



*Beautiful
Beginning*
Is This Love?

j. nichole

Beautiful Beginning

A LOVE STORY

IS THIS LOVE?

BOOK ONE

J. NICHOLE



not the last page

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About the Author

J. Nichole Newsletter

I'd love to keep in touch with you, and if you feel the same, join my newsletter.

By the way, for joining, I'll send you a free book!

<https://mailchi.mp/notthelastpage/ebook>

Author's Note

As with many of my stories, this one came to me randomly. Since the initial idea, it's morphed into many different things.

At some point, this series was called a Tragic Love. But these characters, this story, didn't go there. I allowed the story to go where it needed to go.

And the result, a Beautiful Beginning.

It's the first book in the *Is this Love?* series. The first of my series that consists of a continuous story instead of interrelated stories.

The ending may be unexpected, but it's where it needed to begin. I hope you enjoy getting to know Journey.

With Love, J. Nichole

Chapter One

Journey

“My mama told me to pick the best one, and you are not it.” Pretty sure that childhood rhyme was not intended for picking between fine men. But it was the first day back on campus, and the men that passed reminded me how wonderful it was to be there.

The melanin that surrounded me—midnight blue, creamy chocolate, caramel, and a tint of orange that could have been mistaken for a good tan—was something to gawk at. That’s exactly what I was doing too.

I was taking it all in. Every single inch. From the over 6 feet, to the darling 5-foot somethings, the slim and toned, and even those with a little more weight.

Every man who walked by had me wide eyed and wanting. Back home, I didn’t have as many men to entice me. The summer felt like I was in a drought of epic proportions. And on campus, all my thirsts quenched. Drip by glorious drip.

It helped that most of the guys were helping with freshmen move-in. So, their muscles bulged, and their philanthropic spirits beamed. I could hardly concentrate on my duties of welcoming the freshmen into the dorms. Guiding them to their rooms and answering questions didn’t seem as important as taking note of the men who walked by.

Then one guy walked in carrying a box over his shoulder, and his tattered

shirt did nothing to cover his abs. “Did you see that?” I asked once he walked up the stairs. “Is he new?”

“Girl.” Lauren plucked at a loose braid. “No. And if I think hard enough I can remember every girl on this campus he’s screwed over.” My roommate was a cynic. She saw the guys for what they were, I saw them for what they *could be*.

“Maybe he changed.” I winked. “Welcome to Destiny Hall,” I said to a girl walking in with her parents trailing behind her. Destiny Hall brought back memories of my first year on campus. It’s where I met my roommates and dearest friends. It’s where my dream solidified. I stepped foot on the same exact campus my parents graced decades earlier.

“I swore freshman year would change my entire life.” I dangled my feet over the side of the couch and huffed. “I looked like them.” I watched another girl with her family walking through the hall. “Like the world was my oyster....” I laughed. “Or whatever it is they say.”

“And now?” Nia twirled her keys in her hand as she sat on the edge of the couch. A couch that remained from our freshman year, four years prior.

I hunched my shoulder. “Reality hit.” I frowned. “There’s nothing about my years on this campus that went as I hoped.” I thought about my classes, the parties, men I didn’t connect with. “Well, except you two.” They were the best part of my college experience so far.

Lauren gushed, “Of course, we are part of that whimsical dream of yours.” She waved her hands in front of her. “The rest of it. Pretty sure we could ignore it.” She looked at another freshman girl walking toward us. The girl looked plenty lost, and ready to put us to work. “Can we help you?”

She fumbled a piece of paper in her hand and said, “Please.” Her eyes flashed behind her. “We’ve been circling the floor trying to find my room with no luck.”

My eyes narrowed. Destiny Hall wasn’t overly complicated. Like every other building on campus, they numbered the rooms according to the floor.

“It’s room 404.”

Well, except for one. I looked to Lauren and Nia then smiled wide. “Ah, I can show you exactly where that room is.” I looked at the box in her mom’s hand and asked, “Need help with that?”

There was relief written all over her face when she said, “Yes, please.”

“I’ll take it.” I walked beside my new freshman bestie and said, “So, where are you from?”

There was a gulp before she responded, “Rocky Edge.” Then a little hesitation before she asked, “And you?”

“Lake Side.” It wasn’t a known city, and not anywhere near campus. “It’s about six hours north of here.”

“Must be hard not being nearby your parents,” her mother chimed in from behind us.

I hunched my shoulders. “Not too bad. Once you are all settled here, you start to figure things out on your own.” I tried to assure them, “There isn’t much she’ll need from home while on campus.” I asked the girl beside me, “What’s your name?”

“Halle Garrison.” She had a warm smile and inviting eyes. Still, not a lot of confidence though.

I could relate to that. When I stepped on campus as a freshman, I was a shell of the person I grew into. Then, I didn’t know many people. Had no friends on campus with me, and only had the stories my parents shared about their time there. It was my first choice of colleges, but when I stepped on campus I thought I made a mistake. I should have gone to college with at least one other friend. Somewhere I wouldn’t have to work so hard to figure things out.

“Here it is.” I pointed to the door of room 404 on the first floor. “A little misleading.”

Halle pulled her key from her pocket and unlocked the door. When it didn’t open when she turned the knob I stood beside her.

“You have to wriggle it to the left a little.” Guess something else that hadn’t changed about that dorm in four years. “This was the same room I stayed in freshman year.” It was also the room my mom stayed in when she was on campus.

I placed the box on the ground and asked, “Did you pick your roommate?” Both sides of the room were empty. “Someone from back home maybe?”

Her dad started shoving luggage in corners, as her mom opened the box.

“Honey, we’ll grab the rest of the things. You get settled.” Before her mom walked out of the room she said, “Thank you for your help.” She didn’t look as concerned as she did in the lobby. Had a beautiful smile too. “I am already feeling much better about her being here.”

“Good,” I said, “I’m glad.”

As a campus ambassador that was my duty. To welcome students and

reassure their parents. At least that's what our advisor told us. For me, it was the easiest way to meet the new kids on campus.

"So," Halle slid her hand across one of the beds, "I do know my roommate. She's my best friend from back home. But she's not coming today."

"Unless you've already agreed," I walked to the other side of the room. Away from the window. "I suggest you pick this bed. The sun shines extra bright through that window in the morning."

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to the side. "I can't believe you stayed here."

I nodded. "I did." Then I told her, "My mama too." I warned, "Not much has changed about Destiny Hall in all that time."

"I'll know exactly who to come to for questions." Then she cringed. "I mean, if you don't mind." Her hand flung to her chest. "I don't want to bother you."

I shook my head and opened my arms. "Halle, it's no bother at all."

She wrapped her arms around me, and when she pulled away, she said, "Thanks, what's your name?"

I groaned. "My bad. My name is Journey Thompson."

"Journey Thompson," she repeated. "It's nice to meet you." Then her voice hushed, and she asked, "How about the guys? Grade A like I've heard, or trash?"

I wagged my head. "There's a healthy mix. I wouldn't worry about them as much for a while. You'll have plenty to keep you occupied on campus. Let them come into the mix later."

It was the best advice I could give. Advice someone should have given me. Advice I may, or may not, have taken back then. But at least I could offer it.

The ratio at Hillside circulated to everyone on campus, I reminded her anyway, "It's two women for every guy here. And the guys tend to take advantage of that." I emphasized, "Heavily."

Her mouth rounded. "Oh."

The door opened and her parents walked in with more boxes.

"Remember, if you have any other questions don't hesitate to ask. Nice meeting you." I extended my hand to her parents before leaving room 404 behind.

Lauren and Nia were in the same spot in the lobby. They didn't take to

the Campus Ambassador role like I did. They didn't care to meet new kids but liked the perk of assigned parking so they stuck with it.

"She settled into your old room?" Nia looked up from her phone.

"She'll get there." I scrunched my nose. "But her main question was about dudes."

Lauren shook her head. "Must be something about that room."

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Hopefully she has better luck than me though." Unlike my mama who found my daddy freshman year on campus, I stayed single most of freshman year. "I'm starting to think chances of finding my husband on campus are slimming down." With only a year left, the odds were not in my favor.

Lauren stood from the wall she leaned on and said, "Our shift is over, let's grab some coffee."

Nia trailed behind us and said, "Who knows, Journey, you might meet someone this year."

I looked over my shoulder. "Guess I could meet a guy, fall in love, and graduate with him by my side." I walked down the steps of Destiny Hall. "I won't knock it if it happens."

"Okay," Lauren nudged her chin across the street, "what about him?" She eyed the group of guys. "The one with the red shirt. Remember him? He was pretty nice."

"Nice, but he had that obsession with rapping his answers in class." I shared, "We had math together. Who raps equivalents and statistics?"

Nia joked, "I mean, that's creativity at its finest."

"What about him?" Lauren turned her head to the side. "The one with the waist-length locs."

"The one who stands in the middle of campus selling handmade soap?" I blurted but covered my mouth so he wouldn't hear me.

Nia couldn't stop her laughter long enough to utter, "Entrepreneurial at least," coherently.

Lauren didn't point out anyone else. But it didn't stop me from admiring the other men we passed along the way to the coffee shop. If they weren't marriage material at least they were something beautiful to stare at.

Nia said, "And how about that guy you were talking to before we left for summer?" It wasn't like the three of us went the entire summer without talking. We stayed active in the group chat. Called often and visited each other a handful of times.

“Nia...” I stopped walking and looked at her. “You mean the dude I shared with two other girls?”

She jerked her head back like it was fresh news. “Two other girls? Wait.” She closed her eyes. “Did I miss that?”

Lauren reminded us, “Yes. You were heavy into your finals. But all summer she didn’t mention his name once. You didn’t think that was long over?”

We looked at Nia and waited for her to reply.

“Oh. Guess I didn’t think about it.” She twisted her lips to the side. “My bad.”

We continued to the coffee shop, and when we walked inside we were fortunate to not wait in a long line.

“Hey,” I said as I approached the counter. The guy on the other side looked familiar. I’d seen him on campus often. But never said much to him. He always seemed to be rushing somewhere. “I’ll have the iced mocha with oat milk.”

“I got you.” He smiled and his eyes looked to be digging a hole into my soul. “What else can I do for you?”

Considering the summer was long—in more ways than one—I had some things in mind. But I didn’t tell him the salacious things I could have done with his smooth lips. Or the tingle he would have given me with his beard. I shook my head and said, “That’s it.”

“Hmm...” he hesitated. “I can get that started for you.”

Lauren stepped to the counter and said, “Guess that means I’m paying today.”

I looked from the ground I focused on. “Huh?” Lauren, Nia, and the sexy man behind the counter were all staring at me.

“Well, you must think coffee is free because you stepped aside without paying.”

My eyes widened and the guy laughed. “I’m so sorry.” I reached into my purse for my wallet. “Here.” I outstretched my hand toward him, and his fingers graced mine. The little contact sent a vibration through my body. I blinked as he scanned my card. And when he handed it back I gripped the tip of it to avoid that same contact. The interaction was already awkward as hell.

I moved back to my spot away from him. Away from the girls, and waited for my cup of coffee.

“Whoa.” Lauren eyed me after she ordered. “Was that something?”

I looked behind her. He gave Nia the same smile he gave me. And I remembered the statistics, *two to one*. “No, not him.”

She hunched her shoulder and turned toward the counter. “Too bad. Seemed like a little something, something stirred up there.”

“Iced mocha,” the girl behind the counter shouted.

I grabbed my coffee. “The only thing stirred up around here is coffee.”

Lauren mocked a laugh and said, “Lame.”

“C’mon, let’s go,” I said once they had their coffees. Outside the café I only took a few steps before I felt icy cold liquid dripping down the front of my shirt. “Shit,” I yelled.

“Shit.” The man in front of me raised his hands. “My bad.” He leaned down and collected my half-empty cup. “I can grab you another one.” He stared at my wet shirt. “Some napkins.”

I flicked coffee off my hands and said, “Please.”

He ran inside and returned with a heap of napkins. Lauren and Nia helped with the near impossible task of drying me off.

“What was it? I can go get you another one.” His beard was visible but closely shaven. His lips were a shade of brown, darker than his caramel skin. And I couldn’t focus on his eyes, or anything else for that matter. I could only stare at his lips. “Do you want another one?”

Lauren nudged my side. “Journey...”

“Oh.” I shook my head and looked down. The white Hillside shirt had a streak of brown on it. Dots splattered across the rest like I’d run a 5k through mud. “I’m good. Think I better get home and change.”

“Wait,” he said before I could walk off. “I owe you one. Here,” he pointed to my purse, “Take my number and next time you are on campus and need a cup of coffee, I’ll get it for you.”

I didn’t move though. I couldn’t. My hands weren’t dripping with coffee, but still, I didn’t shove them into my purse to pull out my phone.

Somehow it still ended up in his hands. “My name is Chaz.” He tapped on the screen of my phone then handed it to me.

“Her name is Journey. And she’ll call you.” Lauren’s words were still ricocheting through my mind as she pulled me away. “Guess he could be a prospect.”

Nia said, “Because whatever *that* was would sell on the internet.” She fanned her face. “Damn, that little interaction topped the one with the barista.”

“Maybe senior year will be my year after all,” I announced as I straggled behind them.

Chapter Two

C haz

The back corner of the classroom was perfect. I had a view of everyone without straining my neck to turn around as they responded. The few who engaged in the conversation anyway. Instead, they could crane their necks as they listened to me discuss what I thought was an obvious point. I could do without all the eyes on me. But if somehow their stares led to enlightenment, I could deal with it for a few minutes.

Anything longer than a few minutes would have made my skin crawl and my brain shut down. If there was anything I hated it was attention. An entire day without anyone talking to me, looking my direction, or asking me a question was ideal. For that reason, my corner of the classroom had a circle of empty seats around me.

I didn't want to get to know anyone, and days after the first day of class, people caught on. I met their greetings and empty conversations with a blank stare. Eventually, they stopped trying.

That didn't dissuade Professor Martin though. Every chance he got to call on me, he took. It was like every other question he directed at me. If I didn't know him from previous semesters, I would think he had something against me.

But Professor Martin was cool. One of the few professors on campus who cared about the topic he taught. He didn't stand in front of the class and

ramble off random facts about American politics. He engaged us in healthy discussions that pushed the boundaries of our thinking. On a few occasions he persuaded my perception. Changed my point of view.

That wasn't an easy task. Not for someone like me who was dead set on my thinking. There was little that influenced me. But Professor Martin seemed to have the working formula. Some sort of elixir that made me reconsider my thoughts.

I knew coming to an HBCU would challenge me in ways that my high school never could. It'd open my eyes to the things my teachers tried hard to shield us from—book bans, accurate history, and bias in our political system. That was the main reason I picked Hillside. It wasn't for the band, or the football team. It wasn't because the women on campus were sexy as hell, although that was a bonus. It wasn't because it's where my parents wanted me. Not out of direct rebellion to their wants.

If it were up to them, I would have attended an Ivy League school on the coast. Somewhere *I could connect with the change makers*. They didn't see the value in Hillside. They discounted the *change makers* the school produced. The movers and shakers that graduated year after year. They underestimated the professors like Dr. Martin.

“Chaz, what do you think?” Well, Dr. Martin when he wasn't calling on me out the blue.

“Sir?” I leaned forward on my desk and focused on the board to find a context clue. There were none. Not a single one.

“We are discussing disparities in voting.” He crossed his arms over his chest like he did when he expected the response to be significant.

I adjusted in my seat and nodded my head. “Like how economics impacts turnout.” I snickered. “And how the results of the campaign impact economics for those same people?” I rolled my hands in a circle. “The vicious circle that is hard to disrupt.”

“Exactly that.” Dr. Martin clapped his hands. “Elaborate on the economics that impact turnout.” He paced the front of the class. “How though? It doesn't cost to vote.”

“Most working people can't afford to take off. Their job doesn't give them time to stand in long lines for hours.” Over the years it was something I grew more and more passionate about. Especially after seeing the results of recent elections. “And the validity of mail-in ballots is challenged. So, some are discouraged from using them.”

“So, what’s the solution?” The girl in the front of the class turned all the way around to look at me. Along with her eyes, there were several other sets looking my way.

“As with any other problem, recognizing there is a problem in the first place.” I boasted, “Bet there are many politicians who will debate the merit of the statement.”

“And that is what I want you to write about,” Dr. Martin announced as everyone closed their notebooks, gathered textbooks, and stood from their seats. “Give me five pages on the disparities, and potential solutions.” He pointed to his head. “Think outside of the box.”

There were groans all around the classroom. But none from me. I wanted to think through the problems and suggest solutions. Not that it would go beyond the classroom, but because that’s how I wanted to impact the community. I wanted to bring solutions. Not continuously point out the problems.

“Chaz...” Dr. Martin stood between me and the door. There was no way around him. “Tell me, why haven’t you run for student government?” He started with the discussion he had my sophomore year when I had him for Intro to Political Science. “It’s the best way to involve yourself in your major.” He pointed toward me, “And you have a voice that could make a difference on campus. You should be the SGA president.”

I wanted to blurt, “My voice?” But I pointed to myself instead and laughed. “Dr. Martin, that’s all a popularity contest.” I waved him off. “The handful of people I kick it with on campus wouldn’t be enough to win. Besides, I don’t know how much people worry about voter disparities, or anything that I’m interested in.”

He shrugged. “Change, no matter how small—”

“Can make a rippling effect.” I heard the words more than I could remember in the four years at Hillside. It wasn’t only his motto, but every professor on campus, it seemed. “It doesn’t matter anyway.” I reminded him, “SGA president got voted in last semester. And I graduate in...” I pulled my phone from my pocket. “In nine months.” The look of disappointment on his face made me offer, “I’ll continue writing for the paper though. Write my opinions for anyone who’ll read them.”

His smirk turned into a frown. “You have thought-provoking words. But you can’t hide behind them.” He rested his hand on my shoulder. “Put them to action.”

It reminded me of my dad telling me to “put your money where your mouth is...” in random situations that the words didn’t apply to.

“Alright, enough of my lecturing.” Professor Martin’s hand slid from my shoulder. “See you Thursday.”

I waved and walked out of the classroom. Inside the two small windows facing the trees made it hard to recognize the sun shining bright. So my eyes squinted as I made my way into the courtyard. I planned to get across campus to the library. With a few hours before my next class, I could start on the paper.

But I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Tilted my head to the side and watched the girl leaving the building in front of me.

The person behind me yelled, “Yo, bruh.”

“My bad.” I held my hand up as I moved to the side and watched her stride along the sidewalk in my direction. Days after bumping into her and spilling her coffee over her white shirt, I looked for her. Hoped I’d bump, but not *bump*, into her around campus. Or that any random robo-call would be her asking to take me up on the coffee I owed her. I didn’t see her, and she didn’t call.

I could have let her pass, continue walking along the sidewalk and watch her from the sidelines. Or... I could walk beside her and speak. *Put your money where your mouth is*. Another random application, but it had me walking beside her.

“Excuse me.” I cleared my throat. “Journey, right?”

Her eyes narrowed before a small smile slid across her lips. “Chad?” Her steps continued but slowed.

I shook my head.

“Chaz.” She pointed. “Sorry. I’m not the best with names. But it’s Chaz, right?”

“Yeah. It is. And I owe you a coffee. I feel terrible about spilling yours. Messing up your outfit.” I didn’t tell her that moment, in all its awkwardness, was the highlight of my time at Hillside. The moment that made me think I was on campus to do more than grab my degree and run.

Of course, campus didn’t lack beautiful ass Black women. Women that had me thinking I dropped onto the sidelines of a runway somehow. Women who were more than a beautiful face, and banging body, but who had the intelligence to go along with it. Not that beautiful Black women didn’t attend Ivy League schools. But the number of them at Hillside made me want to

video call my mama and let her watch and say, “See.” As she admired them.

Still, the others didn’t compare to Journey. And who named a woman like that Journey, anyway? Someone who knew the person who crossed her path was about to go on a ride. Discover some shit about themselves. At least that’s what I stayed up thinking that night after I bumped into her. I buckled up and waited for the call to tell me to jump into the passenger seat.

“At least it wasn’t hot...”

I stared at her. Blinked a few times and wished like hell there was a whiteboard behind her that gave me a clue into her thoughts. “Huh?”

“The coffee.” She stopped walking. “We were talking about coffee.” She pointed to the coffee shop a few feet away. “When you bumped into me...”

“Right.” I felt like an idiot. How did I not make that connection? “I’m glad it wasn’t.” I sucked my teeth. “That would have been all bad. I would have owed you more than a coffee to make up for that.”

“Like what?” Her painted fingernail rested on her chin. “What do you think could make up for hot coffee dripping down my body?”

Somebody poured hot coffee down my back apparently. The August heat was torturous, but not that much. Not enough to make sweat bead up on my forehead. Like I needed a towel to wipe it. “A few dinners.” I wagged my head. “To start.”

But to be honest, what the hell could make up for pouring hot coffee on someone? Dinners? What the hell was I thinking?

“A few dinners.” She toyed with the strap of her bag. Then shifted her book to her other hand. “Good thing it wasn’t hot because I’m not sure that would cut it.” She laughed and my insides felt like shards of glass, breaking into tiny pieces. “But I have time now if you want to grab that coffee.”

“Now?” I looked at my phone like I wouldn’t skip everything to buy her that coffee.

“Unless now isn’t a good time.”

“It’s perfect.” Neither of us moved though. The ray of sunshine cascading on her face made her eyes shine. “You’re beautiful.”

Her entire face lit up like every man on campus hadn’t said it at least once in passing. “Thank you.”

“C’mon, let me get you this coffee before the sun has me switching majors.” I clutched my eyes closed. *Was that me?* Out on the courtyard reciting lame ass lines.

She walked beside me and asked, “Switching majors? Are you supposed

to be in class? If so, we can grab it later. Another day.”

I cringed. “If the line wasn’t bad enough, it didn’t land either.” I laughed. “Damn.” I explained, “I could be an art major to captivate your beauty on canvas.”

Journey’s eyes widened, before her long lashes flapped over her eyes. “Chaz, you’re a smooth talker.”

I wanted to interject. Scream, “Not at all. I’m the farthest from smooth. I’m so bumpy it’d irritate your skin.” Instead I opened the door to the coffee shop and said, “Far from it.” We approached the counter, and I asked, “What’s your order?”

She said, “Iced mocha.” Then added, “With oat milk.”

When we made it to the counter, I gave dude behind it her order. Although I was speaking, he stared at her.

Saying, “I got you. Anything else?”

“You know what, I’ll try the same.” I handed over my card, disrupting his stare.

After he handed it back we stood to the side. “Hope this is good.” It could have tasted like dirt though. I would have enjoyed it like it was my drink of choice.

“I think you’ll like it.” She grabbed napkins from the counter. “If not, I’ll replace it next time I see you.”

“In that case, I hope I hate it.”

Chapter Three

Journey

In the sea of blue and white, I don't know how I spotted him. Amongst the cheers, and sounds from the band, most of the crowd was a blur. There weren't many distinctions outside of students, supporters, and the band. But his red shirt didn't exactly coincide with the blue and white surrounding him. The more I stared at him the more he looked as obvious as Where's Waldo, after spotting him on the page. Like the magic eye you couldn't unsee, after staring too long.

Everyone stood as our team entered the end zone. I searched for him through the surge of people who jumped to their feet. I couldn't find him before the cheer captain called out our first touchdown cheer of the season.

“Hey Bobcats, let me hear you roar...”

Then there he was. Not roaring. I eyed him as I yelled, “Hillside's on fire, we want some more!”

After the time we shared at the coffee shop, I committed the shape of his eyes, the caramel complexion of his skin, and the slight tilt of his smile to memory. His name also hung on the tip of my tongue. I'd never again make the mistake of calling him Chad. “Chaz” was on an endless loop in my mind.

But how? How was he someone I never met before that day? How did I not notice him on campus, in passing. Share a class with him, or sit near him in the café freshman year? Chaz was like a ghost.

After our cheer, we took a water break. The other cheerleaders stood around and I asked the same question I posed to my roommates. “Do you know a guy named Chaz?” I didn’t have his last name, but with a name like Chaz, if they knew him, they knew him.

Nia’s lips pulled into a tight smile. “So, he is on your mind.” She nudged me in my side.

“Chaz?” Danielle asked beside me. “That name sounds familiar.”

“It’s not one you hear often,” I admitted. “Matches him perfectly.” I snuck a look in his direction and found his eyes on me. His lips spread into a smile, then he offered a small wave.

“Oh, yeah...” Danielle said with enthusiasm. “I had a guy named Chaz in a history class. Like sophomore year.” Her eyes stretched wide. “He was fine too. You know him?”

I wagged my head. “I’ve met him.” I didn’t know how to describe my interaction with Chaz. Did I describe our meet, which wasn’t exactly cute? Pretty messy as a matter of fact? Or did I tell her about our coffee *date*? Could I call it that? Did I tell her how I searched high and low, every corner of campus, for another glimpse of him? “I don’t know how I haven’t seen him on campus before.”

“He keeps to himself.” Danielle snacked on a protein bar. “He had all the answers in class though. Every single one. But afterward he’d disappear. Wouldn’t see him at parties, after class, on campus. Nowhere.”

“Hmmm...” I looked up to him again and wondered why he kept to himself.

Our break was over, but I wanted to know more about Chaz. And Danielle’s little interactions with him. My curiosity was beyond piqued, and I wanted to know more.

“Let’s go, Bobcats,” was a constant chant we had throughout the game. As our team did everything they could to stay out of the end zone. But the crowd didn’t care that our team sucked. The fans weren’t *football fans* necessarily, they were there to watch the band. And when it was time for them to perform, everyone was on their feet.

I watched, wanting to see how Chaz would engage. He didn’t. I narrowed my eyes to watch him sit comfortably in his seat. He looked the least bit interested in what happened on the field. The guy beside him, tapping his shoulder and pointing, couldn’t get his attention either. *Is that a book?* Who brought a book to the football game? Like a full-on textbook.

I tapped Nia and whispered, “He has a book.”

She didn’t take her eyes off the field though. Nia should have been a majorette. Her fascination with the band was borderline obsessive. “He who has a what?”

“Chaz. He’s reading a book. Like studying for a test or something.” I couldn’t blame him because there were a few books I needed to crack open. Tests I could better prepare for. But what would I look like opening a book on the sidelines?

Nia turned her head toward me and asked again, “What?”

I nudged my chin toward the stands and said, “Look. Red shirt, toward the top.”

She looked over her shoulder and scanned the crowd. But didn’t search hard enough. “He’s *different*?”

“What if he’s my Dwayne?”

A loud groan escaped her mouth before she returned her attention to the field. “Girl, you have to let that go. What is it with your love of that random, old ass, *fictional* couple?”

I didn’t tell her, but Dwayne and Whitley were what I imagined my parents’ college love to be like. The stories they told me aligned with everything I saw played out in reruns of the show. Not the part where Whitley was about to marry another man though. That part didn’t match their story. Mama and Daddy were stuck together. From what they told me they never broke up. Graduated, and made it down the aisle a year later.

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “A college love story sounds beautiful. Who wouldn’t want that?”

She smacked her lips and rounded her neck. “Me.” There was no denying that. Nia was further from finding the love of her life than I was. After one short-lived situation she gave up.

“Well...” I looked up at Chaz one more time before the band stepped off the field. “I do.”

“Oh.” Nia rolled her eyes after snatching her pom poms from the ground. “I know.”

I laughed and stood beside her. Each cheer, I added a little more emphasis. Exaggerated movements, and wide ass smiles. Coach would be proud. But it wasn’t her I was trying to impress. It was Chaz. Trying to make him put the book down.

Briefly, he did. And his eyes connected with mine.

I had plans that night. A party with my roommates, but if I happened to bump into Chaz I wouldn't be mad about it. Well, unless it knocks the drink I'm holding to the ground. Waiting on fate to bring us together again felt naïve. I needed to use his number that I stared at two times a day, at least.

So, when we got to the apartment, as I shuffled through outfits I grabbed my phone, shut my door, and dialed. "Chaz?" I let my voice sound as sultry as it could after screaming for hours. It kinda had that sexy raspy appeal to it. I hoped.

"Journey?" He didn't sound sure of himself. "Didn't think you'd ever use my number."

"Finding you on campus has more appeal to it."

"Or staring me down while you cheer..."

"Didn't know if you noticed, that book you studied seemed to have most of your attention."

He rebutted, "Most but not all."

Of all the guys I talked to on campus, there weren't many like Chaz. Confidently mysterious, in a way that didn't make him seem like an asshole. A hint of sarcasm that intrigued me instead of making me turn up my nose. He wasn't like some guys who needed to be center of attention. If I wasn't mistaken, he was the direct opposite of that.

"And who or what had the other part of that attention." It was a daring question. Especially to ask him. The answer could be exactly what I wanted to hear. To make my heart skip a beat, and my thighs clutch closed. Or he could crush my hopes with one little word. A phrase that could make it all come crumbling down.

Then he said, "It wasn't our sorry ass team."

I chortled. Laughed so damn hard my nose vibrated.

"You okay?" He sounded amused but didn't join in on the laughter. "In the four years I've been here the team has not gotten any better. I know the band is the highlight for our school, but damn."

I yelled. "That first touchdown gave me hope though."

"That was a peace offering given by the other side. It's not good sportsmanship to completely destroy a team on their own field."

"So, 55 to 7 isn't completely destroyed?"

"They gave them 7."

