. I sniffled as he blew out a shaky breath. That was the song I was supposed to walk down the aisle to. They’d never played this song here before. For it to be playing now...

“May I have this dance?” Nova asked as he stood. He held his hand out for me, and I accepted the invitation to dance.

We made our way to the dancefloor. As soon as his arms wrapped around me, I melted against him. Our sway was slow as we looked into each other’s eyes. He caught the tear that escaped from mine, teasing me with, “Still a crybaby I see.”

I giggled softly. There was no denying that.

“Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t use marrying Tiffany to punish yourself for what happened with us. If you don’t love her, promise me that you won’t marry her and spend the rest of your life miserable.”

He looked over my head, swallowing hard as his head shook.

“Chapel...”

“Promise me.”

His jaw clenched as he looked down at me. “Okay. I promise.”

That gave me peace.

Even if I didn’t spend the rest of my life by his side, I needed to know he’d be with a woman who could increase his happiness. Because even though he cheated, there was a time when Nova Cane was my best friend. I still wanted the best for him. I still wanted him to be loved. I still wanted him to get all that he deserved—even if he wouldn’t get it from me.

As the song neared its end, I tried to put a little space between us, but Nova held me closer. Somehow, that led to his nose brushing against mine.

His lips were on mine.

I didn't stop him.

Not right away, at least.

For a brief moment, I allowed myself to indulge in the familiarity of his kiss. His hands were on my waist, then the small of my back. As they lowered, I pulled away.

"Nova," I whispered.

"Yes, sweetheart," came out more like permission than a response.

"We can't do this." He nibbled my top lip before pulling it into his mouth, and it was even harder that time to pull away. "I'll be no better than her. I can't be your other woman."

"You can be my only woman."

Though I could tell he was serious, the sentiment made me smile as I gently pushed him away.

"I should go."

"What about dinner?"

"I um... I think I should go, Nova."

Though my statement caused visible disappointment, Nova followed me back over to the table. I grabbed my purse from the hook, glad he didn't try to stop me. Once I made it to my car, I couldn't pull away immediately.

Because I didn't want to leave him.

Did I want to leave the man that had cheated on me? Yes. Did I want to leave my friend? No. I wanted to stay, and talk, and laugh, and dance, and eat. And we couldn't do those things anymore. That truth had tears falling from my eyes as I sobbed. I really sobbed. It felt like for the first time I was grieving the ending of our relationship.

Was this the start of my healing?

I wasn't sure.

All I knew was, by the time I left the parking lot, I was empty... and it was the first time in the past year that I felt full.

Not long after I made it home last night, there was a knock on my door. When I opened it, I saw the to-go box from JD's that held my salad. Nova was nowhere in sight, and I appreciated that. I ate my salad with a smile on my face, grateful for the progress it felt like we'd made.

I was in a good mood before work, so I stopped by my favorite bakery to grab some muffins since it was Monday. With enough to feed everyone at work that morning, I had my receptionist call the lead associates, who spread the word on their respective floors. The gesture wasn't done for gratitude, but I appreciated the employees who took the time to find and thank me. When Nova did, he lingered longer for conversation. In no rush to send him away, I enjoyed talking to my old friend.

When we were together, we used to start our days watching a funny, warm show. It always put us in a good mood. We did the same thing at night before bed. I'm not sure how our conversation shifted to it, but we were talking about the time we binge watched *Amen*. It was my first time watching the show, and I couldn't believe how long I'd waited to give it a try. It turned out to be hilarious!

As we talked about the episode where Deacon Frye and Bess had gotten into an all-out brawl in his living room, Nova and I cracked up.

"Yo, that episode had me dying laughing. He was really going to war with her ass," Nova said before covering his mouth as he laughed.

“And was losing too! I almost died when he hopped on her back.”

He licked his lips as our laughter died down while I leaned against the counter in the coffee room. Nova had convinced me to fix him a latte to go with his muffin, and I was okay with that. Knowing there was something that he could only get from me, even with us not being together, made me feel special.

“This is dangerous,” he reflected.

Though I was aware of what he was referring to, I wanted to hear him say it anyway. Nibbling my bottom lip, I cocked my head and looked up at him. It wasn't my intention for my expression to make him smile, but it did. I couldn't imagine what I looked like, but if my expression matched my thoughts... I was probably looking at him sweetly.

“What's dangerous?”

“Reminiscing like this.”

“What makes that dangerous?”

Nova's fingers caressed mine before he enveloped my hand with his. “It makes me want to create new memories with you.”

“We can, as friends.”

“Are you sure we can't be more?” When he lifted my hand and kissed my palm, I did have a physical reaction. That didn't last long.

I gritted my teeth as my heart pounded against my rib cage. Removing my hand from his, I tried to breathe deeply to calm down, but that didn't work. Was this how he was with Tiffany while we were together? Did he flirt with her in the coffee room while I was in my office without any clue as to what he was up to? With a frustrated chuckle, I leaned against the refrigerator as I stared at him.

“What?”

“I don't want you to flirt with me.”

Nova chuckled, widening his stance. “Why not?”

“Because it triggers me. I was enjoying being with you, but when you did that, all I could think about was you flirting with Tiffany like this while we were together.”

He nodded in understanding. “I’m so—”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I interrupted him to say. “That’s just... a boundary I need us to have.”

Nova’s head nodded as he placed his hands in his pockets and walked over to me. “I can agree to that. It’s second nature for me to flirt with you, but I don’t want you to think I was like this with other women throughout our relationship. I didn’t flirt with other women, and with Tiffany, it only started when things changed between us.”

“It’s fine,” I muttered, though it wasn’t. I wanted to walk away, but he used his right hand to press my body into the refrigerator.

“No, it’s not. Are you sure you’re okay with us working here?”

I didn’t answer his question right away. The people pleaser in me wanted to tell him yes. My hurting heart wanted me to tell him no. I didn’t know who to listen to.

“It depends on the day.” Cupping my hands, I twiddled my thumbs. “It’s been a year for you, but this is fresh for me. Seeing you with her is tough, Nova, I can’t lie. Some days I’m okay with it and other days...”

I gripped my neck, finding it increasingly difficult to have this conversation.

“Other days what?” Nova’s hand wrapped around my wrist, and he used it to lower my hand.

“Other days... I feel like the walls are closing in on me and I can’t breathe when I see you with her. It hurts like hell watching the man I thought I’d be with forever with someone else. And when she touches you...”

“There you are!” Tiffany’s interruption had Nova growling under his breath quietly.

Laughing, I crossed my arms and ankles. I was surprised we were able to talk for as long as we had without her interrupting. She was a nagging fly that wouldn't stay the hell away. As much as I wanted to swat her, I promised both Jerry and Allegra that I'd be on my best behavior.

“Wassup, Tiff?” Nova asked, turning to look at her.

“I just wanted to see you since you left before I woke up this morning.”

Ow. That felt like a sharp pain straight to my heart. I spent so much time away envisioning them together, but seeing it and hearing about it always felt like machetes ripping me apart.

“I'll stop by your office when I'm done talking to Chapel.”

Tiffany's eyes shifted from him to me. “I can wait for you to get done.”

“We're having a private conversation.”

Her head jerked as she frowned. “What's so private that you can't discuss it with your fiancée present?”

On that note, I decided to make my exit.

“Chap, I want us to finish this,” Nova said to my back as I walked away. I wasn't expecting him to follow behind me, so the feel of his hand in mine caused me to tense up. He stepped in front of me with concern in his eyes. With a softer tone, he added, “I want us to come to an agreement that will make this easier for you.”

I fought not to look at Tiffany as she scowled at me. I wasn't sure how we ended up here. This was my business, my ex-fiancé, yet somehow... I felt like the other woman. If only I wouldn't have run away. I could have fired her ass a year ago and gotten over Nova by now. No matter how upset I was with him personally, I couldn't deny how important Nova was to WCSF.

I believed no one person was irreplaceable, but I did believe in the power of having the right team around you. Nova was a part of my winning team, and even with our

personal relationship ending, I wanted to find a way for our business relationship to remain intact. With his clingy guard dog hanging around, I didn't know how easy that would be though.

“Honestly, Nova, I don't think that's possible. Not any time soon at least.” Swallowing hard, Nova broke eye contact and sighed heavily. “I'm gonna go. See to your fiancée.”

His eyes squeezed shut briefly and he clenched his jaw before releasing a vocal breath.

“Okay. Try to enjoy the rest of your day, a'ight?”

As I nodded, Nova pulled me closer by my hand and placed a kiss on the center of my forehead. I was surprised he'd done that in front of Tiffany, and by her gasp and frown, she was too. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that she'd start yelling soon, so I made my way out. The last thing I wanted to do was be in the middle of their argument. I hoped Nova kept the promise he'd made me about ending things with her. If he didn't, it wouldn't be the first time he broke a promise to someone he claimed to love and care about.

L ater that Day

901-339-0118: Chapel.

EVEN WITH IT BEING JUST A TEXT, I HEARD NOVA'S VOICE loud and clear. After the wedding rehearsal, I blocked his number. The only reason I'd unblocked it was because I'd returned to work. Seeing his number pop up on my phone startled me. My heart dropped, as if I hadn't been talking to him hours earlier. It didn't matter if I'd deleted his contact from my phone. I called that number so much, I'd probably always remember it.

Yes?

Nibbling my bottom lip, I waited for his response, curious as to what he had to say. I was supposed to be setting up a demo to send to Claudia Meyers. She was probably the most successful realtor in Rose Valley Hills other than Jeremiah and Noah Gabriel. Noah Gabriel was in a different lane, though. He specialized in commercial properties. If I could bring her on as a new client, she would easily bring in potential clients from Memphis as well, because she operated all over Tennessee.

I was excited about staging and decorating in new cities and hoped the demo I was putting together would impress her.

When my phone buzzed, I dropped my pen and grabbed it, anxious to see what Nova had to say.

901-339-0118: I just wanted to check on you and make sure you were okay.

I'm good. It's weird not being able to have a full conversation with you here without your shadow popping up but that's to be expected.

901-339-0118: Well I talked to Tiffany and that won't be happening anymore.

I was curious about if he'd done what he promised me, but a text didn't seem like the way to have that conversation. Instead of asking, I simply said okay. If he called their engagement off, I'm pretty sure I'd hear about it before the day was out.

901-339-0118: You looked beautiful today. I hope that's not flirting since it's the truth.

I tried to grit my teeth to keep my smile in, but it didn't work. What I was feeling for Nova shouldn't have been so surprising. We'd always had chemistry and history, it was easy to fall back into certain feelings and habits with him. No matter how easy it was to desire his friendship again, that was all it would ever be. Because he cheated, I could never trust him and feel secure with him.

Even on the off chance that I did try to be with him, there was no doubt in my mind that my fear, paranoia, and resentment would cause even bigger issues between us. I'd probably end up punishing him for Tiffany every day that we were together. It was best to leave things as they were. At least now, we had an understanding that we both dropped the ball. He just... kicked his further into a field neither of us could get it back from.

Thank you. You looked handsome as always.

There was a knock on my door, and I was surprised to see both Allegra and Jeremiah together. Did they want to grab

drinks or something after work like old times?

I grinned as Jerry closed the door behind them, but my excitement died a bit when Allegra said, “I won’t stay long since Jerry is here to see you too. I just wanted to offer my help with the human resources issues until you hire a small staff for that. If you can draft up whatever policies you want to put in place, I can add it to our bylaws and send it out to everyone. If they have any questions, I’ll list me as the point of contact and bring anything to you I feel I can’t handle.”

While I wished she was coming to me for something personal, I was also grateful for her help. Our staff had grown a bit since I was gone, and I needed all the help I could get.

“That sounds great, Allegra. Thank you for your help. I’ll get the policies drafted within the next forty-eight hours and send them to you.”

She gave me a bob of her head and a smile before sticking her tongue out at Jeremiah and leaving my office. Jerry sat at my desk and got comfortable as he normally did before he spoke. My phone vibrated, and I didn’t have to look to know it was Nova. I grabbed it and placed it in my lap before Jeremiah’s nosey ass could try to see who it was.

“Who you talking to that you trying to hide from me?”

My smile was crooked as I read over Nova’s text.

901-339-0118: I know I’m asking for a lot, but I’d love to see you again outside of work. If it would make you feel better, you can invite someone else. I miss my sweetheart. My life was so much better with you in it, even as just friends. Will you please be my friend again Chap?

My heart expanded in size like the Grinch.

Even if I wanted to deny Nova, I couldn’t. I missed him like crazy. Being away from him for a year didn’t lessen that. It made me angrier because he selfishly ruined us.

“Shit,” I seethed, tossing my phone onto my desk.

I hated even reading his texts in my office. There were certain spaces I liked to keep as peaceful as possible, and my

bedroom and office were at the top of that list. My office was decorated in a monochrome blue design. From the different color mood lighting and aromatherapy mists to the small futon in the corner with a small bookshelf that I could use to relax, I'd gone to great lengths to make this space perfect for my mental and emotional well-being.

But now... all I could do was overthink this situation with Nova and Tiffany.

“What’s wrong, Angel?”

I walked around my desk and leaned against it next to Jerry.

“You’ll be happy to hear this, but I’m not going through with my revenge plan.” Jeremiah released a vocal breath of relief. “No matter how dumb Nova’s actions were, first by cheating and then telling me in front of the people we love, I love him. I care about him. I can’t... do something to intentionally hurt him. My heart is too pure for that.”

“And what about Tiffany?”

“She’s a decent stager. She had a lot of potential, that’s why I brought her under my wing. That’s dead though. I don’t want to fire her without a good enough reason, but her options are limited here under me.”

With his hands on my waist, Jeremiah repositioned me so that I was directly in front of him. I wasn’t sure if I was glad I didn’t have on a dress or not since he was right between my legs. All I could think about was how good his lips felt on the ones on my face, and how good they’d feel on the ones between my legs.

He had on his glasses today, which meant he was reading over contracts. I loved how they made the bad boy look good. Only Jeremiah could have tattoos, a gold grill, and glasses, and the combination looked like he was made for a runway.

“First, I’m proud of you. I know it took a lot of inner dialogue for you to come to this conclusion. That’s a sign of growth and healing. You’ve moved from wanting to seek your own revenge to allow life to unfold however God sees fit—

that's a sign of forgiveness." Jerry took my hands into his and kissed both. "Second, you're right about Tiffany. If you fired her now, that could potentially open up legal issues. What I recommend you do is take advantage of these new policies and craft them in a way that will make you comfortable with her working here until she does something that you can get rid of her for."

"Is there a chance you and Nova can be friends again?"

Jeremiah released my hands and sat back in his seat with a hard breath. "The fuck you just ask me?"

I couldn't help but chuckle. He looked like my question had completely knocked him off his square, and I could understand that.

"Pooh..."

"He *hurt* you, Chapel."

"Yes, he did, but if I can let it go, I want you to let it go too." His eyes rolled toward the ceiling, head shaking as he refused to even consider my request. "I know we'll probably never be as close as we were, but you told me to focus on my healing and my happiness. If we can try to get to a place where we can at least be in the same room and talk to each other without it being filled with tension, that will really make me happy."

Since he remained silent, I sat in his lap and wrapped my arms around his neck. "Please, Jeremiah. You have your values, and I won't ask you to be close friends with a man whose actions go against them. What I can say is, I don't want you to lose a forever friend because he and I took things to a level we shouldn't have. Will you at least consider it? For me?"

Maybe I was the one being selfish now. Jeremiah's past had caused him pain and forced certain boundaries for self-preservation too. He didn't want to hurt women like his father, but he also didn't want to be hurt like his mother. I can't imagine how triggering what happened between Nova and me was for him. And it probably didn't help that I dropped off the

face of the earth and made it impossible for him to find me. If he genuinely wanted nothing to do with Nova on a personal level, I would respect that, but I was hoping with time, as he saw Nova and I heal our friendship, he would work to heal theirs, too.

“I’ll consider it, but I can’t make any promises.”

“Good, because Nova asked me to hang out and he told me to bring a friend, and I pick you.”

I tried to get the statement out quickly and get off his lap, but Jeremiah’s hold on my arm prevented that. With his arm wrapped around my waist to keep me in place, Jerry gave me the smile that had been lighting up my life for years now.

“Run that back for me, slower this time.”

My chin was almost to my chest as I hid from him in plain view.

“I said Nova asked me to hang out and he told me to bring a friend so I would be comfortable.”

“And who did you say you were taking?”

“You?” came out more like a question than an answer.