"Are you coming out to..." I couldn't say *celebrate* because what were we celebrating? A loss? "To the party?"

“Not my thing.”

What is your thing? Textbooks at football games? “Oh. Too bad. Was hoping I could bump into you again.”

He laughed. And it was deep. Didn’t last long but felt good to hear. His laugh was like the rest of his personality. Mysterious. “I doubt you want to bump into me anywhere. Unless you have an endless dry-cleaning budget. Then, maybe.”

“No.” I assured him, “I don’t. But seeing you would be worth it.” In case it wasn’t abundantly obvious from the way I stared him down at the game.

“What’s your party pre-game look like?”

I finalized my outfit choice and threw it on the bed as I moved to the bathroom. “A couple of shots with my roommates. Nothing too serious.”

“Feel like skipping shots in favor of another coffee?”

“Coffee? Before the club?” My nose crinkled. “I mean, I guess it would have me energized. But—”

“It’s cool. We could go some other time.”

His words felt final. Like, he was about to find an excuse to get off the phone. Before he could offer one, I said, “If partying isn’t your thing, what is?”

I ran warm water over my washcloth and anticipated his response. I imagined his response would be like, “The library, or watching historical documentaries.” By no means did he look like he did either of those things. But he also didn’t look like he’d hang out with his homeboys playing video games.

“Would you believe it if I said I like to chill at Speak Out?”

And there it was. The surprise I wouldn’t have guessed. “The poetry lounge?”

“Yup. They do book readings. Have open mic. Pretty dope.”

Dwayne and Whitley didn’t have a ton of things in common. My parents also had different hobbies. I always hoped I’d be more like Quincy and Monica though, sharing a love of something with the man I shared my life with.

“Everything I learn about you surprises me.”

He challenged, “Everything?” And his voice sounded like a low growl.

“A political science major, who doesn’t party, reads textbooks at games, and enjoys open mic.” I watched my head nod in the mirror. A loose curl falling into my face. “Everything.”

“When you combine it all together, I guess it does paint an interesting picture of me.” Then he said, “What does your picture look like?”

I wiped the corners of my eyes, ran the towel down my cheek, and thought. *What does my picture look like?* “A finance major, with a love for the community, who cheers.”

“Okay, so something a little abstract.”

“Time for shots,” Lauren yelled as she banged on my door.

“Before you go... join me this week at Speak Out?”

“Will you be reciting a poem?”

“Let’s go...” Lauren’s voice made me close my eyes.

I wanted to hear his response, extend our conversation. If he would have offered I would have skipped the club to stay on the phone all night with him.

“I haven’t before, but I could have found some inspiration recently.”

Yeah, I was on that stay up all night and fall asleep on the phone thing in that moment.

Then a blood-curdling scream called my name again.

“Better go, sounds like your girls need you.”

My eyes rolled. “Sounds like it. Call me this week when you’re ready to get on that stage.”

His deep laughter was the last thing I heard before I ended the call.

Chapter Four

C haz

In four years on campus, I could count on both hands how many parties I attended. The number of clubs I could name near Hillside was less than that. But a few more minutes on the phone with Journey and I was about to scour my closet for something worthy of a night club. Something different than the hoodies, and sweats I rocked to class. Or the button ups and jeans I wore when I needed to change things up.

I would have dusted off my hard bottoms and edged up my beard for a chance to watch her dance. What I saw her do on the sidelines was a tease. And I wanted to see how her body moved to the beat of her favorite song. What her hips could do on the dancefloor. The wide grin as she cheered was for the game. I wanted to see the seductive look she'd give if I slid behind her.

But no, her roommate came knocking. Ended whatever back and forth we had going. Poured water all over the thoughts of getting out the house. Sizzled that little fire that started burning. I shouldn't be mad though. Because what would I look like at the club? A big, brown-skinned wallflower. That's what. I wouldn't ease up behind Journey on the dancefloor. Her hips would have to gyrate to my corner of the room, hide in the darkness, away from the crowd on the dancefloor.

Instead of our quiet dance in the corner of a club, I invited her to Speak

Out. Insinuated that I'd have a poem ready for her if she joined me. Never had I ever written more than the prose required in elementary school English. The lines of text in a haiku. Something about a gentle moonlight, and rustling trees. Enough for me to pass the assignment, but not enough to get Journey's attention on the stage of a poetry lounge.

No. I needed something better than that. I'd have to spit something profound.

I stared at the blank page of my notebook, in the back of class. I had nothing. Yeah, her beauty was worthy of words on paper. But something that rhymed? I was feeling like a kid trying to understand the meaning behind rhyming words. Like, smile, a mile. *One look of your smile, I'd travel a mile.* I shook my head and scribbled my pen over the paper.

Then my phone vibrated, and Dr. Martin's voice echoed across the room. Usually, I tapped into his lectures. Listened to every word he dropped about American politics. Like what he was saying was a verse, the truth, from the Bible itself. But each day that week, I couldn't focus on him. Or any other professors in my class.

"What is going on?" Dr. Martin's voice drowned out the thoughts I had of Journey.

Everyone around me had their phones in hand, scrolling the screen. I pulled mine out too. *Hillside SGA president Exposed.* My eyes bulged as Dr. Martin continued harassing us for a response.

"Wow," the girl in the front of the class uttered. "That can't be *them.*"

I scanned the article, picked out bits and pieces, until the whole thing came together for me. The SGA president, along with the VP, got caught in a cheating ring. Selling tests, and papers to underclassmen. "Damn." I tucked my phone away as the girl in front gave Dr. Martin her own rendition of the scandal.

"Oh," he leaned against his desk with his hand over his chin. "That can't be good." He looked around the class. "It's scandals in politics that can disrupt an entire system." He stood tall like the situation worked in perfectly with his lesson plan. "This is a perfect assignment. I want you to give me three scandals in American politics."

Someone blurted, "That's all," and the class laughed.

Dr. Martin dismissed us, or the rest of the class. He waited for me at the bottom of the steps. A wide stance as he stared at me. "Here's your chance."

I wanted to act like I had no idea what he was referring to. But the sooner

I got out the door, the better my chances were to run into Journey. So, I shook my head and continued my stride toward the door. “Dr. Martin, I’m not your guy.” He had his reason. His motto that he recited easily. But he didn’t understand I wasn’t nor would never be the person he thought could run for that office. “Ask someone else in the class to do it.” Okay, it was a little immature. Petty to put it off on someone else. But I didn’t have time to launch into a detailed explanation of why it wasn’t for me again. I wanted to leave the classroom, get to the courtyard.

“Listen,” he stared at me like anything he said would be a golden opportunity, “if they do a special election, the students will be open to something fresh. Administrators will be looking for a safe bet. Someone they can trust to ease them out of this mess we’re unfortunately in.” He reminded me, “How quickly do you think the state news will pick this up? Not long before our school is the laugh of the nation.”

“We’ve had presidents who have done worse.” I smirked. “I had to learn about ol’ Bill in elementary school. Know how awkward that was?” I tilted my head to the side.

Dr. Martin laughed. “I assume that’ll be one of the three scandals you’ll highlight.”

“How could I resist?” I pointed to the door, “I gotta go.”

Over my shoulder he yelled, “Consider it, Chaz.”

I didn’t think of the other two scandals I wanted to highlight. Didn’t hustle to the library to start my assignment. Or give his suggestion a second thought. I walked along the path in the courtyard. Neared the same area I saw Journey the last time we met on campus.

I didn’t see her at first, only a large butterfly flapping its wings in front of my face. I couldn’t be that corny that every beautiful thing God created reminded me of her. *Could I?* No, I was worse than that. I started thinking of words that rhymed with butterfly, and flapping wings. *Your beauty, like a butterfly, it’s wings flapping, make me want to do a... lapping.* “The hell?”

I shut my eyes and cringed. But when I re-opened them there she was. Sitting on a bench surrounded by people. The sun could have been shining extra bright, but it was like a spotlight illuminated only her. My legs had their own marching orders, stepping toward her. Every other part of me though? It pumped the breaks and tried to jerk me in the opposite direction. I couldn’t approach her in front of her homegirls. Step to her and have all eyes turn toward me. “Naw.”

I set my legs on a path toward the library. Walking across the courtyard at a safe distance away from her.

“Chaz.”

My name from her mouth re-calibrated my legs. My entire body got into formation and turned. I faced her and waited for her to speak again.

“Come here.” There was a look of excitement on her face that didn’t match the sheer panic in mine. She waved her hand toward me further summoning my body.

I couldn’t ignore her. All eyes were already on me. Waiting for my next move. So, I moved. In her direction. To the middle of the crowd of people around her. “What’s up, Journey?”

“I wanted to introduce you to my friends.” Their simple introduction included, “These are my girls.” And mine, a bit more distinct. “This is Chaz.” She rubbed her lips together before adding, “Someone I’d like to know.”

There were oohs and ahhs from all the girls standing around her. I didn’t see their reaction though because my eyes focused on Journey. The way her face slid into something less friendly, and more *seductive*?

“Chaz, nice to meet you.” I recognized the girl. From the first day I met Journey and standing beside her at the game. “I’m Nia. Journey’s roommate.”

Then another interrupted. “And I’m Lauren, her other roommate. Glad there’s no coffee around.” She was there on that fateful day too.

“We had history together sophomore year, was it?” The other girl wasn’t someone I recognized. Sophomore year felt like a decade ago. Especially since time was on a new continuum. One that slowed when Journey wasn’t around, and sped up when she was near. *Could I make that rhyme?*

“Where are you headed?”

As she spoke, my heart raced like I was running a mile. Trying to come in first place but failing miserably. “The library.”

There was a pause, as if time caught up to me, and didn’t want to leave me behind. “Well, this is awkward.” One of the girls asked, “Should we leave you two alone?”

“Ugh, naw. I’m going to get going.” I eyed her then looked back to Journey. “But if you are free tonight, can I take you to Speak Out?”

“I’m free after practice. So, sure.”

“I can pick you up around 7.”

Journey nodded her head, and I convinced time, my legs and my body to move again.

Chapter Five

Journey

They thought Chaz was sexy. But weird. And oddly enough, I didn't care. I didn't care that he looked like a fish out of water standing in front of my girls on campus. At least he wasn't trying to spit game to one of them in front of me. And his hyper-focus on me, that made the whole thing that much better.

Danielle said Chaz didn't look at her when she mentioned the history class. It wasn't a problem for me. Because the way he stared had me wanting to follow him to the library. To do one other thing I always dreamed of doing on campus.

Before I graduated, walked across the stage, and collected my diploma, I hoped to do it.

But to do all that, I had to open a book. To ensure I didn't forfeit my spot on the squad, I couldn't fail my test. To ensure I graduated I needed to study.

I had one hour after practice to get it done, and I tried hard to focus.

Very hard. But every word floated off the page and toted me with it. *Speak Out*, and the date with Chaz felt more appealing than investments. I needed to be solid on the stock market, and strategies. But for the life of me I couldn't get beyond the first two sentences on the page. I'd read them over and over a few times.

Chaz wasn't the only guy I daydreamed about. Not the only man who had me tripping when I should be studying. But he was the first who made the

distraction feel worth it.

The scrap piece of paper I should use to calculate investment returns, turned into a Chaz doodle. His name in bold, surrounded by hearts and flowers.

“Oh wow.” Lauren peeked over my shoulder. “Are we in middle school?”

“No.” I shoved the paper into my book and shut it. “I can’t focus though.”

“Ehm hmm... this guy has you all messed up.” She mocked, “Coffee dates, poetry clubs.” Her head tilted to the side. “Can’t say I blame you.”

Nia sauntered into the living room and flopped down across from us. “Who are we talking about? Lover boy?”

Lauren nodded. “The man who is about to have our girl wrapped around his dick.”

“Finger. The saying is finger.” I laughed.

“I said what I said.” Lauren held her head high as Nia co-signed.

“Whatever.” I mumbled. “I’m going to get dressed.”

I laid out a black t-shirt dress, a pair of sandals, and pulled my hair into a ponytail. I put on a little makeup and tried to think of every scene I’d ever watched in a movie. The ones where cute dates happen in a poetry lounge. Tried to compare my planned outfit with those. “It’ll work.” I nodded after puckering my lips.

I didn’t have long to get dressed. Only a few minutes if he was punctual. I was stepping into my sandals when I heard the knock at the front door. Lauren’s voice screaming my name.

“Coming,” I yelled in return. I shook my hands before leaving my room. When I pulled the door open, Chaz stood before it freshly shaved, a button-down shirt, and a pair of jeans. And he looked even more fuckable than he did on campus with his t-shirt and sweats. “Hey.”

“These are for you.” He stretched his arm out, and the large bouquet of flowers dangled before me.

“Wow.” I looked over my shoulder as I grabbed them. “Flowers.” I wriggled my brows at Lauren and then Nia. “They are beautiful.”

Lauren mumbled, “And she’s gone.”

“Come in.” I walked the flowers to the kitchen and found a vase to put the flowers into. We had a few. Only from the times we showered ourselves. “Flowers add a little umph to our place.”

Nia mocked, “Umph. Do we need umph?”

“Can’t hurt,” Chaz responded without making eye contact with her.

“Welp, there you go.” I laughed as I reached for his hand. “I’m ready.”

I didn’t expect the warmth of his hand to heat me like the sun in the middle of the day. I gulped as I led us out of the apartment. And as we walked down the stairs to his car, I wanted to fill the space with conversation. But the silence we were in felt comfortable.

He opened the passenger door for me and waited until I sat comfortably. Then he got behind the wheel. “You are going all out tonight.” I mentioned when he started pulling out of the parking spot.

“Mama taught me well.” He reached for the control on the radio and asked, “What type of music do you listen to?”

“Anything that’s trending. Rap, R&B, pop, whatever is being played non-stop at the club.”

His cheek crinkled when he frowned. “Give me a song.”

“Okay.” I tried to catch a beat, a lyric, hear a verse. Nothing. “Guess I can’t think of anything,” I finally said.

“Brain turned into mush all of a sudden?” He looked at me with his thick brows bunched together.

I pulled my lips into my mouth then said, “Something like that.” I didn’t admit it wasn’t a sudden response. My brain stopped functioning earlier when I saw him on campus. “There’s something about you that has me intrigued. So much so, I can’t think of anything else.” I hunched my shoulders although his eyes focused on the road ahead. “I guess.”

“Has to be hard for someone who has classes. Cheerleading. And anything else you have going on.” Then he stopped. “You know, I assume you don’t or you wouldn’t be here. But is there someone who’d be mad I’m taking you to a poetry club? Someone who would get pissed if I stood on stage and highlighted your beauty?”

It was laughable. Or pathetic. One of them. But the answer was a strong, “No. And I’m not sure if that’s notable or not.”

“For me, it makes my path forward a little less challenging.”

“You think?”

He turned toward me, and his eyes were answer enough. Still, he said, “At least I don’t have to convince you I’m better than another man. I only have to show you I’m worth your time.”

“Worth my time...” I mouthed and the words felt heavy on my lips. Weighed on my shoulders and beat on my chest. “Last thing either of us wants to do is waste our time.”

“Exactly.” He pulled into the parking lot of Speak Out. Before I could open my door he already banked an extra few hours of my time. “I got that.”

I removed my hand from the door and waited for him to open it. Okay, so if he competed against any other man he’d be winning, hands down. Those ragamuffins didn’t think twice about my car door. Only reason they opened a door to a building was because they needed to walk through.

“C’mon,” he said with his hand on my lower back.

Something about him made me feel safe. Supported. Secure. But when we got inside, and he pulled out my chair, waited for me to get comfortable, it was a sealed deal.

“Are you drinking?” He asked as I stared at the menu.

“I shouldn’t. I have a test tomorrow.”

His lips curled up and he tilted his head. “Should we be here?”

I looked around. To the stage then back to him. “Why not?”

“Test. Tomorrow.” His words were subtle but direct.

“It’s fine. We’re good.”

“Last thing I want to do is further distract you.” But the look on his face. The way his eyes scanned my body, and his lip tugged between his teeth. How could he be anything but the biggest distraction?

I wouldn’t be able to think about portfolios, and stock symbols. Trends or short selling. That look would be the one thing plaguing my thoughts. “It could be too late for that.”

Someone stood on the stage, announcing the next poet. “This next poet to the stage.” She paused. “As many words as I could use to describe her. They’d be antonyms in comparison to her presence.” The crowd responded with finger snaps. “So, sit back and let her arrangement of the alphabet make you wonder if you ever learned the letters correctly.”

My mouth spread into a wide smile, and I leaned across the table. “I see why you like it here.” It wasn’t the chants or the cheers I shouted out at a game. The numerical theories that haunted me inside my textbooks. It wasn’t a dude trying to snatch my attention on campus with a wack pick-up line. It was a dance with my intellect that had me bubbling inside.

“It can be dope. Sprite? Wings, fries. Or something less messy?”

“If you promise me you won’t spill it on me, it’ll work.” I snickered.

“A spilled drink got us here though.” He turned to the server and ordered.

Between the poet who made me question my existence in the room, and the guy who reminded me it was my existence that others should cherish, me

and Chaz traded secrets. At least he told me about his past life, before stepping on Hillside.

“And they didn’t want you to go to an HBCU?” My mouth hung open. “My parents met here,” I finally admitted.

“A Black legacy. I like that.” He shared, “I’d want my kids, grand-kids, and everyone after to walk this campus. Better if my wife...”

I don’t know what he said after that. All I could imagine was him down on one knee. Making that little dream of mine a reality.

Light tapping on the table brought me back. Something of his own beat before he asked, “What made you pick finance?” His eyes were on me and not the guy on stage.

“My dad has his own business. Ever since I could remember he had me in his office counting money. The older I got, the more he involved me. I thought of all the things I could do, and that was the most natural.”

“So, when I’m making pennies from working a campaign, you’ll be able to help me maximize my income?”

“Why would governor, or president be making pennies?” I assumed as a political science major he had big aspirations.

“No. I want to work behind the scenes.” It made sense from what I knew about him. How laid back he was. “Eventually I could get on a big campaign, work for someone who has a huge budget. But till then, it’ll be peanuts.” He crooked his head to the side and asked, “Would that bother you?”

“If you were hiding behind your potential. Then yeah. I might be a little upset.”

“My potential.” He wiped his hand across a napkin. “Think you know enough about me to measure my potential?”

“Intelligent. Attractive. Kind. Charming. Those qualities seem like they’d take you where you need to be.”

“Attractive?” He licked his lips. “I don’t think anyone is winning elections based on their looks.”

“But it helps.”

“My professor thinks I should run for SGA president.”

Because our scheming ass president and vice president left a vacancy. “And what do you think?”

“It’ll be like rolling a boulder uphill to get votes. And” he wagged his head then turned toward the stage, “being in the spotlight isn’t my thing.”

I joked, “So, you won’t be reciting a poem for me on stage?”

His deep stare. The way he observed every line of my face before his turned up into a slight smile. “Not tonight.”

“Too bad.” I stared at the woman on stage before looking at him thoughtfully. “I agree with your professor.” It was a proclamation I could make. Based on his character. “At the least I don’t suspect you’ll get wrapped up in any sort of scandal.”

He shook his head. “Doubt people will be running to vote for me because I’m the lesser of two evils.”

I tilted my head to the side. “We’ve seen that be the case in many presidential elections.”

That must have piqued something inside of him because the way he licked his lips like he wanted to devour me. I wiped the back of my neck.

“You’re right,” he whispered.

“But I don’t suspect it would come easy, anything worth having ever is.”

“In short, you’re telling me I’m going to have to work to have you.”

The side of my lip quirked up and I said, “Oh that’s a given, baby.”

His forearms rested on the table. The veins protruding as he adjusted. “I’m willing to work for you.”

That made my pussy flutter. But I wanted to know, “And are you willing to work for you? To not fade into the shadows? To let people hear your voice?”

He cringed. “Sounds bleak.”

I looked up to the stage. The words coming from the girl’s mouth poured out smoothly. Like salve to a wound. As I listened to the few lines of her poem, I felt at ease. “What will you do to bring back the hope?”

The girl stepped down from the stage, and the hostess took the mic. Announcing, “And that’s it for tonight. Let’s give it up for these brave souls.”

“Hope, huh?” He reached across the table and took my hand. “I’ll think about it. Who knows, maybe someone will vote for the unknown guy they hardly see on campus.”

I rubbed my finger against the back of his hand. “See, that’s where I can help. I happen to know a few people.” I frowned. “Including the past president. Give me the word, and I’ll volunteer to campaign for you.”

He raised my hand to his lips, but they didn’t touch. “You’d do that for me? Someone you recently met.”

“I may have to understand what you plan to do for the university.” In the four years on campus, I didn’t help any other student campaign. I always

watched the chaos unfold. Flyers, fundraisers, people standing in front of classrooms shouting out the candidate's name. I could never decide on one side or the other, so I stayed neutral.

His lips grazed my knuckles, then he said, "I can do that. But for tonight, I should get you home. Can't have you slipping on your test tomorrow." Before I could stand he had his hand on the back of my chair, helping me out of my seat. Wrapping our hands together as he led us out of the lounge.

I sank into his passenger seat and waited for him to get in on his side. Before he pulled out of the parking lot I said, "I thoroughly enjoyed myself tonight."

"Good, then that means we can go on another date?"

I wanted to scream, "Abso-fucking-lutely." But I nodded. "I'd like that." Trying not to give him too much enthusiasm.

He leaned in closer, wrapped his hand around the back of my head and tilted me forward until our lips connected. If his stare had me melting before, his lips completely decimated me. Remnants blasting from the inside out. I didn't want the kiss to ever end. And although I was losing my breath, I held it a little longer when the kiss ended. Kept my eyes closed and didn't move. I felt his lips on mine once again. A soft peck that sent bits of me flying into the universe.

Chapter Six

C haz

I'd never climbed a mountain before. Pushing a boulder up a hill seemed like a task I'd never want to endure. But there I was in the SGA office standing in a short line. Because the school announced the special election for president and vice president.

If I was going to run, I needed to collect the requirements. To ensure I met the qualifications, if I wanted to continue up that hill.

Students and staff filled the office, dressed in suit jackets, and slacks. Giving their best representation of the school. Whereas I stood in the back of the line with a t-shirt and sweats. Dressing in a suit, wearing slacks on campus isn't something I'd get excited about.

After graduation though, it'd likely be my world. *So might as well start now.*

As I neared the desk, to collect the packet, my date with Journey replayed. The question she asked, "What do you plan to do for the university." Most ideas I had to improve the community started with the greater community—not specifically for college students, or our university.

The things like improving the economics, and voter engagement. Ensuring people had the right to understand the candidates was all applicable though. Not likely something to get them excited about me though.

The poster, from the past president, still hung on the wall. The pillars of

his platform outlined—improve café hours, improve parking relations, and game day visibility. I didn't know what the last one meant, but all were comical. I thought back to the year before and tried to remember if I voted for that guy. If I did, I can't imagine what the other person's plans were.

"Pretty terrible, huh?" The guy in front of me pointed to the poster. "We should have known he wouldn't take the role seriously."

"What is game day visibility anyway?" I smirked. "And why would that make the top 3?"

We shared a laugh before he moved forward. "I mean, if that's the top 3 I'm afraid to see what the rest of his pillars contained." He stretched his hand out. "I'm Dean, by the way." It was slick. Something I'd see someone who was keen on running for office do. Because they networked, never missed an opportunity to meet someone new.

"Dean, I'm Chaz, nice to meet you." I studied his face before asking, "So you want to be the new SGA president?"

That's when he cleared his throat, straightened his back, and looked at me like he was standing behind a podium. "I'd be a damn good one."

Thankfully it was his turn to collect the package and move on. Talking to him made me question why I was there. The ringing phone in my pocket quickly reminded me. "Journey, hey."

"I wanted to let you know our date last night had zero negative impact on my test taking skills." Like she did on the sidelines, her voice dripped in confidence, enthusiasm.

"Good, girl." I asked, "How are you celebrating?"

"Well—"

"Sir, do you want this?" The girl behind the desk had her hand outstretched. The packet hovering between us. "Or did you have a question?"

I pulled my phone away and said, "I want it." I slipped it out of her grip and thanked her. As I walked away I said, "Well, did you have plans?"

"Wait." I didn't think it was possible for her voice to raise an octave, but it did. "Where are you?"

"Leaving the SGA office." I planned on taking the packet home, scouring it over. Then deciding before uttering to a single soul I was considering it.

I heard clapping and what sounded like a chant for the football team before she said, "You are going to be amazing." Her optimism countered my pessimism in a great way. Somewhere between us, there was enough water in the glass to quench anyone's thirst. "How can I help?"

But then I had to pour a little of the water out. “I haven’t decided for sure, yet. Picked up the package to review the requirements. But more than anything, I appreciate your nudge of support. If I decide to run, I’d be happy to have you on my side.”

“On your side, huh...”

I repeated it back, and it did sound a little more intimate than I intended. Still, if she was down, I’d have her by my side for sure.

“You know,” she started speaking and whatever it was, if I knew it already, I’d learn it a few more times, “I’ve stayed out of the school’s political scene. But you genuinely want to leave the school better than you found it. And even if one of my besties runs against you, I’m comfortable supporting you.”

“That’s like an endorsement from the greatest president of all time,” I joked. “But how do you know I genuinely want to leave the school better than I found it.”

“Because you aren’t worried about who you will impress along the way. It doesn’t seem like you are in this to win friends. Expand your circle. Get noticed outside of school.”

The thought made my stomach turn. “Definitely don’t want that.”

“See...”

If knowing Journey for a couple of weeks was any hint, my senior year was about to change my life. It’d easily be the highlight of my four years on campus. “You never said how you were going to celebrate.” I didn’t wait for her response though. I offered, “Would you mind if I pick you up for an impromptu date?”

She repeated, “An impromptu date. In the middle of the day?”

I worried she’d turn me down.

And she didn’t directly, but she did say, “I am on my way to practice now. But after that I’m down.”

“You practice at the gym?” Once she confirmed I asked, “And what time is it over?”

“Five.”

Enough time for me to scour the package, and list out the pros and cons. “Not exactly impromptu anymore, but it still works.”

“It does,” she said before hanging up.

Instead of going home with the packet, I made my way across campus to the library. Passing students, and wondering how I could introduce myself, if

necessary. Thinking what things would excite them. What would convince them to vote Chaz Brown for president. I shook my head though. The sound of me as president was crazy.

And when I sat down with the packet, in the back of the library, I realized the qualifications were too. Quite literally anyone who wanted to run could if they stepped foot on campus. Democracy at its finest. Anyone is qualified to lead the people if the people deem them qualified. *Great.*

I had an hour until Journey finished practice. Instead of pulling my laptop out and working on an assignment I left. I ran to the store to grab a couple of things to have ready for our little *impromptu date.*

I parked outside of the gym and waited. As soon as I saw her walk out, I called her phone. "I'm here."

Her head swiveled side to side as I gave her instructions to find me. I stepped out as she neared. The smile on her face was as wide as I'd seen it. "Thought we'd meet up after I showered and didn't smell like a couple of hours of jumping around."

I didn't care if she smelled like fresh lilac, or an old gym bag. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her toward me. The back of her shirt was wet, but it didn't matter, I held her close anyway. "I'm not a stickler for perfection. I dance with reality."

Our embrace caught the attention of some of the other cheerleaders. And I heard them cheering us on when she stepped up on her tippy toes and brushed her lips against mine. Then loud claps when I let my tongue slip into her mouth. When we pulled away, there was a crowd standing off to the side watching us. Journey rested her head against my chest and sighed.

I tilted her chin up and asked, "I hope you don't mind them seeing us like this."

Her response came by way of another kiss. One that was a little deeper than the first. It snatched my breath in the process and if that was the last breath I ever took, I prepared for my consequences. Then she pulled away, trailed her finger against my lips and said, "I don't mind."

"Shit that was sexy," one of them shouted at us and Journey laughed.

"So, this impromptu date. What are we doing?" She tugged on the strap of her bag, and I took it from her.

"Thought we could keep it simple." I opened the car door and dropped her bag on the seat before grabbing the flowers. "These are for you."

She raised them to her nose and said, "Thank you."

Then I grabbed the super-size platter of sushi and asked, “Should have asked if you like this...”

Her eyes stretched wide as her body rocked side to side. “You may just be my favorite person.”

“Sorry to everyone else I knocked down the list.” I laughed and closed the car door. “Tell me if I keep that spot after asking you to sit on my trunk and enjoy sushi with me.”

She cringed. “The trunk?” When she didn’t budge I sat the platter down and wrapped my hands around her waist. Then I placed her beside the sushi. “But there isn’t room for you.”

I nudged her legs open and said, “There’s plenty.” I scooped up a piece of sushi and raised it to her mouth. “It’s not from the best spot in Hill Mount, but it’s not bad.”

Her lips wrapped around it, but I didn’t move my fingers from her lips. “Ehmm...”

I could have fed her the entire platter to hear that moan escape her mouth. Not only was it sexual but satisfying to know I hit her spot.

“Chaz,” her eyes fell to her lap, “what happened in your past relationships?”

If I had to write a manifesto, it’d be short. A single line would suffice. “Would you find it strange that there haven’t been any?” I clarified, “Not officially.” I had dates to homecoming, and prom in high school. Took a few chicks out on campus. But none made it beyond that.

Journey’s eyes met mine. “Not entirely. Your shy guy demeanor gives me that vibe.”

“Shy guy?” I flinched. “I don’t know if that describes me as much as someone who minds his business.”

She laughed. “Minds your business. Okay.” Her hand rested on my cheek. “It’s not a bad thing. I like it. And the way you treat me, I’d take shy over an overtly outgoing guy.”

“Then your past relationships, what happened?” I didn’t know if it was safe to hear about her past. I’d want to find any guy on the planet who didn’t treasure her.

When her lips twisted, I knew it wasn’t something I wanted to hear. “Well, the last guy had me and about two other girls I later learned about.”

My hands balled into a fist. “Greedy mother-fucker.”

Journey moaned. “Ehmmm... I don’t know, I might like this savage Chaz

as much as the shy one.”

“I’d prefer to keep that side tucked away.” I rubbed my hands against her thighs, “But trust, along as I’m around, I won’t tolerate anyone mistreating you.”

Her legs spread wider, and she leaned into me. “You, Chaz, are trouble.”
And she was my reciprocal.

Chapter Seven

Journey

There wasn't one thing I could find wrong with Chaz. Lauren reminded me, "In the beginning nothing ever goes wrong. But remember, nobody is perfect."

"What if there's someone who is perfect *for me*?" I asked as we walked through the community center. Every Saturday morning, we volunteered. Well, I volunteered, and I drug her along with me. "Is it possible for me to find beauty in his flaws?"

Lauren sighed. "Knowing you, it's highly likely. For the rest of us not living in Romancelandia, not as much."

As the day's instructor stood in front of the room, I whispered, "He's kind, and can kiss. Has a little grit to him."

Her eyebrows arched and she leaned on her hand. "Grit? The guy who finds joy at the library?"

"Hey," I said a little too loud interrupting the instructor. "There's nothing wrong with being studious."

Lauren laughed. "The nerdy guy and the cheerleader. Couldn't get more like a fairytale if someone wrote it."

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. "Whatever, Lauren."

"And speaking of Mr. Perfect, how did he skip out on this volunteer

opportunity?” Her head tilted sideways. “This seems like something he’d enjoy. Or you’d make sure he got involved with.”

I scrunched my nose as I looked around. Financial literacy had nothing to do with Lauren’s English major and that’s why she wasn’t thrilled to be there. It didn’t have anything to do with political science either, and I had no idea if volunteering was his thing.

“If not,” Lauren boasted, “Would it be a flaw you found *beautiful*?”

I pulled my phone from my pocket and said, “Guess we’ll see.” I walked to the corner of the room so I wouldn’t distract the participants. As soon as Chaz answered, I asked, “Are you busy?”

He had that morning rasp in his voice like he wasn’t fully awake. “It’s too early to be busy.”

“How about to volunteer?” If he was anything like Lauren and Nia he was rolling his eyes. But I hoped, there was a smile on his face. I wasn’t ready to consider his rejection a flaw.

“Volunteer? When?”

Okay, not a complete rejection. “Now.” I held my breath waiting for him to say anything.

“It’s not my thing.”

When he said that about partying, I thought it was cool. But about volunteering? I didn’t want to hate it. I wanted so badly to find it beautiful. Wanted to find some redeeming quality in his reasoning. So, I asked, “Why not? I’d think someone in public service would find volunteering important.”

I heard shuffling, grumbling, then, “You’re right. It’s important.”

That was it. No renegeing on his initial statement. “So, want to join me?” I held out hope. That we could keep his track record clean. That there wouldn’t be a reason for me to contemplate all the many reasons I could think to find him imperfect. “If you come, there’ll be time for me to help you brainstorm ideas for your campaign. I know you haven’t decided yet, but there’s only a week for me to show everyone what I see in you.”

“All you had to say is you wanted me there with you. Shoot me the address and I’m on my way.”

Redeemed.

“Sending it now.” All eyes looked my way as I pulled the phone from my ear.

Lauren blurted, “He’s fucking perfect? Isn’t he?”

“Something like that.” I winked.

Most Saturdays, I hated how long the instruction took before people could start the lesson. But when Chaz walked in, I was glad the woman was still in front of the room on point three of five.

Our eyes connected, and I raised a finger. I navigated the room until I stood in front of him. Pulled him by the hand and found a corner where we wouldn't disrupt anyone.

"What is this?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I was expecting Hillside students, or little kids. Not..."

"Grown adults?" I hunched my shoulders. "This is a program for the community to learn financial literacy. People come in to discuss budgets, investing, and tax implications."

He uttered, "Economic improvement." He nodded. "I like it."

I smiled. "Me too." I pointed to a couple of chairs and said, "Let's sit. We have a bit before she finishes, and they need our help."

"Can I..." he looked behind me first, "have this first." He leaned forward and kissed my lips.

My arms wrapped around his neck, and I deepened the kiss. For the shy guy, with no relationship experience, his kissing did everything it needed to do when it needed to do it. "Damn," I whispered when he pulled away.

He rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Damn is right."

With my eyes on him, I couldn't remember what it was I wanted to discuss. Kissing him till the instructor reached point number five could replace whatever it was. I rubbed a hand across my forehead. "There was something I wanted to talk about."

"Campaign?" There was a satisfied grin on his face.

"Campaign," I pointed at him, "right. I know you haven't decided yet, but there's only a week before the special election. Seven days for the students to love and respect you, for them to check the box next to your name."

"If I run, what do you think that'll look like? I imagine I'd need longer than a week to make someone fall in love with me..."

Our eyes connected and I counted back the days. From the coffee spill, to then. A little over two weeks. "You'd be surprised." I shifted in the seat then said, "You'll need a running mate. Someone who has the same aspirations, someone trustworthy like you."

"Can't think of a single soul." He rubbed his hands down his leg. "Unless you plan on running."

It'd be hard for me to give him a hard no. Especially if I was trying to

convince him to run himself. So, I tried an easy one instead. “How about someone from your major. I imagine they would like to see themselves on a local, state, or national ballot one day. They can start here, on campus.”

It was cute when his nose scrunched up. The way his eyes crinkled. “I’ll have to think about it.”

I reminded him, “We don’t have long.” On to the next thing. “And because you are running for SGA president, you’ll need more than the senior class’s support. You’ll have to get out and meet the underclassmen too.”

Sheer panic replaced the cuteness. Behind us, I heard shuffling, and no longer the monotonous voice of the instructor.

“I’m not sure about all this,” he said with a deepening frown. “Kissing up to people for their vote.” He stared straight ahead. “That’s the part of political campaigns I like the least.”

“It’ll have to be your thing.” I joked, “Unless you think you can be SGA president from your apartment. Hide out and never be seen.” I emphasized, “It’s not only the campaign that you need to be out for. *When* you become president we’ll need to see you.”

“Ha. When.” He stood from his seat, “I see *you*.” He winked.

People moved into groups, and I said, “In these groups, we answer questions. Help with budgets. Or discuss options from what they learned today.”

He grabbed my elbow and leaned in close to my ear. “I’m not a finance guru. And somebody talked through the lecture. So...”

So? Had me heated. Ready to grab him and lead us back to the corner. “If you can’t piece it together I won’t be far from you.”

Lauren’s eyes were on me as I walked away. She said, “Okay. Perfect. Sign me up.” She hardly ever paid attention to the lesson.

I laughed and walked to a group of middle-aged women. They were trying to budget for their households—growing children, after-school activities, and unexpected events. I stressed, “Although I can’t relate. The key to any budget is to expect the unexpected. And you can do that by allotting money for savings. That could mean, decreasing other areas. Eating out less or finding grocery store coupons.”

Heads were nodding, and the look of fear started to fade away. I walked around the room and helped other groups with similar questions. When our time was up, as people gathered their stuff to leave, Chaz stood beside me.

“What’s next?” he asked.

Lauren boasted, “We take our asses home and enjoy the rest of our Saturday.”

“Not mad at that.” Chaz looked down to me. “You have plans tonight?”

“Journey, Lauren...” the instructor stood in front of us. “And?”

I offered, “Ms. Deluca, this is Chaz Brown, a senior political science major at Hillside.”

She outstretched her hand to him. “Thank you all for being here. I know it isn’t the easiest way to start your weekend, but I’m glad you can help.”

Lauren smacked her lips. “You got that right.” Then she softened. “But it is nice to see how much this is helping them. How it’ll impact their families. The community in general.”

Ms. Deluca pointed. “Exactly.”

After she walked away, we walked outside. In front of my car, I wrapped my arms around Chaz’s waist. “I know this wasn’t your thing, but thanks for coming out.”

“It wasn’t that bad actually.” He pulled me closer, wrapped his arms a little tighter around me. “You know, you’d be a good first lady.” He laughed. “That introduction was superb.”

I looked up at him and asked, “Think so? Does that mean you want me by your side?”

He leaned down and whispered, “More than I want to campaign next week.”

I pulled away and said, “That’s not hard to beat.”

Chapter Eight

C haz The arms of the blazer fit a little snug around my arms. The tie around my neck irritated my throat. And the slacks were nowhere as comfortable as my sweats. My dick needed space to roam and had none.

I stood in the mirror and stared at myself. Knowing it was me staring back, I still didn't recognize me. The fresh fade, and edged beard were a nice touch. But rubbing my hand down the sleeves of the blazer reminded me how uncomfortable it was to be buttoned up.

"Shit." The day of baggie clothes and comfortability would be behind me if I won the election. Like Journey said, I couldn't operate SGA from the apartment. Although I would have done everything in my power to make that a thing. I knew I had to get out on campus and represent the position well. I knew that much from years of studying politics. There was a level of expectation put on politicians that wasn't associated with a regular ass person like *me*.

The entire night before I went back and forth about the decision. I completed the online application but wouldn't hit submit. Couldn't hit submit until the last possible minute. There was something about giving up *me* that didn't sit right. The enthusiasm Journey had for the events, the campaigning, *all you are going to do for Hillside*, was admirable. But I couldn't match it.

My running mate, a woman from Dr. Martin's class would have been a good fit for the office. And helping her win appealed to me more. Like me, she didn't want the main position either. She never wanted to campaign or help anyone else. She wanted to be an analyst. Talk about the odds of someone winning, the breakdowns of the voter block. But holding a seat

wasn't something she wanted.

For our ticket, she predicted a twenty-five percent chance we'd win. And that's without knowing for sure who was running against us.

"What?" Marcus' voice boomed behind me. "A suit?" He laughed. "What's the occasion?"

I turned from the mirror and said, "Time to campaign." Tension clenched my jaw. "I guess."

I tugged on the side of the blazer and said, "This is for shaking hands in the cafeteria after convocation. Getting out to meet the underclassmen."

The blank look on his face solidified everything I felt on the inside. "I'd never thought I'd see the day." He reminisced on freshman year. "Remember when we had to wear suits that first week of school?"

I sighed. "And what was the point in that?" If I was a petty political type, I'd announce I was going to work with the administration to scrap that.

"And here you are four years later, in a suit, not complaining." He snickered. "My how things change."

I pulled the knot of the tie and said, "Not complaining is a stretch. But Professor Martin had a point. The only way to assure nothing changes is to sit back and watch."

Marcus leaned against my door and crossed his arms over his chest. Sucked his teeth. "Didn't realize you were passionate about anything changing on campus."

"I wasn't. But whatever I do after Hillside can start now. All these students will be out in the world one day. Wherever I end up, it's likely a constituent will be a graduate of here."

He laughed. "That's debatable. Have you heard about the graduation rate here? You should make that a talking point." He cringed. "Whatever it is that has you running, I know you could make a difference. But..."

I knew Marcus was about to drop something. He had that look on his face like he'd spent the night contemplating life. Woke up and still had no answers for why he was here.

"Are you sure Professor Martin was the only one who influenced you to throw your hat in the ring?"

He wasn't. I admitted, "Journey had a few encouraging words too." I moved toward the kitchen and Marcus followed.

"So, what's up with you two?"

I grabbed a water from the fridge and didn't answer until I swallowed half

the bottle. “We’ve been kicking it. She’s cool. We get along.”

“Sounds like there’s a lingering but somewhere.” He dipped his head and placed a hand over his eyes. “Where’s it at?”

“You’re a fool, man.” I laughed. “But... I’m not sure I can keep up with her. She’s outgoing, overly optimistic, and has a huge group of friends.” I smirked. “She’s a cheerleader for God’s sake.”

“You might not have to keep up. She finds something intriguing in your differences apparently. How many people would go out of their way to help with the impossible?”

My eyes narrowed. “The impossible?”

“Convincing students at Hillside to vote for a guy they hardly know. Someone they don’t realize goes to Hillside. A man who would rather kick it at the house than party at a club. This guy who—”

“Alright.” I held my hand up. “I get it. The impossible.” I shrug. “The worst that could happen is they vote for the other person.” In my eyes, voting was the winner. If we could get every student to vote in the election, that was half the battle.

Marcus grunted, “Or the worst that could happen is they vote for you.”

I finished the bottle of water, looked him in the eye and said, “It’ll be a change for me for sure.”

Marcus stayed behind as I headed to campus. Driving to the cafeteria, campaign signs lined the road. I’d need those too, didn’t talk to Journey about them, but then I saw my name. In bold, blue letters—Chaz Brown the Only Option for Change. *When’d I get a campaign slogan?*

I parked in front of the cafeteria and stayed in the car. The thought of calling the whole thing off crossed my mind more than I could admit. But I knew somewhere inside the café, Journey was waiting for me.

The cafeteria wasn’t somewhere I frequented often. When I moved off campus, I found other places to eat. Avoided the barrage of freshmen hanging out in front of the buffet. Walking inside felt like a blast from the past. The noise was as loud, the tables as crowded, and the smell of fried chicken as mouth-watering. The one thing I missed about eating there.

“Chaz,” I heard my name from the middle of the room. A group of people surrounded what looked like the cheerleaders in full uniform.

I walked their direction and got nudged to the middle. “Hey,” I said when I saw Journey. “How are you?”

The people surrounding her didn’t concern me. The guys trying to get

close could wait. I ignored her squad holding flyers too.

“I’m good,” she tugged on the lapel of my blazer. “You clean up well, Mr. Brown.” She winked before asking, “Ready to kiss babies?”

“Kissing babies is the easy part.” I leaned in closer. “It’s convincing the adults to vote that is hard.”

“Good thing we already hyped them up. They are ready to meet you.” She smiled before spinning me around to face them. “And here is your candidate for SGA president. Ask him anything you need, but whatever you do remember next week, when you vote, vote for Chaz Brown.”

I cleared my throat, prepared to detail my plans. Outline my five pillared program. Tell each student standing before me how I planned to make a difference in my last year at Hillside.

There were no questions though. Not even one. I shook a couple of hands. Had a few pats on the back, but they were only interested in getting close to the cheerleaders. Eyes bulging, mouths open, they couldn’t care less about me, or an election.

I tugged Journey to my side and said, “I’m not sure this is going to work.” She frowned. “Why wouldn’t it?”

“Because” I looked to the guys and lowered my voice, “they haven’t heard anything about me.”

“But” she defended, “now they know you exist. There’s a debate at the end of the week. If they care to know more, they’ll attend.” She lifted a flyer in front of me. “We got the week’s events printed on your flyer.”

“Chaz Brown the only option for change,” I read out loud. “Who came up with that?”

She laughed. “One of the girls. We were up all night ensuring you had everything you needed to kick off a successful week.”

“Damn. Meanwhile, I spent the night contemplating if I wanted to do this.” I got close to her ear and said, “There aren’t any babies around here to kiss. Think I could kiss you instead?”

She placed a hand on my chest and said, “Anytime. Anywhere.”

The time was then, and the place was there.

Chapter Nine

Journey

Chaz's campaign was my first and last. By day seven of corralling the entire school around him, I was over every talking point we came up with. I didn't want to hold another flyer or hear another opponent's rebuttal.

Unless, of course, Chaz decided to run for governor, congressman, or president one day. Then of course, I'd be ready with the flyers, the slogans, and talking points. I'd stand beside him all day, watching with admiration as his eyes lit up talking change.

His eyes looked nothing like amusement as we stood on campus though. They wouldn't announce the final results until eight o'clock. It wasn't like Amya, his vice president, said where we'd get numbers throughout the day. Have updates and almost know for certain if Chaz was our next SGA president. She informed us that was for sophisticated systems. Not a college election.

I don't know which one would calm my nerves more. Getting a play-by-play update or waiting till the very end for the final announcement. As I rung my fingers together and paced the small circle available to me, I thought the *sophisticated option* would be much better. I tried to hold it together for Chaz though, kept the assumptions to myself. Most people I saw voting that day confirmed they voted for him. I didn't let him know that. In case, well, things didn't go his way.

“This is taking forever,” Nia stood behind me watching the crowd grow. “Can they do this already. They tallying votes by hand?”

Chaz turned and responded, “If it’s close, it could require a hand count.”

My stomach churned. “A hand count?” With the ten thousand students on campus, I imagined we’d be there all night.

He pulled my hand from my mouth where I started to bite on the tip of my fingernail. “It’s cool. Win or lose, you might have a career in campaigns yourself.”

I huffed. “Me?” I shook my head. “Not at all.” Then I reneged, told him, “Unless you plan on running for state or national office, count me out.”

His eyes danced across the courtyard where the stage remained empty. “I don’t know about that now.”

“Hey,” I thought about the busy week we had, “Did you have a chance to write an acceptance speech? Do you know what you’ll say when you go up to the mic?”

We spent a full day preparing for the debate. Hours drilling him with questions. And his appearance on stage showed his preparation paid off. He was the most interesting, informed candidate up there.

But the bug-eyed looked he was giving me made me think we wouldn’t have a repeat scenario. “I didn’t have time.”

Amya cleared her throat. “I have one. We can go up there together.”

Thank God for her. The boulder on my shoulders didn’t roll away, but it got a little lighter. “Okay, you got this. The two of you will have a great partnership.” I smiled at her. “Glad we convinced you to join the team.”

She snickered. “I’m still out on that decision. I’ll let you know at the end of the year what I think about it.”

“Bet,” I nodded.

The crowd hushed as we watched the dean of students take the stage. My heart pounded harder than it did when I held my Hillside acceptance letter in my hand. More than when I waited to hear I made the cheer squad. My palms sweated, and I could hardly hear through the thumping sound in my ears.

But I felt when Chaz’s arms wrapped around me. His soft whisper burst through the sound in my ear, and I heard him say, “We did it.”

“You did what?” I screamed. “You won?”

“We should go up there,” Amya stood beside us urging Chaz to let me go. “Say something before everyone clears out.”

“Yes,” I wiped a delinquent tear from my cheek. “Go.” My hands covered

my mouth as the two of them made their way to the stage. A week before, nobody would have known who it was standing up there. But that night, the crowd chanted his name. Like Chaz and Amya were celebrities. “They did it,” was all I could say repeatedly. “They fucking did it.”

A hand rested on my shoulder, and Nia’s head leaned closer. “You pulled it off. You made the shyest guy on campus popular. You drug him from his shell and got him out here for everyone to know. Damn good job, Journey.”

I wiped a few more tears and turned to her. “And thanks to you all for helping me. This wasn’t easy in the slightest way.”

On the other side of me, Lauren broke down the side effects of my good deed. “Are you ready for girls to be all over your man?”

I frowned and asked, “What?”

She nudged her head toward the stage. “He’s intelligent, sexy, and now out in these streets.” Her eyes stretched. “Before Chaz was your little hidden gem, and now everyone on campus knows him. He’s about to be on every woman’s radar.”

Nia smacked her lips. “And you know these chicks don’t give a damn whether a man is in a relationship or not...”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “But we aren’t in a relationship.”

Lauren rubbed her hand down my arm. “That’s worse.”

I tuned out Nia, and Lauren, going back and forth about the scandalous ways of some of the people on campus. I focused on Chaz, and Amya, speaking on stage. I only remembered being that proud about one other election in life. It happened when I was young, but the energy from it was as palpable as it was that night in Hillside’s courtyard.

When they left the stage, and the crowd cleared, I found Chaz again. “Do they whisk you off to a confidential meeting? Prep you on all the Presidential business or do you have one night to celebrate?”

He looked over his shoulder. “If that celebration looks like me and you, by ourselves, somewhere quiet I can ditch whatever anyone else planned for me.”

“Your place or mine?”

He intertwined our fingers and said, “Let’s go to mine.”

“You know...” Once we were on our way I said, “My roommates think you are about to have panties thrown at you left and right. Every chick on campus knows your name now and will recognize what you’ve been trying to hide for four years.”

He tapped his hand against the steering wheel before turning his head toward me. There was a blank look on his face when he said, “Nothing changes with me. I don’t want all that attention.”

That was both good and bad. He didn’t mention that the other girls didn’t matter because there was *me*. The obvious choice in his passenger seat. The woman who was ready to be his first lady, hit the campaign trail, and support him in all his endeavors.

That boulder that rolled away when they announced him the winner, it was back. A little heavier too. The joy in my face drained and I stared at my fingers in my lap.

“Hey.” He placed his hand on top of mine. “No matter what. How many pairs of dirty draws get thrown at me. How many chicks think they want to know me. It doesn’t matter. I hope I have my first lady already.”

That next breath exhaled easy. The inhale that followed was like fresh air floated through his car. I turned sideways and asked, “Is that an official statement from the office of the president, or...”

His fresh shave, and haircut started to grow back. There was weariness in his eyes, and his mouth held a little smirk. But still, he brought a smile to my face when he said, “If you want to know if I want to change everything up, and make this,” he tightened his grip around my fingers, “official. Then, yeah.”

If we weren’t in the car I would have crawled into his lap. Kissed down his face and ripped open his shirt to continue downward. But we were. “Are we almost at your place?” I asked with a heavy voice.

“Oh,” he growled as he dropped my hand, “is someone a little anxious?” He rubbed a circle around my thigh, and I should have clamped them close.

“A little?” I told him, “The way you’ve been kissing me. Staring at me like you could eat me for breakfast. I’m more than a little anxious.”

“For what?”

His question caught me off guard. I thought my want was obvious. Very apparent by the way I stared at him. Rubbed my body against his when he hugged me. Damn near melted when his hand grazed my ass. “For us to make love.”

“Ehm...” he pulled his car into the parking lot and slung his door open. He ran to the other side and whipped mine open. He didn’t wait for me to unbuckle. He did that for me. Lifted me into his arms and carried me to the stairs where I thought he would let me walk up them myself.

He didn't though. My legs wrapped around his waist, and he warned, "Hold on tight," as he jogged up the stairs like he was carrying a bag of groceries.

He fumbled for his keys with one hand and gripped my ass with the other. He kicked the door open with his foot and walked the few steps to his bedroom. His roommate could have been sitting on the couch as we passed but neither of us would have known.

Inside his bedroom, he let me down onto his bed. "Did you say you wanted to make love?"

I looked up at him as he unbuttoned his shirt.

"Is that a problem?" I hoped not because the tingling between my legs would be hard to ease.

He flung his shirt to the floor and started unbuckling his pants. "Not at all. I want to be sure I heard you correctly..." his eyes didn't leave mine.

"Does it scare you?"

He shook his head. "Not in the least." His chest flexed as his pants slid to the ground.

My eyes traveled his torso and had to close when they reached his bulge. I sucked in a breath and waited for him to climb onto the bed.

"I can't stand those tight shirts, those slacks with no room for my dick to move." He nuzzled into the side of my neck, trailed kisses to my chest. "Let me help you out of this." His hand cradled my thigh before moving upward and taking the dress up with it. "It looks sexy on, but I won't lie, I can't wait to see it off."

I sat up so it could slide over my head. "I got you, Mr. President."

He smirked before leaning me back down and finishing his trail of kisses to my stomach and finally the middle of my thighs. I considered his roommate and what he'd hear if I let out every moan, and recited the chant that came to mind as he licked between my folds. "*Lick it down, lick it up. Don't stop. Don't stop.*" So, I didn't scream it out. I didn't let my moans grow over a whisper.

But he responded accordingly, each time I moaned he licked harder, dug deeper. Growled as my body moved. The vibration doing something to my entire body. It was sensory overload by the time his fingers slid inside me.

Through gritted teeth, I moaned, "Chaz."

When I reached my mountaintop, I couldn't hold back the loud moans. His fingers didn't leave me, but his mouth covered mine. His lips sucked the

wind from my sails, and afterward I laid there motionless.

I heard him move from the bed. Didn't open my eyes and watch him when I heard the condom wrapper rip open. Braced my body when I felt the bed deflate beside me. And when he hovered over me, I opened my eyes.

"Dammit, you look gorgeous right now." The tip of his dick dangled at my entrance. But the way he looked at me like I was Mona Lisa in the flesh, had my body warming all over again. His lips crashed into mine as he entered inside.

If his mouth wasn't covering mine, I wouldn't have cared if his roommate heard me shout, "*V-I-C-T-O-R-Y. Yeah, Yeah, we got a victory!*"

Chapter Ten

C haz

If the celebration for winning SGA president resulted in *that*, imagine if I won a higher office. I couldn't get thoughts of Journey off my mind. Her moans when she ate sushi were enticing. But what she did when I *ate her*, I'd run for every open political vacancy in the land to hear it over and over again.

The morning after though, that was a different situation. There was an early morning call to let me know where I needed to be. *Me?* I needed to be somewhere? Somewhere that didn't include one of the five classes on my schedule? Somewhere other than between Journey's legs? And I wasn't a morning person, so the call wasn't well received. To say the least.

After that call, I had class, then after class a meeting with Hillside's president. Thank God the coffee shop was nearby and I was able to squeeze in there to grab a cup of coffee. I'd need that and more to make it through the day.

A usual run to the coffee shop didn't mean running into anyone. Unless, of course, I considered literally bumping into Journey. Nobody knew me before, so I could get in and get out without speaking to anyone.

That morning though, I had three different people approach me with small talk before I could make it to the line. Another girl, stood beside me a little too close. And when I looked at her over my shoulder, she took the opportunity to speak.

“Chaz Brown.” Her eyes wandered down my body before she said, “I agree you are the change we need.”

If I didn’t have Journey on my mind, lips, and fresh off my dick, I might have caught exactly what she was throwing. But I kept it casual. “I hope I can be that,” I said, turning back to the counter. Hoping the person in front of me kept it simple and quick.

That didn’t discourage her though. “I’m a junior, and I don’t think I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting you.”

I could feel her breath and assumed she was still talking to me. I rubbed my hand across my neck before saying, “I doubt we would have had classes together.” Then I remembered the encouragement I got about meeting people on campus. *Be nice, ask about their major, and what they love about the school.* “What’s your major?”

Her tongue curled when she answered, “Elementary education.”

“Great, you’ll be teaching the kids.” I stepped closer to the counter. Two people stood between me and my order. An exit from ol’ girl breathing down my neck.

“Yeah, I’d love to teach you something.”

I gulped and my eyes stretched. The person in front of me looked over his shoulder when I got too close. Everything was telling me to get away from the girl before she said something she couldn’t recover from. Something someone nearby heard and misconstrued. Politicians were always caught up in some shit. Little scenarios blown out of proportion. And I could see how folks would be looking at *my change for the better* and doubting my potential.

“So, what do you think?” Her hand rested on my shoulder.

“I’ll have...” I said before the man in front of me finished paying. “Two iced mochas.”

The guy taking my order smirked when he looked up from the register. “One of those for Journey?”

I nodded but could feel ol’ girl a little too close behind me. “Sure is.” I said, “I’m taking it to her.”

“Ah, and you ended up winning SGA president.” His words echoed as the girl behind me still had her hand on my damn shoulder.

I pulled my wallet from my pocket but couldn’t slide the card from the slot.

“Congrats on that win, man.”

“Thanks, did you vote for me?” I was that guy. The one always talking about the election. I didn’t want to be that guy. But I also wanted to avoid any conversation with the chick behind me.

He shook his head and had a blank stare on his face when he said, “I missed the voting window because I wasn’t on campus.”

As I tugged on my card, I said, “That’s one thing I hope to change. Voting windows for students should vary more. Especially for those who don’t stay on campus. You know there’s a similar problem in regional, state, and national elections too. Voters get overlooked because of their inability to get to the polls.” The card flung from my wallet, and I handed it to him.

He laughed and said, “You already won, man. But sounds like a good plan. I could imagine there are people who would benefit from us not being able to vote.”

I reached for my card and said, “Exactly.”

The girl behind me cleared her throat, and I stepped aside to wait for my drink. Hoping like hell they could pour those coffees with super speed.

The wide glass windows, wooden tables, and matching chairs gave the space a nice natural feel. One I wouldn’t have noticed had I not been trying to focus on anything besides the woman now standing beside me.

“You up for a lesson?” Her voice was soft.

“Lesson?” I narrowed my eyes. “I think I’m good. But thanks for the offer.” *Did I say that?* I cringed as I heard my name shouted. “Thank God,” I mumbled, grabbing the cups and making my way outside.

Journey wasn’t at her usual bench across the courtyard. My head swung around searching for her until I saw her headed my direction.

A wide smile on her face as she neared. “It’s such a beautiful day today, isn’t it?” There was a glow on her face. I would like to think I knew how it got there but I didn’t want to be too confident in my abilities.

“As beautiful as you are.” I handed her the cup. Carefully making sure it was secure in her hands before I said, “You seem to be in an extra good mood today. Wonder what that’s all about.” I leaned down into her ear and asked, “Would it happen to have anything to do with the celebration last night?”

She giggled, then stood back. “It’s possible.”