The low chuckle he gave me wasn’t one of amusement.
“No.”

“No?”

“Yeah.”

“So yes?”

His chin jutted as he glared at me, making me laugh.
“Chapel.”

“Why not?” I whined with a pout.

“I told you I would consider it, but I’m not comfortable being around the two of you together just yet. I don’t feel like he deserves you on any level, but I’ll respect you keeping the peace and being his friend.” His grip around me tightened. “I’m just not ready for that yet, Angel, but I’ll try in the future.”

With respect, I kissed his cheek and his nose. That was good enough for me. The desire to get off his lap and put space between us was nonexistent. I found myself snuggling up against him, getting comfortable to stay awhile.

“You’re my best friend,” I shared. “My soul mate. I’m so happy to have you in my life. You’re the only person I’ve ever felt comfortable enough to be myself with. You’re truly my person, Jerry. I love you so much.”

His large palm cupped my cheek and tilted my head while it lay on his chest. Our eyes connected, and I loved the softness in his. Our mouths were like magnets, drawn to one another. This time, I didn’t want to be careful and avoid my desire for him. This time, I found myself holding his wrist, wanting to make sure he didn’t take the sweetness of his kiss away until I’d had my fill.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered against my lips. “I know I agreed to us not doing that again, but...”

“Shh...” Cupping the back of his head, I lowered his lips back to mine. His hand lowered to my ass as his tongue swirled around mine. Moaning into his mouth, I relaxed more into his frame as he cradled me against him.

“The fuck?” At the sound of Nova’s voice, I pulled away from Jeremiah. Had he not had such a strong grip on me, I would’ve fallen onto my carpeted floor from jumping so hard.

“Nova,” I called, feeling as guilty as a kid with their hand in the cookie jar.

This felt sinful.

I tried to stand and make my way over to him to explain, but Jeremiah held me tighter.

“So this is why you couldn’t text me back?”

“Um... I...” Stammering, I looked to Jerry for help. He offered none. I’m not sure why I felt so nervous being found in this position with Jerry, but my heart was racing. “I would like to be your friend.” Clawing at Jerry’s arm, I asked, “Will you let me go so I can stand up?” His eyes left mine and met Nova’s. “Jeremiah.” His arms slowly unraveled from around

me. Standing, I wiped the corners of my mouth and took a small step in Nova's direction.

"Y'all together now?"

"No, we're just..." Twiddling my thumbs, I looked back at Jeremiah. "I'm not exactly sure what we are, but we're not in a relationship. He's... he's still my..."

"Soul mate." Nova released a humorless chortle. "Yeah, that's what you call him, right?"

"What does this have to do with you?" Jeremiah asked, standing from his seat. "She said she's cool with being your friend. If that's all you wanted, you can leave now."

I didn't know who to look at... who to give my attention to. My natural response had always been to run, so that's what I did. Leaving them both standing there like alpha dogs trying to stake their claim, I headed down the hall so I could go outside and get some fresh air. What I'd said to Nova wasn't a lie. I didn't know *what* the hell was going on between me and Jeremiah.

All I knew was, I was seeing him differently and desiring him in ways I never had before, and I don't know how to turn that off. There's no part of me that wants to risk what I have with Jeremiah, especially after things turned so sour between Nova and me. Whatever this was, we needed to make it stop, no matter how natural it felt to be in Jerry's arms and on his lips.

Jeremiah was trying to make a liar out of me.

I said nothing could happen between us, but the more time we spent together privately, the more he made me want to change that. Not intentionally. There wasn't anything special or extra he'd been doing. Jeremiah Simpson was making me fall in love with him just by being *himself*.

On Sundays, we prepared for the week together. Outside of crafting our to-do lists and getting our meal prep done, we picked out our work clothes as well. At my home, we were just about done with everything when the lights went out. The vibe wasn't completely ruined. It was still daylight out, so I could see in my closet. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to cook until the power came back on.

"Chap, I thought you said you were calling your uncle about this?" Jerry confirmed, making his way into my room.

"I forgot. It's been just the outside lighting for a while now. This is the first time the lights have gone out in here too."

"I don't want to leave you here without power, so pack what you need to pack and come home with me."

With a squeal, I shifted gears with my packing. I loved Jeremiah's home. He had an indoor pool that I couldn't wait to swim in, and he had a pantry loaded with unhealthy snacks. His home theater was bomb. We were going to have a great time tonight.

"Do you need me to handle this for you?" Jeremiah asked, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "I can get one of the

electricians we work with for my properties...”

“Oh, no. You don’t have to do that. I’ll get my uncle to take care of it for free.”

“When are you going to call him, Chap?”

“I’ll call when we get to your house, I promise.”

Pleased with my answer, Jeremiah left so I could focus on packing.

By the time I was done, the lights still hadn’t come back on. We made our way to his home, enjoying the lazy cruise of empty streets on this gorgeous Sunday afternoon. The moment we arrived, I changed into my swimming suit, put my hair up, and got into the pool. I loved swimming and dancing. Both cleared my mind whenever I was overwhelmed.

As I floated atop the water, my mind took me back to my thirtieth birthday bash. I remember telling Jeremiah about how in all the years of my life, no one had ever thrown me a birthday party, and I hadn’t gotten a birthday cake since I was thirteen. It seemed like a silly thing to be upset over, but we were heading to Memphis for my sister’s birthday party, and it put me in my feelings.

When I was growing up, my father was too busy to set aside time for family things like birthdays, family vacations, and holiday time with family. Though he still didn’t travel often, he made a fuss over Tierney for her birthday. I loved that for my sister and was glad she had his attention, but my happiness for her didn’t outweigh the sadness that came from my own personal experiences. My reasoning behind it was simple—talk to Jeremiah about it so I could get out my heart and head and give all my attention to the birthday girl when we arrived.

I thought back to how for my birthday, that same year, Nova gave me the perfect gift—a surprise birthday party and a huge birthday cake. Gestures like that made me confident that risking our friendship for a romantic relationship was worth it. I was so deep in my thoughts I didn’t hear Jeremiah as he approached, placing a tray with wine and fresh-cut fruit on the

side of the pool for me. I swam over, thanking him for the kind gesture.

“You must have been in deep thought. I called your name twice.”

“Yeah, I was actually thinking about the surprise party Nova gave me.”

Jeremiah held his stomach, as if he was physically pained by my words.

“What’s wrong, Jerry?”

“Before I answer, are you thinking about that because you miss him and want him back?”

“No, why?”

“I don’t want that to be a check in his favor.”

As playful as he was being, I wanted to be serious, but I couldn’t help but smile.

“Tell me what I should know.”

His mouth opened, but he hesitated. “I told him to do that, Chap.”

“What?” I asked quietly, setting the piece of watermelon I’d picked up back down. “Why?”

“I was always giving Nova things to do for you. When you told me that you’d never had a party thrown in your honor, I decided to do it for you, but figured it would mean more coming from him. So... I told him he should throw you a surprise party and make sure he got you your own individual birthday cake.”

If my heart could have burst into pieces, it would have—like strings of confetti. That moment had meant so much to me. To know that the idea had come from Jeremiah...

“What else?” I asked, sitting on the side of the pool next to him.

“What else what?”

“You said you were always giving him things to do for me. What else?”

“Chapel...” His sucked teeth and dismissive wave wouldn’t stop me.

“Tell me.”

“You want a list?” He stretched each word.

“Yeah, I do. Give me examples.”

The ease with which he began to recite thing after thing that made me fall in love with Nova even more...

“The Vegas trip was my idea. I told him what kind of jewelry and birthday presents to get you. Taking you to the pickle festival—that was all me. I’m the reason he started leaving you sticky notes with reasons he loved you. I also told him to text you prayers in the morning and at night when he wasn’t able to be with you physically. It was a lot of shit, Chap. Too much to list honestly.”

Nova’s willingness to learn how to love and please me, or Jeremiah’s willingness to give him the map—I wasn’t sure which meant more to me at that moment. My feelings, like my thoughts, were all jumbled up. It felt... like I’d been conned... finessed into valuing Nova’s intentionality and consideration when it wasn’t him all along.

It was my Jerry.

As my eyes watered, I shoved a piece of watermelon into my mouth. Eating my emotions wouldn’t help me sort through them, but oddly, stuffing my mouth so no other words could come out felt satisfying. So I ate, ate until I couldn’t help but blurt...

“For someone who claims to not be romantic and expressive, you sure had no trouble helping him make it look easy.”

The sexy chuckle he released as he rubbed his hand over the waves in his hair went straight to my gut. It made me vibrate. Like fireflies in my belly.

“I’m not very sentimental, but with you, certain things just come easy.”

“Was I in love with him, or with you?”

Jerry’s tongue rolled across his cheek before he swallowed and looked away.

“Him.”

“Can we say that with certainty now? Because a lot of what made me love him romantically, I question if those things came from you.”

“All that matters now, is all that matters now.”

The featherlight kiss he placed on my shoulder and neck made me shiver. Jeremiah stood and headed back inside, and I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until he closed the door and it released.

T hat Night

IT WAS TRUE.

Well, I knew it was true because Jeremiah had never lied to me a day in his life. Still, I had to ask Nova to be sure, and he confirmed it. I laughed from my gut. Thinking back over our entire relationship, I questioned if anything Nova did for me romantically was his own doing. I wasn't upset with him; I actually respected him for doing what Jeremiah suggested. I was upset with Jeremiah. Because the truth was, all this time, I never allowed myself to consider Jeremiah as a romantic partner for two reasons—because of our friendship, and because he wasn't my type romantically.

I took great pride in being one of the few people he opened up to. Because of that, I could never greedily ask for more. Now, I wondered if he would have made a good lover for me, seeing as so many of the things Nova did that I loved came from him.

My feet seemed to have a mind of their own, taking me from the guest room to Jeremiah's bedroom. Well, maybe they were connected to my heart while my mind wanted them to stay in bed. I knocked on his door, and after he told me to enter, I opened it. Not going in fully, I leaned against the doorframe and stared at him.

He looked so damn sexy with his beautiful brown skin against white sheets. Slumped down slightly, his comforter was just under his naked chest. As always, three gold chains were around his neck.

I enjoyed designing his home. His home theater and bedroom were admittedly my favorites. A true bachelor, his bedroom had recliners for relaxing, a large TV with an electric fireplace underneath, and the same mood lighting I used in my office. The fireplace was used mostly for ambiance and not heat, because he had a standing fan and his ceiling fan going to make sure the room stayed cool.

“You good?” he checked.

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“When you say you love me... what do you mean?” His mouth opened but nothing came out. He’d been very careful with his words today. “How do you, how do you love me, Jerry?”

He sat up in bed with a shake of his head. “I don’t think this is a conversation we should have.”

“Why not?”

“My answer has the power to change things between us, and I don’t believe either of us would be ready for that.”

Oh.

Okay.

For a normal person, that would have been enough.

Not me.

Not the glutton for punishment.

“I still want to know.”

Three seconds passed before he replied with, “Then come here.”

As I slowly made my way over to him, it felt like his eyes were piercing through me. This was my doing, so why was I

so nervous? At his bed, I got inside, being sure to keep enough distance between us so we wouldn't be able to touch each other.

“Do you love me like your sister?” The soft smile he teased me with as his head shook made my heart race. “As your best friend?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Oh, okay, why didn't you just say that?”

“Because that's not all.” Leaning forward, Jeremiah's hand wrapped around my neck, and the act had me on my hands and knees crawling closer to him. When we were sitting close enough for our skin to touch, he continued. “I love you as my soul mate. I love you as my mirror—the person who shows me the best and worst in me. I love you as my life partner, the one I'm supposed to do life forever with. I love you with my spirit.” My eyes closed and head hung as I fought to compose myself. “You make me better, and I feel like I was created to make you better too. I love you with my heart, my mind, my emotions... my actions. I love you like you're mine because you are.” His hand cupped my cheek as he told me, “Look at me.” I opened my watery eyes. “I love you like I'm in love with you, but I also love you selflessly enough to remain what you need me to be... just a friend.”

My eyes fluttered as I fought back tears. He was right. His answer *did* have the power to change things between us. He was right. I *wasn't* ready for it. Knowing that truth didn't stop me from straddling his lap and cupping his cheeks.

“Jerry,” I whispered against his lips as he held my waist. “Thank you for loving me in all the ways that you do. I love you always in all the ways. I'm in love with you too.”

“You don't have to do this, angel.”

“Yes, I do.” I took his hand into mine and kissed it. “You satisfy me so much as my friend that that's all I've ever wanted from you. For the last year, I've been in a haze. The man I thought I could trust, the one I was supposed to feel the safest with, violated me in a way that had me questioning

everything. I've never had to question you. You've always been the one I've felt safest with, the one I trust the most. The one who handles me with love, kindness, and respect. I've always loved you with my soul and it's attached to my heart. You're the perfect man for me, but I'm just so afraid to ruin what we have for something romantic. I lost Nova that way, and though I wouldn't dare compare you to him, I can't lose you too."

"You never will. I can promise you that, Chapel. You never have to worry about losing me. I got you forever, however. I'm yours."

He's mine.

That declaration, the simple choice of giving himself to me instead of telling me I was his, further confirmed Jeremiah was the one.

He was mine.

Mine to have, mine to keep.

I wouldn't have to worry about him giving himself to anyone else.

My eyes fluttered, and I kissed him, heart squeezing as the weight of having him as mine settled within it. Even without a title, Jeremiah's word was his bond. A bond that I was sure would never break.

His eyes began to glide across my body, causing soft whimpers of mirth to release from me. His eyes, as soft as a caress, looked my frame over, as if this was the very first time. I suppose this was the first time in a sense. We were in uncharted territory at this point, yet being with him in this way felt comfortable and familiar.

"You love me in all the ways?" I confirmed, sliding down the bed.

Jeremiah hovered over me, connecting his hands with mine and stretching them over my head. "All the ways."

Every place his eyes touched, heated. My eyes fluttered as I panted, feeling strangely vulnerable yet comfortable under

his lust-filled gaze.

“Then love me... love me in this way.” I lifted my hips, winding them against him softly.

“Mm,” he moaned, gripping my waist. “Don’t do that, baby. You’ll have me cumming before I’m even inside, and I can’t make a bad first impression.”

His confession made me giggle as it inflated my ego.

“You want me that much?” I whispered, spreading my legs as he made himself comfortable between them.

“I want you this much.” He wrapped my hand around his hard shaft, and my pussy immediately began to throb. Stroking his dick, I moaned in anticipation. He was long, thick, curved. Meaty.

“Damn,” I muttered, feeling my arousal grow with each stroke.

Jeremiah’s hands were all over me—with little haste, he took his time, no urgency. They were on my breasts, my neck, the pads of his fingers sliding down my stomach, palm caressing my pussy. I was panting, chest heaving as I tried not to disentangle just from his foreplay.

I moaned into his mouth as his palm continued to circle my clit. As my back arched and I felt myself on the verge of my climax, he pushed my panties to the side and entered me with his middle finger. My walls pulsed against him as I came. He slipped a second finger inside as he pushed the straps of my nightshirt down. The warmth of his mouth around my nipple was almost orgasmic within itself.

Jerry pulled his fingers out of me, licking away my essence. He undressed me before making his way down between my thighs. Each kiss he placed there had my body dropping deeper and deeper into his bed. A shudder passed through me the moment I felt his breath on my clit. I loved head, and I loved having my pussy played with. The feel of his tongue sliding between my folds lulled me into a state of euphoria.

The slow, tender way in which he made love to my pussy with his mouth filled me with angst and made me want more. No man had ever taken his time pleasing me the way Jeremiah was. He was completely in tune with my body—doing more of what made me move or moan. I was cumming against him, though it felt like it took him little effort to get me to that point, and he stayed there—continuing to eat my pussy as if I wasn't leaking into his mouth.

The more I squirmed, the more he held me in place, by my waist, my thighs, my neck. It wasn't until he made me cum a second time that he stopped his successful attempts to keep me from running.

His fingers were back in my opening as he slurped and licked my clit, free arm holding my trembling legs down on the bed. I felt that familiar warmth building up within me and it made me beg him for mercy. It didn't come. Not until I came. Only after that third time did Jeremiah allow me to push him away.

He made his way up my frame with a satisfied smirk lifting the corners of his mouth. When he wrapped my legs around him and they fell he laughed.

“Chapel...”

“It's your fault.”

The smile in his eyes was a sensuous flame. “How is it my fault?”

“You ate my pussy way too good, pooh. I'm weak.”

“You want a break?”