I led us to a nearby bench and said, “You’re a numbers person. Statistics are all numbers. So how do we get that possible to an absolute?”

We sat side-by-side, and her grin didn’t fade. If it wasn’t for the other meeting I had that day, I would have taken her back to my apartment to give

her a few more data points.

“Hmm... we can run a few statistical analyses to determine the outcome.” Her lip tugged between her teeth.

“If only I didn’t have this meeting coming up, I’d say we could get started on that *now*.” I rested my hand on her thigh.

“What meeting?” Her leg bounced.

I had to look away from her thighs to answer. “One for SGA. Getting me up to speed.” Then I remembered the guy in the coffee shop. “I’m thinking I need to discuss the plan to get students to the polls. Since I’ve been here there hasn’t been a huge initiative to do that.”

Journey sipped her mocha and nodded. “Good idea. Will you tell them about it in the meeting?”

“I think so.” I wasn’t sure how receptive everyone else was to listen to my ideas. Voting for me was one thing, applying my plans was something different.

Journey twisted her body to face mine. “You know what else is important?”

Licking her from the base of her foot to the crux between her legs. “No, what?”

“A date with my boyfriend.”

I pulled her from the bench to sit her on my lap. “You know, for someone who wants to spend time with me, you sure did launch me into this busy ass lifestyle.”

She cringed. “Terrible. Horrible. Not good timing on my part. Things are getting good with us, and I throw you to the wolves to limit my time with you.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “What was I thinking?”

I smelled the sweet scent of her perfume behind her ear. “I can make time for you tonight. Let’s do it.”

She snickered. “Let’s do it?” with an arched brow.

Although my dick was straining in my pants. I didn’t mean to imply *that* necessarily. “I mean, yeah. Because now you’ve awakened a beast.” I kissed her collar bone. “A proper date first though.”

“I like that. A proper date.” Her lips landed on mine and I imagined what a resignation letter would look like on the first day of my job.

“Hey Chaz.”

My head turned toward the girl from the coffee shop, and I sighed.

“What’s that all about?” Journey stared the girl down.

“Some girl who introduced herself in the coffee shop.” There wasn’t much more of a description I could give her.

She mumbled, “The wolves.”

Chapter Eleven

Journey

“What would Whitley do?” Since seeing little *Miss Wave At My Man* earlier in the day I couldn’t get the thought out of my head. I didn’t want to overreact because Chaz didn’t seem to think much of the interaction. But still. I was in his lap watching this girl flirt with *my man*.

I paced the room, huffing as I took each step. Then I blurted, “And I was in his lap.”

They’d heard the story a couple of times. Too many times probably. All the different angles I could imagine. All the ways I could find to tell them how it felt to be sitting there with that girl all in his face. And by all, I mean she wasn’t close to his face, but she could have been. That little wicked smile she wore before sashaying her ass on past us. She might as well have bent down to kiss him.

“I can’t believe she had the audacity.” I tried to think if I’d seen the girl on campus. Had classes with her. Saw her in the stands at the game. “I don’t think she’s a senior,” I finalized. “Maybe a junior. Looked a little too confident to be much younger than that.”

Nia shut her textbook and folded her legs onto the couch. “All she did was wave? Say his name?”

Okay, when she said it slowly, in a calm, reassuring voice, it didn’t sound *that bad*. Still, “Yes, while I was sitting in his lap.” I tried to mimic her voice,

“Hey Chaz...” I eyed Lauren, hoping she’d understand me. “You know that syrupy sweet voice a woman uses when she wants a man’s attention.” I flung my hand toward her.

“Ugh, yeah.” Lauren was tapping away on her laptop though. Likely not listening to my latest rendition of the story, an illogical rant. “We told you his newfound popularity could make him a wanted man...” She looked up from her screen and shrugged.

“That’s not as comforting as you may think.” I stood in front of the window and crossed my arms over my chest. I’d already dressed for my date with Chaz. He would be pulling up any minute. But the last thing I needed was to still be reeling from the chick.

“Look at it this way,” Nia waited for my eyes to meet hers, “if all works out you could be his Michelle. So, stick with him. He’s a good man, Journey.”

Lauren scoffed though. Burst my bubble when she said, “The jury is still out on that one for me. I never trust the quiet ones.”

Huffing, I said, “I must be a glutton for punishment. Because I did this to myself. I convinced him to run. Where were the two of you when I was doing that?”

They exchanged a look and laughed. “Right here saying you were doing too much when you enlisted us to help.” Nia reminded me. “Between classes, cheer, volunteering, and then this campaign.” She smacked her lips. “Girl, I’d think *you* wanted to run for office as much as you were out here in everyone’s faces.”

“Definitely not that.” I plopped down into the chair across from them. “Okay, I need to let it go.” I let a stream of air invade my lungs.

Lauren and Nia said, “Yes,” in unison.

By the time a knock came at the door, I released it. The chick, the wave, and the smirk on her face. I was ready to go out with *my man*.

“Hey babe.” Chaz held a bouquet of roses in the air. “For you.”

I reached my hands out and said, “And a vase.” I laughed. “Thank you.” I placed it on the kitchen counter and smiled.

Nia and Lauren gushed, “See, look at that.” They stared me down without revealing all I put them through before he arrived.

Lauren shouted, “Bring me a snack back,” as the door closed behind us.

“Where are we headed?” Hill Mount had decent options. Many I hadn’t tried myself because my pockets stayed thin. Like I told the community

members, best way to save was to eliminate eating out. And that's what I did.

"You'll see when we get there."

I rolled my shoulders. "Oh, a surprise, I like that."

He pulled me to his side in the middle of the sidewalk and said, "And I like you." But his eyes didn't rise with his lips. He looked like he could use a nap.

"I like you too." Then I rubbed his face. "Are you too tired though? I know this has been a long day."

He closed his eyes and when he re-opened them he appeared more refreshed. A nice smile on his face. "And this is the best way to end my long day." But before he could walk away he yawned. "My bad. I need time to adjust to all this."

I nodded. "I get it. But like you told me when we were at Speak Out, if I need to get you home early, I will."

He wrapped me in an embrace and said, "I appreciate that."

Before we were a mile from the apartment, Chaz's fingers tapped across my thigh. Although his hands were on me, it seemed his thoughts were distant. Far away from the closeness we shared in the car.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"Honestly?"

The thought of anything but honesty made me think back to the last guy I dated. The one who was everything but. He'd lie about the day of the week if there wasn't visual proof. I wanted nothing less but honesty, ever, even when it hurt. "Please."

"I was thinking about this new role, and how I can be effective. How the *politics* could stand in the way of anything progressing." In the week since campaigning and assuming his role, his face looked to age a year, at least. His eyes were weary, and his smile didn't hold the promise and vibrancy it did when we met. "And if I can't make this work, what does that look like for my future. Where I plan to stand on the outside and effect change?"

"All that, huh?" I snickered. "I'm not sure I can offer valid advice since I am far outside anywhere you are on politics. But I can say that this could be an example of what needs to change. Use it to collect data points that will strengthen your stance."

He had a weak smile on his face. And although it wasn't the one I saw that day we shared a coffee, it still made my insides shout with joy.

"Optimism is an underrated trait." His hand smoothed along my leg.

“There’s a balance of optimism and pessimism in the world. But if it was off-balance in the favor of *glass half full*, we’d all be in a better place.”

It wasn’t something I thought about often. My outlook on life was concrete, and I didn’t consider the fact that I wore rose-colored glasses. I also didn’t dwell on those who wore a lighter shade. Those who didn’t see things as I did.

“I’d imagine there’d be less need to compromise.”

“That part.” His haughty laugh filled the car as he pulled it into a spot.

Not one I’d seen before. But the name emblazoned on the restaurant in front of us was something I was familiar with. Very familiar with. I didn’t mention it as we walked side-by-side. As the hostess opened the door and greeted us with a warm smile.

The dim lighting and candles on the tables made me thankful for the dress I plucked from my closet. “Dinner for two?” the woman asked, and Chaz responded with a head nod. “Right this way,” she said with a wink.

Chaz pulled out my seat, and as I settled the woman placed a menu in front of me. Around us, there weren’t a ton of familiar faces from Hillside. In fact, many of the people seated around us weren’t college-aged at all. They could pass for parents of the students, faculty and staff, or regular working adults in the city.

“In the four years I’ve lived in Hill Mount I have never been to this place.”

A wide grin graced Chaz’s face. “I hope I can continue doing things for you nobody has ever done for you before.”

I found something that sent a warm tingle between my thighs more than a soft kiss to the side of my neck. I didn’t think it was possible for words to turn me on the way they did. *But damn.*

“You’re saying all the right things.” As my cheeks heated I tried to focus on the menu instead of the lust I saw staring back at me. I didn’t want to overheat. Pass out in the middle of the restaurant. Imagine my first time being there and I miss the chance to taste the food I heard so much about. Steak, lobster, risotto, then there were the things I couldn’t pronounce and didn’t recognize. Our café could never. The other restaurants in the city, the ones I did visit, could try. But they wouldn’t have the same results. Not the beautifully plated dish that sat at the table beside me. The sauce drizzled ever so carefully along the edge of the dish. The aroma did something to my senses, and before I could close my mouth I felt it water.

I swallowed before asking, “What do you want to do after you leave Hillside?”

“I planned to work for an advocacy group.” His words were calm, thoughtful, intentional. Not like he was giving me an answer to snatch my attention from the food. Or that he threw out something random, or generic. He thought about it. He winced. “Not a lot of money in it. But to be honest...” He paused and sat his menu on the table. “Becoming SGA president, I see opportunities I hadn’t considered before.”

“Like?”

“Working for a major campaign. Running for a role in local government. Having a bigger platform.”

A bigger platform. I felt the lump in my throat and hoped Chaz didn’t hear it when I gulped. *More Little Miss Wave At My Man* energy. “Impacting more people. Doing greater good for the community. Makes sense.” I nodded. Because it did. Even if that meant more women throwing their panties at Chaz. “Be part of the solution instead of complaining about the problem.”

After we ordered—a steak for him, and the risotto and scallops for me—he asked me, “What about you?”

I liked to think my answer was as thoughtful, intentional. I wanted to match his level of calm and confidence. I straightened my shoulders and said, “I want to move to a sizable city, work for a known finance company. Continue my work with the community to improve financial literacy.”

With a smile that only turned up his lips halfway, he said, “Sounds admirable. But what city?” I could sense his hesitation. The restraint he held in his voice.

“Do you not like large cities?” Hill Mount wasn’t a large city. It wasn’t a small town with only one streetlight. But it couldn’t compare to the nearby cities or those across the country.

“Hadn’t considered moving to one.” Unfortunately, his response was confident. Like there was no room for compromise.

“But you would?” I stuttered. “You’d consider it?”

His stare stopped the clock. Time remained, and the globe didn’t revolve. But his words shattered the atmosphere, and maybe my soul. “I don’t think so.” It lacked the surety of where he’d work. What he’d do next. It didn’t lean on a possibility. It wasn’t final. But it didn’t promise hope either.

His answer tainted the rest of the night, lightening my rose-colored

glasses. For the first time I looked at the goblet of wine sitting on the table as half empty.

I tried grasping for the optimism. Tried re-arranging his words, his tone, and his delivery to mean anything but what it did. The four words weighed heavy on me. So heavy, that the ride to his apartment and walk inside felt robotic.

At the edge of his bed, where I sat, I tried to let the warmth of his lips remove the haze. Pull me from the rabbit hole of my mind. They did. For a minute. His hands gliding down my body gave me something else to focus on. The exchange was like an exercise in compromise—but I wished it wasn't needed.

Chapter Twelve

C haz

Studying used to look like me, a book, and a quiet room alone. Somewhere I could check out of the world and indulge in the material I needed to cram for a class. I could stay in my hole for hours before emerging ready to take a test. To pass whatever exam my most meticulous professor put in front of me.

But it hinged on the concept of quiet.

And the library should have been that place. With a stern librarian scouring the crowd. Workers hushing people. Cutting off side conversations, and meaningless anecdotes. That would have given me the quiet space I needed to study for my ideologies exam. But between the high-pitched squeals of Journey's friends, and low grumbles of the guys that flocked to them, the space was everything but quiet.

My headphones with white noise couldn't cancel them out. I'd re-read the same sentence four times. Still, I was nowhere near understanding what it said. Couldn't imagine how Professor Chapman would use it as a question on the test. I shifted in my seat, one beside Journey, and stared at the words a little harder.

When they danced along to the sounds of the voices surrounding me, I gave in. I decided it wasn't going to work. The little agreement I made to join her in the library had to end. I tapped my pencil on the book and looked around at the faces hardly studying. No focus on the books stretched open on

the table. Laptops sat idle, and the only thing happening was conversations that had no end in sight.

I touched Journey's arm and pulled her from the exchange she had with Nia beside her. "Hey, I'm about to leave." I tried to keep my voice quiet. To honor the sanctity of the library. Although none of them would have cared, and a stern librarian was nowhere in sight. The workers hardly visited our space once to hush us.

"Leave?" Journey tilted her head to the side. "We aren't finished studying yet. We've only been in here for an hour." Her face turned into a serious scowl. "Are you ready for your test?"

I shook my head. "No, and that's why I need to leave." I looked around the table at each of the people sitting there and decided not to put them on blast. I couldn't shake the look of disappointment Journey gave me though. It was much like the look she gave me at the restaurant when I told her the city life wasn't for me. I hated the look from across the table then, and from beside me now. I put my book down near my bag and told her, "Come with me real quick."

She looked beyond me but didn't hesitate to rise from her seat. I reached for her hand and led us down the hallway. Looking back and forth amongst the shelves of books, and closed doors until I found one that was open. I pulled her inside and shut the door behind us.

The quiet of the room, and how it blocked all the noise outside of it was a perfect place to study. "I like studying in spaces like this." I heard her intake of breath. But couldn't watch her facial expression.

"Dark rooms?"

I assured her, "Quiet. It's here where I can hear myself think. Whatever I read has a chance to permeate my brain, and stick." I placed my hand on the door beside her head. "Out there, it's too loud for any of that to happen. For any of my thoughts to have a chance amongst the sea of noise."

"But at the game..." Her chest heaved in front of me. "You had a book while everyone around you stood and chanted. The band played beside you. And the football team ran up and down the field. Helmets clacking. Then us. We cheered, and I can't imagine any of that was near quiet."

"It wasn't." There was a simple explanation for that. "I wasn't studying. I was passing the time."

She snickered. "With a book. Like what was going on around you wasn't entertaining enough."

“Not my type of entertainment.”

I leaned in closer to her face. Felt her lips rise when she began to speak again.

“Got it.”

“Are you upset?” I could hear the slight change in her tone. It went from a promising chipper to a tainted despair. “Does it bother you that I can’t sit out there with your friends?”

“No.” Although she said it, it didn’t resonate. “I understand. I’ve always understood. We are two different people.” I felt her hand along the side of my arm, then her palm as it rested on my face. “I like that we aren’t one and the same. And I get it. You need a quiet space.”

“I do,” I whispered. “But when you finish here, come to me.” My lips crashed into hers, and I allow the quiet of the room to drown out any thoughts I had before meeting her there. The only thing louder than the room was my beating heart. And when I pulled away from her, I rested my head on hers. I could have stayed the night in that room, but we both needed to study.

Her breath warmed my neck as she spoke. “Well, shit,” she huffed. “Let me cram this material then.” A soft laugh escaped her mouth.

“Yes, please.” I tapped her ass and opened the door behind her. “I’ll see you soon.”

All eyes were on us when we returned to the group. Nia stared me down hard as I collected my books, picked up my bag. The others returned to their above-a-hush conversations. I heard Nia ask Journey a question, but I didn’t stand around to wait on her response. I walked out of the library into the night, and to my car. I had to get to my apartment and get in as much study time before my exam the next morning.

Professor Chapman was one of those professors who found joy in throwing us off on the test. She liked to *read between the lines* of our provided text. Although she didn’t provide context clues during her lectures. In short, her ranking on Rate My Professor was below sea level. But she was the only professor available that aligned with my schedule.

It was that mindset that found me on the couch, books open in my lap. Notebooks scattered across the coffee table. A half-eaten bag of chips beside me. I would stay up all night, go to her class on zero sleep, and show her how determined I was to pass the test.

And the sentence I read on repeat in the library. It only took once for it to sink into my mind in the quiet. I moved on from that one and to many others

in the few hours since being home. But the more I read, the heavier my eyes became. I wasn't foreign to all-nighters. In my four years of college, they'd become my thing. Not only for professors like Dr. Chapman, but for professors who made it their business to *teach us*. The ones who didn't require much studying to be able to ace a test. It was always my thing though. Studying until I was confident I had it.

So, the droopy eyes and many wide-mouthed yawns caught me off guard. By complete surprise. I wasn't expecting to fight a spirit of sleepiness. For it to come over me like a wave of water, ready to take me under as soon as I stopped wrestling it.

I stood. Stretched my arms over my head, then bent over and touched my toes. Pulled my knees to my chest and stood firm on the ground again. Walked to the window and stared out at the streetlights until I regained my energy.

It only lasted a little while though. The yawns and droopy eyes returned shortly after. "Fuck," I mumbled as my head started to drift toward the back of the couch. "Okay, five minutes." I promised myself. "Only five..."

My eyes shut, and the waves of sleepiness won.

The waves rocked me back and forth, back and forth, and someone shouted my name from shore. "Chaz, Chaz. Wake your ass up."

I stretched my eyes open and saw Marcus leaned over me. His hand shaking my shoulder.

"Damn. What happened?"

He didn't need to tell me that I fucked up. The light shining through the window did that. The phone I fumbled for, and missed calls, assured me of my mistake. The time written across my screen shouted how bad it was.

"Bruh, you fell asleep out here," Marcus said anyway. A winner of the most obvious award. "Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"All this extra shit has me off my game." I stood, stuffed my books in my bag and placed my hand on the front door. "I'm late," I yelled as I ran out. I dared every yellow light to stay a little longer, and prayed the red ones wouldn't last long. By the time I parked, and made it to Dr. Chapman's class, it was a bold move to walk through the door. One she didn't scold me on, at first. So, I found a seat and cleared my desk.

She placed a stapled stack of papers in front of me with a stern look in her eyes. Behind the stare, I could only imagine satisfaction gripped her. She knew I'd be no better prepared to take the test if I walked in on time.

I looked at the first question and closed my eyes. *Dammit*. The rest of the questions went in a similar fashion. I raked my brain for answers nowhere in sight. Not in the notes I studied the night before, not in the book that laid open when I fell asleep. Certainly not in my memory of her lectures.

It'd been years since I considered Christmas Treeing a test. But the thought crossed my mind after reading and failing to find the answer to the tenth question on the test.

I thought I'd never understand why the ex-president and his VP sold stolen tests and papers. Couldn't understand the risk anyone would take using anything from them. But as I sat staring at the answers on my sheet, I understood.

"Turn in what you have," Dr. Chapman announced to the few of us remaining in class. I heard people leaving over the length of the test but didn't realize it was only me and a handful of people left.

I stood and took my walk of shame to her desk. Placed the test face down as if she could recognize at a glance how horrible I did.

"Mr. Brown." Her arms crossed over her chest. A smug look on her face. Although that was customary in her classroom. "I expect the SGA president not be late to class." Her eyebrows peaked. "I suspect your test results will make up for your tardiness."

On most days, the answer would be a resounding yes. That's when I had hours of study time. Had a good night's rest, and not a million things running through my mind. That was before I became SGA president. Before Journey, and the newness of a relationship.

Did it matter to Dr. Chapman though? *Hell naw*. Stating any of the obvious wouldn't result in any empathy from her. I'd seen a man walk in and plead with her for more time on a paper. He spent the night in the hospital with his pregnant girlfriend. Dr. Chapman still said no. Told him he should have taken his laptop with him.

So, instead I leaned on committing to do better. "It won't happen again." Whatever needed to get done, I'd adjust my new responsibilities. "No excuses." I lifted my shoulders.

"Because excuses are tools of the incompetent, used to build bridges to nowhere and mountains of nothingness. Those who use them seldom amount to anything." The Brundage Jr. quote was something I heard often. Hardly ever in reference to myself. "I suspect one day someone will quote you because you are great. Because you leave a resounding mark on this campus,

and in your community. Not because you take all the skill, talent, and ambition and lose it when faced with adversity.” She continued, “I assume this new responsibility is a challenge.” She pointed to me. “One you must face and overcome.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“I don’t like to be right. I’d rather be understood.”

My eyes stretched. Either because of the adrenaline I had rushing into her classroom was starting to wear off, or because I couldn’t tell up from down in her comment. Whatever the case, I needed to slide on past Dr. Chapman. A simple nod and smile had to do.

“Get out of here, Mr. Brown. And I hope home to change into something more presentable.” Her eyes traveled the length of my body, and when her eyes met mine again, a look of disgust resided.

“Yes ma’am.” *Because the last thing I need is for anyone to see me in sweats and a t-shirt. God forbid.*

Chapter Thirteen

Journey

Homecoming is the highlight of any fall semester at Hillside. But my last as a student on the illustrious campus? Oh, I was ready. Or I thought I was before my boyfriend went MIA. The week of events kept me busy. Between the parade, pep rally, and alumni meet and greets with the squad, I had little time. Still, I wanted to at least cozy up with Chaz at the end of the night. To rest in his arms, feel his lips on mine, and his body hovering over me.

Yet, since our night at the library he'd been ghost. After he told me to *come to him* like some sex god, he didn't answer the phone. Hadn't answered since. In my head, he secretly, or not so secretly, broke up with me. I thought the worst possible outcome. I couldn't think what Whitley would do because, did Dwayne ever do something like that? My mind was drawing a blank.

"He's the SGA president. He should be making appearances at these events," I whispered to Nia as I sat in an auditorium seat. Granted the fashion show had nothing to do with SGA, and I didn't see any of the other cabinet members in the audience. I assumed he'd be there. Showing his support.

He wasn't, or at least from what I could see as I leaned forward and strained my neck looking up and down the aisles surrounding us. "Where is he?"

Nia hushed me and whispered, "Minding his business. Enjoy the show."

I tried to ease into my seat and focus on the modeling troupes on stage.

The many ways they turned blue and white into fashion ensembles worthy of a Paris runway. With the game the next day, I needed to relax. Enjoy the night before all eyes would be on us. Well, on the team, but we all suspected they'd flop. The band would be the main attraction, and until they were on the field, it'd be us. The cheerleaders tasked with pumping up the crowd.

"Okay," I finally replied, "I'll enjoy the show."

But each guy resembling Chaz had me thinking of him. Guys with their hair shaved on the sides like his. Or any man with the peculiar point at the end of their nose. It reminded me that his wasn't as unique as I thought. Don't let the guy have caramel complexion with dark lips. I was out of my seat to stare him down under the dim lights of the auditorium.

When the fashion show was over, I searched the crowd outside. Couldn't find Chaz anywhere. I checked my phone for the hundredth time. If it wasn't for the texts from my homegirls I would have thought the cell company disconnected it. *What if his phone was off?* I tapped Nia's arm and gave her my latest revelation. "What if he can't call me? Or text. Phone got disconnected."

"Or send a carrier pigeon?" She side-eyed me. "This campus isn't that big. He could find you if he wanted to. Besides, he knows where we live. He could pop up and tell you his raggedy phone wasn't working."

"Oh." I twisted my lips to the side. "Right." And the more I thought of the ways he could have reached out but didn't, I grew disappointed.

Nia placed a hand on my shoulder. "You are thinking about your ex. You can't consider Chaz in that same boat from one mishap."

"But should I? Aren't we supposed to avoid obvious red flags. I'd call him ghosting me for a week a *red flag*."

Nia wagged her head. "You have a point, but still. Don't be too quick to jump to a conclusion. I'm sure there is a reason for it." She pointed to a group of people standing across from us. "But in the event you've returned to the dark side of things, I'll welcome you with open arms." She gushed, "I mean look at these sexy ass alumni you could flirt with any one of them. Get you an established man who is already where you'd want him to be."

I followed behind her to the group of guys. As she mingled I tried hard to hold basic conversation. Answering "Where are you from?" and "What's your major?" with ease. Anything more than that was a test of my patience.

From bed that night, I tried one more time to reach Chaz. And nothing. I tossed and turned until I fell asleep. But it seemed like that was only for a

couple of hours. Because when I woke up the next morning my eyes were still heavy, my brain a little foggy. And the pillow, it called my name.

As I dressed in my cheer uniform, I convinced myself that I wouldn't spend the day searching for Chaz in the audience. I wouldn't side-eye every man who resembled him. And I wouldn't ask Nia or anyone else on the team for help with my looming existential crisis.

It was my last homecoming at Hillside. I would enjoy it whether I had Chaz by my side or not. Every other homecoming I enjoyed single. Why did this one have to be any different?

I made it to halftime without fumbling. Now, the football team, they fumbled the ball a few times. Only had one touchdown compared to the other team's four. But still, the vibe on the sidelines was electrifying as our band took the field. I let myself focus on the songs, the formation, and the excitement from the crowd. With the crowd standing, and yelling behind me, I wanted to look over my shoulder and find Chaz. Find him with a random book opened to *pass the time*. But I didn't.

"Let's go Bobcats," I chanted till the end of the game. And although, the team lost, I considered my resolve a win. It wasn't until I felt an arm on my elbow tugging me from the crowd that I lost it.

"Journey." His voice was loud. Overcoming the noisiness of the crowd leaving the stadium. "Can we talk?"

I looked at the rest of the cheerleaders rushing to the locker room. Thought about joining them and doing to Chaz what he did to me—ghosting him for days.

"I've been trying to do that all week." If I was going to talk to him, I wasn't going to make it easy.

"I apologize. I've been extremely busy." Then a frown formed on his face.

"No excuses though."

"Because you aren't the only one busy around here." I held my pom poms down by my side. "Still, between events, late at night, anytime I had a chance I called." I took a deep breath because I felt myself getting worked up. "All you had to do was answer. Tell me you'd call me back. Send me a text. Something." My eyes narrowed as I watched his face change expressions. From a frown to his head hanging.

His hands went up and he said, "I can't admit I did anything right this week. Not exams, not meetings with the cabinet, definitely not

communicating with you.” He stared into my eyes. “Before meeting you, I led a quiet life. Kept to myself. I see now how hard it is for me to step outside of my comfort zone.”

“And you want to return to that?” I asked hating what the answer could be. “Life before me?” *Without me?*

He reached for my hands, held them tight within his grip. “Journey, I don’t know what I want. The comfort calls me back to it, and I wonder if I’ll ever be able to keep up with you. Keep up with this responsibility. If it’d be better for me to finish this out without hurting you.”

“Hurting me?” As if the knife in my chest could hurt any less. Or the breath struggling to fill my lungs would recover quicker. If he didn’t know, I was already hurting. All week without talking to him was a pain I didn’t want to bare.

Still, I didn’t want to walk away from what we had. Not if he was willing to try. “Are you not willing to try to make this work?”

“I want to fight the uncomfortable feeling I have. I want to defy my own odds. I want to work out every kink with you so that our relationship can be smooth.”

“Chaz, we need you for pictures.” Amya stood at a safe distance and looked between the two of us. “It’ll be quick,” she promised.

“Okay.” He nodded toward her. “Journey, can you call me tonight. Whenever you’re done. I’ll be at home.”

I didn’t lie when I said I’d think about calling him. Because the entire night that’s all I did. Shots, drinks, guys talking to me as we walked through the club, and still Chaz was on my mind.

I tried standing on the dance floor, falling into a line dance. Laughing at the alumni who tried to get into step with us.

More drinks, more shots, and still Chaz ran through my mind.

So, at the end of the night, despite wanting to play hard to get. To make him suffer for how he had me in my feelings all week long. Did I call that man?

I did.

I waited until we were back at the apartment. Showered, and in my bed before I attempted to call. In case he didn’t answer, I wanted my pillows to catch me when I fell. I needed that support if Chaz decided he didn’t want the pressure of leaving *comfort*. In case he retreated into his safe space. Like a turtle, tucking his head into his shell. I didn’t have a shell to protect me. If he

didn't answer, I'd need the pillows to soothe me.

On the first ring I counted, it took two seconds for it to complete. And the space at the end, before the next started, it took a second. I eased into my pillows ready to brace for the fall, when on the second ring it stopped after one second.

"Hello." His voice didn't sound tired, not like I felt. "You called." He sounded optimistic. Like he was ready to leave his shell behind. "Thanks."

"I thought about not calling for a week." It crossed my mind, but hearing his voice won out.

"That would be fair." He sounded a little distracted. "But I'm glad you decided to have mercy on me. Another week without talking to you would have proved very difficult."

I smirked. "Oh?" I shifted in my bed, finding a position that propped my head up on the pillows.

"Although we didn't speak, doesn't mean I wasn't thinking of you."

"I would assume otherwise."

"I can't explain it." He hesitated, and I shifted. "It's like everything became overwhelming. When I missed your calls after the library, I fell asleep studying. I was late to my class that next morning, did horrible on the test." He continued listing all the bad things that happened to him that week. "I had an impromptu interview for Hillside Chronicles. If it weren't for Amya nearby, I might have fumbled on all the pillars we ran on." Finally, he took a breath. "As much as I wanted to hear your voice, see your face, feel your body—"

"You kept yourself away from me."

"It felt like one less thing to fuck up."

I chuckled. "And by avoiding a fuck up, you fucked up." I didn't tell him his plan was as ingenious as it was. It wasn't necessary for me to rub it in his face.

"I fucked up. Royally. So, how can I make it up?"

The liquor started to wear on me. The week's activities stretching over my shoulders. My head heavy from wanting to collapse into a deep sleep. "Tomorrow." I covered my mouth as I yawned. "Come to brunch with me."

"With you, or—"

"Some of my friends will be there. It's homecoming brunch. The end to the weeklong activities. A tradition."

He repeated, "A tradition. Okay. If that'll start my make-up period, I'll be

there.”

“Good, I’ll send you the location.” I covered another yawn. “I should go now. Before I fall asleep with you on the other side.”

He joked, “I’d listen to your light snores.”

“These ones might be a little louder than that.” All week, sleep was hard to come by. Now that me and him were good, I could rest easy. “Goodnight, Chaz.”

He cleared his throat before offering, “Goodnight, Journey.”

Chapter Fourteen

C haz

I had a lot of making up to do. I would have preferred doing it with the two of us. Her and me, wherever she wanted to be. Answering every call. Responding to each text. Taking her on dates and stopping into the coffee shop for her iced mocha between classes. I was ready to be on my 90's begging era.

I wasn't ready to go back to life without Journey in it. As challenging as it was with her, it was far more enjoyable. Stepping out of my comfort zone had nothing to do with her, entirely. I had difficulty being around her, and all her people.

But that Sunday morning, after the homecoming game, I sucked it up. A brunch with her and her homegirls wasn't the library while I tried to study. I could dine with her and a couple of her homegirls.

Not alone though. I needed back-up. A little reinforcement. I knew my trash behavior the week before would lead to an inquisition of sorts from her friends. And I needed someone there to distract them from me. So, I banged on Marcus' door.

At first he didn't answer. A loud groan echoed from inside instead. When I knocked a little harder I heard, "What do you want?"

"Wake your ass up." I knew better than to open his door though. No telling what I'd find on the other side of it. He deemed homecoming week,

his time to indulge. And indulge he did. A different girl every couple of days pranced out of his room. “Come with me to brunch.” I didn’t mention Journey’s girls, in case there was one already in there.

“I’m not hungry...” he groaned again.

“Come on man, I need a buffer.” That was enough of a keyword for him.

His door creaked open. Lines crossed his cheeks, and crust filled his eyes. I stepped back before I got a whiff of his breath.

“Her girls gonna be there?” The whisper let me know there was someone in his room.

So instead of a verbal reply I nodded my head. “Get ready.”

He wasted no time, shuffling into his room. Minutes later a woman pranced down the hallway in front of my room. I heard him mumbling something to her as she tried to convince him they could do something together. Finally, I heard, “I’ll call you later,” before the front door opened and shut. He walked past and stuck his head through the door. “Trying to lock me down.” He shook his head. “Shit, this is senior year. You’re the only fool on that shit.”

Like a fool, I said, “I’ll be that for Journey.”

Marcus laughed all the way to his room. Thirty minutes later, he was still laughing when he walked out fresh. “Let’s go, man. I gotta see what her girls are on. But I swear if they on the same thing she’s on, I’ll quit my wingman duties on spot.”

“Got it.” I assured him, “All you have to do is distract them. But her girls are cool, so you’ll be good.” I was only speaking from the few interactions I had with them. But I knew Marcus, and he wouldn’t care about their personalities as much as what they looked like.

“Are they *cool*. Or are they *sexy*?” His head tilted to the side.

“I’ll let you be the judge.”

He yelled, “Ah hell,” as we walked out the apartment.

But as we neared the restaurant he told me, “You know, I’m a little nervous.”

I looked at him sideways.

“Journey changed your whole life.” He patted his chest like he lost something. “I’m not sure I’m ready for my whole life to change. What if one of them puts a hex on me, like she did you?”

I hit his shoulder. “Chill, man.”

We both laughed. And when we got inside, I searched for Journey. Tried

to find one of her roommates, or other girls from the cheer squad. When I found Journey, there was a group of people surrounding her. They took up the entire back half of the restaurant.

“Is that your girl waving over there?” Marcus stood close behind me. “Thought it was only her and her homegirls? That looks like half the football team and the whole lineup of cheerleaders.”

The hostess looked a little perturbed as she pulled two menus. She said, “Let me guess, you’re with them?”

“Ugh, yeah?” I gulped. “Guess so.”

As we neared the table, the hostess dropped our menus at the only two empty seats. Next to some of the guys, and far away from Journey. I pulled my seat out and stared at my menu.

“Man, what kind of shit is this?” Marcus mumbled as we sat.

I eyed Journey because although I didn’t say it, I agreed with Marcus. She slid her hand in the air and waved again. I regretted the fact I decided to be on my begging shit the night before. I could have left the restaurant and caught up with her later. When there weren’t as many people around.

But when Journey stood, her tight-fitting, navy dress hugging all her assets I couldn’t go anywhere. She walked toward me, inching through the crowded space and finally made her way beside me. She kissed my cheek before turning to the guy beside me.

“Can we switch seats?” Her voice was syrupy, and I hated she needed it to convince his ass to move.

“Yeah, you got it,” he said before standing and taking a different, less constricted route to the other seat.

“I thought...” I leaned in closer to her ear, “this was only going to be you and a few homegirls.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It is, and a few of our homeboys.”

Her use of the word *few* made me cringe.

“I mean we aren’t all together.” Her neck strained behind her. “But here together. You know?”

I didn’t know. But I let the topic slide. At the end of the day, it didn’t matter. Marcus concerned himself with some chick across from him. Her roommates were on the other end of the table. So, I considered the two of us alone, as much as that was possible.

I tried to ask, “What are you having?” But Journey started a conversation with the chick across from her. I stared at the menu instead. Trying to find

something to order. As soon as the server came around, I asked, “Could I get the shrimp and grits?”

She had to shout over everyone talking to tell me they were all out.

I fidgeted with the menu and sighed. “Alright, a stack of pancakes.”

She shook her head regrettably. “Out.”

“Damn,” I said, and Journey looked at me.

Her eyebrows were tight and her eyes searching mine.

My back and forth continued with the server until I ended up with an All-American breakfast. Something I could have made at the apartment for a lot less than what they were charging.

Journey’s hand rubbed my leg and she asked, “You good?”

I wiped a hand against my beard. Marcus had no problem conversing with the people around him. Journey looked at ease carrying on with the people surrounding her. Me, it felt like I was on an island without a soul to talk to. Not because nobody would listen, but because it felt strange. “I’m not into big gatherings like you. I guess—”

Her eyes flickered around the table. Like she mentally took count of everyone seated. Then she said, “Sorry. Next time, I won’t include you if there will be a lot of people.” But it wasn’t in a way that was comforting to me, much more discouraging for her.

I tried to ease the tension I saw growing on her face. “How was the party last night?”

“Crowded.”

I reached for her hand. Laced our fingers together. “Listen, we knew this from the beginning. Thought our differences were what brought us together.” Of course, I spoke low so all the listening ears around us wouldn’t hear my confession. “I’m good with chilling one on one with you. Getting to know you. I’m also cool if *you* want to get out. Chill with all your *many* friends.”

“So, why does it sound like a dig? That I have a lot of friends. Like it’s a bad thing?”

“Your easy to love, it’d be hard to believe if you didn’t.” I meant it in the sincerest way possible.

Still, Journey looked no more relieved when she heard it. For an hour, I picked over my toast, bacon, and eggs. Regretted not ordering more than an orange juice. For not asking them to hit it with a shot of Henny.

Me and Journey sat side-by-side, but I could have been across the room. Everyone around her had some story they had to tell her about the night

before, or during homecoming week. A crazy situation that apparently never happened before. Everyone had a saga to share.

Across from me, the girl asked, "How was homecoming for you?"

With a hunched shoulder I replied, "Busy. Real busy."

She was beaming like that was a positive response. "I bet. But look at you. Out here making changes on campus and what not."

I didn't know what changes she referenced because everything I suggested to the cabinet, or university board members, got struck down. I was only a face for the students. Not a voice.

It wasn't what I wanted as an advocate of change. I wanted change. I wanted to see the difference. Becoming SGA president meant I'd be the difference.

"You think?" I asked hoping for an honest opinion.

But her smile fell, and eyes narrowed. After pondering the question, she answered, "Well what is it the SGA president does anyway?"

The guy beside her smirked and recited, "Exactly." His enthusiasm matched mine and I imagined he was only there for her.

Plates cleared, checks paid, and finally we were leaving the restaurant. I stretched and met the sun with squinted eyes. It felt like we were holed up in a dungeon for hours and I welcomed the freedom, the space, the quiet.

"Do you have plans for today?" I asked Journey as I followed her to the parking lot.

"Lots of rest. Maybe we can catch up tomorrow?"

"Yeah," I mumbled, "tomorrow." I reached down and wrapped her in my arms.

Her head shifted up and she kissed my lips. It was soft, but quick. Didn't linger like I would have wanted it to. Still, I appreciated the connection after a week of nothing.

We separated, both of us going to our own cars. And once I was inside mine, Marcus yelled, "Yo."

"What?"

"Exactly." He pointed to the restaurant. "What happened in there?"

The opening door, another few people walking inside, held my stare. "It's me, man." I admitted, "I've never liked crowds. I'm cool with a few people. But I like to keep my circle small. She's not like that. Apparent by all those people in there. But I don't know if we have a middle ground. If we can find one."

“I don’t know, man. Your circle is more like a period. You could open it a little more.” He squeezed his fingers together in front of his face as his eyes closed into a squint.

“Easy for you to say.” I started the car and looked in the rearview mirror before pulling out of the spot. “You made five new friends in there.”

“Even managed an invite to Thanksgiving.”

I side-eyed him. “Of course, you did.” *Thanksgiving*. “Hadn’t thought about what I’m doing yet. And here you are with someone welcoming you into their house.”

“You have a girl, bruh, that’s an automatic invite.”

It wasn’t as obvious to me. Every year I went home for the holidays, and every year someone in my family asked if I was bringing a girl home. It never happened. I couldn’t assume Journey would be ready to take me home with her. Not after the week we had, and the brunch that didn’t exactly go all that well. “I don’t know. We haven’t exactly talked about it yet.”

Chapter Fifteen

Journey

“What do you mean they are getting a divorce?” I shouted into the phone rattling the walls of my bedroom. I stood from the desk and paced the floor in front of my bed.

As Monroe went on, I tried to think of the last time she prank called me. Having two older siblings I dealt with a lot of foolery, and always found myself in the midst of their mess. When I was younger, the jokes often went over my head but brought plenty of laughter to the two of them. But since I’d been away in college the jokes decreased, the pranks came to an end.

“Wait, this isn’t a joke? You aren’t pranking me?” I blurted in the middle of whatever she was saying. “Did you say *our* parents.” Was she talking about some show she was watching? Or one of her co-workers who became her good friends when she joined her firm. Not the two people who cared for each other more than life itself. The man who hung the stars, moon, and sun on my mom’s existence. A woman who would work all day then happily cook dinner. Sat across from him at the table to hear him talk about his day. To share hers with him.

“Monroe, what did you say?”

She was talking but nothing she said registered. Because whatever she was saying sounded like she was talking about *our parents*.

“Journey. If you would calm down and listen you’d hear what I’m

saying.” Then she asked, “Do you have someone who can sit with you? I didn’t think this would send you off like it is, but it sounds like you are hyperventilating over there. Sis, you good?”

“No. You dropped our parents getting a divorce as if you were telling me you had coffee for breakfast. Is this not a surprise to you? How long have you known?”

Then there was a long pause. The one that indicated she’s known for some time. Another thing being the youngest afforded me, being the last to know everything in my family. When we moved in middle school, I didn’t find out until the day before movers showed up at the house. When Mom got hospitalized with pneumonia I didn’t know until Dad was in the kitchen cooking dinner that night. Meanwhile, Monroe and Dre casually mentioned they knew it all. Long before me.

“I can’t believe you all still don’t trust me enough to tell me shit. I’m not a kid anymore.” It was their main excuse. I was too young for all the details. To know them in advance. It wasn’t something I needed to worry myself about. But now? Why wait?

Monroe sighed like my questions were invalid or not worth her time to stress over. “Me and Dre agreed we wouldn’t say anything. I urged them to tell you when they came to this conclusion.”

Conclusion? Like they were picking where they were vacationing for summer. Not ending their thirty-plus-year marriage. “They’ve been together for too long to end things now.” I laughed. Or something like a laugh. It was more of a nervous reaction that I had no control over. “They can work this out, right?”

“Sorry, Journey, this is it.” I heard someone talking to her in the background before she offered, “Hey, I hate to do this to you now because it seems like you are having a hard time...but I have to run.”

“Now?” I don’t know what she could have done hours away from me, over the phone. After all, it wasn’t her who was petitioning for a divorce. It was my parents. They needed to console me. Explain what was going on and why. “Never mind, call me later.”

“Great, love you, sis.”

Although I had nothing but love for Monroe, it was hard to express it. Everything that I built my definition of love on was ending. “Love you too,” I mumbled, but it was after she hung up.

I sat back down at my desk and stared at the wall in front of me. The

pictures that hung, some of me from high school. A few of my roommates. One of our family. The five of us each rocking a wide smile. Like everything was great. Back then, it was. When I graduated from high school, my parents bragged about having an empty nest. How they'd be able to travel the world together. Go to expensive restaurants and not worry about bringing home something for us to eat. Their ambitions to expand the family business. For my mom to soon retire and join my dad in managing the gyms.

Everything seemed so well planned out. Like they knew exactly how life would look for the next fifteen years, at least. But here we were, at year four, and that plan was falling apart.

A tear fell from my eye, and I swiped it away. I didn't want to mourn what we were losing. I wanted to understand what was going on, encourage them to work things out. Convince my mom that all their broken pieces could fit together again. Tell my dad whatever it was he did to piss her off this time, he'd need to come ready to make it right. And not with a bouquet of flowers he always brought for her. But something more. It's not like they fought often, if they did, a divorce wouldn't surprise me. The fights they had I could count on one hand. The biggest being the start of the gym. My mom wasn't as confident back then my dad should take a huge chunk of the savings to start it.

And look at it now. Two more opened since. *No.* I shook my head. Whatever it is they have going on, they can fix it. I closed my notebook and stood from my seat. After class, I'd call them. Talk to each of them and find out how they can make it back to where they needed to be.

On my way out of the apartment, Lauren stopped me and asked, "You good?"

I felt everything but, still, I replied, "Yeah, I'm good."

She smacked her lips and shouted, "Lies." Her hand wrapped around my wrist. "Tell me what's going on. I see where you tried to wipe away that tear and failed."

My hand hurried to my face. A finger slid along my cheek.

"See. Is it that man? The one who looked like he would rather watch paint dry than have your friends surrounding him?" Her hand rested on her hip. "What'd he do now?"

Lauren's skepticism of Chaz was borderline comical. She had her doubts about him, and no matter what he did good, she wasn't convinced. I confessed, "Actually, it's my parents." I wasn't ready to say the words yet.

“My sister called and said...”

“They had an accident?” Lauren panicked. Started looking around the apartment. “I can cut that six-hour drive into three. Let me grab my books, I’ll study while we are there.”

I held my hand up and shook my head. Lauren and Nia came home with me on occasion. My parents treated them as their own and made sure they didn’t have to worry about anything while they were with me.

“They are closing the gym?” Her nose crinkled. “Not Daddy Thompson with his zaddy vibes.” She sucked her teeth, and I tilted my head. “My bad, you know I love your mama.”

And that’s when it hit me. A little harder than when Monroe shared the news. If they divorce, there will be no more *them*. They’d both be free to find someone else. I didn’t want new people in my life. I didn’t want them to be apart, let alone have someone else connected to them.

I tried holding back the tears, but they broke through. Streaming down my face as I became a blubbering mess. “They are getting a divorce.” I don’t know if Lauren heard me because the way she stared at me was giving she was in a daze.

She fanned her hand toward me and said, “Stop lying.”

“Dammit, I wish I was.” Monroe didn’t call back cackling in the phone. I would have loved for her to tell me her boredom had her pranking me early in the morning. “I don’t know if I’ve ever heard Monroe as serious.”

Lauren threw her bag on the couch and said, “Did you call them? That’s the easiest way to confirm it. Call Mama Thompson. She’ll tell you it’s one big misunderstanding.”

Lauren knew the feeling. Her parents divorced when she was in high school. At times she still recalls days after she found out. The process of them separating and splitting time between the two. How terrible she’d feel when she was with the other. “You know how many times my mama would threaten divorce and stick around?”

“But still divorced?”

“Guess that isn’t the silver lining I thought it could be, huh?”

I laughed and shook my head. We stared at each other before I said, “I need to get on campus. When I get home I’ll have to make the call. One of them will need to tell me what is going on.”

“And I’m going to pray by then, they’ve worked out whatever the situation is.” She wrapped me into the warmest hug and didn’t let go until my

shoulders sank. “It’s going to be okay.”

I’d never want my parents to stick together for the sake of us, or me. If one or both were unhappy I’d want them to find happiness. But I couldn’t imagine their story ending like that. Them apart. Not when they’d been together since college. Their love story started off with perfection and grew into one of the greatest I’d seen.

Walking on campus felt like I was drudging through sinking sand. Each step heavier than the last, and my eyes feeling the weariness of the tears I shed. I wanted to tuck away in the corner of my classroom, away from everyone. But to remain awake, I’d need coffee. Something sooner than what Chaz usually brought me after my first class.

As I walked into the coffee shop, my shoulders slumped thinking about Chaz. And how my parents’ relationship was the baseline for ours. The goal I aspired to achieve with him. By the time I made it to the counter, I considered returning home to crawl under the covers for the rest of the day.

But then, a deep voice said, “I don’t think an iced mocha is all you need today.” The guy behind the counter stared at me. “You good?”

Without telling him all my family business I shook my head. “Some stuff going on back at home.”

There was a look of understanding in his eyes. “If they only knew how hard it is to function here, when there isn’t all good.” He pulled a muffin from the shelf and said, “Here, something sweet to help cheer you up. Whatever it is, know that unless you can control it, it’s out of your control.” He handed me the muffin and I passed him my card.

“Thanks.” I smiled. “That’s helpful.” I looked at his nametag. “I appreciate it, Malachi.”

“Anytime, Journey.”

I stepped aside and waited for my coffee and took a bite of the muffin. While I chewed I thought about his words. How I wanted to *fix* my parents’ relationship. Repair whatever broke in their marriage. In the end, it was out of my control. No words I could speak, memories I could render for them, or plans I tried to make could undo what was happening.

“Iced Mocha for Journey.” The girl behind the counter passed me the drink.

I walked out of the café feeling a little lighter, but still like I could go home and take a long nap.

Then there was that familiar tug on my elbow. The one that I started to

associate with only Chaz. “Hey,” he said in a soft whisper like anything louder would send me spiraling.

I realized despite how I felt on the inside, a mix bag of emotions, my face couldn’t hide any of them.

“I’ve been trying to call you all morning.”

“You have?” Other than my sister’s call, I didn’t notice any others.

“Yeah, it was going to voicemail.” His stare became a little more fine-tuned. “Is everything okay?”

I wished like anything I could hide it all. Take a moment to let it sink in before needing to discuss it further. But my heart and my mind couldn’t reconcile. Tears started to stream, and I huffed. “No.”

“Come here.” He walked beside me until we reached a nearby bench. One away from the crowd of people in the courtyard. “You have class right now, right?”

I decided I’d be no good there. “I do, but I’m not going.”

“What’s wrong?” His hesitation was thoughtful. “You don’t have to share if now’s not the time. I can sit with you till you start to feel better.”

That felt like something my dad would do. Sit with my mama till she felt better. Not drilling her with questions or forcing her to express her emotions. It’s what he did after grandpa passed away. At first, after the tears, she sat not saying anything. And for the entire time daddy sat with her.

Of course, the memory brought a tear to my eye. Well, a couple of them. Still, Chaz stuck to his word. He didn’t question them, he only pulled me closer to him and waited.

“My parents,” I whispered, “they are getting a divorce.”

“Journey,” he said without forcing me to look at him, “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, it’s tough.” Tough could be one way to describe it. But being tough meant they could fight through the challenge. What was letting go? I didn’t want to think either of them were weak. Choosing happiness wasn’t weak. And they’d also shown me they were anything but. If they got to the point to walk away, things had to be bad. “Never thought I’d see the day.” Then I snickered. “Kinda wanted to invite you home for Thanksgiving. To meet them.” I’d gone back and forth about it. If it was time for us to do that yet. If we had hit that milestone.

I remembered the story of my dad meeting my grandparents. The first Thanksgiving they shared together. Daddy admitted he was a nervous wreck,

and grandpa preyed on that. Drilled him with questions he never considered. Made him contemplate what a future with Mama looked like. Daddy said it was then he decided she was the one. His future included her.

Were me and Chaz *there*. After our mishaps could we bring it altogether?

“But now, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” I stretched my neck to look at him. “If that would have been something you wanted to do in the first place.”

His face lacked his gorgeous smile. His hand rubbed against my arm, and I thought he was going to tell me there was no way he would have joined me. Parents divorcing or not, it was something not worth considering. “I would have liked that.” Then he offered, “Would you want to come home with me?”

I blinked. It wasn’t how my parents’ story went. It wasn’t ever how I imagined things going. Me meeting his family first. Before mine had a chance to drill him. “If all this wasn’t happening I wouldn’t mind. But I should go home.” My chest felt heavy. “I need some time with them to figure out what’s going on.”

Chaz said, “I understand.” Then his voice was a little more chipper when he added, “But the invite is out there if you change your mind.”

“I appreciate that.”

The courtyard was clearing, and I wanted more than anything to crawl into bed. Pull a pillow over my head to force myself back to sleep. To wake up again, a fresh start. The entire day a vivid dream I could escape.

“Is there anything I can do to help you feel better now?” Chaz stared at me.

Our closeness on the bench had a couple of suggestions popping up in my mind. And as *good* as it would have made me feel, I shook my head. “I need a little time alone to process this.” I rested my head on his shoulder. “But I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Whenever. I’ll answer. Okay?”

When shit hits the fan, it’s amazing how nothing else matters. I wasn’t tripping about the week Chaz ghosted me. The brunch situation was insignificant too. More than anything, with my parents falling apart, I wanted everything else to stay right where it was.

I stood from the bench, and he pulled me into a hug. His head rested on top of mine before his lips found a soft place to land on my neck. “Talk to you later.”

On my drive home, I decided I wasn’t ready to talk to my parents. And Monroe couldn’t do much to convince Dre to co-sign her crazy, so I called

him. He'd confirm, or hopefully deny, what she told me.

"Hello?" There was apprehension in his voice when he said my name, "Journey..." then he sighed. "You talked to Monroe?"

"So, it's true?"

I could hear footsteps around him. But it sounded like a hollow space. Between that and my car speakers where his voice projected, I tried to listen. To hear him when he spoke. Not to fade out like I did with Monroe.

"Fuck man," he groaned. "It's true."

The confirmation didn't make me break down into the tears. Although they stung my eyes. I held them back. "But this summer. When I was home, they seemed fine." *August, September, October, November.* "What happened in four months?"

"Journey, it's been longer than four months. They were trying to hold on until you graduated. Guess they couldn't do it anymore."

That made less sense than them getting a divorce. "How? I can count how many arguments they've had. Never seem upset. Were they faking all this time?"

"Maybe." His blunt answer was a blow to the gut. "In relationships, everything isn't always as it seems on the outside."

I scoffed. "Apparently."

"If you call anyone. Call mom first."

That was an odd request, but I agreed. "Okay."

"How are you? Outside of this, I know it's a blow. Hence why I told your big-mouthed sister to wait till you came home for the holidays."

I pulled into a parking spot at the apartment and blurted. "Thank God, I would have had Chaz with me. How embarrassing that would have been." I closed my eyes when I realized my error.

"Chaz. What kind of name is Chaz? And who the hell is that? You bringing someone home I never heard of. What kind of shit?"

I shut him up quickly. "You were keeping our parents' divorce a secret. Think we are even."

He was quiet. "Oh, you defending it. Must be serious. He treating you right?"

"He's amazing. Our relationship is everything I ever wanted it to be." I laughed. "Except what I've always wanted I based on Mom and Dad. Whitley and Dwayne too. So, guess I have a 50/50 chance of it working now." Telling Dre about the bad was unnecessary. There was no sense in

getting him fired up about nothing he could control. Then I realized. It was what my parents did to me. Hid the bad. *Fuck*.

Dre laughed. “Whitley and Dwayne are a fake couple. Sounds like you need to set your own relationship goals. Based on what *you* need.”

I stared at my reflection in the windshield. “I guess you’re right.”

Before we hung up he said, “Have I ever been wrong?”

Chapter Sixteen

C haz

Seeing my family for Thanksgiving usually left me refreshed. Knowing Journey was at home dealing with the end of her parents' marriage, I stayed on edge. Every phone call from her I anticipated the worst. Expected to hear tears, pain, anguish. And when I did, it unnerved me.

I couldn't get back to campus soon enough. Paced the apartment, clutched my phone in my hands, waited for her to call me. All I wanted to do was hold her in my arms. Lay her in my bed, remind her what love *felt like*...

Love.

Carter joked that's what I was feeling when he saw me moping around back home. He, and the rest of my family, mentioned how little I ate. How I shuffled my food around the plate. Joked I'd typically be on plate number two. Said my lost appetite must have meant something. Something more than a little *like*.

I denied love. Said it was me missing Journey. Because we weren't at love yet. But had her parents not dropped a bomb on her before the holidays, I would have gladly buttoned up a shirt to meet them. To spend the few days away from campus with her.

I didn't think Journey and I were there yet because I didn't put much thought into it. Logically, how could I love her if I didn't think about it? Isn't love something that should be on my mind non-stop? In the morning when I

woke up she was the first person I wanted to talk to. And before bed the person I needed to hear before closing my eyes. But *love* wasn't on my mind. The word didn't threaten to fall from my lips, and I wasn't plotting different ways I could express it to her.

And Journey. Although she wanted me to join her on the trip back home, she didn't mention it either. So, I didn't think we were there yet. Around the corner, down the street, a block over, but not there.

My phone rang, instead of vibrating, and fell to the ground when I jumped. "Hello," I rushed without looking at the screen after picking it up.

"Hey." Her voice was softer than usual. Her chipper cheerleader enthusiasm disappeared sometime before the break. I hoped it would return after the trip, but I guess not.

"Are you back?" I asked.

"Yeah, pulled up a few minutes ago. I want to see you."

The words tugged on my chest. Somewhere near the middle.

"Journey, I want to see you too." The way I wanted to see her involved skin on skin, body to body, my lips on hers. "Do you want to come over?"

"Can we go somewhere?" Wasn't what I expected her to ask.

"Sure." I hesitated but didn't put too much thought into it. "Hungry?"

"No, not really."

I didn't want to waste time figuring it out. "I'm on my way."

"Okay."

The drive to her apartment was unusually long. Every light between my place and hers turned red as I approached. Sitting and waiting felt like torture on the grandest scale. I would have sat in a crowded room with random people if the lights would turn green for me.

As I pulled up to her apartment, I took a breath though. I didn't rush out the car, to her front door, to ask her where she wanted to go. I sat in the car, looked up to her floor, at the window that overlooked the parking lot. My fist clenched before I stepped out. I walked to the stairs, then jogged up them. Raised my clenched fist to the door and knocked. Held my breath till the door opened, and when I saw her face, exhaled.

Her smile relieved every nervous thought I had on the drive over. Her open arms and warm embrace made me forget she didn't want to come over to my apartment. Her whispered, "I missed you," rejected my worries about what she had to say to me.

"Me too." I pulled her at arm's length. Looked at her like my grandma

did me back at home. With observant eyes. Checking to see if I noticed anything out of place. “You okay?”

She wagged her head before tugging on her purse strap. “Can we go to the lake?”

The lake. In the middle of the city where most people went out to exercise. It had parking spots, and a walking path circling it. “If that’s where you want to go.”

Her subtle head nod confirmed, and I took her hand as we walked to the car. Our fingers interlocked, and other than the silence between us we felt normal. I opened her door, she climbed in, and waited for me to do the same. Nothing was out of the ordinary there either. We chatted about all the food we ate back home. Small jokes about our childhood favorites that didn’t seem all that good anymore. Debated the purpose both a ham and turkey, and whether it was necessary. Ham was always the star of the show.

“And the mac and cheese.” I said, “It was on point this year.” Although I regretted not eating more.

But when we made it to the lake. Parked in front, and I killed the ignition our conversation changed. I had to ask about the elephant sitting between us. “How are your parents?”

There was a long exhale like she’d been holding her breath since she returned to Hill Mount. I anticipated more tears, and when they fell, I grabbed her hand. Rubbed a thumb against the back of it.

When she was ready she said, “It was tough being home.” Her words drew out. Each sentence punctuated with a long pause. “I thought we’d have one last Thanksgiving together as a family.” She pulled her hand from mine. “But my dad moved out.” Her fingers brushed under her eyes, wiping away the tears. “My mom did her best to maintain our traditions. Huge brunch that morning, and dinner that afternoon. Dessert that night while watching Christmas movies.” She shook her head. “It wasn’t the same though. Not without him there.”