Before he could lift himself, I was gently taking his dick into my hand and putting it at my opening.

“No, I want you.”

Jeremiah placed my ankles on his shoulders, slowly stretching me with his length, inch by inch. His first stroke was a command, and my walls sucked him in, and happily obliged. The steady rock and roll of his hips against me was a dance I never wanted to end. I was so wet I thought I'd started

my period. Looking between us, I whimpered at the sight of my wetness coating him. Fluttering eyes locked in on his chains—how they dangled each time he entered and exited me. The slow, methodical pace of his strokes had me tightening against him as I moaned his name.

Kisses turned into his moans and groans as he buried his face in my neck. My nails dug into his back as I gasped for air and tried to remember how to breathe. As tingles crept up my spine, my toes curled, and I braced myself for what I was sure would be a hard climax.

My lips quivered as I told him, “I’m about to cum.”

“I know, Angel,” he moaned against my ear before sticking his tongue inside.

That act had my eyes rolling into the back of my head as I came underneath him.

“Shit, Jerry.” I pressed into his stomach, but that didn’t keep him from continuing his satisfying strokes. My pussy opened up for him more, allowing him to go deeper. “You’re so deep,” I moaned as my trembling legs fell from his shoulders.

“You want me to stop?” he asked breathlessly.

“No. Please don’t stop.”

“You can take it?” The half-grin he gave me before tugging his bottom lip between his teeth had me wanting to say yes to just about anything.

“I can take it.”

“That’s my good girl.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist, and I took it. I took every fucking stroke—all night—and by the time we did fall asleep, I was weak, full of his cum, and completely sated as he held me with a smile on my face.

The Next Wednesday Mixer

I WAS FEELING RISKY, AND BRAVE. BEING LOVED ON BY Jeremiah sparked something in me that felt dead for quite some time. With renewed confidence and security, I strutted over to the table where Allegra was seated and asked if she'd join me and Jeremiah. When she agreed, I went over to the bar and grabbed Nova as well. It was a rare occasion where he was by himself while Tiffany cackled with a few of her friends at the office, though I wasn't sure how long that would last.

"This is nice," Allegra said, pouring herself a glass of strawberry wine. "I've missed you guys."

"Same," Nova replied.

"I've missed this too. We have to find a way to get back to us," I said.

All eyes were on Jeremiah. I placed my palm on his thigh and he looked at me. I could tell by the hardness of his expression that he was doing this for me. My thumb massaged the space between his eyebrows, and he smiled.

"I've missed y'all too. As long as we can do this without drama, I'm cool with it," he chimed in.

"Yay!" I squealed, lifting my glass for a toast. "To... a new beginning. For all of us."

“To a new beginning,” they added, clinking their glasses against mine.

“So, what’s been up with y’all?” I asked, happy to finally have all of my people back. I wasn’t naïve enough to believe this would happen consistently, but I’d appreciate it every time it did. There was still an underlying issue between Allegra and me and Jeremiah and Nova, and until those issues were resolved, we would still need space.

“Why wasn’t I invited to the party?” Tiffany asked, tossing her arm over Nova’s shoulder and running her hand up and down his chest with a syrupy smile.

“I’m hanging with my crew, Tiff. I’ll come and find you a little later,” Nova said, carefully removing her arm from around him.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes. “If we’re getting married, I should have a relationship with your friends, babe.”

“No, you really shouldn’t,” I replied.

“Chap, please.” That was Allegra, and the fact that she shifted her attention to me instead of Tiffany was already starting to piss me off.

“Why don’t you go give your lady the validation she needs, brotha? So we won’t have no issues,” Jeremiah told Nova, whose eyes thinned into slits.

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do, Jeremiah.”

I knew shit was about to go left when Jeremiah laughed. “It was just a suggestion.”

“See, Chapel. This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Allegra said, sitting her glass on the table.

I scoffed and pointed at myself. “Me? How is this my fault? She came over here interrupting the flow, and it’s my fault?”

“It’s all your fault!” Allegra yelled, jumping up from her seat. “None of this would be happening if it wasn’t for you!”

“A’ight, that’s enough,” Jeremiah said as both he and Nova stood.

“You left us!” Tears began to fall from my best friend’s eyes, and I felt like they were drowning me. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. All I could do was sit there and let her yell at me. “You left me! I needed you. We *all* fucking needed you! And all you cared about was your damn self!” Sniffling, Allegra wiped her face, but the tears continued to rapidly pour. “I had a whole ass baby without you, Chap.” She chuckled as her hands trembled. Nova took her hand into his while Jeremiah wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “You broke my heart, and I’m *so* fucking angry with you. You didn’t even apologize for leaving me. A whole year.” Her voice cracked and I was no longer able to hold back my own tears. I tugged my bottom lip into my mouth as they fell. “You didn’t even apologize,” she whispered softly before snatching her purse off the back of her chair and storming off.

“Chap,” Nova called.

“Go. Make sure she’s okay,” I ordered. Looking up at Jerry, I told him, “You too.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“I’ll be fine. Just go and make sure she’s okay.”

I kept swallowing as I made a beeline for the bathroom. All eyes were on me. Some were round in fear, others sympathetic. I didn’t care about any of them. None of them. Except Allegra’s. My hand covered my mouth as I found it increasingly more difficult not to vomit. As soon as I made it into a stall, I dropped to my knees. Dry heaves led to rapidly pouring tears.

All this time, I blamed Nova for his selfish act of cheating, but me leaving was selfish too. It didn’t matter the reasoning, Allegra was right—I’d left her. I’d left them all. All I had to do was check-in, call her, or at least send a text. For almost a year straight, I said nothing to my best friend at all. I was so consumed by my pain that I caused hers as well.

Light knocks on the door caused my sobbing to turn into sniffles. I didn't bother asking who it was or telling them to go away.

"Angel." Closing my eyes, I only cried harder. Of course, it was Jeremiah. "Let me in."

"She's right, Jeremiah. I've been such a horrible friend. A horrible person. All I cared about was myself. I didn't think about how my absence would affect y'all. Well, I did, but I cared more about doing what was best for me."

"And that's your right. You had every right to leave. Could you have called or texted? Yes. But what's done is done. There's no point in you being upset about a decision you made to protect yourself over a year ago. Allegra has finally expressed to you how she feels. It's up to you to fix things now."

I reflected on his words for a while before grabbing some tissue and patting my face. Standing, I unlocked the door and stepped out, avoiding his eyes.

"Is she... still here?"

"Yeah, but she's leaving. Nova is going to drive her home and I'm going to trail them in his car so he can come back."

As much as I hated her meltdown, I was glad it led to them working together.

"Okay. Well, I guess I'll drive your car, so you won't have to come back up here with him or Uber."

"Are you going to stay and talk to her?"

"Not tonight. I think we both need some time to decompress. When I talk to her, I don't want my feelings in the way. I want to be able to focus fully on hers and what she has to say."

"A'ight," he agreed, pulling me into his arms.

I didn't want just a hug. I needed his lips on mine too. A slight tilt of my head was all the directive Jeremiah needed. He lowered himself to me, connecting his lips with mine.

“We will fix this, a’ight?” he declared, pushing my hair out of my face, and looking into my eyes.

I just nodded. I needed him to be right. I needed all of us to be all right.

T hree Days Later

ALLEGRA HAD BEEN WORKING FROM HOME. I TEXTED HER AND told her to let me know when it would be a good time for me to stop by and talk. It took her three days to respond, but when she did, I stopped what I was doing, grabbed her a bouquet of flowers, and headed to her place.

I was glad Allegra had finally been honest about how she was feeling, but I do hate the time and place it happened. It felt like we were finally getting back to our crew. For that to have been the space she used to express that, it made me wonder if she did so because being around the guys made her feel safe to do it. Even if that was the case, I wanted this to be a conversation we had alone.

Once I made it to her house, I told Jerry. He told me I could come over and decompress if I needed to. Hopefully, things would end on a good note and that wouldn't be necessary. After cutting off my car, I grabbed the flowers and headed to her door. It took her a little while to answer after I rang the doorbell, but when she did, I extended the flowers and used them to hide my face. Allegra chuckled as she accepted them. Instead of her grabbing just the flowers, she covered my hand with hers and used it to pull me close for a hug.

“I am so sorry, Lay. I've been waiting for you to talk to me about how you really feel, but I didn't know it was this deep. I

am so, so sorry.”

She held me tighter, and I relished in how good it felt to be this close to her again. When she released me, we went inside and got comfortable in the living room. I asked about my baby, and she told me that Ava was with her parents for the weekend.

“I’m sorry about my outburst,” Allegra said. “I was trying to work through how I was feeling but it wasn’t working. The whole time you were gone, I was worried about you but also upset. I know I had no right because you needed to do what was best for you, but I missed my best friend. Then you came back, and I was happy but still frustrated that you’d left for so long to begin with.”

“While I don’t apologize for leaving, I do accept responsibility for how I left causing you pain. That wasn’t my intention. I guess I didn’t take into consideration how much you’d miss me. I was drowning in my pain, and it was hard for me to think about the pain of others. But at the same time, I’m hurt by the fact that you didn’t tell me you were pregnant. I know I told everyone not to call me, but come on, Lay. That was something I needed to know.”

“You’re right. I should have told you. I knew if I did, you’d come back.”

“Immediately. So why didn’t you tell me?”

With a sigh, Allegra rubbed her hands up and down her thighs. “That’s an even longer story for another day. I can’t talk about that and us right now. But what I can say is that was from a place of anger, and that was wrong of me.”

I could respect that, so I didn’t press it. “Can you forgive me for not being here for you?”

“I can. Again, I’m sorry for unloading on you like that, especially in front of our employees. That was not the time or the place.”

“I’m just glad you finally got it out. Hopefully, we can move forward now.”

“I would like that,” she agreed softly before standing and giving me another hug.

When I left a year ago, I wasn't worried about my friendship with Allegra or Jeremiah for that matter. We had the kind of bond that I didn't think could be strained by time. What I had with Jeremiah couldn't. We didn't just pick up as if not even a second had passed, but we were even closer now. That clearly wasn't the case with Allegra, but I prayed now that everything was out in the open, we could rebuild on this new foundation.

The Next Day

IT SEEMED LIKE EVERY TIME I CAME HOME TO MEMPHIS, MY mom became Nova's personal cheerleader. I didn't know if it was because she genuinely wanted me to be with him, or if she thought that was what I wanted. If my daughter had spent a year trying to get over a man, the last thing I'd do was try to push her back into his arms. Her logic was different though. To her, because it took me so long to get to a place where I was able to even face him, it meant we belonged together.

There were a lot of things I'd take my mother's advice on. Love, however, was not on that list. Staying with a habitual cheater didn't make me respect my mother less. It did when I was younger, but as I matured, I realized she simply didn't value fidelity enough to leave. I used to hurt when she hurt. I'm not sure at what point she became numb, but I never did. The woman whose heart was broken when I was ten years old wouldn't dare tell me to stay with a man who cheated. That was the woman I wished I could talk to today.

She'd spent our entire family dinner asking me about how things were in Rose Valley Hills, just to try to convince me to give Nova another chance. I hated having those kinds of conversations around Tierney. My sister did not have the trauma of our parents cheating visible to her right now, and I

didn't want my choices in men and love to make her think that was okay.

I'd never been happier for dinner to be over as I was today. I flew out of the dining room, but before I could go to my bedroom, my father was calling my name. Him even being home for Sunday dinner was a miracle. I turned to face him, unable to hold in my smile from how much we looked alike. I got my cinnamon brown skin, bow-shaped lips, and slanted eyes from him... and that made me grateful he looked so much like his mother.

My mom's parents died before I was born, so all I had was my paternal grandparents. Grandpa died when I was five, and I missed him, but we didn't have enough time together on this earth for me to carry him in my heart and memories the way I did my grandmother. That lady was my whole world. I missed her every day of my life.

"Hey," I spoke, wondering what he wanted with me.

Between my dad's cheating and hectic schedule, we'd never had the close bond I wish we had. I was grateful to have a father who was in the home and was a provider, but he wasn't the best example of what a husband should be. To his credit, when he was present, he was a damn good father... so I gave him credit for that. My mother had never been the bitter type who tried to use me as a bargaining tool or leverage. No matter how he treated her, she never allowed me to hold that against him. She would always say, when I became an adult, I'd be able to form my own opinion of him as a man, husband, and father—and she was right.

"Are you leaving any time soon?"

My plan had been to stay until morning and just leave early enough to make it on time for work, but after dinner, I wanted to leave now.

"In about an hour, what's up?"

"Can we talk?"

Curiosity had me following behind my father to his study. It was reminiscent of Cliff's on *The Cosby Show*. My dad

would never admit it, but I think that show had a lot to do with him becoming a doctor seeing as he changed his major after watching the first season it had come out. My mom, ironically, had her law degree but had never put it to use.

He closed the door and pulled a seat back for me, before going to the opposite side of his desk. In true dad fashion, he took his time getting to the discussion, breathing deeply, and adjusting himself in his seat.

“Are you considering getting back with Nova?”

“I may have thought about it once or twice but it’s not going to happen. Why?”

“Are you sure it’s not going to happen?”

Hmm...

“What’s this about, Dad?”

“When Nova asked me for your hand in marriage, I didn’t want to give it to him. I always thought you’d be with Jeremiah if you were to date either of them. They both have some qualities about themselves that remind me of me, but the truth is, I don’t want you with a man like me. I don’t want you with a man who cheats.”

For a while, it took me some time to fully process his words. From him thinking I’d be with Jerry to him not wanting me with a man like him. That was a lot to digest at once.

“If you didn’t want me to marry Nova, why did you approve?”

“I didn’t think if I tried to give you relationship advice that you would listen.”

“Because of Mom?” He nodded. “So why do you do it? If you know you wouldn’t want your daughters to deal with that, why do you put our mother through it?”

“I’m not putting her through anything. She’s willingly staying.”

“Yes, because she loves you and thinks you’re worth it! Why don’t you love her enough to stop!”

Squeezing the bridge of his nose, he shook his head. “This is exactly why I’ve never tried to talk to you about this, Chap.”

Chin trembling, I sat back in my seat and pulled in deep breaths as my leg shook. Could I admit my luck with men would have been better if I had a better example? Yes, but I could also admit I had to make the choice of what I was willing to accept and tolerate. Regardless of my father’s influence, I was aware of what I wanted and needed to feel healthy, heard, and happy in a relationship. There was a part of me, though, that wished I’d had the kind of father to talk to me about love and men and I be grateful to God for his wisdom.

I’d never been a disrespectful child who yelled at my parents, but I also never felt comfortable having this conversation with my father until now. It wasn’t anger, more so passion. Passion and regard for my mother. For her honor. But did I have the right? If she tolerated this, who was I to demand more for her?

“Regardless of how you feel about your mother and I’s choices in our marriage, these are some things I want you to ask yourself before you start yours—no matter who it’s with.”

He pulled a small white pad from the top drawer of his desk and scribbled for a few minutes before handing it to me.

“Can you understand that?” he asked with a smile in his voice as I squinted to understand his chicken scratch. “If so, I don’t want you to actually read and ponder until you’re about to get into your next relationship. These answers should come to you quickly, and I don’t want you forcing it with anyone you have in mind right now.”

With a nod, I folded the list and put it in the back pocket of my jeans.

“I will. Thanks, Dad.”

As we stood, he told me, “I love you, Chapel.”

I’d never doubt that. I just... wished he treated my mother in a way that showed how much he loved her too.

One Week Later

INSTEAD OF GOING HOME TO MEMPHIS FOR THE WEEKEND, I stayed in Rose Valley Hills. The strangest thing happened yesterday. Jeremiah stopped by, with flowers, and asked to spend today with me. I didn't think much of it until I'd finished showering and doing my skincare routine. Now, as I prepared to get dressed, I wondered if this was a date. I had no idea what we were doing, so I didn't know how to dress. To be safe, I left my closet to call him and see if he'd tell me what he had up his sleeve.

“Yes, Chapel.”

I doubt if Jeremiah intended for his words to sound as seductive as they did, but at the sound of them, I wished he was saying that while he was inside of me.

“Um, hi. What exactly are we doing tonight? Is this a date?”

A few seconds passed before he chuckled. “It's a pre-date, I guess you can say. I want to talk to you about some things so I can plan the perfect date and discuss our next steps, if that's okay with you.”

Blushing, I hiked my shoulders as those fireflies fluttered in my stomach, trying their hardest to get to the man responsible for them.

“That sounds nice, so dinner tonight?”

“Yes, and dancing if you’d like.”

“Dancing, dancing, or going down to the country to line dance with your people?”

His laughter made me smile. “Whichever you’d prefer. I haven’t done any stomping in a while and you know I’m always down for that, but we can go to that club on Perkins or JD’s if you’d like to.”

Decisions, decisions. Jerry looked good enough to eat line dancing and trail riding. Trail riding and stomping. I never thought something as simple as dancing in dirt would ever be sexy and appealing to me, but it was. Maybe it was because it was him in raw form—shirtless, probably a little high or tipsy—enjoying himself and feeling light. Then again, if we went to the dance club tonight, I’d have him in my arms.

“I want us to actually have fun, so we can go down to the coun—”

“Ayyee, I’m heading to pick you up now.”

All I could do was laugh as I disconnected the call. Even though the plan was for him to pick my brain to put a good date night together for us for the future, I knew my buddy would want to spend the evening truly enjoying himself, and there was nothing better for a man like Jeremiah than some good music, moonshine, and movement.

I put my phone on the charger, then returned to my closet to get ready. With a clearer idea of what the night would have in store, I decided on light-wash ripped shorts, cowboy boots, and a white baby tee that I’d cover with a flannel shirt if it got cool. Jewelry was needed regardless of the attire, so I put on a herringbone chain and wrist and ankle bracelet before grabbing the brown leather cowboy hat that matched my boots from the top of my closet.

Only a few minutes passed before Jeremiah was ringing my doorbell. As soon as I let him in, I grinned. We’d unintentionally matched and he looked so handsome I couldn’t

keep my hands to myself. After a long, warm hug, I locked up, and we headed out.

We made small talk as we headed toward the beach. I got even more excited when he told me we'd be having dinner at The View. Outside of their perfect view of the beach, they had the best sushi and tacos in town.

There was a short wait, so instead of sitting, Jerry and I stood so we'd be able to see when the busser was done wiping off our table. His arms wrapped around me as he said, "You always look amazing, but there's something about you dressing down that's so sexy to me."

"Jeremiah," I cooed, curving my frame as he kissed my neck. "We're at the stage where we do PDA now?"

"Apparently so," he agreed before kissing my ear.

We hadn't really talked much about *us* since the night we made love. So far, whatever this unspoken thing was that was happening between us was fun. It felt like our usual vibe with more kissing and touching divided between the two of us. Jeremiah taking the time to have a pre-date let me know he did plan for things to progress between us, but I was grateful for his patience and the fact that we were on the same page about not getting into a relationship any time soon.

I still had some work to do on myself before I committed to anyone else. There was also a part of me that was unsure about taking things to the next level with Jeremiah. I didn't think he was capable of doing something to hurt me, but I'd thought the same thing about Nova too. And even if he didn't cheat, there were other reasons a relationship didn't work. I'd meant it when I said I didn't want to ruin what we had. Nova was a loss I could get over with time, but Jeremiah? Losing him would permanently shatter me. He wasn't just my friend, he was a part of literally every part of me, every part of my life, and now that we'd had sex... that only pulled us closer to one another.

There was also the fact that Jeremiah and Nova were once best friends. Hell, we all were. Would I be breaking some kind of code if I dated Jeremiah?

It was too much to even think about.

“Hey,” Jeremiah called, turning me in his arms. “Where’d you go?”

I was about to ask what he was referring to, but then I noticed my hand was around my neck—my telltale sign of holding something in.

“Do you think this is a good idea, pooh? I mean... You and Nova were once best friends. Should we be considering a relationship in the future?”

“Nova lost you because he didn’t value what he had with you enough to put in the work. And because of what he did to you, he lost me too. If I have to choose between being his friend or your man, he’ll lose... every time.”

He was always doing that—saying the right thing. And it was always... so sincere. My hands slid down his chest as I mustered up the courage to do what we’d come here to do—talk about him and I becoming we.

As we headed toward our now clear table, my eyes landed on Tiffany, and they rolled. She was never hard to spot. Her favorite color to wear was green, and she had it on at least four days out of the week. Long forty-inch weave, bone straight, was her signature. And her nails were always painted white.

Though I desired to simply pass them and pretend they weren’t even here, I knew that wouldn’t be possible when Nova grabbed my wrist and stood. He held one hand while Jerry held the other. Unintentionally, it became a physical representation of the way my heart felt—caught between the two, risking being ripped in half. Jeremiah turned, with a scowl.

“Y’all really doing this?” Nova asked, releasing my wrist.

I was surprised Tiffany hadn’t spoken up yet. She watched on with a smug grin, gaining pleasure at the spectacle of our unintentional love triangle.

“Doing what?” was what I asked while Jeremiah said...

“What we do is none of your concern.”

Nova's expression was stony as he placed a hand on his abdomen. "How long are you going to punish me, bruh? I lost her. You think I haven't suffered enough? You want me to lose you too?"

His declaration looked to have hit Jeremiah in a place he wasn't prepared to handle. Ignoring Nova's question, he continued to our table.

"I'll um... I'll talk to him, okay?" I offered, giving Nova's arm a soft squeeze.

"Aye," Nova called out to me. I didn't want to look back, but I stopped. "That's ya man now?"

Slowly, I turned to face him. "No, he's not." *Not yet.*

"Then who is he to you?"

"What he's always been, Nova. He's my lover. In every way. Jerry has always been love to me and for me, and it's just... starting to feel different now." Pausing, I took a step in his direction. "Would that be okay with you?"

"I don't really have room to object do I?" With a huff, he looked down at Tiffany.

"Still. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. If you wouldn't be okay with us dating..." His eyes closed and head shook. "We're not dating now. I'm not ready yet. But... for future reference."

When he opened his eyes, Nova released a hard breath and licked the corner of his mouth.

"I want you to be loved the way you deserve. If Jeremiah can do that... I'm not going to stop it."

Unable to resist, I stepped closer and hugged him. "Thank you," I whispered before releasing him.

I don't know how I would have reacted if he said he didn't want us to date, but I'm glad that wasn't the case. Having Nova's permission made this a little easier, but my concerns were still at the forefront of my mind and heart. I didn't want to lose my Jerry. He was my haven against the troubles of this world. Nothing would *ever* change that.

A Few Hours Later

ALL THE LADIES THAT WERE AROUND ME SCREAMED JUST AS loud as I did while recording. Jeremiah and his cousin Brady had led a few other men in a zydeco stomp, and they were having the time of their lives. With a jar of moonshine in his hand and a blunt between his lips, Jeremiah's feet had dirt and dust swirling all around them.

An incoming call prematurely ended my recording but when I saw who it was, I didn't mind. I'd told both Allegra and Nova where we were going after dinner in case they wanted to come. After what happened at The View, I felt getting Jeremiah and Nova in the same space was the right thing to do. I could tell Nova missed his best friend and Jeremiah was holding his father's actions against his best friend. I wanted them to be able to work out their issues, no matter what happened between us as a crew.

"Hello?"

"Where you at?"

"Follow the dust. I'm in the front."

"Okay!" she agreed happily before disconnecting the call.

I went back to where I was standing originally, and not too long after, Allegra and Nova showed up. He told me he wasn't

going to bring Tiffany, and I was glad I didn't have to ask him not to do that.

"Hey, boo," I greeted, hugging Lay.

"Hey, boo. Have y'all been here long?"

"Maybe like an hour."

"I wish we could have gotten here sooner for the trail ride," Allegra said.

"We can come back next weekend," I offered, just as the song ended.

When Jeremiah made his way over to us, he took his shirt off my shoulder and used it to wipe the sweat that had accumulated on his face. He hugged Allegra and tossed Nova a nod before extending his moonshine to him. It was faint, but a smile lifted the corners of Nova's lips as he accepted.

That was a start.

We led them over to where we were sitting on lawn chairs away from the dirt. After Jeremiah took his seat on the low-sitting lawn chair, he pulled me down to his lap. Allegra's eyes widened as I wrapped my arms around his neck. She sat up in her seat and looked over at Nova as Jeremiah gripped my thigh. He did that often. He said my thighs were *immaculate*. I think that's why I was anxious to have him between them again.

"Um, is this the twilight zone? Am I missing something?"

Her serious expression caused us all to laugh.

"They aren't dating but he's her lover," Nova answered, shooting me a wink.

"Her lover?" Allegra repeated, taking the blunt from Jerry's hand. "Y'all fucked and you ain't tell me?" She looked over at Nova. "And how are you okay with this?"

"A person can be your lover and it have nothing to do with sex," I replied. Though we had made love, that wasn't something I wanted to talk about in front of Nova. True enough, I'd had to see him with Tiffany for weeks on end, but

still. I wasn't that malicious. It was awkward enough even sitting on Jeremiah's lap in front of him, but I wouldn't deny him just to placate Nova. "Jeremiah is the lover of my soul. Is that okay with you, Lay?"

"Is that okay with you?" she asked Nova.

Nova shrugged as he slumped down further in his seat. "I'm man enough to admit I fumbled Chap. I wasn't ready for a serious relationship or marriage. I fucked up my chance with her. If Jeremiah has one, I'm not going to stand in the way of that. I want them both to be happy. If that's with each other... I'll adjust."

"Are you ready for marriage now?" I asked, hoping he intended to keep the promise he'd made me.

"Look, this ain't about me, aight? This is about us. So either we drinking or I'm leaving."

As much as I wanted to call him out on his deflecting, I let it ride. He was right. I'd called them here so we could try to restore our bond. Even if he and Jeremiah didn't talk among themselves, just sharing their drink and being in each other's space without the tension was progress, and I was truly grateful for it.

Time passed, and we genuinely enjoyed ourselves. One jar of moonshine turned into two, and before I knew it, we were all good and drunk. A brief argument between Jeremiah and Nova turned into them both apologizing. Then, they started talking and enjoying themselves like no amount of time had passed. It always tickled me how easy it was for men to become friends and resolve their issues. By the time we'd decided to go home, they were making plans to work out together in the morning.

Nova and Jeremiah were sober enough to drive, and thankfully, Allegra had taken an Uber. Since I was going home with Jeremiah, Nova offered to take Allegra home and she agreed. It felt like old times, except, I would have been going home with Nova and Jerry would have been taking Allegra home. Either way, I was just glad we'd been able to unwind and have a great time.

It took us about forty-five minutes to get to Jeremiah's place, and I slept the entire drive. After my nap, I'd gone from drunk to a happy, hungry tipsy. Nova had called to let Jerry know he'd dropped Allegra off and made it home himself, so I was able to rest my mind and not have to worry about either of them.

I found myself following Jerry into his bathroom instead of the guest bathroom I usually occupied to shower. Truth was, I was horny, and far too much time had passed since the last time I'd had Jeremiah inside of me. Even though Jeremiah hadn't said anything about my comment about him being the lover of my soul, I realized what type of time he was on when I tried to join him in the bathroom, and he stopped me.

"Wha—?" I tried to drop his arm since he was using it as a block against the door, but he didn't budge. "Let me in," I demanded with a pout.

"Why?"

"So we can shower."

"Go shower in your bathroom."

"I want to shower with you." My foot stomped softly. I wasn't spoiled, by any means, with anyone... except my Jerry. There weren't too many instances where he hadn't let me have my way. I didn't suspect me wanting to have my way with him to be the time that changed.

"For what?"

"I want you."

He eyed me skeptically, tongue rolling across his cheek.

"I thought I was just the lover of your soul?"

I knew it. Earlier at the restaurant he told Nova what we did was none of his concern. I swear this man was something else. He didn't want anyone questioning us, but apparently, he didn't want me downplaying what we were doing either.

"You're the lover of my pussy too."

"Then why didn't you tell Lay that?"

My chin lowered almost to my chest in defeat.

“I didn’t want to throw too much on them at once. This is a big enough adjustment for us. I didn’t want to overwhelm them too.” My hand slid down his chest and I cupped his hardening dick. “Please, pooh. I’ll beg for this dick.”

And seeing as it was the best one I’d ever had, there was absolutely no shame in my game.

His hand wrapped around my neck, and he tilted my head, pulling me closer to him. Without my heels, there was a glaring height difference between us that had me moaning as I looked up at him.

“You giving this pussy to somebody else?”

“Nobody, I swear.”

Jeremiah licked his lips before lowering himself and allowing his tongue to slither its way into my mouth. He wrapped my legs around his waist and carried me into the bathroom. After placing me on top of the sink, he cut on the shower. As anxious as I was to have him inside of me, I was about to break a world record for the quickest shower.

We washed swiftly before toppling onto his bed with wet skin.

“Pooh,” I called, heart racing as he used my ankle to pull me to the middle of the bed.

There was a hunger in his eyes that alarmed me. Jeremiah ignored me as he spread my legs and latched on to my clit. The licking and sucking combination he did rivaled the rose vibrator. So much so I began to shake uncontrollably, battling between using his head to keep him close and pushing him away. He waited until I came to lower himself to my opening, fucking me with his tongue. Jeremiah folded me and tilted my hips, dipping his tongue in and out of my pussy until I coated it with my cum.

His fingers made their way inside as he kissed up my body, nibbling on each of my nipples and licking them as I moaned his name.

“Oh my God,” I purred, circling my hips as his thumb circled my clit.

“When someone asks you if I’m in this pussy, it better leak just at the *thought* of me. I don’t give a fuck *who* it is. You *and* this pussy belong to me.”

“Yes, Jeremiah,” I agreed before releasing a sizzling breath. Just when I was about to cum, he pulled his fingers out of me. Before I could protest, Jeremiah had me flipped over and on my knees.

His medium-paced strokes left me breathless. Jeremiah’s arm rested on the small of my back. As he hardened his movements, he squeezed my ass cheek before slapping and rubbing it. A moan escaped me as the top of my body melted into the bed. The sound of my cheeks smacking against his hard frame permeated the room.

Gripping the sheets, I closed my eyes as my mouth hung open. My pussy leaked against him as I began to fuck him back.

“Mhm,” he moaned, gripping my waist. “You care more about that nigga feelings than mine?”

With a handful of my hair, Jeremiah slowed his strokes, making sure I felt every inch.

I could only hum as my toes curled. “Jerry...”

“Answer me,” he gritted, smacking my ass.

“No!” I yelped.

“I don’t care if you want to spare his feelings or anyone else. When it comes to me, to us...” He lifted me by my hair so that my back was on his chest. Jeremiah’s hand wrapped around my neck as he filled me with strokes that touched my spot each time he entered me. “You don’t shrink or dim what we got going, and you for damn sure don’t hide it.” With his fingers circling my clit, he returned to his medium pace, moaning when the sound of my wetness increased. “Do you understand me, Chapel?”

“Yessss,” I slurred.

As soon as he released me, I gushed all over him.

His arm wrapped back around me and kept me from falling into the bed. Jeremiah held me up until my tremors subsided. When they did, he laid me flat on my back and made his way back inside me. Our lips connected, and Jeremiah's tongue swirled around mine with the same slow, nasty pace of his dick inside me... and I've loved every second of it.

For the rest of the night, he taught me a lesson—one that would ensure I never downplayed the act of giving myself to him with anyone else again.

The Next Morning

I WALKED INTO MY OFFICE ON A CLOUD. NOT ONLY HAD I spent the evening with my crew, and it almost felt like old times, but having Jeremiah inside of me before falling asleep in his arms was the perfect combination for an amazing night of sleep. My smile wavered slightly when I saw Allegra pacing in my office. For her to be anxious this early in the morning, nothing good could come from that.

“Hey, everything okay?” I asked, allowing the door to automatically shut behind me.

When Allegra looked up, I saw the redness in her eyes.

“Lay...”

“We need to talk.”

Instead of sitting at my desk, I headed over in her direction. She put space between us, and that alarmed me more.

“Is this business or personal?”

“Personal.”

“Okay, what is it?”

Allegra pulled in a deep breath. She squeezed her neck and took another step back. “I never wanted this to come out, but I

can't hide it anymore. Last night was great and if we're going to have a chance at getting our friendship back on track, I have to be completely honest."

"Honest about what, Allegra?"

"Have a seat."

Okay. Now she was really scaring me. If she believed whatever she had to say would make me weak at the knees, did I really want to know?

Behind my desk, I took a seat and tried to mentally prepare for whatever she had to say. I couldn't think of anything worth this level of dramatics. Allegra stood in front of my desk, and as a tear slipped down her cheek, she spoke.