“Did you see him? Your dad?” I wished we would have talked about all this while we were apart. Caught up on the hard part so together we could discuss something that wasn’t as painful. But when she was away she didn’t reveal much.

“I did. A few times. We had lunch with him the day after, and breakfast before we left.” Her shoulders went up to her ears before they tumbled down. “Guess it’s our new norm.”

I leaned forward and tilted my head toward her. "Journey, I'm sorry."

"It is what it is, I guess." She wasn't sure about much. Not like she used to be. "It did make me think about us though." Her lips upturned but only slightly. The pause between that sentence and her next made me more nervous than when she spoke of her time away. "What I want for my future. Getting married, building a family, a successful career. Those were all things I wanted before." She glanced at me then to the lake. "I still want those things. Despite my parents situation and my hurt over them."

I waited to hear more, and when it didn't come I said, "I never thought much about relationships. And where things go in the future. Kids, marriage, a white picket fence. Seems like something little girls dream, and women make a reality. But left to my own imagination, it isn't anything I could visualize."

Her breath hitched but she didn't speak.

I watched a couple holding hands on the path in front of us. "I only want to be happy. I never defined in detail what that would look like." Happiness seemed simple. Like it could come without too many expectations. That if defined it could be hard to achieve. "Should happiness have boundaries? Rules? A checklist?"

"Until recently, I thought so." Her arms crossed over her chest. "A few weeks ago, I'd say absolutely. All the above. Boundaries, rules, checklist, goals. Otherwise, how would we know we accomplished it?"

"Wake up happy." I thought about how I felt that morning knowing I'd see her. "This morning, I woke up happier than I have all week. But before I fell asleep last night, it wasn't like I set an expectation for what had to happen for me to gain happiness." It felt like more than needed to be explained, but I said it anyway, "The rest of the week, I was still happy. Today, a lot more."

"And do you imagine in the future, you'd want to continue that *more*?" Our eyes connected. "With me? Or, after we graduate do you plan to go your own way. Find happiness in something else? Someone else?"

I snickered. "I mean. I could see you being there." I held my hands in front of me. "If I tried to imagine the future." I made a little circle with my finger. "I could see you beside me. But I don't know if I can make any promises. Do either of us know what will happen six months from now? Feels like a lot is undefined."

"Undefined. Hmph. In the mess we can't define, there's one thing we have more control over, but sounds like you aren't willing to control it."

“If your parents weren’t divorcing, would you have the same thoughts? Feeling you need to control us? Our future? Or would you be open to see where things went naturally?” I offered, “I get it. Their divorce has stirred up a lot of emotion, but I don’t know if we should direct it at our relationship.”

“And by we, do you mean me? I shouldn’t direct it at our relationship? I should chill?” There was a little spice in her voice. Not something I heard before from her. “If you don’t want to define the future, do you want to be together now?”

“Whoa.” I held my hands up between us. “I’m not implying that at all.” I didn’t know what to say next. Fighting felt foreign, and uncomfortable. All I wanted to do was escape the confusion, the resistance between us, and get back to what was comfortable. I stepped out of the car, walked to the passenger side and opened her door.

She hesitated when I tried to help her out of the car. “Chaz...”

“Come on,” I urged. I stood in front of her until she stepped out. And when she did, I wrapped her in my arms. I pulled on her chin until we were staring at each other, then I bent down and kissed her lips. Let our tongues reacquaint themselves. Found familiarity in the warmth of her mouth. Felt my shoulders ease, and my mind relax. I pecked her lips right before placing my hands on the car and caging her in place. “Listen, this year is nothing I expected.”

In my junior year, there’s no way I could have predicted anything that was happening. There were no signs, no indicators, not a single data point that would have suggested the shift. A girlfriend. SGA president. A change to my career aspirations. Everything I thought would be my life senior year, wasn’t. And not in a bad way. Although it was change, I adjusted. I didn’t suspect anything would be different after graduation. If there was something I didn’t expect, I’d adjust.

“I’m glad we met, Journey. I’m glad I’m stepping out of my comfort zone. Bear with me though, I’m adjusting. Willing to change to fit this, whatever my life represents right now. But I’m not ready to define what it’ll be later. Because what it is now is more than I could have imagined in the first place.”

“I understand.” Her eyes closed and I feared where her thoughts were. Worried we weren’t on the same page. If she wasn’t willing to sit in the unknown with me, was she willing to sit with me at all? “With my parents’ situation I need time to figure life out. Let things settle, and not let my

emotions get the best of me. Not race to force this to be, or not.”

“So?” I searched her eyes.

“Give me time. Let me get myself together.”

“Time. I can give you that.” I couldn’t ask her how much she needed. Or what we’d do in the meantime. Because that wasn’t much different than her asking me if we would be together after college. They both were in the future. And if I wasn’t willing to rub the crystal ball, I couldn’t ask her to either.

Chapter Seventeen

Journey

Watching Whitley and Dwayne on a constant loop wasn't ideal. There were other shows I could watch to keep me from the edge of despair. Their love reminded me that my parents' didn't last. Their cute banter made me miss Chaz. I pulled the covers up to my chin and buried my head into the pillows. A week since I saw him at the lake, and I still couldn't decide if I wanted to appease present me, or torture me of the future.

Chaz didn't sound sure of us. Certain of what could be. And if he wasn't definite, what was the point? If he dropped to one knee at the lake, I couldn't guarantee I'd say yes. But would I want him to pull out a ring one day? I could see things going that way. And that's all I wanted. I wanted him to see things progressing.

My door creaked open. I took my eyes off the TV long enough to look at Nia and Lauren standing beside each other. Both dressed in cute, wintery outfits, makeup done to perfection. Meanwhile, I wore my favorite sweats and a free t-shirt I got from a campus swag bag.

"We've decided." Nia had a stern look on her face. "You're coming with us."

Lauren chipped in, "We only have a few months before we finish college. What would we look like letting you waste another day in here sulking? So," she stepped closer and yanked the covers from the bed, "get up and get

dressed.”

“For what?” I groaned. My body settled into the chill of the apartment. “I’m getting to the good part.” I pointed to the TV.

“The fact you know you are getting to the good part is point enough for you to get your butt up. You’ve watched these episodes a million times. You can miss it.” Nia grabbed the remote from my nightstand and clicked the TV off. “Come on. If you take too long I’m making you buy us drinks to make up for missing happy hour.”

“With what money?” I laughed.

She smirked. “Exactly.” She slid my closet door open then said, “You take a shower and I’ll find an outfit.”

I was reluctant, but I climbed off my bed because there was no escaping the two of them when they grew determined. “I’ll be quick.”

Lauren shouted, “You better,” to the closing door.

One look at my face in the mirror let me know I’d been neglecting myself for days. My hair was all over my head, I needed to exfoliate my face, and my eyebrows needed some love. Still, I did the best I could with the time I had.

“What am I wearing?” I stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around me.

Nia pointed to a sweater dress, and I wagged my head. After pulling it on, I started to feel better. Not great, but better.

The club we ended up at had plenty of people. Or distractions as Nia deemed them. She sipped from her cup then shouted, “This whole idea of finding a man to leave college with is a terrible idea.”

I swirled my cup but didn’t respond because I was starting to agree. But I wasn’t ready to admit it yet.

“Look at all these guys.” Lauren waved her hand around us. “You won’t get this much melanin when you leave.” She sucked her teeth. “This much intelligence and sexiness in one room.” Her head shook side to side as she gazed across the room. “There’s no way you need to be stuck on one guy when you can have many.” She raised her cup into the air. “I propose a toast...”

I hesitated because the last time she proposed a toast, it was *to a night of no cares*. She had me bent over on the dance floor. And the night ended with my head hung to the side of a toilet. It was after our last exam of junior year. Lauren suggested we thoroughly enjoy ourselves. And we did.

“To a night of...” she eyed my cup, and I raised it. “No expectations.”

There was a smug look on my face before I tipped my cup back and gulped whatever remained. *No expectations.*

No expectations were great, but I argued after another drink, “I like Chaz though. I want to expect he likes me too.”

A guy beside me leaned in closer, “My name isn’t Chaz. But I can like you.”

Nia looked at him and fell into uncontrollable laughter. Even after a few drinks I managed to hold mine back. To look at him seriously and say, “I don’t know if you can compete.”

The look on his face let me know he was willing to try. And he was kinda cute. In a rough and rugged way. With a good edge up he would hold much more potential.

“I need another drink,” I yelled to Lauren, “Grab the bartender.”

After our fourth drink, we ended up in the middle of the dance floor. No expectations looked much like *no cares*. And I twirled my ass in a circle. Backed it up to a few guys who approached, and when nobody was around I danced like I was giving a show. “Me and Chaz haven’t danced like this.”

Lauren scoffed, “Could you see him in a club?” She placed a cup in my hand. “Drink up and keep dancing. Don’t worry about him.”

“But” I said between sips, “I want things to work with him. I don’t care if he won’t let me back it up to him in front of all these people.” I swung my hand and dripped liquor down my chest. “Oops.”

Nia reached over and hovered a finger in front of me. “Shhh... dance. Bend it over like this.” She fell forward. “Then drop it low like that.”

I could only watch because my balance was a little off. Standing still and swaying side to side with the beat was a challenge. “I’m good.”

A familiar voice asked, “You sure about that?”

The club was dark, and the flashing lights didn’t assist in my ability to find the face. But as it neared I recognized him. “My iced mocha.” I smiled.

“Your iced mocha.” He laughed. “Looks like you could use one right now.”

I nodded my head and pinched my fingers together in front of my face. “A little too much alcohol.” The heaviness in my stomach became uncomfortable. I looked across from me and said, “We should go.”

Lauren stopped dancing abruptly. Left the guy behind her looking mad. “Let’s do it.” Her arm reached for Nia and she led the way off the dance

floor.

But my first few steps were a little wobbly. The heeled boots I wore felt heavier each time I tried to pick up a foot. “Wait...” I called out to the two of them, but they continued walking.

A hand wrapped around my waist. “I got you.”

My eyes tried to focus on his face. But through a few blinks his features were hard to make out. Either way, he helped me to the exit. Then I told him, “The car is far,” like it was his job to help me the rest of the way.

He chuckled and said, “Can’t have you falling across the parking lot.”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

Lauren and Nia finally looked behind them when we got to the car. Nia’s eyes bulged and she said, “Oh. Ugh... what’s going on here?”

“You know iced mocha,” I mumbled. “He’s helping me to the car. Didn’t want me to fall.” My eyes drifted closed as I stood there.

“Here I’ll help you get her inside,” his voice sounded even deeper.

I started lowering, and when my ass hit the seat I rested my head back.

“Make sure she sleeps on her side,” he warned and sounded like somebody’s daddy. But not mine because he was no longer Mr. Reliable.

“We got her.” I don’t know which one of them made that declaration, but I trusted either one of them had me.

“Damn,” Nia said as the car started moving. “That man is fine.”

The two of them went back and forth about the different coffee drinks he could represent.

I whispered, “But he’s iced mocha already.” And like a flash of cold water hit my face I shouted, “Chaz. I want to call Chaz.” I searched my purse for my phone. Trying to unlock it before Nia snatched it from my grip.

“Now?” She blurted and it felt like a slap to the face.

I blinked a few times trying to make her face come into better focus. “Yes, now.” I reached for my phone. “I need to talk to him.”

She dangled it in the air. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Too many drinks plus late-night phone calls don’t mix.”

“Unless it’s a booty call. But not on some I need to talk about my feelings.” Lauren stared into the rearview mirror. “If that’s what you are about to do.” She turned to Nia. “Keep the phone.”

“But my feelings matter.” I stared at the window. “My feelings for him matter.”

“Okay, Nia, give her the phone then.” Lauren pulled into a parking spot

in front of our apartment. “Let her see how it works out.”

Nia stepped out of the car. “Oh, Journey. If this goes bad, I’m not going to hesitate shouting ‘I told you so’ in the morning.”

I nodded with my fingertips on the edge of the phone. “You won’t have to.” I stuck my tongue out and swiped it from her. I clicked Chaz’s name and waited for him to answer. It wasn’t quick, and I was in my room before I heard the roughness of his voice.

I sat on the floor in front of my bed. “Chaz…”

“Journey, you good?”

I shook my head and waited till my emotions settled. “I had some drinks,” I admitted. “Then some guys talked to me at the club. I danced with some too. Would you dance with me at the club?”

“Ugh, I don’t dance for real.”

“I thought you’d say that.” I frowned. “But it’s okay. It didn’t make me want to be with them.”

Chaz scoffed. “I guess that’s good.” His voice wasn’t the comforting sound I wanted to hear.

“Chaz,” I whined, “I want to end my night with you.” I didn’t hear him rushing from his place. Didn’t hear him shuffling around or moving at all. “Chaz?”

“I have an exam in the morning.” He informed me, “I can’t come to you tonight.” Then he added, “And sounds like it’d be a bad idea for you to come to me. So, I guess we’ll have to wait on that.”

“Wait,” I reiterated. “Okay.” I would have settled to listening to him breathe all night too. And I tried.

But he broke through my contentment and said, “I’ll talk to you later, Journey. Get some rest.”

“Later, Chaz.” I dropped the phone to the floor and hung my head back on my bed.

Chapter Eighteen

C haz

Not between classes. While she was on campus. After cheer practice. But when she realized she didn't want the guys who were dancing all over her at the club. It wasn't exactly the return I expected. I wished hearing Journey say she wanted to end her night with me gave something. Anything. But it didn't. Not after she said she danced with other dudes.

Not when she knew I wouldn't dance with her.

But I did have an exam in the morning. And I had no room for error with Dr. Chapman. I could only hope after the liquor wore off Journey still wanted to see me. Because five days was long enough since the last time. The breaks were starting to become more normal than us being together. The longer I sat in them, it made me wonder if there was anything left to hold on to.

I had to focus though, after the interview, I'd find her. Find out if everything I was thinking was way off. I walked across the courtyard and stood next to the cameraman. Waited for some instruction from the reporter.

"We'll ask a few questions, fifteen minutes top." She eyed me. "You sure now is a good time?"

I adjusted the collar of my shirt. Decided to unbutton the top button. "Now is good." Later would be worse. I wanted to get it over with. The university insisted on the interview in the first place. And despite the changes they weren't allowing me to make, they wanted me to speak about change.

There wasn't much I could say about that.

"Alright," she nodded toward the cameraman. "Looks like either side is good for you, so I'll stand here. My left side is better." She winked and the cameraman pointed. "We are speaking with Chaz Brown, the SGA President of Hillside University."

After all the times I heard the title behind my name, I still grinned hard when someone said it. But that grin slid away when I heard what the reporter said next.

"Mr. Brown won the special election. The one needed because the prior administration got caught up in a cheating scandal." The mic posed in front of my face. "Do you have anything to say about that?"

I looked nervously at the cameraman. I didn't know where to put my hands, so I stuffed them into my pockets. "People make mistakes. There are consequences for actions. Their consequences serve as a warning to those who forget they'll be accountable."

The reporter smirked. "I've done some digging..." she let her sentence trail.

If I had anything to hide it would be time for me to panic. But I'd seen how journalist try to get politicians to squirm. I wasn't going to budge.

"And before this, you weren't active in the campus politics."

It wasn't a question, so I kept my eyes trained on the camera. Waiting for her to proceed with something I could respond to.

"Why is it now? Is it because you are nearing graduation? You need the attention to fuel your post-graduation aspirations."

I looked down at her and smiled. "My post-graduation aspirations?" I informed her, "If your question is if I did this for personal gain, my answer is no. I did this because a professor suggested I use my voice. Told me that the articles I penned weren't enough action."

"Enough action," she repeated. "And now, with the approved budget, and new dorm proposal, do you see this as a win?"

"I see any progress the university is making a win for all students." I kept my answer minimal. Because the budget, the new dorm proposal weren't my ideas. I had other goals for the board to focus on, and those were dismissed.

There was a small crowd forming around us as she continued. "With months left until campus life is over for you. If you could work for any political campaign, which would it be?"

That was an easy question. Not something accomplishable soon but

ultimately, one day, I'd love for it to happen. "A presidential campaign."

She widened her eyes. "Running as president?"

I clarified, "I'd prefer to be behind the scenes." Over the reporter's shoulder I caught a glimpse of Journey's hair. The slant in her eyes when she looked toward us and noticed me too. Although the journalist was talking, I couldn't take my eyes off Journey.

She cleared her throat, "And how about your personal life Mr. Brown. Or your love life? Is there a future first lady on this campus?"

I didn't appreciate the segue. If it weren't for the crowd, the cameras rolling I would have dismissed myself from the interview. Ended it before it got too deep into life outside of the position. "I've never wanted all this attention. Hence, why I'd help someone campaign but wouldn't want to be on a ballot beyond this. I like to keep my personal life lowkey. Anyone I'm ever in a relationship with deserves the same respect."

"Well, WGHM, you heard it here first. Mr. Brown will not be running for president, and anyone interested in if he's single, well, we'll never know." She lowered the mic and stared at the cameraman. When the camera lowered she said, "Maybe this interview will get you in front of the people you need." Journey never neared us, but the reporter noticed her. "But if this is the life you are choosing, you might have to think twice about your privacy. Your eyes are telling."

I wiped a hand across my beard. "I'll do what's necessary." I reached my hand out to shake hers. "Thanks for the interview, I hope you have what you need."

"Indeed, we do." She nodded toward the cameraman. "Before you graduate we may have to do a follow-up. I, for one, would love to hear where you are headed next. I've heard positive things about you in the short time you've been SGA president."

"A follow-up?" I considered what I'd be telling her. Where I'd end up after graduation. What city or town I'd be moving to. "I'm sure you'll be in touch."

The crowd dissipated, but Journey was still feet away from where I stood. I took long strides to get to her. But when I stood in front of her, I didn't know whether to embrace her, pull her into my chest, kiss her lips, or stand back and wait. I put my hands back in my pockets and locked eyes with her. "How are you?" For someone who drunk dialed me the night before, she looked to recover well.

“This morning was a reminder that I shouldn’t drink too much.” Her face twisted. “Recovery time lessens the older we get.”

“I’ve heard.” Was she too drunk to know we spoke? To realize she called me? “Do you remember much about the night or is it all a blur?”

“Like calling you? I remember that.” She winced. “Sorry to call you like that.”

I shrugged my shoulder. “Days after not talking, I was happy to hear your voice. But not as excited for you to tell me you were dancing up on dudes.”

“I said *that*?” Maybe she only remembered parts of the short conversation.

I nodded. “You did. You followed it up with wanting to end the night with me.”

“And you said you couldn’t.” Her face fell, and she looked down to the ground. “Over there,” she looked toward the empty space that held a crowd, cameraman, and reporter minutes earlier, “you said something about a relationship, but—”

“I don’t want my business in the streets. It’s not for public consumption.”

“Not even the fact that you are in a relationship?” Her eyes met mine and I saw pain on the other side.

I shook my head. The beginning of us was easy. Our conversations came without pressure. We hardly had anything to argue about while getting to know each other. There wasn’t enough commitment to force anything more or be mad at anything less. It was effortless. And now, I had to navigate every other sentence to ensure a landmine didn’t await its departure from my mouth. *Tick, tick.* “Journey, it’s not like that. A confirmation is as much as giving them permission to dig into my personal life.” *Boom.*

“Would it be so bad?”

“For the city to know you exist. That you are someone always on my mind. Someone I’ve been intimate with. Someone I asked to be my girl, *officially*?” I shook my head. “No. Because it’s not our relationship I’m worried about hiding. I’ve seen the politics and how they can pick a person apart. I’ve seen families put on the chopping block because of a comment they made. From a view they have that differs from the public, or the party. You aren’t the one in the position, you shouldn’t have to answer to anything. Long-term, would I prefer that not to be an issue I have to contend with? Yes. It’s the basis of everything I want to change in politics—remove what doesn’t matter.”

“But me and you, are we good?” Her words cut through what didn’t matter.

Chapter Nineteen

Journey

“Us?” The look on his face—somber, agitated, disinterested.

“Yeah, us? Are we good?” I admit, I was all over the place. Fully on board with me and Chaz. Wanted everything my parents had. Longed for that Whitley and Dwayne happily ever after. Thought me and Chaz would walk off the stage at graduation into a beautiful future together.

The problem was, I was alone in that. I was on a page in the book he hadn’t flipped to yet and may not get to anytime soon.

That, combined with my parents’ divorce, the dream felt further from reality. The more I thought about it, the more I worried our relationship was a waste of time. That if there was no beautiful ending, then why care about the beautiful beginning?

I wish it was that easy though. For me to wake up and tell myself all the feelings I had for Chaz were over. For me not to think about him throughout the day. The smallest things, like the courtyard of our campus reminded me of him. That’s why I slowed when I saw him doing the interview. I kept a safe distance. I didn’t want to distract him. Make him lose his thought. But I admired him from feet away. I wanted to stand beside him and let that reporter know Chaz was about his business, whatever his business was.

But how could I do that, and still believe us now could be all there was to our relationship?

It was crazy. A part of me wished I never visited the coffee shop that day. Wasn't walking along his path so he could bump into me. That Chaz Brown would have gone unknown to me for the rest of my time on campus. Now that I knew him, I couldn't forget him.

"I know," I offered before he could speak, "I've been all over the place." I pulled my book closer to my chest. "I don't want to lose what we have. If now is all we got, I want now."

A little smile shifted onto his face, his eyes brightened, and I saw hope there. "Can't lie and say I haven't missed you."

Oh, if my heart wasn't nervously beating before those words, it kicked into overdrive afterwards.

Then he licked his lips. His hand reached out, and a finger brushed against mine. My mouth opened as I stared at him. *Now* trapped me. It wouldn't release me if I fought it. Even if I begged it to let me slip into the future. My feet stood firm in *now*.

"I hope you missed me too."

"More than you'll know," I whispered. "I hope you aren't thrown off by these mini meltdowns I've been having." I smirked. "I promise, this isn't me." It wasn't. For most of my life, I remained stable. Balanced. The boat floated along a calm lake without rocking. Then a storm came and damn near knocked me into the water. "I wasn't ready for my ground to shift from under me."

He inched closer to me, not once letting his eyes leave mine. "At first it caught me off guard. It was a lot of emotions, a lot of ups and downs. But then I had to think about how I'd feel if my world was changing, and I can't say I wouldn't react the same way." He winced. "I'd be in my room with all those emotions, but still..."

I laughed and his hand cupped my chin. "I should have stayed in my room too."

He rebutted, "Except, that's not who you are. You are the girl who is going to embrace her people. Wear your feelings on your sleeve and dare everyone around you to brush them off. That's who you are."

I wiped a hand across my forehead. For December in Hill Mount, it sure warmed up. "Thank you." I nodded and closed my eyes before looking at him again. "I'm still hurt by it all. Still trying to adjust." I smirked. "I'm sure as things progress there will be times when I feel the weight of it all again. But I don't want that to impact what we have."

“I’ll be here if, and when, that happens.” He leaned down and our lips connected. Better than the first kiss we shared, more intimate than the sex, more sincere than his sweetest words.

I breathed him in and didn’t sigh until it ended.

“I have a break before my next class...” his words didn’t say what his eyes revealed.

I laughed. “My apartment is close, and I’m parked right over there. If we leave now, I can make it back for my afternoon class.”

He pulled my bag from my shoulder. “Should we run?”

I laughed as he started speed walking across the courtyard toward the parking lot. “Like actually run?”

He looked over his shoulder and said, “When we get there, I won’t rush with you. But we have to get there.” His head tilted to the side. “It’s been a minute.”

“You have a point. It has.” I quickened my pace, but his strides outpaced mine still. When we got inside the car, I told him, “I’ll take the fast route.”

“Please.” A pleading look in his eyes had my entire body tingling. His hand dropped to my thigh like he could sense the vibrations happening throughout my body. He rubbed his finger in circles, and it was hard not to moan at the red light.

When it turned green, I sped through. Whipped into a parking spot and didn’t wait for him to open my door. We were laughing as we ran up the stairs. And as I fumbled with my bag, trying to grip my keys, he leaned behind me with his dick planted firmly into my back. Kissed along the nape of my neck.

“Chaz,” I breathed, “Hold on. I can’t think like this...”

He gave me an inch of space. Still, I could feel him behind me. Feel the warmth radiating off his body. The key turned and he fell back into place. I threw my bag down and continued our kiss from earlier. Walking backwards as he guided us to my room.

“Journey?”

My feet faltered, knees buckled, and I poked my head around Chaz’s back. “Mom?” The tension in my jaw could have cracked a pecan shell. “What? What are you doing here?”

“Lauren let me in before she left for class.” Her cheeks warmed, as she looked from me to Chaz.

“Ugh...” Chaz looked down at me. “I should go?”

“I drove,” I whispered between gritted teeth. “Come on let’s sit.”

His eyes widened and he didn’t move at first. I wrapped my fingers in his and walked him to the couch. “Mom.” I took a long deep breath and said, “This is Chaz. Who I told you about during Thanksgiving.”

She stood and outstretched her hand. “Chaz, pleasure to meet you.” Their eyes connected and it was like he was *kissing babies again*. He was in politician mode, ready to say what was necessary to get the vote.

“Sorry, it’s like this.” His smile faded. “I can give you some time to talk. Journey, I can go in your room?”

“No, please sit.” Mom’s smile was menacing as she took her seat on the couch. “I’d love to talk to you for a minute.”

Chaz sat in the chair across from her. His hands crossed on his lap.

“I hear you’re SGA president, with political ambitions.” She gave him a tight-lipped smile. “That’s amazing. What made you want to do political science?”

“Watched too much news as a kid.” There was a nervous laugh filling the room I never heard before. “Started asking why things were the way they were. Eventually understood our politicians had a lot to do with it.”

Mom’s head nodded and I could tell her brain was churning a barrage of questions to follow up with. But there wasn’t time for all that. If she drove six hours to *talk to me* it had to be serious.

“Mom, why are you here?” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I mean, it’s not like we are down the street from each other.” I stared into her eyes to find something. Anything that would give me a clue into what she was thinking. I found nothing.

“You’re right. It isn’t.” She laughed. An uneasy laugh that sounded much like Chaz’s did minutes earlier. “It’s longer than I remembered it once I hit the highway. After not breaking the divorce news to you myself, I felt I should be the one to tell you I’m selling the house.”

There was the other storm I anticipated. It didn’t rock the boat as much as I thought it would. Maybe after the initial one, the others were tolerable. The water never went back to calm anyway.

“Wow, okay. That is news. But you could have called. I would have been okay, Mom.”

Her chest heaved, and her eyes went to the ceiling. I felt the onslaught of the next storm coming before the boat started rocking.

“I could have, but I know this has all been challenging. At least for me,

it's been devastating. And" she cleared her throat as a tear trickled down her cheek, "I'm moving back home for a while."

"Home? A while?"

Mom's hometown wasn't close to Hill Mount. Or Lake Side. She'd be further away from me. Further away from Dre and Monroe too. Far away from Daddy. I clenched my eyes closed because I guess that was the point.

"I need to take some time to figure me out. For so long, I've been a mother. A wife. I haven't been only me in a while." That's when the tears cascaded down her face.

A few down mine too. I mouthed, "I'm sorry," to Chaz.

He shook his head. "You know what..." He stood from his seat. "I'm hungry. Are you two hungry?" He looked between the two of us. "I'll treat." He held up a hand. "Take a minute to decide, I'll run to the bathroom. Journey," he looked down the hallway, "do you mind?"

I shook my head. "Second door on the left."

Mom wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Other than what was about to go down if I wasn't here." She laughed. "Chaz seems like a very nice guy. I'm happy for you." There was a bright smile that quickly faded. "Me and your father were crazy in love like that at one point. When we were here on campus. Our future felt bright. Was bright until recently." She bit the side of her lip. "I don't want you to fall into the same disillusionment. Things can be perfect and still not end up where you expect them."

With weight on my chest I said, "I'm trying hard to allow myself to enjoy whatever it is now. Not get too caught up on what it could be later." I clarified, "I was about to make that mistake. I won't do that."

Her hand landed on my knee. "Good. I don't want to see you hurt. Ever."

Chaz made his way back to the living room, clapped his hands and asked, "Lunch?"

Mom looked at me and nodded. "Better fill my belly and take a nap before I get on the road again." She asked, "Is that okay with you, Journey?"

"That's fine with me, Mom." I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a hug.

Chaz blurted, "Can I get in on that too?"

Mom didn't have a chance to respond before Chaz's long arms engulfed the both of us.

Chapter Twenty

C haz

Meeting Journey's mom on the way to getting her between the sheets wasn't on my bingo card. Watching her overcome by emotion was harder than watching Journey go through it. There was something in her that seemed fragile. Like any little jostle would have her crumbling to pieces.

When I was young, and had a bad day, Mama would always offer food. In form of a snack, lunch, dinner. Ice cream after. Lunch felt like the best solution to resolve the feelings in the room. To keep them from plunging into the depths of the sea. Off to the bottom where it'd be hard to recover.

And from the questions she asked, I didn't think sitting with the two of them a little longer would be too bad.

It wasn't. At first. We laughed and talked about campus. Didn't let her mom dwell too much on her time there. Those stories often led to tears as she remembered her relationship. The cycle was vicious—smiles, laughter, anger, tears. Then it repeated.

Instead of taking her through it, me and Journey took turns telling her about our four years on campus. Journey's time much more intriguing, but I did offer the little tidbits I had. Let her in on my plans to keep to myself. She didn't seem to find any fault in it. Nothing she outwardly judged anyway.