"A month after you left, I couldn't ignore how lonely I was anymore. The guys weren't on speaking terms and hanging out with them one on one wasn't the same, so when I lost you, I lost both of them, too." *Oh, hell. Are we back on this again?* "I started dating and this guy that I'd really started to like stood me up. I was pissed and drinking and... Nova showed up." She sniffled. My heart stopped. "We started talking about how different things were. How angry we were that you'd left the way you did. I expressed my hurt and he wanted to make sure I had a good time, so we went back to my place and started drinking all over again."

Oh, God.

"Allegra..."

"Please." She lifted her hands and released a shaky breath. "I need to get this out." Nodding, I closed my eyes and let her continue. "I drank a lot, Chap. More than I had in a really long time. We had sex and I honestly was too drunk to remember most of it. Ava... she's my memory of that night." My eyes popped open. "Nova is her father."

I felt like *The Bride on Kill Bill* when that alarm started ringing and red lights began to blink. It had already taken a significant amount of self-control to not knock Tiffany's teeth out of her mouth every time I saw her but this... this was different.

This was personal.

She wasn't a random woman I barely knew who had carried on with my man.

She was my best fucking friend that had a baby with him.

Did he know?

Chuckling, I began to rock in my seat.

“All this time.” My head shook as my heart raced. “All this time you've been giving me hell about leaving you meanwhile you've been hiding *this*?”

“Chapel...”

“You had Nova's baby and you've looked me in my face every fucking day and didn't think I needed to know?”

“I'm sorry, I—”

I couldn't stop myself. All the hurt, pain, betrayal... it came out. Like wind, I was hopping over my desk and tackling her. My fists repeatedly connected with her face as she screamed for help, but I didn't care. I couldn't care. I couldn't stop.

I was tired.

Tired of turning the other cheek.

Tired of those I love betraying me.

Tired of people getting far more grace than they deserve.

Tears began to blur my eyes so badly I could hardly see. Strong arms lifted me off her body. I didn't know who it was. It was all a blur. Why couldn't this all be a dream?

“What the fuck is going on?” Jeremiah asked, rushing into my office.

I turned, eyes widening at the sight of Nova. “Did you know!” I yelled, elbowing him in his chin. “You slept with my best friend, Nova! How could you?” I tried to hit him again, but this time, he was prepared to block it. “Did you know Ava is your fucking baby!”

“What?” He and Jeremiah yelled simultaneously.

“That’s my child, and you’ve kept her from me all this time?” Nova asked, jerking a disoriented Allegra up by her arm.

“What’s going on?” Tiffany asked, pressing her way between Jeremiah and Nova.

Something snapped inside of me. Before I could stop myself, I was punching her in her eye. By the time Jeremiah had gotten me off Tiffany, I’d hit her three more times.

“All y’all need to get the fuck up outta here!” I yelled as Jeremiah carried me out. “I want you all gone! Get out!”

As I sobbed, Jeremiah quickened his pace. I didn’t care who saw me. I didn’t care what they said. How they felt. I didn’t have it in me to be strong anymore. My whole world had shifted on its axis yet again, and yet again, Nova Cane was at the center of it.

With my best friend.

Just the thought had my cries growing louder as Jeremiah carried me to the elevator. He hit the emergency button as he placed me on my feet, but I slid down the wall.

“I’m not taking you to the first level until you compose yourself,” he said, and I appreciated his concern.

I’m not sure how long we stayed in the elevator as I cried, but Jeremiah didn’t turn the emergency button off until I was all cried out. He pulled me to my feet and wiped my tears before slathering my face with kisses. When the elevator dinged, he pulled me into his chest and covered my face with his arm. He was my guide, getting me safely outside and into his car without anyone else seeing me.

I didn’t speak.

Not on the ride. Not when we got back to his place. Not for hours. The sun had gone down when Jeremiah decided he couldn’t take the silence anymore.

“Promise me that you won’t let this make you run away again,” he said, hovering over me as I lay in bed.

I couldn't promise him that. Not right now anyway. If I ran again, it wouldn't be out of pain; it would be to avoid causing anyone else pain.

"Angel... I'll lock you up here if I have to. I'm not letting you leave me again."

That made me smile, but tears soon followed. When I sniffled, he made his way inside the bed and cuddled up behind me.

"I didn't come home for this, Jerry."

"I know, baby."

"How could they not tell me?"

"When would they have had the time? Things have been so off between all of us." My body stiffened against him, and he held me tighter to ensure I wouldn't leave. "They both were wrong, and I'm not denying that, but Lay was even more wrong for not telling Nova about his child."

"Have you talked to either of them?"

"Nova. He wanted me to tell you that he didn't know about the baby and would not have kept something like that from you. He did admit to telling Allegra not to tell you they had sex when you first came back on the off chance you were willing to give him another chance. I don't think that's why she didn't tell you; I think she had her own reasons, the biggest one being she didn't want Nova to know."

"I agree. It wouldn't have taken a rocket scientist to figure out he was the father based on the timing of when everything happened."

"He said she went into labor a month earlier than expected and he did ask her if the baby was his when she first gave birth and she said no, so he let it go."

"Of course, he did." I turned in his arms and looked into his eyes. "Am I a hypocrite?"

When he didn't respond right away, I figured it was because he was going to say yes. I wouldn't have blamed him. Here I was, lying in bed with him, like he wasn't Nova's best

friend a year ago. True enough, their friendship was over when things turned physical between us, but still. Was what Allegra and Nova did that much different from Jeremiah and me? They had a baby, yes, and they hid it from me... but other than the timing... was it that much different?

“What do you mean?”

“They had sex. We have too. I—I hit her, Jeremiah. I think I may have overreacted.”

His head flinched as he sucked his teeth.

“The situations are different. What they did happened one month after you left. At that point, you and Allegra were still best friends. She went on to hide a pregnancy from you. If they weren’t ashamed of what they’d done, they wouldn’t have agreed to hide it.” That was true. “What you and I share...” He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. “That’s pure love.” Our hands remained locked. “Nova and I didn’t have a personal relationship when this started, and we let them know upfront. You even went as far as to gain their approval before we got into a relationship. Out of respect, we didn’t let them know things have turned physical because you wanted to spare Nova’s feelings, when all this time, he’s been hiding the fact that he slept with your best friend.”

I rolled over onto my back as he continued. “Do I think it was wrong to get so angry that you lost control of yourself? In your place of business? Yes. But you’re human. A human that has dealt with blow after blow from people you love and trust. You snapped. It happens. But you and I... we’re nothing like them, Angel, and I won’t allow you to reduce what we have and put it on the same level as a drunken one-night stand.”

I heard what he was saying, but I wasn’t sure I agreed. I mean, I knew I was wrong. Fighting was beneath me. There was a time when I took great pride in my ability to crush people with only my words. The longer I thought over what they’d done, the fewer words seemed to be able to do me justice.

Did Allegra and Tiffany deserve to get their asses beat? Absolutely. But now, I hadn’t just stained my character, but I’d

done so in our place of business. My anger had dug a hole that I wasn't sure I'd be able to climb out of. At least with Jerry by my side, I knew I'd be able to try.

The Next Morning

I'D SPENT ALL MORNING LOOKING FOR TRACES OF NOVA IN THE pictures of Ava that I'd taken since my return. She was her mother's twin, and I'm sure Allegra was glad about that. There were so many things that I wanted to ask Allegra, but I couldn't pull myself to call her. I knew eventually that we'd have to face each other. Even with me firing them all, they were protected by our bylaws. If I were to fire them without just cause, I'd have to offer up a hefty severance package along with a glowing recommendation.

Now that I'd calmed down some, guilt was sitting even heavier on my heart. My anger had potentially destroyed my reputation. How could I face my employees after this? What would our clients say if they found out? There was no doubt in my mind that there were people who wished I'd never come back.

My presence had surely disrupted the flow and peace at WCSF, no matter how much that wasn't my intention. I could justify my behavior and excuse it by saying no one truly knows how a bear will react until it's poked but that wasn't good enough. I had far more to lose than a friend in that moment. I wasn't thinking about being arrested or potential clients that could have been on our floor.

The doorbell rang, pulling me out of my thoughts. I stared at the wall as if I could see who was at the door through it. When it rang again, I stood and went to go let whoever it was inside. At the sight of Nova, my eyes rolled. I tried to shut the door in his face, but he used his hand to stop me. Stepping inside, he closed the door behind himself and walked further into my home.

“I want you to leave,” I told him, not bothering to move.

The whole point of me not going to work was to avoid them and conversations about them. Something told me Nova would still go to work, even with me firing them all, and by the way he was dressed I could tell that’s where he was headed.

“Come sit down so we can talk,” he commanded, unbuttoning his suit jacket.

I crossed my arms over my chest, tilted my head, and crossed my ankles. If he wanted to talk, he could do so on his way out. Forgiving him for Tiffany was one thing; sleeping with my best friend was on a whole other level.

“I have nothing to say to you.”

Nova’s head bobbed as he sat on my sectional. “Okay, then come sit down so I can talk while you listen.”

The audacity.

“Get the fuck out of my home, Nova. *Now.*”

“It was a mistake, Chapel.”

“Aren’t you tired of making those? And cheating isn’t a mistake. It’s a choice. You chose to cheat with Tiffany, then you chose to cheat on her with Allegra. Then you chose to ask her to keep that secret from me. You’ve been making a hell of a lot of bad choices lately, Nova.”

His head hung as he chuckled. “I won’t argue with that.”

With a huff, I ran my fingers through my hair. God. I hated how pitiful he could look at times. Pitiful and sincere. Sincere and apologetic. But I was tired of apologies. I needed right behavior. Clearly, I wouldn’t be able to get that from Nova.

“She had my baby, Chap, and she didn’t tell me.”

I may not have wanted to feel bad for him, but what had been done to him was wrong. “I’m sorry she kept that from you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“I was... so mad at you.” That piqued my interest. Slowly, I made my way into the living room as he continued. “I hated that you’d taken away my ability to make things right with you. When I told you, I wasn’t trying to embarrass you. I genuinely thought I was doing the right thing by coming clean before we said our vows. Then you left and I realized just how much I loved you. How much of my life you’d embedded yourself in.”

I sat next to him as he continued. “So when I saw Lay at the bar, it felt therapeutic for us to be able to talk about you with someone who would understand. Jerry didn’t give a damn how either of us felt. All he cared about was you. It was nice hearing someone say they were upset at you for leaving because I was too. And maybe I didn’t have a right, but I was. I wanted the chance to do right by you and you took that from me, so I drank.” Nova chuckled as he sat up. His legs spread and hands dangled between them. “A lot. I won’t lie and say I didn’t know what I was doing because I did, for the most part. I don’t remember the whole thing and I don’t remember not wearing a condom, but I do remember the start of us having sex. I regretted that shit immediately. Allegra is beautiful, but I’ve never been attracted to her in that way. It was a one-time thing whether you believe that or not. I have no romantic desire to be with her, Chapel, I swear.”

“I’m not the one you need to convince; your fiancée is.”

“I broke up with Tiffany.”

Wasn’t expecting that. “What? Why?”

He squeezed the back of his neck. “You were right; I was staying with her as punishment for what I did to you. I told you I didn’t love her and she’s not the kind of woman I want to be with for the rest of my life. Finding out about my child, and especially it being a daughter, makes me want to do better

by the women in my life. I don't want her growing up and choosing a man like me."

He sounded like my father, and for Ava's sake, I was glad Nova was coming to this conclusion while she was still so young. Nova had more than enough time to get his shit together before she'd be able to pick up on his actions, motives, and the way he treated women.

"It's good that you want to be a good example for her. Have you... talked to Allegra yet?"

"Yeah. I talked to her yesterday. I'm going to see Ava this evening."

I remained silent. Envy was creeping in. I was supposed to be the woman he married and gave babies, not Tiffany or Allegra. That was my pride. My ego. My heart knew Nova and I were better off with other people. For me, that person was Jeremiah. Still, I couldn't deny the hurt I felt knowing my best friend had my ex's baby.

I hated feeling that. I hated how it caused anger to boil inside of me. My eyes blinked rapidly. Weren't they tired of crying over this man already?

"About work," I said, pausing to clear my throat of the emotion piling up, making it hard to speak. "I don't want to see you and Allegra, but I can't deny you all are just as much the heart of WCSF as I am. If you want to continue to work there, you can, but you'll need to work on the same floor as your associates. I need time to process this, and I don't know how long it will take. Regardless, I'm not putting myself in the position to have to see either of you every day."

"That's fair. I can work from home more too for a while. If you feel like you'll never truly be comfortable with me working there, I'll leave and start my own financial firm. Whatever is best for you."

I nodded, unsure what to say to that. It didn't feel right to thank him for his kindness when we were in this mess because of him.

"What about Tiffany?" he continued.

“She’s not valuable enough for me to keep her on. I don’t want her to come back. Once she signs off on her severance package, I’ll have you send her payment and draw up her letter of recommendation.”

“I’ll uh... I’ll take care of the payment personally. Don’t worry about taking it out of the company account.”

With a nod, I stood. “Can you go now?”

Finally, he stood and made his way over to the door. While there, he asked, “Do you think you’ll ever feel comfortable with me again? I meant it when I said I wanted you back as my friend.”

“Nova, being your friend is not even the last thing on my mind right now. I think you need to focus on being a father more than anything else at the moment.”

“I could accept losing you to Jeremiah because he’s better for you, but the thought of losing you because of my actions...” His phone vibrated and I was glad for the distraction. “This is the office. I gotta go.”

Nova made a quick exit, leaving me with more to think about than was in my head and heart before he arrived. I was proud of myself for doing what was best for my business and all parties involved instead of being completely selfish and seeing to my own needs.

Not being on the same floor as him and Allegra would probably be the only way I could handle working with them still. Hopefully, Allegra would agree. If she didn’t, I had no problem reaching out to [Lei Fifer](#) and seeing if she’d mind being her replacement.

Her replacement.

I never thought I’d get to this point with Allegra.

No matter what issues we’ve had in the past, the thought of her sleeping with Nova and having his baby would have always been foreign to me. Even if I found a way to justify it and say they were drunk, there had to have been a deep seed of desire within both of them to take it there. Men may have slept with whoever they could, but women slept with who they

wanted. Nova could say he'd never thought of her in that way, but I knew my girl. She wouldn't have had sex with Nova unless she really wanted to...

T hat Evening

“IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN BRING YOU, BABY?”

“All I need is you.”

“Then that’s what you’ll have. I’ll see you soon.”

My smile was wide at the sound of Jeremiah’s voice, but it wavered when I got an incoming call from Allegra. I knew I wouldn’t be able to avoid talking to her, so I ended my call with Jeremiah since he was on his way and answered. It was heartbreaking knowing all the progress we’d made to get our crew back together had been destroyed, but I was glad the truth was out. Nova deserved the truth, and Ava deserved to have her father in her life. That was the only thing that mattered to me right now.

“Hello?” I answered, turning on my side. The bulk of my day had been spent in bed. I’d only eaten breakfast and was okay with that. I wouldn’t say finding out their truth had taken my appetite away. Overall, I just hated how things had been lately for all of us.

“Hi. Can we talk?”

I sat up and pulled a pillow into my chest, holding it up with my knees.

“Yeah.” I released a shaky breath. “I need to apologize to you. I should not have put my hands on you, Lay. That wasn’t even just about you. That was my anger toward you, Nova, Tiffany, and this entire situation. It wasn’t fair of me to take that out on you. I’m so sorry.”

She chuckled softly before sniffing. “I deserved that, I can’t lie. What I did was foul. There’s no excuse for it. I slept with him and gave you hell when you came back. I can take responsibility for that. I guess... I just thought it was safer telling you now because of what’s going on with you and Jerry.”

“I can understand that, but they aren’t the same. You weren’t with Jerry for years. You weren’t engaged to him. He didn’t cheat on you one month ago. I didn’t sleep with Jerry out of spite because I was mad at you for leaving. He didn’t hurt you to your core, Lay. You, in essence, slept with my enemy at the time.”

“I know, I know.” She sighed. “I’m sorry, Chap. I was wrong; we were wrong. Things never should have gone that far, and I should have told you sooner.”

I appreciated her apology and wanted to waste no more time on it. It seems the last year of my life revolved around Nova. I didn’t want another day to be consumed by either of them.

“Jeremiah let me know you’re taking the week off and that he’s acting as managing partner on your behalf,” she continued.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“I’m cool with working on the same floor as my associates. I really didn’t want to leave, so I’m glad you reconsidered firing us. I promise I’ll keep my distance at the office, but if you ever miss me and want to try to work through this, I’m down for that too.”

I couldn’t make her any promises that I would ever get to that point. Up until her truth, I was willing to do just about anything to get our crew back together. Now, I wasn’t sure if

that was healthy anymore. We've been friends since we were teenagers. That history didn't mean they needed to be in my future. We were changing as individuals, and quite frankly, a lot of lines were being crossed that shouldn't have been.

More than anything, I just wanted to be healthy, happy, and healed. If I was healed with them in my life professionally only, I'd be okay with that. I didn't have to have them to feel whole and I didn't have to get even to feel justified. We'd all made mistakes at this point. I just wanted to be happy and free.

"I'll let you know," was all I could think of just to get her off the phone.

Once the call was over, I checked my email to see if Nova had reached out about Tiffany's severance pay. He had reached out, but it was to let me know he hadn't gotten a forwarded copy of her severance contract. Since Jeremiah was temporarily working on my behalf, he was supposed to take care of that. I decided to take a quick shower and talk to him about it when he arrived, which ended up being about thirty minutes later.

I could tell by his solemn expression that he wasn't coming with good news. He headed straight for my alcohol collection and poured us both a shot of the whiskey he'd purchased from Jax at The Tippy Grill.

"Uh oh. Is it that bad?"

"Yeah, it is." Jeremiah waited until we were seated at the island to say, "Tiffany didn't sign her severance contract today, so I didn't forward the package to Nova."

"Did she say why? Don't tell me she's asking for more money."

"She went to Black to Back this afternoon and did an interview."

Oh shit. Black to Back was the biggest Black-owned radio station in the South, and they were nationally syndicated, listened to on every coast. The Rose Valley Hills station was extremely popular because they made their episodes available via podcast and live stream.

“How much damage did she do?”

“It’s hard to say yet, but she played the victim card. She made it seem like you attacked her for no reason and that you and Nova weren’t together when they started dating. She threw him under the bus too, telling them he cheated on her and got another woman pregnant. They were joking about how she did you a favor by taking him off your hands.”

“I don’t care about her lying; I just don’t want this to negatively affect the company. People look for any reason to not support Black-owned companies. We are just now starting to branch out to other cities. I don’t need this causing people to look at us as anything less than the professionals we are.”

“Well, there are a couple of ways we can handle this. You can go on the show and tell the truth, you can ignore it and let the chips fall where they may, or we can start damage control by hiring a PR company to fix what the fight and her interview may have fucked up.”

I took a small sip of the whiskey, savoring its peppery burn as I considered my options.

“I’m going to enjoy this drink with my favorite person in the world, fix us dinner, and talk to you about anything other than work. Then I’ll make up my mind in the morning.”

The smile he gave me was filled with pride, and I couldn’t help but mirror it.

“That sounds good to me. I’m here for you forever, however. Whatever you want to do, I got you.”

Every time Jeremiah said that, it made me feel invincible. The past year of my life was filled with suffering—much of which was my own doing. A quote that changed my perspective was, we suffer far more in our heads than we do in our realities. Even with my fight-or-flight response being to run, I could never run away from my thoughts.

I turned my back on God, seeing no reason for my suffering. Because there had to be a grand reason or lesson for it, right? No way would I have gone through what I went through just for the hell of it. In my quest for a why, I found

none. In its place, I gave birth to a need for revenge. If I didn't understand the problem from my Savior, how could I trust Him with the solution? So, I took matters into my own hands, and they smeared the stain that was already on my spirit even more.

This was the first time, maybe in my adult life, that I wasn't filled with haste to run or control a situation. No overthinking or moving swiftly off imbalanced emotions. Releasing the desire to control made me feel more in control of things than I have in a while. And if this shift in my character was the only positive thing that came out of this outside of my deepened union with my Jerry, God had truly blessed His child.

E xactly One Week After the Meltdown

EXCEPT, THINGS DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY GET BETTER.

They got a whole lot worse. Black to Back loved Tiffany's personality and commentary. They said she was controversial and added excitement to their show. Listeners, via radio, live stream, and podcast, loved the drama that unfolded during her episode. They loved it so much that Tandy, the host, brought Tiffany back on for three days. For three days straight, Tiffany dragged me, Nova, Allegra, and WCSF as a whole.

The great thing about that was slander went against her employment contract. Because she hadn't signed her severance contract, she was still technically an employee of WCSF while she was ranting about us on the radio. Her actions allowed me to not only terminate her immediately without pay and recommendation, but I also had the opportunity to sue her. While I wouldn't take it that far, it did make me happy to be able to fire her because of her own actions.

Since it was my first day back, I wanted to look and feel my best. I looked myself over in my full-length mirror, pleased with what I saw. The tan pantsuit I'd chosen accentuated my curves perfectly. My hair was in its signature bombshell curl style, and I'd done the trending latte makeup look. As I sprayed my perfume, my phone rang. I wondered if it was Tierney, so I headed to it with urgency. She was going to start

spending the weekends here with me in Rose Valley Hills instead of me going back to Memphis. I loved that for us. It would give us time to bond as sisters without our parents, and we needed this.

At the sight of Jeremiah's Facetime request, I shimmied with excitement. As excited as I was, one would think I hadn't talked to him already this morning, but I did. We talked as soon as we woke up. He prayed for me, which I appreciated, and I laced him with a few affirmations. It didn't matter how often we spoke, though, because I could never get enough of him.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I accepted the request.

"Hey, pooh."

"I got some news for you, baby."

He was driving, and I wondered what he had to tell me that was so important it couldn't wait until we both made it to work.

"What is it?"

"I was tired of Tandy and Tiffany talking shit, so I bought our franchise of Black to Back. Tandy is officially off the air, and she will no longer use her platforms to drag you or WCSF with Tiffany or anyone else for that matter."

I was glad I was seated because his statement caused my body to feel like it was floating.

"You did what?" I asked quietly. Even though I heard his words, I couldn't believe what he'd said—what he'd done. "Jeremiah." Chuckling, I rested my hand on my cheek, hoping my tears wouldn't fall. "You bought Rose Valley Hills' biggest Black-owned radio station?"

"Yeah, I did. She was bullying you for better ratings and I will not tolerate anyone disrespecting you." His tone was just as nonchalant as his expression.

"Jerry..."

"I gave her time to apologize and stop but she didn't." He shrugged and looked at me briefly before returning his

attention to the road. “So now she has to find another job.”

I was speechless. What words could I have used to express my gratitude anyway? Thank you didn't seem good enough. Still, I thanked him before laughing in disbelief. This man. My man. My partner.

“I don't know what to say besides thank you, Jerry. No one's ever stood up for me this way. Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me for protecting you. It's my job.”

“I don't deserve you.”

“You deserve me and so much more.” My head shook as I continued to fight back my tears. “You've been the best thing that ever happened to me. At the lowest points in my life, you were there. I am who I am today because of you. Do you think there's anything I won't do for you?”

Jeremiah was loyal, that I knew. He was a man of honor and integrity. Our values and beliefs had always aligned. That's what made him so good for me, to me. I knew all these things in my mind, but when he actually showed me, those actions used to go straight to my heart. Now, they were going to my pussy too. Sex wasn't a proper thank you for all things, but in that moment, I wanted to suck his soul out of his dick.

“Stop by here,” I requested, getting an immediate smile out of him.

“We have work to do, Chap.”

“I'll be quick.”

I watched desire fill his eyes as he considered my request before he laughed and shook his head.

“Tonight, a'ight? You can do whatever you want to me then.”

“Fine. I love you, and I'll see you soon.”

“I love you too, Angel. Be safe.”

“You too.”

After disconnecting the call, I finished getting ready. Now, I was even more excited about getting to work. I still wanted to work on myself a bit more before getting into a relationship with Jeremiah or anyone else, but knowing he was my man and that he had my back the way he did gave me a boost of confidence that had me walking on a cloud.

That cloud darkened but it didn't burst when I walked into WCSF and saw Tiffany seated by the receptionists' area. Because it was just minutes before nine, a lot of employees were standing around making small talk before it was time to get to work. I prayed she didn't try to start any shit. The last thing I needed was more public drama.

After greeting our receptionists and the employees who were hanging around, I headed toward the elevators. Tiffany hopped from her seat and made her way in my direction, yelling out for me. Unlike in the past, she wasn't well put together. Her hair was in a low ponytail, there was no makeup on her face, and she was dressed in a hoodie and leggings.

Had she come to fight?

"Is there something I can help you with?" I asked as sweetly as I could.

"Yeah, you can re-activate my severance package. I'm ready to sign it now."

As amused as I was, I maintained my composure.

"I'm sorry, Tiffany, but that package is no longer on the table." Her eyes rolled and she groaned as she took a step in my direction, but I continued to speak. "You terminated that offer when you went on the radio and slandered us. That goes against your employment contract, so I am not obligated to offer you a severance package."

When I turned to walk away, she grabbed my arm. I looked around, and the fact that people had their cameras out already tickled me. The receptionists were up and headed our way, while others were waiting to see the drama unfold.

I lifted my hand, stopping Brook Lynn and the others.

“You owe me,” Tiffany said through gritted teeth. “I held things down while you were gone. The design department would have gone downhill without me!”

Jerking away from her, I straightened my stance so that we were face to face. “Are you forgetting I left because you had an affair with my fiancé?” She scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “I took you under my wing because I believed in you. I was prepared to help you get to my level, to exceed me. But instead... you wanted to be me.” I looked her over with disgust, feeling like Tyra Banks on that episode of *America’s Next Top Model*. I wanted to yell about how she’d fucked her own self up. How I believed in her. How I was rooting for her. But none of that mattered anymore. “I don’t owe you anything, Tiffany, not even mercy. Please gather your things and leave the premises.”

My eyes shifted to my personal receptionist, Kathy, and I told her, “Put hiring an independent, Black-owned security team on the company to-do list. Effective immediately, she is not to be let in without approval from me or another partner. Also, hire personal assistants for all partners and lead associates.” I directed my attention to Brook Lynn, who was beaming as she stared at me. “Please call Mr. Cane and ask him to make sure Tiffany gets all of her belongings and leaves the building promptly.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she replied simultaneously.

As I continued toward the elevators I added, “To all of you who decided to pull out your phones to record what you thought was about to be a fight, please remember it goes against company policy to record and share anything that happens during work hours at WCSF. Instead of firing you all, I’m going to assume you forgot how things work because I’ve been absent.” I did a quick 360 spin so I could look at them all. “This is your only warning; I will not extend this grace again. Get to work. Now.”

Like roaches when the lights were turned on, they all scurried in different directions.

As I stepped onto the elevator, I couldn't help but smile. It felt good to be in control of myself and my emotions, it felt good to maintain my cool, it felt good to be back at WCSF.

S everal Weeks Later

FALL BREAK HAD COME AND GONE. I SPENT THE ENTIRE WEEK with Tierney since she was out of school. Jeremiah and I had taken her to Universal Studios, and we all had a blast. She said it was refreshing seeing us as a couple, and that meant a lot to me. It also meant a lot to me that she was considering going to RVH University so we could be closer. While I wanted her to experience life and all this world had to offer, I also wanted her to live life on her own terms. If she wanted to stay in Tennessee for college, I'd make sure she had everything she needed while she was here.

Rose Valley Hills had started up with the several fall festivals the town offered. Fall was my favorite time of year. As happy as I was about the activities being offered, there was a big decision weighing heavily on my heart. It wasn't something that I'd talked to Jeremiah about yet, but I planned to do so this evening.

I'd started talking to a therapist right after firing Tiffany. She helped me get the things in my mind out that needed to be out, and when I couldn't release them, she gave me tools on how to live with them anyway. The problem hadn't been me wanting to do what was best for me; it was me hiding within myself without actually trying to make things better. I spent so

much time in a dark space, deepening insecurities and self-doubt that, up until that point, I'd never suffered with.

There was a lightness that came from knowing what I had to take accountability for and what I needed to release. A compassion that came from giving myself the grace to say even while others hurt me, as long as I was good to myself, I would be okay. So that had been my focus—being good to myself while not inadvertently being bad to others.

I'd returned to doing things I love—shopping, restaurant hopping, granting myself states of nothingness and rest. I'd also found ways to show myself love. After a conversation with Jeremiah, my perspective on love languages changed. It happened maybe a week ago during one of our date nights. We'd just gone for a carriage ride that led to us having a picnic on the beach. When we were done eating, we went to Sabbath's tea bar to sip and talk. I'd asked him...

“What do you think is your love language?”

“Am I supposed to have just one?”

“No, but I think maybe a main one?”

“What would you say it is?”

“I think you want quality time and need words of affirmation.”

He massaged the hair on his chin, nodding as he considered my words. “Maybe. What about you?”

The pad of my pointer finger swirled around the top of my teacup. “I don't know. I'm starting to think it depends on the person you're with and season of your life. With Nova, it was quality time because we were so busy. With you, it's kind of all of them.” I giggled, feeling greedy for his love. “You love me in so many ways, I can't limit myself to just one.”

Jeremiah nodded his approval. “I'm glad you said that. I always felt like love languages were limiting. It became a trending topic and people ran with it. I feel like you set yourself up for disappointment, looking for love in only one way.”

There was also the possibility of a person using that to make you feel loved while they had impure intentions. I hated thinking about the worst in people these days, but after what I'd gone through, I no longer put anything past anyone.

“Hmm, now that you grant that perspective, that makes a lot of sense. I think it's a great foundational tool to learn to love someone, and a way to be intentionally thoughtful and romantic, but you're right, there are so many other ways to show love. I think the most important thing is to straight up ask your partner how they show love and how they feel it.”

Since that talk, I'd been actively using the five love languages to make myself feel loved, but when it came to others, I gave them what they wanted while also leaning toward becoming love based on 1 Corinthians 13. I wanted to be patient, kind, and lacking envy. I wanted to work on my pride and ego. Being more honorable and considerate of others. Compassionate toward myself. More emotionally intelligent and truthful, protective and hopeful. Consistent and unwavering.

The more I worked on my spirit and tried to be love, the more content and happier I became with myself. There was just the matter of WCSF.

“Hi.”

I didn't have to look up to see who that voice belonged to. Even with it being low and shaky, I knew exactly who it was. Allegra Fisher. Up until now, both she and Nova had been keeping their distance. The only time I saw them was at meetings, and then, we only talked about business. Neither of them had reached out on a personal level, which I appreciated. Now that we had a small human resources staff and personal assistants for partners and lead associates, there really wasn't a reason for Allegra to seek me out. I assumed, because she was, that it was something personal.

Shifting my gaze from my computer, I looked at Allegra as she stood at my opened doorway. She looked nice in a white, long-sleeved blouse and black slacks. Her hair had gotten a little longer, and she had it styled in wavy curls. I missed her

face, her spirit, but I couldn't say that. I wouldn't say that. It was okay to miss someone without welcoming them back into your life. That was a lesson I was learning too.

No one should have had a permanent ticket to stick around unless they were treating me the way I wanted to be treated. I had no hate in my heart toward Nova and Allegra for the night they'd spent together, but I couldn't lie and say I was in a place to see the physical reminder of what they'd done in the form of Ava—no matter how sweet and beautiful my baby girl was. I had to be self-aware enough to be honest about my limitations.

If I tried to be in their lives, I'd want to punish them. Maybe one day that would change. For now, I accepted what I was capable of and didn't try to pressure myself in ways that would harm me or someone else.

“Hi.”

“Are you busy?” My eyes lowered to her twiddling her thumbs. She was nervous.

“Not really, what's up?”

Allegra took a step into my office. “Is it... okay if I close the door?”

“Yeah, that's fine.”

Her head bobbed as she closed the door and walked over to my desk. She waited until I gave her the invitation to be seated to do so.

“How's Ava?”

I missed her too. Before the truth came out, I had a whole list of things I wanted to do with her this year. Pumpkin patches, sunflower photoshoots, spoiling her for Christmas. Now that chance was gone.

“She's good. Healthy, bigger.”

“Is she adjusting to Nova well?”

“Yeah. He's... surprisingly really good with her.” Allegra chuckled. “I judged him and didn't believe he'd be a present,

good father, but he is. He's been great."

"That makes me happy. I'm glad the two of you were able to work things out."

"That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about." When she paused, she released a nervous breath. "Because of how she was conceived and born, I didn't really do the typical things an expecting mother would do. Sabrina wants to do a half-birthday party for Ava next month that will serve as a late baby shower. It'll also give his family the chance to meet her and get to know me." Her eyes shifted as she crossed her legs. "I'm sure you don't want to be her godmother anymore, but I... I was just wondering if... if maybe you'd want to come? If it'll be too weird, I totally understand. I just wanted to extend the invitation before Sabrina started sending them out. It's not my intention to make you feel like I didn't consider you."