Then Journey stepped away to use the restroom, and Mrs. Thompson took her gloves off. Leaned into the table and stared deep into my soul. Had me

pulling on the collar of my shirt it became so uncomfortable.

And when she asked, “So, Chaz, do you think you’ll marry my daughter?”

I panicked. We only met recently. *Are we there yet?* Asking deep, provocative questions like that? After a gulp, I stared at her. I tried to find the words to respond.

After we left the restaurant, I didn’t know if my answer was sufficient or not. Mrs. Thompson didn’t seem to treat me any different. She hugged me before Journey and I left her to take a nap. Promised we’d see each other again. And hopefully before graduation. I thought everything was good.

I guess I could say I was floating on a cloud for the night, the next day, and into that evening. The speech I had to deliver to the student body before break had me worried earlier in the week. But as I stood at the podium, I was fine. I held my shoulders back, stared over the crowd, and smiled.

My girlfriend’s mama caught us in a compromising position. She asked me difficult questions afterward, and I survived. I could conquer the damn world. That’s what I thought as I wet my lips and prepared to deliver my speech.

“Dear Students of Hillside University.” I didn’t like the intro, but Amya insisted on it. And being the political analyst she was, I trusted she had the data to support it would land effectively. “As we embark on the end of what I hope has been a successful semester for you, I want to take the opportunity to prepare you for what’s ahead.”

Working with the board, and my cabinet, I had a list of exciting things to announce. By exciting, I meant things that gave the freshman something to look forward to. Seniors like me could be a little salty that many of the efforts wouldn’t apply to them before graduation. Still, I proceeded, “The housing project will start next semester. For those of you who are freshman before you leave you’ll witness the state-of-the-art facility. For those who complained about late-night food options, the café has worked out an agreement. It will allow them to stay open until midnight four nights a week.” That landed a round of applause.

“We understand that there aren’t sufficient study areas for group projects...” It wasn’t something I felt necessary to note in my grand speech, but again, Amya felt it was. “Jackson Hall will now be open after class hours. With your student ID you’ll have access to the classrooms.” Like I expected there was little excitement about it. But the final announcement, I thought

would excite everyone. “For those of you who tussle with financial aid each semester. Standing in long lines only to hear there is no answer to your question. The department will be dedicating more staff to help efficiently answer questions, resolve issues, and cut back on the time you wait both in line, and for your money.”

As expected, the crowd went wild.

“Wishing you a safe, and happy holiday season. See you here at Hillside next year.” As I stepped down from the stage with Amya close behind me, students approached me.

“Not too bad, Brown.” Marcus found his way to the front of the crowd. “More food, and money.” He hunched his shoulders, “Can’t complain about that at all.” He pointed. “Could have used those dorms when we were freshman though, right?” He hit my chest.

“Yeah, still have nightmares about those bathrooms.” I laughed as I scanned the crowd.

“I already know. You looking for your girl?” Marcus stood aside. “I saw her and her crew toward the back.”

“Good looking,” I said as I unbuttoned my jacket. I maneuvered around him and the other students trying to exit the auditorium.

Journey was in the back right where Marcus said he saw her. The cheer squad surrounding her. Hands were moving around, words flying, but all I could see was her. In a cute Hillside blue hoodie, and a pair of jogging pants, she looked more casual than she did on most days. Still, her beauty outshined everyone around her.

“President Brown,” one of the cheerleaders looked at me like she had a lot to say, “nice speech.” She winked at Journey. “You have a good one here. Past presidents didn’t excite me half as much.”

I couldn’t tell if it was a genuine compliment, or if I was reading too far into it. Either way I thanked her. But I didn’t expect the frown on Journey’s face in response. “You good?” I narrowed my eyes. The girls parted like the Red Sea then disappeared leaving us alone. “What’s that about?” I pointed to their backs as they stood feet away from us.

“Giving us space to talk.” I didn’t think anything we had to say in the auditorium required space. If it was up to me, we would scramble out of there and pick up where we left off the day before.

“Thought we could get out of here.” I grinned. “My place this time.” I wrapped my hand in hers, but the grip she had on me was loose at best.

Hardly holding on. I stood and stared at her. Watching for the torment I expected to see in her face. Maybe the situation with her mom affected her more than she let on the day before. She warned that the emotions came at her in waves. “Are you upset about them selling the house? Your mom moving?”

“Yes. But that’s not it.” She pulled her hand from mine and wrapped her arms over her chest.

“Okay... so what is it?” I looked up to the stage. “Something I said up there?” I rehearsed the speech a few times. Amya bared witness to everything I prepared. Although it wasn’t her job to warn me if I’d piss off my girlfriend, I’d hope she’d give me a heads up.

“No.” Her head shook as she looked to the stage. “That was good. Well prepared in fact. Sounds like you have a good outlook on the *future* of the school.”

Future. *We were here again?* The day before we had an agreement. “I thought we were in the now?” I narrowed my brows and stared at her. “How are we flashing forward again? Rushing to the end of next semester?” I put my hands in the air but lowered my voice. “We haven’t had a New Years’ kiss yet and we are already wrapping up spring semester?” I didn’t understand. The emotions made sense. The sometimes happy, sometimes sad, I could deal with. I expected it. But the back and forth about our future was making my head spin.

“New Years’ kiss.” She smacked her lips.

The remaining students in the auditorium cleared the building. With only walls, and us, our voices echoed. The smack sounded like it had acoustics attached to it.

“That’s not too far into the future to consider?”

I rubbed the center of my forehead. “Journey.” I sighed. “I don’t want to fight every other day. And right now, it feels like you are waging war. I don’t even know what happened in the last twenty-four hours to break the peace treaty.”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

That felt like a trick question. Something my mom would ask of me and Carter when we were young. She already had the answer, and wanted to see who would be the first to snitch. It was never me.

Her hand hovered between us. “How about the conversation with my mom?”

“Your mom was cool. She didn’t seem to find anything wrong with my responses when she drilled me.” Then I figured it was Mrs. Thompson who snitched. “Did she think otherwise?” I wanted to tell her Mrs. Thompson should have told me she disagreed with something I said. But that would lead to another battle. I couldn’t fight two at once.

“When I went to the bathroom—”

“She asked if I wanted to marry you.” I could have judged Mrs. Thompson for asking such an invasive question. Instead, I took a minute to consider my words carefully. It’s what every good politician learned early. Don’t blurt out the obvious answer. Think about it. Reporters lived off knee-jerk reactions. They made good soundbites. “Your mom, who is in the middle of a divorce asked about marriage. Didn’t think it was appropriate to add injury to pain.”

“*Journey is cool and all, but I don’t think we are at the stage to talk long-term.*” She rolled her eyes. “That’s what you decided to say?”

Okay, so I should have taken a little longer to think through that response. I didn’t blurt it out but didn’t consider how the words would sound. I tried to dumb down our situation but didn’t mean to throw it in a ten-foot-deep hole.

“She’s skeptical right now, for obvious reasons, but after that? You didn’t give me much ammunition to defend us in the *now*.” Journey’s eyes were weary.

“Journey, I stood up there and announced plans for the university. Not plans for me.” I pointed to myself. “I couldn’t do that if I wanted to. I have no idea what I’m doing when I graduate.” I tilted my head to the side. “Should I be hitching you to my wagon? You know what you want.” I recited her plans, “Big city, huge finance firm.” I shrugged. “Should I hitch my wagon to you? Move to a big city I don’t want to be, and hope to God I find a job?”

“No.”

I looked away from her and took a deep breath. I don’t know what gave me the illusion that relationships would be easy. Thought people got together and skipped off into the sunset. Rose petals along their path, butterflies flapping around them.

Not navigating a barren land, hoping like hell a mirage was somewhere in the distance.

“I was going to ask you to join me for Christmas. But maybe that’s a bad idea.” My words didn’t set off a landmine, but they didn’t ease the worry

from her face either. I didn't like the sadness in her eyes. Or the unknowing in mine.

"I would likely say no anyway." It didn't seem like she intended to hurt me with those words, but I felt a sting in my chest. "Last Christmas in the house I've called home for twenty years. I want to be there. Whatever that's going to look like."

Angry or not. Swords drawn or walking off the battlefield, I didn't care. Journey needed a hug. I pulled her into my arms and rested my head on top of hers. "I hope it's everything you need it to be."

I heard a snuffle before she whispered, "Me too."

Chapter Twenty-One

Journey

“For Sale.” A leaning sign in front of our house looked how I felt. Like I could hardly stand straight. The six-hour drive home was long, but I considered how often I’d make that trip in the future. There was only one more break before graduation, and after that, I would no longer be in Hill Mount. Driving wouldn’t be as necessary because I could hop a flight to Lake Side to visit. I sighed and popped my trunk. Grabbed my suitcase and drug it to the front door.

When it opened, Mom stood on the other side with a crooked smile. “Come on in.” She looked over my shoulder like she expected to see someone else. “Hold on, be careful with that.” She took the luggage from my hands. “Can’t mess up the floors, there’s a showing tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I said, “Like Christmas Eve?” I scoffed. “They can’t wait till after the holidays.” Stepping into my childhood home made me feel a little like a *kid*. I wanted to kick and scream and storm up the stairs. But that was neither helpful, nor what I needed to do as a grown ass woman. “What if they buy it?”

Mom shook her head. “It’ll take at least a month before it closes.” She walked through the house. Each step navigated with caution like she didn’t want to leave a footprint. “We won’t be on the street for Christmas.”

“Thank God,” I said with a sigh. “Wait.” I called behind her back.

“Where are you going?” She wasn’t nearing the stairs. Not going up to my bedroom on the second floor.

“Your sister and brother aren’t staying. And I have the upstairs all cleaned up. Thought you could stay on this level with me.”

“By cleaned up, what do you mean?” Since leaving for school four years ago, I migrated some of my things to Hill Mount. But majority of the things from my childhood littered my room still. “Did you throw away my stuff?”

“No.” Mom had an agitated look on her face. “I haven’t thrown away anything from any of the rooms upstairs. You, Monroe, and Dre will need to tend to it this week though. Anything remaining after is fair game.”

I wasn’t ready for that either. Packing up all my shit and parading it to Hill Mount or getting it to whichever city after that. I always imagined my stuff would have a home with my parents. In their house. “Okay.” I knew my mom had a lot on her plate, and I didn’t want to add to it. “I’ll clean it out.”

I walked over to the Christmas tree and grabbed a branch. It only had half the decorations as usual. “What happened to the tree?” Only some of the usual ornaments hung on the branches nearby.

“Haven’t had time to get everything together this year.” Her downturned face told me there was more to the story.

I didn’t pry. Instead, I offered, “I don’t have much else to do. Can I help finish decorating? If people are coming to look at the house, a fully decorated tree would be beautiful for them to see.” I blurted, “When Monroe gets here, I’ll make her help me. We’ll make it a thing.”

Mom appeared from the guest room and smiled, “I’d like that. I can run out to the store and get cookies for us to bake too.”

“Perfect.” I stepped away from the tree and nodded. There was a little glimmer of hope. It was possible to make the best of our last Christmas in the house after all.

Mom plopped on the couch and patted the seat beside her. “I assumed you’d be spending Christmas with Chaz. Here or with his family.”

I winced. “Didn’t feel right to miss Christmas here. And...” I wagged my head. “Didn’t exactly want to invite him into this.”

The mantle only held four stockings. I noticed the one that was missing. It couldn’t be because she didn’t finish decorating. The missing stock was intentional.

Mom tapped my leg. “There’s no reason this Christmas won’t be as cheerful as any before it.” With all the power she had, she tried. Tried to

appear optimistic.

There was no fooling me though. I knew when she was lying. I didn't learn that look until I was in high school. Back when she'd give me an excuse about why I couldn't do something, then later Monroe would let the truth slip. The crinkles in her face formed.

"Mom, all this time, were you acting happy?" It would make sense. I couldn't think of a time when there were issues between my parents. Not anything that stood out. But if she was trying to be optimistic, against all skepticism, then she fooled me.

"Journey," she sighed, "honey, your father and I were together for so many years. Of course, I was happy. For many of those."

I swallowed. "And then?"

"Things happen, and it's hard to fight a losing battle if you are the only one willing to show up for the war." She stood from the couch. "I'm going to go get those cookies. Monroe will be pulling up any minute now. If you are going to convince her to do work you'll know she'll need an incentive."

I wanted to laugh but couldn't. A small smile lifted my lips instead. "You're right."

After Mom left, I walked around the house. Tried to see how much changed since Thanksgiving. Family pictures were missing. Nothing with my dad in it displayed on the shelves. The cabinets in the kitchen were void of his cognac glasses. The refrigerator had none of his favorite snacks. It was like he didn't exist.

By the time Monroe came strolling into the kitchen, I was a blubbering mess. "Journey, oh my goodness, what's wrong?" She threw her purse to the counter. "Where's Mama?"

I tried to pull it together. Stuttered my response. "The store."

"And why are you in the kitchen having a melt down? Did you two get into a fight?"

That would be characteristic of the two of them. Mom and I hardly ever fought. Of the three of us, I was the last my parents worried about. Or so it seemed. After Dre and Monroe were out of the house, there wasn't much I couldn't get away with. I calmed and said, "No. Why would we fight?" I reminded her, "Mom is going through enough now. I don't need to add any stress." But I pointed to the mantle. "Dad's stocking isn't up there." Then to the cabinets. "His cognac glasses are gone. None of his snacks are in the fridge."

“Who needs that stinky cheese anyway?” Monroe laughed waving her hand through the air. “Journey, they are getting a divorce. What’d you expect? This place to still hold all his stuff? I assume he grabbed it all when...” her sentence hit a brick wall.

Like with Mom, I could recognize Monroe’s expressions. She fucked up. “Spill it.”

She hurried to the tree and said, “I remember when we decorated the tree altogether growing up. Dre would stick all his ornaments up high.”

I stood behind her. “Nice try. Tell me what you are failing at hiding.”

“And this ornament. Hanging on by a literal thread.” Inside a circle, there was a cutout. It held an image of young Monroe. Dressed up in a pretty red dress. “I can still remember that day. The Christmas dance recital. Dad brought a huge bouquet of red roses to match my dress.” Her eyes downturned before she moved on to another ornament. That one brought a huge smile to her face. “And this one, I tried for years, to lose it.” That one held an image of Monroe with a mouthful of braces. “That’s one investment I appreciate but wish I could forget.”

I cringed. “Tell me about it. Those brace face years were insufferable. We should burn any evidence of it to the ground.” I pointed to the empty branches, that made up half the tree. “We need to finish decorating. Mom said she didn’t get around to it.”

Monroe turned her attention to the mantle. “Yeah, she’s been busy. Or busy trying to stay busy.”

“Okay, enough of the context clues.” When I was younger, she would do the same thing. Throw out clues until I could piece together what she wasn’t supposed to tell me. “Say it already.”

She moved to the couch and flopped back. Getting a little too comfortable if she planned to help me decorate. “If Mama comes in, I’m shutting my mouth. And you didn’t hear this from me.” A defiant gaze stared me down and made a shiver travel my spine.

“Okay, hurry before she gets here then.”

“Daddy cheated.”

“Wow.” I tested the temperature of my forehead. I felt like I was going to vomit. “I’m going to throw up.” I held my mouth closed as the bile traveled to my throat.

“On the floor? Mama will kill you.” She shuffled me to the trash can in the kitchen. “And no need to be all dramatic.” She held my hair. “Shit

happens.”

“Monroe,” I yelled when I managed to calm my stomach. “That’s only applicable to a missed appointment, or a bad hair day. Not your husband cheating on you after decades of marriage. You can’t be serious right now.”

Then she rattled off statistics, she loved math and numbers as much as me. “Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Infidelity is one of the reasons for many divorces. The other is money, and they had two things working against them.”

“Money?” I shook my head. “But the gyms are expanding. That doesn’t make sense. Logically, if they were expanding they had the money to do so.” I tried to think back to any and every conversation with Mom or Dad. “How long have I been living in the dark?”

Monroe shrugged. “You’ve been away for four years. When you come home everyone can get by without disclosing everything.”

“This Christmas is starting to feel a lot less like Christmas.” I huffed as I leaned onto the kitchen counter.

Monroe moved back to the living room. “I figured you would have avoided it all and spent it with your boy toy.” She turned to face me. “I heard Mama walked in on you two getting it on.”

I raised a finger in the air. “Not getting it on.” I laughed. “We were kissing.”

“Heavily as she explained it. Why didn’t you go with him? Is it not that serious yet?”

“That serious?” That could be one explanation, at least from his standpoint. “All this with Mom and Dad has been getting to me. It isn’t helping us progress.” Then I admitted, “He also isn’t sure about what he wants after graduation.”

Monroe fanned her hand. “What guy is? Do you expect him to be like, let’s get married and run off into the sunset together before we’ve tried real adult life.” She scoffed. “This isn’t the age of our parents anymore.”

“Living as if it were makes me a little delusional. I’m finally realizing that.”

Her eyes bucked. “A little? Girl, you did not actually expect that.” She whispered, “Did you?”

I hunched my shoulders. “Anyway. I’m here. But I wish I could be with him.”

“So, be with him.” Her phone swung in the air. “I got a nice little bonus,

consider it my treat. What city is he in? I'll get you a flight."

I twisted my lips. "Last minute. Must be some bonus." I laughed. "Wait did you not have another gift for me?"

"I was going to do a mad dash tomorrow." She smacked her lips. "This'll make it easier on me."

"But I'm here now. I'll make the most of it."

Monroe pulled all her big sister power and insisted. Finalizing a ticket for the day after Christmas before Mom walked through the door. Mom unpacked the easy bake cookies from the bag.

Monroe shouted, "Someone didn't want to spend the week with us," before we could get the cookies onto a sheet pan.

"What?" Mom cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sending Journey to be with her little boyfriend on the 26th."

"That's great," Mom raised her hand, "but you need to clean your room before you leave."

Monroe assured her. "It'll get done." She placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'll help."

I mumbled, "Thanks. And thanks for my gift."

"Anytime. Promise me you'll enjoy whatever it is the two of you have, and not put any crazy pressure on him to do more." It was the sincerest I'd ever heard Monroe.

"Promise."

Chapter Twenty-Two

C haz

I never understood the obligatory dinner the day after Christmas. There was Christmas brunch the day before. We all gathered around the tree on Christmas. Spent the day eating and being *merry*. Then the day after we had to go down to my mom's favorite restaurant and share another meal together. As if we weren't all tired of each other already.

Of my family, I was the only one who hated every minute of it. I sucked it up and tried to plaster a fake smile on my face. One that wouldn't let Mama know I despised spending that much time with them.

But then again, I came home. I could have found other reasons to stay away. I did like spending time with my parents, Carter too. I didn't want to see as much of them though. Or for them to require mandatory fun.

Because Carter had his girlfriend home for Christmas, all eyes were on me at the restaurant. "Tell me again why you didn't bring your girlfriend home..." Mom passed the basket of bread to me. "I would have loved to meet her. This could have been a little thing. Both my boys and their girls." She gushed, "You know I've always wanted girls. And this is the best of both worlds."

Carter's girlfriend had a huge grin on her face. One that didn't leave the entire four days. She rolled into the house with Carter full of enthusiasm, hugs, and cheer. I imagined that's exactly how Journey would be if she were

there. Full of joy. Mama would have loved every bit of it.

That morning texting Journey, I joked about the bliss Mama would sprinkle all over the restaurant that night. But Journey was a little late on her response. I knew the whole week was a little off for her. She explained being home was an eye-opening experience, but she didn't elaborate.

"You might meet her at graduation," I told Mama as I stuffed half a roll in my mouth.

That prompted her to say, "Oh perfect, that's another five months or so. You plan to still be together?"

Carter looked off into the ceiling somewhere. Avoided all eye contact with Taylor sitting beside him. When we had a minute alone, he told me inviting her was a mishap. It occurred while the two laid between the sheets. The invite was something he blurted in the heat of the moment but instantly regretted.

"I mean I'm not plotting to end it anytime soon if that's what you are asking." I eyed Carter who still found a spot above him to stare at.

Our dad chipped in, "Of course not, son. The Brown men are better than that." He stuck his chest out like he announced we were mighty warriors, or extreme athletes. Like not planning the end of a relationship made us men of honor.

"Right." I grabbed another buttery roll. If nothing else, at least the rolls were fucking amazing. "I love these things." I looked at the bar. "Anyone need a drink?"

Taylor surprised me when she offered to join. "I could use one." She had a sheepish smile on her face. "Mind?" She asked Carter like he'd care if she got a little tipsy.

"Not at all," he stretched his arms, "bring me a beer."

Before Mama could complain I hurried away with Taylor close behind me.

As we leaned over the bar waiting for the bartender, Taylor asked, "So you have a girlfriend?"

I looked at her and nodded. "Yeah, her name is Journey."

She stretched her eyes. "That's an amazing name. Wow, I love that."

I couldn't imagine there was much Taylor didn't love. The girl walked around dripping glitter, and dancing on rainbows. "Yeah, I like it too."

"And you didn't bring her because?" When I didn't answer Taylor tried another approach. "It would be nice to have another family outsider here to

talk to.” She looked over her shoulder. “Feels like I’m intruding.”

I felt bad for the girl. That quick, her glitter, sunshine, and fields of dandelions won me over. “I hope it’s not because of us. And nothing we are doing. Would hate to make you feel uncomfortable.”

She scrunched her nose. “Not that, but you know this time of year families have their traditions.”

“We have a lot.” I huffed. “Too many.”

“See. And I know nothing about them.”

I didn’t know what Carter planned to do with the girl when they returned to campus. I didn’t want to give her the wrong impression. False hope if he planned on avoiding her after. So, I only said, “Mama said it herself, if it was up to her she would have had daughters. I’m sure she doesn’t mind you participating in the traditions.”

Her smile returned, and her hand flung over my shoulder. “Thanks, I appreciate that. You’re a decent guy, Chaz. If you weren’t already taken I’d try to introduce you to one of my roommates.”

“Chaz?”

With only sips of lemonade most of the day, without the Hennessy from the bartender yet, I couldn’t have been drunk. But what other reason would I have for tripping? That voice...

“Chaz?”

I turned around and Taylor’s hand fell from my shoulder.

She leaned in closer and asked, “Is that someone you know?”

Okay, so Taylor wasn’t the brightest crayon in her very colorful box. “Yes, that’s Journey.”

Journey stepped in closer and asked, “What’s going on?” She looked between me and Taylor. “Here I was thinking it’d be a good idea to surprise you, and here I am surprised my damn self.” Her head shook side to side. “This was a mistake. I tried to tell Monroe I shouldn’t surprise you. I should have told you when I booked the ticket.” She rambled on. “When you said you’d be here at this restaurant tonight with your mom. I didn’t expect you’d also have a woman with you. I shouldn’t have popped up.”

Taylor stared at her and thought it was the perfect time to say, “I love your name.”

Me and Journey both blurted, “What?” at the same time.

“Sorry,” Taylor winced. “Bad timing.” She cozied up beside Journey and said, “This might look bad.” The worst way to ever convince someone

whatever they saw was in fact not what they were seeing. “But we weren’t doing anything.” Second worst way. “We were grabbing a drink.” Not getting any better.

“Journey, this is Taylor. My *brother’s girlfriend*.” I pointed across the restaurant. “My family is over there.” As confident as I was in telling her what was going on, I couldn’t help but stare at her. She was there in my city. Standing across from me.

“Oh.” Journey bit the side of her lip. “Nice to meet you, Taylor.” She shook Taylor’s hand before eyeing me. “Sorry this is a lot. I rolled into your city guns blazing. My bad.”

“Girl,” Taylor chuckled, “These Brown men sure know how to drive a woman crazy. It’s fine. I would have been all, ‘get off my man you skank hoe too.’”

I was speechless.

Journey tried to laugh but it wasn’t her full belly laugh. More like a nervous chuckle. “Okay.” She blinked.

“Here,” Taylor wrapped her hand around Journey’s arm, “let’s introduce you to everyone.” She looked my way and said, “Are you okay grabbing the drinks?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. I watched Taylor escort Journey to the table. But turned before the introductions kicked off. I needed something more than the Hennessy I planned to sip. I needed a shot. “Can I get a beer, two of your specials, and a shot of Tequila?”

The bartender joked, “Not all for you, I hope.”

“It could be.”

He nodded. “Holidays can be like that sometimes.”

“You have no idea.” I threw the shot back, then told him, “Thanks.” I wrangled the drinks and walked to the table.

Mama was already engaged in conversation with Journey. Taylor across the table looked like she ate up every word that spilled from her mouth.

I sat beside Journey and passed her a drink.

“Isn’t this such a pleasant surprise, Chaz?” Mama looked at me and had this angelic glow to her face. “She flew all the way out here to see little old you.”

Carter sucked his beer down, and my dad held no eye contact.

“Yeah, amazing surprise.” I placed my hand on Journey’s thigh.

“And you didn’t tell me the amazing woman who helped campaign for

your role was your girlfriend.” Mama leaned into the table.

“Guess I left that out.” I looked over to Journey who still had a smile on her face. “If it weren’t for all the people she knows it would have been highly unlikely for me pull out a win.”

“Oh, honey. I’m sure they would have loved you. But I’m thankful you had her.” Mama said, “And now with this role, the sky is the limit. My son could become governor, a congressman, even president.” Mama’s eyes glistened.

I had to remind her, “I don’t want to be *in* the position, I want to advocate for change. From the outside.”

“Semantics dear. With this role, who knows what doors will open for you. You can be on the *inside* making changes. I’m not as hip to politics as you. But I know it’d be easier for someone to rearrange my furniture if they were inside my house. Not standing outside.” She looked around the table for agreement, “Am I right?”

Of course, it was Taylor, halfway through her drink who co-signed, “I love that analogy, Mrs. Brown.” Then she stared at me. “You gotta be in the house, Chaz.”

Journey and I weren’t connecting on much, but in that moment we did. A shared stare that acknowledged Taylor was a lot. Journey laughed a little and I looked away before I joined her.

“And Journey,” Mama wasn’t done yet, “what do you want to do after college?”

I would have thought she’d set that question aside. Especially, after Taylor responded she wanted to live on a farm and grow shrooms days earlier.

“I hope I can get a job with a notable finance consulting company, move to Neveah City.”

“Neveah City?” Mama wasn’t looking at Journey though. Her eyes were dead set on me. Mama knew a big city was not in my cards. She knew I’d move home before I moved to a big city. Still, she said, “That’s nice. And a financial consulting company. So, you’re good with numbers?”

Journey nodded. “I am. And I know financial literacy will be a game changer for our community. I plan to continue with my volunteer efforts to impact the community on the side.” Journey’s hand rested on top of mine. “Chaz came to help at the community center in Hill Mount one day. Good experience, right Chaz?”

“Oh Carter, we should be like them. We need to volunteer. Help the community.” Taylor was at the bottom of her drink. But with or without drinks, Taylor was the same.

“Yeah.” Carter groaned. “Sounds good.”

Daddy piped up. “Journey, you must be something. You got that guy to volunteer his efforts around people?”

I huffed. “What does that mean?”

The entire table laughed. But Taylor laughed the hardest.

“We all know you hate peopling, son.” Dad had a point.

“It was for a good cause,” I told them.

After dinner, we rode to my house with Carter and Taylor. Journey and I didn’t have time to catch up. Not with Taylor turned all the way around in her seat throwing a hundred questions at Journey.

Journey was a champ though, she responded like none of it bothered her. When we were in the house, she said, “I need a moment.”

“From one inquisition to another. I bet you do.” I pointed to the stairs and told her. “We can go to my room.”

“Are your parents okay with me staying here, or should I—”

I walked up a few steps and looked down to her. “My mom wouldn’t have it any other way.”

There was a soft smile on her face as she nodded and followed behind me. “Are you okay with me being here?” She asked as we stepped into my room, and I closed the door behind us.

I wrapped her in my arms at first. Inhaled her scent and felt the warmth of her body. I missed it more than I had words to express. But still, I wondered why she surprised me. “Curious about why you are here. Thought you wanted to be home.”

She sat at the edge of my bed. Took in the light gray walls, the framed pictures, and green comforter. It looked nothing like the room of my childhood. In fact, I couldn’t find one thing remaining in that room from back then. Mama told me once I left she was upgrading her house. The posters, and random books I had filling my room had to go.

“Christmas wasn’t what I expected...” she cringed. “Or what it’s been in the past. Selling the house, moving things out, it was somber. I wanted to be somewhere comforting.” She rubbed her hands down her arms. “Somewhere I wasn’t reminded of everything that is falling apart.”

I sat beside her and stared. Placed a hand on her cheek and rubbed along

the edge of her chin. “Journey, I told you before. I don’t want to be the person you come to when nothing else works for you. I want to be here for the good and the bad, but it’s starting to seem like you only come to me when all else fails.”

She shook her head. “I’ll admit, this hasn’t gone the way I would want it to. We’ve talked about that. And I apologize for making you feel like the last option. Because you are far more than that to me.” A heavy sigh escaped her mouth. “Chaz, I love you.”

“Shit.” That wasn’t what I should have said. But the blow that hit my chest, knocked the wind from me. It was like stubbing a toe. Unexpected, except it wasn’t painful. It felt right. “Wow.”

Journey laughed. “I hope that’s a good shit, and a better wow.”