It didn't surprise me that Sabrina wanted to do this. She'd been waiting for me to give her her first grandbaby. A half-birthday slash late baby shower was a cool idea.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I think that would be a little uncomfortable for me to be there with his family when the baby isn't mine. However, I do want to do something for you and her. We made a promise to be the godmother of each other's children. I would like to have a relationship with Ava in the future, but I still need time. When I see her and spend time with her, I don't want to view her as proof of you sleeping with Nova, if that makes sense. I just want to see her as my baby girl, the way I did when I first came home."

"Yeah, no, I get it. For sure." She stood quickly, avoiding my eyes. "Thanks, Chap." When her voice cracked as she said, "I'm really sorry about this," I was seconds away from losing my resolve.

Blinking rapidly, I released a shaky breath. Standing, I licked the corner of my mouth and swallowed hard, fighting back tears.

"I don't want you to be in a state of guilt and apology every time we cross paths. I'm not going to lie and say I see us

being best friends again, but I want to get past this, Allegra. It's done, I reacted, I just want to move forward.”

“You're right but I can't help it. I just feel so bad. I'm working on releasing the guilt over what we did, but until then, I'm really sorry, Chap.”

She made a quick exit, and I was glad she did. I was conflicted. Missing my best friend was constantly going to war with needing a certain amount of loyalty from that same friend. A loyalty that wouldn't allow her to ever do something like that to me. Allegra may not have been a woman I'd want as my best friend anymore, but I had a feeling she would have a smaller role in my life. That was something I'd learned too. Sometimes relationships didn't need to be severed completely; sometimes the roles just needed to be adjusted—temporarily and permanently. For right now, I needed no contact, but there was a chance that would change.

That way of thinking made it easier for me to sympathize with my mother. We'd worked through a few issues too. I'd learned her marriage with my father was more of an arrangement than a loving, healthy marriage. They were life partners, but not in the way I thought. She had no romantic love or feelings toward him anymore, which explained why she was numb when it came down to his cheating. She was, however, letting him keep other vows he'd taken with God toward her. Vows to provide and protect, to make her life easier. As far as dates, and sex, and love were concerned—that was done for her.

It wasn't a marriage I believed I could be happy in, but if she was content with it, I would be too. Allowing them to operate in a way that worked best for them positioned me to respect and have a better relationship with them as individuals. That truth allowed me to be able to say, given the circumstances, maybe one day I'd be able to have a glass of wine or cup of coffee with Allegra to talk about life as associates, but she'd never, ever, be my best friend again.

L ater That Evening

JEREMIAH AND I HAD FIXED DINNER TOGETHER. I ENJOYED ending my days with him. We were sitting out on his veranda enjoying the sunset. It was a rare occasion that both of us had gotten off before the sun did, and we wanted to take full advantage. As I looked over at him, I tried to prepare myself for his response to what I was about to say. He'd give me his usual spiel about supporting me, but I had a feeling he'd think I was a little crazy too. The whole point of me returning to Rose Valley Hills was to get back what belonged to me, and get revenge, so if he did think I was crazy... I would understand why.

"I've been thinking," was how I started.

"About?" was his response.

He looked over at me with those dark eyes that I loved so much. His grill was out, showcasing his pretty white teeth against his nutmeg-brown skin. I was genuinely obsessed with this man and hoped to give him a son one day who looked just like him.

"I want to leave WCSF. The building, not my company."

"Explain."

I sat up in my egg chair, fully prepared to spout all that I'd been thinking about for the last couple of weeks.

“When I started WCSF, it was because I wanted to do what I loved, but I also wanted to create a business that would allow my friends to have success as well. I wanted us all to get rich making a difference with something no one else has done.”

“And you did just that.”

“Right, and I think it’s time for me to move on. WCSF is widely successful, and I still want to be a part of it just in a different way. I had a dream and I brought it to fruition. Now it’s time for me to walk into a new season.”

His expression hardened as he asked, “And what does this new season consist of?”

Regardless of what he was thinking and how he felt, Jerry wouldn’t tell me until I put all my cards on the table.

“I have two goals. For me personally, I want to branch out and have my own design company. It’ll be Wilson and Co. Well, Wilson Simpson and Co. I want you to do this with me, but I understand if you don’t want to. It makes more sense for us to remain business partners. You find the clients and properties and I do the staging and interior decorating. Nova will still handle in-house credit repair and loans while Allegra does contracts and takes care of any legal matters, but they’ll do so from the main headquarters of WCSF through our team at Wilson Simpson and Co.”

“And the second goal? Professionally, I assume?”

“Yes. I want to start smaller branches in other states. I’ll work through the south first, starting with Memphis. Each one will do in their cities what we do here, offer a one-stop shop for anyone wanting to buy, sell, design, flip, or rent.”

He looked out into the distance, considering my words. “How would this work for WCSF?”

“Well, I figured instead of putting someone in my place, I could delegate a lead design team so they can share the load and responsibilities. And I’d make Nova and Allegra co-managing partners. And you and I would be co-managing partners for WSC.”

I waited, brimming with excited patience for his response. I knew the idea was good, I was more concerned about whether he'd want to leave. Even if he didn't, this was what I was going to do.

“Are you doing this because you genuinely want a fresh start, or is this your way of running without leaving?”

“I can understand why you'd ask me that, and I can also admit that things aren't the same at WCSF anymore. Without the crew being how it is, the vibe isn't the same. Not to mention what happened with Tiffany and the fight. This isn't me running or quitting; this is me adjusting to what life has given me and doing what I think is best for all parties involved.”

Jeremiah's arm reached across the space between our chairs, extending his hand for me. I placed my hand in his and allowed him to lift me from my seat and place me on his lap. He gave me a tender, lingering kiss that made my heart skip a beat. Cupping his cheek, I resisted the urge to deepen the kiss because this was a conversation that we needed to finish.

“First, I've never been prouder of you. The choice you've made shows an extreme amount of growth and maturity. And the fact that you found a way to still include them after everything that's gone down shows the purity in your heart and love for them. Second, the ideas you have in mind are innovative. I've always loved your hustle and ambition, and the way your mind works. What you're venturing out to do is monumental, and I'd be honored to stand by your side—personally and professionally.”

“So that means you'll leave with me?”

“I'll go with you to the ends of the earth and back, Angel. Just tell me when we leave.”

This time, when our lips connected, I left no room for self-control. I allowed our kisses to lead to touches that had our bodies becoming one.

The Following Week

THOUGH THERE WAS NO REASON FOR NOVA OR ALLEGRA TO BE against my plan, I was nervous about how they would react. If they didn't want to go along with the changes, I would be receptive to that. Nova had already made it clear that he was pretty much down with anything, even starting his own financial firm, if that was what I needed to be comfortable again. My concern was mostly about how they'd react to the increase in responsibility.

If they were to become co-managing partners, they'd have to make plans and decisions for everyone, not just their individual associates. Unintentionally, I'd made things a lot easier for them as far as the bylaws and policies were concerned. And with me adding additional staff members to serve as assistants and the human resources department, they wouldn't have to carry the load alone.

How big WCSF was growing was a reason I wanted to branch off as well. I was happy that business was flourishing, but it left little time for me to enjoy the fruit of my labor and have the kind of personal life that I wanted. I didn't want to work with eighty clients a season, all having various levels of temperament, expectations, and demand. I wanted up to fifteen clients a season that would make my time and creativity worth the work.

The silence in the conference room was so loud. Nova and Allegra were sitting next to each other instead of across from each other.

Had they gotten closer?

More... intimate?

That wasn't my concern.

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I stood and slid folders that held my plan inside to each of them. After I gave Jeremiah his, I sat down and began to speak.

“Thank you all for meeting me. I know we're at the end of the month and busy, so I'll be as precise yet brief as I can.”

“No rush,” Nova replied. “I miss you, so I'll sit here and listen to you recite the alphabet if it means I get to be in your and his presence.”

It was hard for me to admit it, but I missed him too, and I know Jeremiah did as well. They'd just agreed to work on restoring their bond when the truth about Ava came out. That drove another wedge between them. Jeremiah had shared with me that they talked more around the office, but they hadn't been spending time together outside of these walls. I guess that was better than nothing, but I hated how quickly their reconciliation had diminished.

“I guess that's a perfect time for me to take responsibility for my part in our demise. A lot of the blame has been placed on Nova because he cheated, but a lot of things that happened wouldn't have happened if I didn't run away. This meeting is my attempt at fixing things around here and also doing what's best for me without my choice making things worse for any of you.”

Their expressions turned serious, and after a slight pause, I continued.

“Jeremiah and I are leaving this office. We're starting an imprint under WCSF, Wilson Simpson and Co. We're going to do what we do here there, on a smaller scale. I want to make both of you co-managing partners here. You both will be

running things in my absence. We'll still utilize your services, but we'll have our own building, clients, and team."

"You're leaving?" Allegra asked quietly as her head shook.

"Yes, but again, things won't really change as far as business is concerned."

"You just won't have to see us or deal with us because your team there will be working with our teams here," Nova said.

"Yes," I agreed. "I think that's for the best."

Neither of them spoke, so Jeremiah filled in the silence.

"This will allow us to handle business without anything personal getting in the way. Y'all know shit has been fucked up between us for a while. There's no point in us walking on eggshells and suffering trying not to upset, offend, or make each other uncomfortable. With this plan, WCSF remains WCSF, just in two locations."

"And it will expand from there," I picked up. "I want smaller branches all over, starting with Memphis. We created something magical with WCSF and... I just don't want what's happened between us personally to ruin it. I could have done this on my own on a smaller scale, but you all helped me make it what it is. I wouldn't have wanted to do this with anyone else. If you want to leave, I'll understand, but I'm hoping after you've looked over the files and had time to think about it, you will agree."

"What about personally?" Allegra asked. "Do you think this will help us get back to some semblance of a friendship?"

"Honestly, I don't know. It's hard to navigate both because the lines are so blurred. Maybe once we completely detach professionally and adjust to how things are going to be, there will be clarity on that. I can't completely overrule that because I do miss you both, but for right now, the water is too murky for me to see."

"That's fair," Nova said. "So, how will this work? Are we buying y'all out of the partnerships or what? I get the whole we work through our teams thing, but if Allegra and I are

going to be running things here, you'll be getting a new team, right?"

"Yes. This will be yours, that will be ours. We'll have a new team. I figure the buyout should be like the buy-in, so one dollar?" I said, looking at Jeremiah for confirmation, and he agreed.

"Nah, if we're going to do this, I want to change the buyout terms." Nova sat up in his seat, resting his elbows on the table. "I'll buy y'all out if you both can promise me once we've all done some work individually that we can try to be friends again. I don't care if it takes one year or ten, I want this back."

I looked over at Jeremiah, wanting him to speak first. I could understand how our relationship may have made Allegra and Nova feel some type of way. To some, I'm sure it was a bit taboo for us to be together. Even though he and Nova weren't friends when it happened, they were friends for quite some time.

The mirage of being loyal to standards invented by society instead of doing what was right for you had a lot of people stuck in unhappy friendships, relationships, and work situations. Lord knows I hated how things played out between Allegra and Nova, but Ava was a blessing for them that they'd have for the rest of their lives. My blessing? My Jerry.

"What do you think, Angel?" he asked, taking my hand under the table.

"If you'd be comfortable with that, I think I am."

"I can agree to that," Jeremiah said, and both Allegra and I released quiet whimpers in exchange for the squeals bubbling up within us.

He and Nova stood, shaking hands across the table. Allegra and I did the same.

This felt good.

This felt right.

T hat Weekend

IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN I MADE IT TO MY FAVORITE restaurant and saw my family, Jeremiah's mom, a few of our close cousins, and Nova and Allegra waiting for us. It was Jerry's bright idea to celebrate us starting an imprint under WCSF. I appreciated the consideration and the gesture, and we ended up having a great time. There was no drama, which I was grateful for.

I couldn't help but notice how cozy Allegra and Nova seemed. At one point, he had his hand on the small of her back as she whispered something in his ear. I wondered what they were up to. If they were giving a relationship a go. Who was I to judge them if they were? I was sure when they were comfortable telling us that they would.

For a brief moment, bitterness and anger crept in. I felt myself thinking about how one woman's trash could be another's toxic situation, but that wasn't fair to either of them. If they were trying to give Ava a healthy family while building a romantic relationship, I would genuinely wish them well. I wasn't bitter enough to want them single and suffering while I experienced being loved better than I ever had been before by Jeremiah.

By the time we left the restaurant, I was full—physically and emotionally. I smiled the whole time Jerry drove. Several

pictures had been taken to remember the night, and I was sure I'd be looking at them repeatedly over the next few days. It was the first time in a really long time that I enjoyed myself with my family and old friends and nothing went wrong. If that was a sign that I'd made the right choice, I was excited to see what else there was to come.

I went back to Jerry's place. That had become my norm. I'd spent more time at his home than my own. It was big enough for us to have space from each other when we needed it, but we enjoyed each other's company enough to have a healthy routine. When we walked in, I had no expectations, so my eyes immediately watered when I saw what he'd done for me in the living room.

Thick stacks of cash were resting under a large red bow along with the listings for several buildings from Noah's commercial company.

"Pooh, what is this?" I had to laugh after asking because it was clear what it was, but I still needed to hear him actually say it.

Jeremiah wrapped his arms around me as he said, "That's the down payment you'll need for the commercial building. Depending on which one you choose, I'll take care of the rest. Those are a few commercial listings that Noah has available that I think you'll like. I made an appointment with one of his agents to go and have a look at them tomorrow."

Turning in his arms, I resisted the urge to fight my tears. They flowed freely as I hugged and kissed him.

"You really have my back, huh?"

"Back, front, and side."

"You're the best life partner ever. I love you so much, pooh."

"I lo—"

Kissing the words off his lips, I lifted my leg, so he'd pick me up. I didn't need to hear the declaration; I felt and saw it every day that I spent with him.

We tumbled onto the couch, where I gave him slow, sloppy head before riding him until we both were empty.

After we pulled apart from each other, we showered and snuggled up on the futon in his bedroom to watch a movie, but the way I felt, I'd be going to sleep soon.

"I need to go home tonight, pooh. I need more clothes."

"You don't want to wear something you already have here?"

My head shook as he massaged my scalp, and the gesture was about to put me to sleep. "No."

"A'ight, well I'll drive you since it's so late."

"You might as well pack a bag and stay there."

Jeremiah chuckled, causing me to smile. "That's what you want anyway."

Unable to deny it, I lifted my head from his chest. "I don't care where we sleep; I just want us to sleep together."

"Speaking of... I want you to move in with me."

"Really?" I almost whispered, tugging my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Yeah. I mean, we spend every night together anyway. It just makes sense. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, so I'll wait if you want to. But I want you to know my home is yours whenever you want it to be."

His declaration made me want to go another round. I loved how easy it was for Jeremiah to express himself now. He was careful of how he expressed what he wanted and needed, and I did the same. Even when we had disagreements, we were mindful of the way we handled each other. I absolutely loved his big, beautiful home and would have been honored to live with him at any time. There was a part of me that wondered how quickly we'd get into a relationship and get married if we started living together now, but I trusted Jerry to do right by me. I also was a little scared about things progressing because of my fear of being hurt again. No matter how much my mind

told me I could fully trust Jeremiah, my heart still had the scars from Nova that urged me to take things slow.

I told him that we could take it slow with me spending two weeks at his place and him spending two weeks at mine and take it from there. I don't know. Fear of titles and moving in and getting engaged felt like milestones that would lead to pain and being triggered. All I could think about was us getting into a committed relationship or engaged and finding out some horrible truth like with Nova. That wasn't fair to Jerry or me, but that's the current state I was in. Thankfully, he understood, and he agreed, giving me yet another reason he was perfect for me.

I straddled him and expressed my love for him as well, which led to him being inside of me again. That time, my pussy put him to sleep. After I washed up, I decided to just go home and grab what I needed. There was no point in me waking him up to drive me.

The drive to my place was quicker since the streets were clear. I hummed as I made my way upstairs to my front door with a smile on my face. Things were going so well in my life, and I was truly grateful for the positive progress that had been made. I didn't think anything could change that until the lights went out and I took a misstep that had me falling onto the concrete steps.

J eremiah

CHAPEL'S WOMB HAD BECOME, TO ME, WHAT HER NAME MEANT—a place of worship. She was my heaven on earth, and I was willing to go to hell and back to make sure I never lost her. I felt the absence of her presence. When I woke up and saw that she'd left, I showered again and got in bed. Something didn't feel right in my soul. We were connected there. If something was off with her, I'd know. I called her and she didn't answer, so I checked her location and saw that she was at home.

A part of me figured Chapel had simply fallen asleep, but even if she had, she would have answered the phone. I felt led to go and make sure she was okay, and I was glad I did. The power had gone out while she was going up the stairs and I found her in the middle of them—bleeding and unconscious.

After calling for help, I reached out to her parents. I didn't call anyone else until they came out with an update on her condition. Because of the impact of the fall, the doctor's biggest concern was bleeding or swelling on her brain. They took her back for testing immediately. Thank God there wasn't any major damage done. She did have a concussion and was still unconscious. Outside of a few scratches and bruises on the side that she fell on, Chapel would be okay.

When I first found her, I was scared as fuck. All I could think about was losing her and we'd just gotten started. I

prayed harder than I ever had, hoping God wouldn't give her to me for this brief moment just to take her away. If He did, I would have found a way to be grateful for the time we'd shared. There was so much more to life that I wanted to experience with Chapel.

Outside of the professional moves we were about to make, I wanted to continue to travel with her and make memories. Do things we'd done for years as friends, as lovers. Experience things that were on our bucket lists. I wanted to marry her and give her three babies.

Our story couldn't have ended this early.

Then I started to get upset. I'd told her repeatedly to have her uncle take care of the wiring at her place. If she would have, this accident wouldn't have happened. As upset as I was, I could only blame myself. Even if Chapel didn't make it a priority, I should have. I should have gotten one of the electricians that I outsource for my properties to handle it. This wasn't going to happen again, though, because I'd already put in that call, and they were going to take care of it in the morning.

If anything, this moment taught me that I must take the lead with Chapel more. In my desire to give her space to learn to trust me in this new space we're in, I've been giving her the reins to lead us more than I should. When we become a couple, where we sleep, when she calls her uncle, the pace of our relationship. All of that was going to change when she woke up. Almost losing her reminded me even more that I cannot lose her.

I don't give a damn what happened with her and Nova or any other man in her past. Only love could heal pain. We were going to be in a relationship, we were going to live together, and she was going to be the woman I spent the rest of my life with. I wasn't going to let her fears or insecurities stand in the way of that.

C hapel

I SLEPT FOR THREE DAYS STRAIGHT. I THINK MY BODY NEEDED the rest more than anything. When I did wake up, people alternated between crying over me and being happy I was okay to scolding me for not getting the lights taken care of sooner. I appreciated the range of emotions and was grateful I had people in my life who truly cared about me, and Jeremiah was at the top of that list.

WCSF had sent me flowers and a large care package, and from what my mother told me, Allegra and Nova stopped by every evening and stayed for hours. Dad came the first night but went back home for work. He took Tierney with him since she had school, but she called and checked on me every day. For three days straight, Mom and Jeremiah never left my side outside of to rest and take care of their hygiene. I appreciated the gesture more than they would ever know. It felt like I had angels watching over me while I slept.

The first thing I wanted to do was send everyone thank you cards. I know it wasn't necessary, but I wanted to let them know I appreciated their thoughts, prayers, and visits. The second thing I planned to do was call Uncle Chris to take care of the wiring. And after that, I wanted to plan a getaway for Jeremiah and me. I can't imagine how hard things were on

him. He'd been telling me forever to take care of the wiring and I put it on the back burner.

Mom said he didn't want to do anything while I was asleep. He'd hold my hand, talk to me, and play my favorite shows the whole time he was there. I was truly lucky to have him. He continuously did things to prove I was safe with him in all the ways. If this situation taught me anything, it was to take care of my business but also prioritize the now. I didn't want to spend time worrying about what would or could go wrong in the future. We didn't know how much time we had on this earth, and I wanted to spend mine doing what I loved with those I loved, and Jeremiah was at the top of that list.

"You ready?" Jeremiah asked, taking my hand.

I hesitated to go up the stairs and hoped he wouldn't notice. He did. I nodded and took a deep breath as he led me up the stairs. Our steps were slow. The whole time I walked, I looked down and made sure each step was correct. That each step was careful. That I didn't rush and pay less attention as I tended to do. I'd say it was less fear and more carefulness than anything else. I wasn't sure how long this would last, but I'd be patient with myself for as long as it did.

It was in that moment that I realized this was how I'd been with Jeremiah. Nova was like a fall I didn't think I'd ever be able to heal from. Jeremiah... he'd been my slow and steady pace. The man in whom I took my time and hadn't rushed. The one where I was careful, wanting everything to be correct. Because I was sure that was what would have kept me safe. Kept me from falling and getting hurt again. But that wasn't the case.

No matter how careful I was, the only thing that would truly keep me safe with a man was his intentions and his character. His choice to do right by me. And I had confidence that Jeremiah would do just that.

"The wiring has been handled," he said, cutting the lights on in the entryway and living room.

"Okay, pooh, thanks."

His hands rested on his waist for a few seconds as he looked around. When they dropped, he turned to face me.

“I want you to move in with me, baby. Now. You’ve had this townhouse since college and the shit is falling apart. The inside looks good because of your interior design, but this shit is old. I want you with me, or at least let me put you in something new.”

“Okay, I’ll move in with you.”

As I passed him, I realized he was prepared for me to give him a hard time. “I know you have a thing about us moving too fast, but you can trust me. Have I ever intentionally let you down before?”

Giggling, I shook my head as I continued to my room. “Uh no, Jerry. That’s why I said I’d move in with you.”

“Exactly, so I don’t want to go back and for—”

When his mouth snapped shut, I looked back at him.

As the weight of my agreement settled within him, his tense body relaxed, and he smiled. “You said yes.”

“Mhm.” I mirrored his smile as he walked over to me. “I said yes.”

“You’ll come home today?”

“Yes, Jeremiah. I’ll pack as much as I can and leave today.”

“Don’t worry about doing too much. I don’t want you moving too fast too soon. Just grab the necessities you need for tonight and I’ll have a moving company here in the morning to take care of everything else.” His arms wrapped around me, and I tilted my head for a kiss. “You can redecorate and do whatever you want to the house. It’s your home now and I want you to feel comfortable.”

“I already do, but we’re gonna need more color in the master bedroom. And softer chairs. Ooh! And can we turn the free room by the pool into my office?”

“Whatever you want, Angel.”

I wasn't sure which one of us was smiling the hardest, but it made it impossible to kiss. Still, we tried. I wouldn't fight Jeremiah on this, or anything else he wanted to do for me for that matter. The days of going slow out of fear were over. I'd be careful and take my time, but I'd also trust him to guide my steps as we fell deeper in love.

EPILOGUE

Thirty-Seven Days Later

THERE WAS A TIME, NOT TOO FAR IN THE PAST, WHEN NOVA looked at me with the same amount of love in his eyes that shined as he stared at Allegra—his girlfriend. I knew now, that look wasn't reserved for me; it was reserved for whatever woman was making Nova feel loved at that moment in his life. And I was okay with that.

At Ava's half-birthday party, Nova and Allegra announced their new relationship. Because I had an idea things were changing between them, I was prepared. Out of respect, they asked Jerry and me to meet them for drinks the next evening and they told us the news. Now, I was looking at them holding each other with huge grins as their attention shifted from Ava who was crawling toward them to each other on a video Allegra had posted.

It was a little weird seeing them this way, but I suppose they could have said the same thing about me and Jeremiah. I wouldn't say we were close friends with them again, but if we saw each other out, we'd spend a little time together. We were making slow work of getting ourselves together and becoming the best versions of ourselves that we could be, and I wanted nothing more than that at the moment.

Tiffany took barely no time leeching onto another man. This one just so happened to be a married secret society

member whose wife left him when she found out. Unfortunately, she wasn't as nice as me. She dragged Tiffany from Tennessee to Mississippi when she found them in bed together two weeks ago, and I hadn't heard any news about Tiffany since. When I did, I prayed it was that she found an unattached man to tie herself to.

Exiting out of the Facebook app, I checked my emails while I waited for Jeremiah to call and let me know I could come inside. Business was doing exceptionally well at WCSF. With the new staff members on board, the adjustment of me stepping down as managing partner and giving that title to both Nova and Allegra was easy for everyone. Jeremiah and I had been enjoying our temporary break. Instead of working from home, we decided to take some time to enjoy life and each other. So for the past month or so, the only work we'd been doing was looking for a building for Wilson Simpson and Co.

I finally found one that I loved, and Jeremiah approved, so he purchased it for me even though I insisted on going half for it. I was sitting in the parking lot now waiting to do an independent walk-through now that we'd finally closed the deal and gotten our keys. He said he wanted to go through it himself first to make sure everything was okay, and I appreciated him for that.

After scrolling through emails for another five minutes or so, I finally got that call from Jeremiah. Excitement immediately filled me. This building was the complete opposite of WCSF, and that's why I loved it so much. It wasn't tall, with several floors and a glass design; it had two stories with a standard office design that I couldn't wait to spruce up with my skills.

The low hum that was escaping me turned into a gasp when I opened the door and saw what my Jerry had been up to. Candles flickered and a rose petal aisle led me to where he was standing—the space that would be my office.

Inside, Jeremiah had created a romantic ambiance that immediately brought tears to my eyes. Adele's "One and Only" played in the background. There was a round table in

the center of the room where he was seated. Candles and rose petals were scattered across it.

“Come have a seat, Angel.”

After pulling my chair back, Jeremiah returned to his seat. He didn't speak right away, allowing the words of the song to reach my heart. The longer I listened, the more I realized what he was doing. I couldn't help but laugh lightly and wipe fresh tears as the song ended. Every word had seeped into my heart and mind, and I was ready and willing to take on the dare of keeping Jeremiah as my one and only and committing to him.

“Do you remember when we went out and you said you'd know I was serious about a woman when I made a grand gesture?” he asked, and I knew the exact moment he was referring to.

It was just before I'd committed to Nova years ago. We were talking about love after watching a rom-com. I told him I wouldn't believe he was seriously in love with a woman until he made a grand gesture like in the movies because of how he never had serious relationships. Even with the wining and dining he did while dating and having a sexual relationship with a woman, commitment was a completely different thing. He told me, if the time ever came, he'd do the grand gesture that would show his woman how serious he was about taking things to the next level.

And he was doing that for me.

My Jerry.

My soul mate.

My life partner.

“Yes, I remember.”

“Today, I'm going to love you in every one of those love languages you love so much. Then, I'm going to ask you to be my woman, and you're going to say yes. Does that sound good to you?”

“Yes,” I whispered, voice trembling.

I was happy... so happy. And at peace... deeply. On my own. But Jeremiah... Jeremiah was a man who increased those things within me. I wanted to find healing and happiness, and I'd done so with him as my anchor. He could have asked me for just about anything at this moment and the answer would be a resounding yes.

And so, he did what he said.

Jeremiah combined gifts with words of affirmation. Along with a new promise ring for my right ring finger, he gave me one hundred envelopes, all of which had a hundred-dollar bill in them. As I opened each one, he gave me a reason he loved and wanted to be with me. One hundred reasons why he loved me. *Me*. I was happier about that than the money, but I was sure going to enjoy spending every bill.

He took me over to the corner of the office, where a massage table was positioned. On it, he offered me service and physical touch that relaxed every muscle in my body and put me to sleep. Afterward, we spent more quality time together during dinner, which ended with a large bouquet of red roses being delivered along with a bottle of champagne for us to share.

The live band began to play "One and Only" again, and I shivered in anticipation of what was going to come.

It was time.

Jeremiah stood and rounded the table, taking me by the hand. I thought I'd be nervous when this happened, but I wasn't. I was actually quite calm. That further confirmed the fact that Jeremiah was the one.

On the list my father gave me, he wrote at the top, *God is not the Author of confusion, neither is love. When it comes down to the man you're supposed to spend the rest of your life with, you won't feel nervous or confused, you'll be calm and at peace.*

The four questions he wanted me to ask myself were: who do I trust, who has my back, who makes my life better, and

who increases my peace? The answers took no thought. Jeremiah was the answer to every question.

We made our way to the dancefloor, where we began a sway that made everyone else in the room disappear.

“All of this for little ol’ me?”

Jeremiah gave me that sexy chuckle that I’d fallen in love with. “Everything for you, Angel.” He held me closer. “I love you always, in all the ways. I love you forever, however. Will you officially be mine?”

“Yes, Jeremiah.” The happy giggle that escaped me caused me to tug my bottom lip into my mouth, but I still smiled. “I would love to be yours.”

His hands cupped my cheeks, and he tilted my head, covering my lips with his.

“I love you,” I muttered against his lips before kissing them again. “Thank you for making it safe to love again.”

Our lips reconnected, and I lost myself in him, as I often did. And that was okay. Because Jeremiah had always been my haven, and now, I had no doubts that he’d be the man I’d spend my forever with.

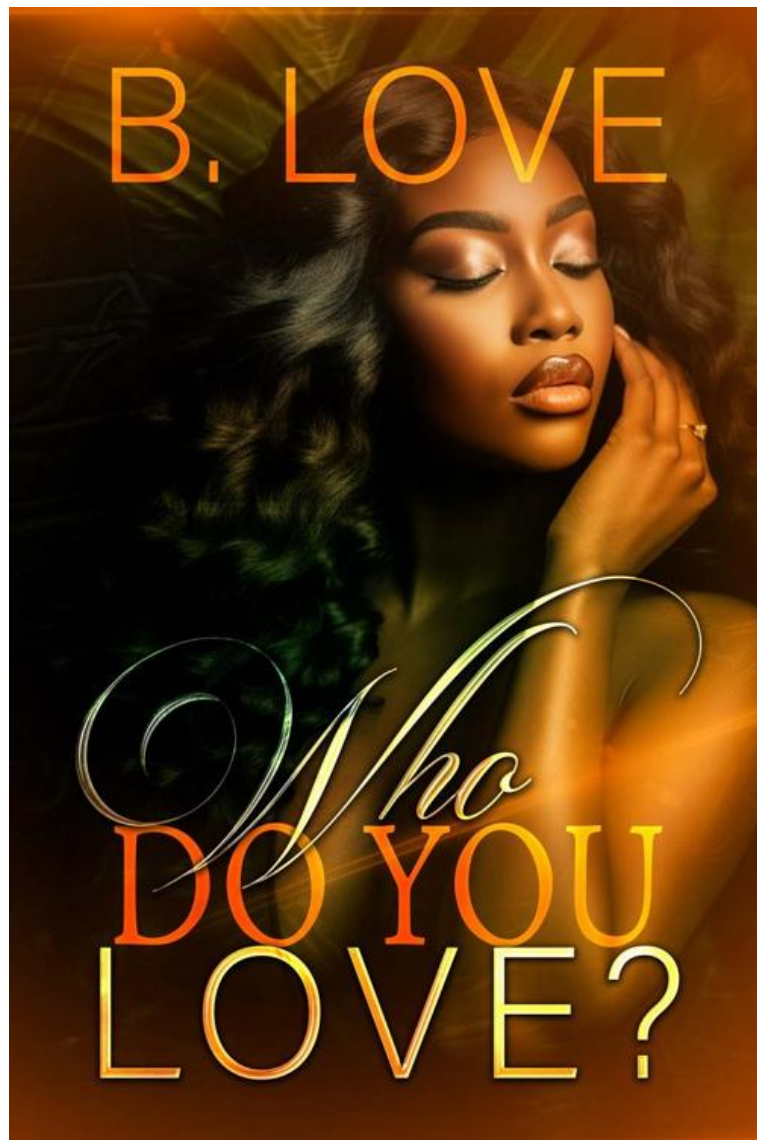
The End

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed Chapel's story, please leave a review/rating and recommend it to a friend.

Until Love Returns...

Love, B.



For Isla, life is safest and most fulfilling when she's in control. When she meets and falls for Laken, her heart and life spiral out of control. After a year of dating, Isla decides to give Laken an ultimatum—commit and give her the babies and future she wants or lose her altogether. In that moment, she realizes having to give the man who claims to love her that choice should leave her with no choice but to leave. Isla does, and she immediately meets and falls for a man who wants the same things she wants. The problem? Her new lover is off limits. Soon, Isla finds herself caught between two men—one of which has everything she wants while the other has everything she needs. Will Laken be the one to give Isla her happily ever after, or learn one man's trash is truly another man's treasure?

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