I pulled her head toward mine and rested my lips on hers. Nudged her toward my bed and spread her legs. “I can show you better than I can tell you how amazing that made me feel.” I looked up to her before inching the hem of her sweater up her stomach.

“But” her words were soft, “your parents. Your brother. Taylor.”

I shook my head. “I don’t care.” And I didn’t. “But I’ll do my best to not make you scream.”

She grabbed a pillow and pulled it to her face. I wriggled down to her feet and pulled her boots off one at a time. Then tugged her out of her jeans until I saw the lace of her panties. The bright red reminded me of all the red bows decorating the house. “Christmas panties, huh?”

I flicked them to the side and swiped my tongue against her folds. “This is the best gift I could unwrap.” I honored my promise, keeping my licks and sucks at a minimum, taking my time to build the intensity. And when I felt her body squirm, I eased away.

Except, that led to her begging, “Please, Chaz,” until I gave her what she needed. She pulled the pillow further over her face as moans rippled through her body.

When she settled, I found a condom in my wallet. Stripped out of my clothes and hovered over her body. I moved the pillow enough to stare into Journey’s eyes. “I love you too, Journey.” It could have been like the whispered invite Carter gave to Taylor. Something I’d regret the next day, but in that moment, it was everything I wanted to say to her. I wanted her to know she wasn’t the only one catching strong feelings. Despite the unknown, I did know that.

She tugged on the back of my neck until our lips greeted each other. Her tongue eased into my mouth as I eased into her. And for as long as I was inside of her, our tongues tangled.

By the time my body released, I was breathless. I laid beside her and rested my hand over my eyes.

“I’m glad I came.”

My eyes popped open, and I winked, “I’m glad you came too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Journey

The ball bouncing back and forth down the court reminded me of my relationship with Chaz. Before Christmas we were down. During Christmas we made our way back up. And after, it felt like a slow decline.

Chaz was busy with SGA, and everything else occupied my time. I didn't realize the last semester of classes would be brutal. Studying took on a new perspective, and I couldn't wait until the end was near.

Except, the end of the semester could mean... I didn't want to finish the thought. It pained me to think about our relationship ending.

"Go, Bobcats." Nia yelled beside me. I should have yelled along with her as the team scored another two points. But I couldn't focus. Not with only two hours of sleep the night before, and with a night of studying ahead of me. Coach would be in my ass for not being *present*. But did it matter? The cheer season was almost over. My cheering days would be behind me.

I clapped my hands along with the team. The crowd behind us in a roar after more points posted on the board. I scanned the crowd looking for Chaz. He planned to be at the game. Like me though, he had a lot on his plate. I didn't doubt he found a quiet corner of the bleachers and sat with a textbook wide open.

The scoreboard had a few minutes remaining, and I couldn't wait for them to dwindle down so I could get out of there. Escape the gym and get

back to my books. The quicker I could get into them, the faster I could steal a couple hours of sleep.

“Let’s go, Bobcats.” Feet stomped beside me, and I joined in. I caught the beat and clapped my hands without paying attention to much else.

Across the gym, I saw a guy shuffling down the bleachers. Before the doors swung open, I caught a glimpse of Chaz’s face. *Where is he going?* Around me phones started vibrating. Voices started whispering. Loud gasps all around us.

“What happened?” I looked at Nia. “Why is everyone on their phone?” I looked up at the scoreboard to see how much longer we had in the game.

“I don’t know.” Nia nudged her chin toward coach. “But we need to stay in the game, or she’ll have a field day with us at practice tomorrow.”

I yelled, “Two points, give us some more,” for good measure and smiled in coach’s direction. Then under my breath I mumbled, “Game’s almost over. She shouldn’t worry about us.”

“Except,” Nia mumbled in response, “you know she is.” Then she leaned back. “What happened?” she whispered to the girl sitting behind us on the bleachers. “Why is everyone checking their phones?”

“State announced budget cuts for the school?” Then she added, “And they are big.”

“What?” That was a little louder than I intended. Caught coach’s side gaze and a finger point. A subtle warning that let me know tomorrow would be worse than today. Little sleep and running drills. *Great.*

“We are about to graduate.” Nia shrugged. “That’s somebody else’s problem.”

My eyes widened and the girl behind us smacked her lips so hard it echoed louder than the game buzzer.

“Nia, girl. Insensitive much?” I looked between her and the girl who made her way down the bleachers. “Besides what if they impact this semester.”

Her smirk turned into a scowl. “You think that’s possible?”

I retorted, “Budget cuts in the spring, and not October. Anything is possible.” Before she could ask me to call Chaz, I already had the phone to my ear.

“I hope your boo has some reassuring news. Like the fact it won’t impact graduating seniors. At all. Like nada. If it helps they can keep the printed diploma and that little holder. I’ll take an electronic copy and print it my

damn self.”

Nia was on something else. I held the phone until the robotic voice told me Chaz wasn't going to reassure us. “Dammit, he isn't answering.” I scoured the crowd as if anyone there could give us more than what was written on the school-wide notification.

Out in the parking lot, everyone stood around talking. I needed to get home. To at least get a few hours of studying before I dozed off. “I need to go.” I nudged Nia in the side. “Riding?”

“You good?” Danielle's face twisted up. “You look like you have a gorilla on your back.” Her stare judged me from head to toe.

Nia didn't budge. She looked from Danielle to me and said, “Doesn't she though.” She plucked the shirt of my uniform. “Overwhelmed Journey does not look good on you at all.” She whispered, “Need to let that man come over and work some of that stress out of you.”

Danielle snapped. “Yes. That. And more of that.” She giggled. “What's going on with you and our future U.S. president anyway?”

I hunched my shoulders and the gorilla they were talking about reminded me he was there. “We're together.” I tried to sound as optimistic as possible.

Danielle cringed and looked side to side. “Well, around here. That's something. You could be single and wishing you had someone, or with someone wishing things could be better. We are never happy.”

“You're right. Starting to sense that in me. Not content with what I have.” I pouted. “I need to do better.” I looked at Nia. “I also need to get home. You coming?”

She followed behind me as I walked away. “Were you serious?”

As I pulled out of the parking lot I asked, “About what?” I had already started computing how many hours I'd have before I needed to be back on campus.

“About not being content with what you have. You think that's the problem with you and Chaz?” I could feel her eyes on me.

“I don't know. As much as I care about him. Love him. I thought it would be easier than this. I thought the relationship part would be all smiles and laughter.”

“Because where in life is that ever the case?” Her arms crossed over her chest. “Absolutely nowhere. Except for when we were kids, and our biggest problem was who we were going to play with at recess. Should have listened to my mama when she said don't rush growing up. This part, this part right

here kinda sucks.”

With a smirk I said, “Welcome to adulthood.” When we were at the apartment, I asked, “At some point it has to turn around though, right?”

“Think if we asked our moms they’d beg to differ. Life keeps on life’ing after childhood.” We both walked from the car faces drooping.

Inside the apartment, I saw a text message on my screen.

Chaz: In an emergency meeting, I’ll talk to you after.

“Chaz is in an emergency meeting.” My heart started to flutter. “I hope these budget cuts will not impact us.”

“Tell me as soon as you hear something.”

“Will do,” I promised before walking into my bedroom.

Getting in the shower was easy, sitting at my desk, not so much. The bed, pillows, and blankets were calling my name. But I knew even a few minutes of rest would throw off my whole night.

Two hours into it, my eyes grew heavy. I could hardly keep them open as the numbers and words started to cross. I couldn’t decipher interest rates from the policies that drove them. And when my phone vibrated across my desk I welcomed the distraction.

Chaz: Can I come see you?

The semester before we didn’t have a lot of late-night texts. When we got back to campus, they became the norm. Neither of us had a ton of time during the day to meet up, but before bed, we made sure to touch base.

Journey: I’m up studying

Telling him he couldn’t come through didn’t feel quite right. I wanted to see him. Could have lived with him occupying himself while I finished studying. Wouldn’t mind if the two hours of sleep I got were in his arms.

Chaz: I won’t stay long

I stared at the phone and thought all hell was about to break loose.

Journey: See you soon

When I answered the door for him, his face mimicked mine. He looked like he'd been through four days in 24 hours, and there wasn't an end in sight. "You okay?"

He followed me to my room. Inside he said, "That meeting was intense. And complete bullshit."

Before he arrived I was dragging, but he was a shot of espresso waking me up. "Whoa. What happened?"

"The mid-year budget cuts target programs that only impact the university. None that'll impact the many other state funded schools." He pounded his fist into his palm. "This is the type of stuff I'm talking about. There must be real change."

"Slow down." I raised my hand. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough that it may decrease the student population in the next few years if we don't have these programs." He lifted his shoulders. "I could see current or prospective students finding other schools out of the state."

"Damn." I didn't want to sound selfish and ask about us—the graduating seniors. But I had to know. "And what about us? Those of us graduating this semester."

"Shouldn't have an impact." He rolled his eyes. "Lucky us. I guess."

"Is there anything we can do?"

He put his hand to my face and said, "I wanted to see you." He licked his lips. "Kiss you a little. But I don't want to disrupt your studying." Then he stole a kiss. "So, give me one more of these and we can talk about all this later."

I gave him one more. Staring up at him I said, "I was thinking you could keep yourself busy while I finish." I looked over at the full-sized bed, the size of his back home. "We could get comfy while I sleep for a couple of hours."

He winced. "As tempting as that sounds, I should go. I need to research these cuts. Then study for this exam I have in a couple of days."

"Busy, busy." I sighed.

He wrapped his hand with mine as we walked to the front door. Then he looked at me with a half-smile. "Our last semester of college, then all this will be over. No more studying, no more exams."

It should have been a rallying cry to ignite my inner child. She should have been able to rejoice and jump for joy. Sixteen years of school, finally complete. But no matter how hard she tried to leap she felt a little bad for her excitement. She tampered her joy, hid her smile, and shrugged. "Yeah, it's

almost over.”

Our foreheads met, and I inhaled him one last time before he left the apartment.

Chapter Twenty-Four

C haz

Budget cuts, programs ending, and mundane tasks to finish the school year. On top of my final classes, projects, and papers that kept coming, I was starting to look forward to the end of college.

Although, walking across the stage was the easy part. Thinking about what was next was the challenge. I had no idea where I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, or how I wanted to do it. Well, I did know I wanted to be in politics. But that was as good as asking a kindergartener what he wanted to be when he grew up. Which was never my answer as a kid. I didn't dress up as the president or think twice about the branches of government. When I was in kindergarten pretty sure I wanted to be some sort of superhero. One stacked with superpowers. In my head, I could combine all the powers available and make one hell of a hero.

I guess, in a way, I was still trying to save the world. But without a cape, or superpowers, my hero status was questionable.

“And at the end of the week, we'll have an exam.” Professor Martin's smile had me thinking he was a sadist. The week before we had a paper due. The class was nothing like the one he taught the semester before. In comparison, he was good versus evil in the flesh.

I tossed my notebook into my bag and stood from my seat. The students around me scattered. None interested in sticking around to form a study

group. Nobody made plans to meet in the library or at the coffee shop. They dispersed like sheep left without a shepherd.

I smirked as I looked down at Professor Martin. Warned, “Your professor rating is going to tank.”

He shrugged his shoulder. “Graduating seniors don’t often complete the rating. They are too worried about what they are going to do once they flip that tassel.” He leaned against the desk and got too comfortable. Staring at me over the top of his reading glasses. “Speaking of what’s next. Have you considered where you’ll lend your political prowess once you leave Hillside?” Then he scoffed. “I mean of course you have. You have months left in the semester. You know exactly where you are going, right?”

Professor Martin had more confidence in me than I had in me. “That would be too much like right.” I smirked. “I’m out here living like a freshman with nowhere to go for four more years.”

A look of concern crossed his face, and he pulled his glasses from his eyes. “You’re joking, right?”

My head shook side to side. “Wish I was.”

“What are you waiting on?”

“Between writing papers, studying for exams, and figuring out how bad these budget cuts will impact the school... well, I don’t exactly have the time.”

“Mistake number one.” Professor Martin’s tone echoed my father’s. Sounded like my dad when he wanted to get his point across. A forceful tone that relayed, *try me if you want to*. “This is your life. It’s no question if you have time, you never will. You have to make time.”

That was one of those anecdotes that was way easier said than done. It was pointless to recite because it provided little value to make a difference. “If it were that easy, I’d add two more hours to my day and dedicate them to searching for a job.”

Professor Martin smirked. “With your reputation, you should have political connections in Hill Mount. Finding something should be easy.”

I shouted, “Hill Mount?” Like a rat ran across the floor. It was the town I spent four years without issue. But anything beyond that was questionable. I didn’t come there to stay awhile. I came to get what I needed and leave. I was close to having that in my hands, so the thought of leaving was the only acceptable response. “No.”

“Is there something wrong with this city?”

“Well, no. Obviously I live here now, but—”

“You don’t think it’s worthy of a life beyond college?” He waited for my response, but I didn’t think it was necessary. “Many students miss out on opportunities because they want to run away from this place. Move on to bigger and better. Don’t count it out. Especially if you have no plans of your own.”

That warning alone made me want to find options. Many options. “I’ll need to find some soon.” I laughed. “And I better figure out how to create time. I’ll see you later.” I waved my hand over my head before walking out the door.

I walked across campus. The barren trees, and yellow grass in the courtyard wasn’t screaming *stay here*. Of course, if I did stay in Hill Mount I wouldn’t be on campus. The city, as small as it was, had a lot to offer. But many of the places I frequented had students. What would it be like to roll up to a place and not be a peer anymore?

Or was there some secret level that unlocked when you lived in the city permanently. Because I couldn’t recall a single time I ran into any one of my professors. They had to be hanging out somewhere, right? But who would I go to those places with? Marcus was moving clear across the country to start his job at an engineering firm. And Journey planned to move to Neveah City. Not on the opposite coast as Hillside, still hundreds of miles away.

If I could create two more hours in the day, I’d add in a third to sit and think about Journey. And what we would do after graduation. Because there was no way I was moving to Neveah City. It was doubtful she’d consider any place else. I never imagined I’d have a long-distance relationship. But if I had more time to think through it, it could prove possible.

When I got to my car, instead of rushing home to study. Or stopping by Journey’s I drove around the city. Hill Mount had a highway that circled the city, and paths of roads throughout. But the best road to travel, was the one that divided the city in two. I chose to take that one. As I drove, it wasn’t obvious that the street divided the city. The buildings that lined the road were similar. Clothing and shoes stores, some restaurants. But to those who frequented Golden Avenue not many visited both sides of the street. The division couldn’t scream *Jim Crow South* more than it whispered it to those who asked.

If there was a single reason for me to be an advocate in Hillside, Golden Avenue would be it.

Near the end of the road, there was a large city park. Tree lined sidewalks, playgrounds, and benches. A public park where anyone was welcome not everyone enjoyed it. Every time I passed I never saw a person with skin like mine. But then again, I never stopped there either.

As I turned around to head back up Golden Avenue, my phone rang over the car's speakers. Journey's name illuminated on my screen. My cheeks tugged into a small smile before answering, "Journey, what's up?"

"I got it," she yelled into the phone. "I got the interview." Her cheer voice did her well in almost all occasions. It added to the intrigue of whatever she revealed. But an *interview*? Especially that.

"Interview for?"

"Only the top finance consulting company." She gushed. "I heard this morning, and it's tomorrow."

My eyes bulged. "Tomorrow?" That didn't give her long to prepare. Not enough time to gather her thoughts and determine how she'd impress the shit out of them. But who was I kidding? Journey didn't need time to discover how impressive she was, she just was. "That's dope." My voice likely didn't mirror one screaming from a blow horn though. "I know you got it." As I continued, my voice became shakier.

"I have a huge favor to ask."

Outside of jumping from a plane, anything Journey asked I would have done. Especially, if I could create another couple of hours in my day. "What you got?" I started to tell her I got her, but I waited to hear the request. In case jumping from a plane was on her pre-graduation bucket list.

"Nia and Lauren are on campus, and I need someone to drill me with interview questions."

"Now?"

"If you have time." The cheer voice was gone, and a whisper replaced it.

I had no time, but in Professor Martin's soliloquy he suggested I created it. So, I did. "I have time."

"Thank you." Her bubbly tone returned.

That was easy. "I'm on my way."

Journey met me at the door with her arms spread wide, a huge smile, and her soft lips on mine as we embraced. "Ehm," she moaned into my mouth, "I wish we had more time for that. I can't get enough of it."

"I'm on this, create the time you need kick, so..."

She laughed and pulled me into the apartment, kicking the door closed

behind her. “How about we multi-task?” The hem of her shirt creeped up her stomach. “If I can answer questions while you pleasure me, then I should be able to answer them with a free and clear mind.” She winked. “What do you think?”

I clapped my hands and agreed. “That’s what I’m talking about. Multi-task, the best way to create time.” We laughed as we stumbled into her room, removing clothes, and kicking off shoes. A pile of papers riddled her bed but that didn’t stop us from falling beside them. “Do you have questions in mind?” I asked between tugging on her bottom lip and rubbing my hand down her arm. “Or do you want me to wing it?”

“I have questions.” She fitted her hand around the bed till she had a piece of paper suspended in the air. “I’ll put them here.” She hoisted them up on the pillow.

“And tell me why you are pursuing a career in finance?” I dipped down between her legs.

Between moans, she replied, “I’ve always loved math. Numbers come easy to me, and” she paused as I licked harder, “where was I? Numbers. I love numbers. A business can have a winning formula but fail if the numbers aren’t correct.”

I peeked up her belly and said, “Good answer.” I read another question, “Outside of your degree, what experience do you have with finance?”

“There’s the community financial literacy program where I volunteer. It teaches people how to manage their finances, create a savings plan, and decrease debt.”

I didn’t tell her how great that sounded. Companies love someone who volunteers. Giving back was likely one of their core values. Somewhere before or after diversity inclusion I’m sure. But to ensure she knew it was good, I spread her legs a little further and dipped a finger between her folds.

The next question came as her body folded around my hand. “If someone asked you to change numbers to benefit an organization, would you—” I halted my finger. “That can’t be an actual question.”

She panted, and mumbled. “Could be.”

“And your answer would be an obvious hell no, right?”

“Well minus the hell, but an obvious and stern no. Right.” Her eyes popped open, and she asked, “Can we continue multi-tasking?”

I looked at her eyes then my finger and said, “Of course.” If I could multi-task like that as I studied for my exams, I’d master the art of creating

time. Or if I could have some of that while I scoured the internet for jobs, I'd add a few more hours to my day.

There were more questions, more moans, great answers. When she climaxed for the first time, I suggested, "For this next bit, it needs all your attention."

"I can't say I'd argue that." There was a satisfied grin on her face. A slant to her eyes.

"Good." I pulled a condom from my pants and slid it on. I leaned over the bed and found the side of her neck I loved to nibble. A soft bite to her skin, then a lick to the same spot. As she recovered from that, I inched my way inside of her.

Her hands wrapped around my back. She buried her mouth into my neck. And her legs clutched around my waist harder with each stroke I delivered. That back and forth, give and take, undid me. And when I felt her body release, I knew we were on the same page. At least about one thing.

"I can't wait till there isn't cheer, or volunteering, studying, SGA between us, and we can do this whenever we want."

I laughed. "So, fuck our jobs, huh?"

She hunched a shoulder. "There's that. But still. A lot less than what we have now."

I smiled because it was a lot less. If there were hundreds of miles between us, coming home and stripping her naked at the front door wouldn't be as easy though.

She held the questions in her hand then said, "If I get this job, I'd be moving to Neveah City." There was a question behind her statement that she didn't ask.

"At least you'll know where you'll be," I offered, "and that's half the battle."

"But what about you?" And again there was more to her question I heard in what she didn't say.

"Neveah City is your thing. A place for outgoing people." I tapped her nose. "Like you. I haven't put much thought into what that place is for me. But the closer we get to the last day of the semester the more I know I need to figure it out."

She pouted. "I hope there is some obscure suburb of Neveah City that attracts you." She wriggled her brows. "Last thing you want is to end up stuck here."

My lips twisted to the side before I asked, “Would it be that bad?”

The look on her face told me it was as bad as drinking sewer water. She confirmed it with, “Well, I’d never want to stay here.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Journey

I looked at the answers to my test and had an overwhelming feeling of relief. Four days of studying paid off. I flew through the test and had time to check my answers three times. Each time getting the same result. *I did it.*

Standing from my desk, I walked the answer sheet down to the professor. With a smile on her face she said, “First one done.” It fell when she asked, “You sure you don’t need more time?”

I looked over my shoulder then back to her. “Nope. I’m good.” I tossed my hand in the air in a wave and walked outside. The bright sunshine was a nice boost. But seeing Chaz leaning against the wall brought the biggest smile to my face. “Chaz?”

He walked toward me and passed me an iced mocha. “How’d your test go?”

Considering we were alternating weeks with big exams, studying was a constant thing. “It went well.”

“Must have been. You were the first to leave the building.”

“The professor questioned me too. Said I could take more time. But I checked my answers three times. And each time the same answer. So—”

“Talk your shit then.” The laughter rumbled his chest as his eyes narrowed. “I think,” his laughter dissipated, and his face grew serious, “you deserve a dinner.” The lick across his lips had me thinking the type of dinner

he was trying to serve included me on a platter.

I eased into his body and whispered, “Oh yeah?” As I looked up at him.

He pulled me in a little closer and mumbled, “Yeah,” in my ear. The warmth tingling my senses.

“I thought Valentine’s Day would be a given...” it’d been years since the last time I celebrated the day with a guy. Each year it was me and the girls doing Galentine’s Day. We’d go out to eat together, fill the house with flowers we bought, exchange chocolates. They weren’t too excited I would miss out on the celebration but wanted to see what Chaz would come up with. “Didn’t know I had to pass my test first.”

Chaz rubbed his hands over my ass. “You would have gotten dinner either way. But now I’ll have to think of something a little extra since you passed your test.”

“Hmm... thank God we’ve learned the art of multi-tasking.” I hinted at the few times we sexed each other while running through study guides. Drilling each other on questions, as he drilled me. If we could do that, we could do anything. That included figuring out how we’d manage after graduation.

Chaz’s fingers hooked through my pants, and he said, “Thank God for that.” He pulled away to look me in the eyes. “Did you have something in mind for tonight?”

“I have some things I want you to unwrap. But only after a romantic night out. Eating, then feeding each other dessert. Or doing something cute, like a craft date.”

Chaz’s face scrunched up. “Crafts? That’s romantic?”

“We could make anytime we spend together romantic.” I assured him, “As long as we are together.” *Together*. The smile fell from my face.

“You good?” He lifted my chin. “Where’d your smile run off to? Did she have somewhere to be?”

I shook my head. “No. My mind is getting the best of me. But” I huffed, “I’m here. Right here. In the present.” It took me repeating that in my head to believe it. For my smile to feel confident enough to return.

“Okay. So, dinner tonight. I’ll find some coloring books for us to use afterward. A box of crayons.”

I hit his chest. “If you are looking for a box of crayons make sure they are a jumbo box. I need variety.”

He winked and let our lips meet one last time before he said, “Okay, I’ll

be at your place in a couple of hours to pick you up.”

A couple of hours. Would that be enough time to get myself together? To *wrap* his gift? It had to be. I ran into my apartment, but before I could get to my bedroom Lauren was standing in my way. “Where’s he taking you?” her eyes filled with excitement. She followed me into my room. “Do you need help getting ready? Picking out an outfit.” She was rambling.

“You seem more excited than me?” She ignored me though. “I thought you’d have something else funky to say about me missing our annual plans.”

She waved her hand in the air. “I mean, I’m mad you won’t be there. Me and Nia will look like the sexiest couple wherever we go, or whatever.”

I bent over laughing. “Are you serious right now?”

Her vicious side-eye let me know she was dead ass. “It won’t stop me though. Anyway, where are *you* going?”

“He didn’t tell me. I told him a romantic night could involve something cute. Like doing a craft together.”

“Y’all about to knit a blanket?”

I turned from the closet and shook my head. “His response was coloring books and crayons.”

She shrugged. “I mean. Girl, you out here suggesting crafts to a grown ass man to spend Valentine’s Day. Like funk it up and do some naked body art.” She pointed at me. “Now that would be erotic and well worth the night.” She sat at the edge of my bed. “In fact, when I get a man, that’s what we are doing.”

“I could see that.” I held up a yellow dress. “What do you think about this?”

“He’ll rip you out of it with his teeth.” She wagged her head. “I approve.”

“Exactly what I need. One of his gifts will be waiting below.”

“So...” she snickered. “Your ass wants to color, and then hand him your bare coochie? Her arms crossed over her chest. “I am confusion. You seem like two separate people right now. A meek and humble kindergarten teacher and a dominatrix. But if that’s what you’re going for—sweet in the streets, freak in the sheets. Mission accomplished.”

Before I could dispute her claim, my phone vibrated in my back pocket. An unknown number. I hesitated before answering. I didn’t have time for the robocalls.

“Ms. Thompson?”

I eyed Lauren and bit my lip before responding, “This is her.” With my

parents divorcing, the house on the market, and the number of unknowns. A phone call could have been anyone or anything. My jaw tensed as I listened for an indication of what it was.

“This is Mrs. Albright...”

My eyes stretched wide, and I rushed to my desk. I shuffled through my drawer for a pen and notepad.

“Mrs. Albright, hello. How are you?” What did you say to the VP of the finance company you desperately wanted to work for?

“I’m doing well. Is now a good time to talk?”

I replied with a resounding, “Yes, perfect time.” Although I didn’t have long before Chaz would pull up. He’d understand.

“I won’t take too much of your time, I know it’s a special day for many, and I have plans too. But before HR reached out I wanted to extend a congratulations to you. Be the first to tell you we are very interested in you joining us after graduation. I hope that the package we’ve pulled together will be sufficient. And if it is not, I encourage you to tell us what it’d take to get you here.”

I should have jotted something on the notepad. Asked questions. Thanked her. Made a single sound. A little peep to let her know I was still on the phone.

“Ms. Thompson?”

“Sorry.” I stared at the blank page. “I’m honored. A little speechless I suppose. Thank you. I’m looking forward to receiving the details.” I could have given her a response. A hearty, “Hell yeah I’m coming.” But I didn’t want to sound desperate.

“Great, well enjoy this day, and we’ll be speaking.”

Lauren didn’t need my recap of the phone call. She was ear hustling real hard. And congratulated me as soon as the call ended. “What a day.” She covered her mouth. “What a fucking day. Girl, you got the job.”

Her arms flung open, and she pulled me into her chest.

“I’m shocked.”

She pulled back and asked, “For what? You know your shit. Have a lot going for you, and more to offer. Girl, this is it. We are about to be out in the world stacking cash, traveling, living life.”

“We are.” I felt a tear forming in my eye. “I’m beyond excited.”

She frowned. “Could have celebrated with us tonight, but I’ll let Nia know we are taking you out tomorrow.” She walked toward my door. “Now

get dressed.”

The lace panty set looked amazing, the yellow dress over it did what it needed to do. And my face, hardly needed any makeup because it was still glowing from the phone call with Mrs. Albright. I did make my lips pink, covered them in a glossy shine—ready to pucker up to Chaz. I couldn’t think of any other response to my news he’d give me than wanting to kiss the hell out of me.

I bounced around the kitchen waiting for him to arrive. And when he did, with a bouquet of beautiful red roses, I wanted to divulge the news. But the way he stared at me, pulled me into him, kissed me hard and slow before I opened my mouth—I let it all happen. Took it all in and giggled when he said he wanted to rip the dress off me.

“Lauren thought you’d say something like that.” I rubbed his chest, down each of the buttons of his white shirt. Tugged on the end of his tie and winked. “And this could come in handy when we make it back here later.”

“Well let’s hurry this up so we can get back.” He nudged me out of the door with his hand on my lower back.

But when we got in the car, as he drove across town, I couldn’t hold the news any longer.

“Chaz.” My voice felt like it was bubbling over. “I have amazing news.”

“You do?” He turned to look at me. But continued watching the road as I nodded.

My hand rested between my legs, but I moved it to his thigh. “Chaz, I got the job. The head of VP called me today.”

There wasn’t a response. Not a word. Not a sound of acknowledgment. Nothing. He was speechless like I was when I heard.

“I was the same. Speechless. But after I recovered...” I was hoping he would recover.

Still nothing. Then a short look my way before his eyes met the road again. I almost thought I said it to myself. My inner voice could be loud sometimes.

“Did you hear me?”

There was another long pause before he said, “Congratulations, I’m happy for you.” If happy was a flat tire on the side of the road. That’s the feeling I got from him. “I had no doubt in my mind you’d get it.” Except he looked more shocked than I was, and I thought I was confident about the interview.

“You don’t look happy.” I bit the inside of my lip. Trying to maintain the pink I painted on the outside. I’d imagine if he told me about a job he got, I’d be much more enthusiastic. Then again, I’m a cheerleader, my entire life is full of enthusiasm. Optimism dripped from my pores. For Chaz, it wasn’t like that.

“I...” he parked his car but didn’t look at me. “I’m happy for you. Honestly, I am. It’s a huge accomplishment, and a big relief I’m sure. You don’t have to worry about what’s next for you. Where you’ll be or what you’ll be doing. If you’ll be making money or drowning in student loan debt.” The last part made his lip quiver. “So, of course, I’m happy for you.”

“But...” There was a but somewhere in there and the more he said the more I expected it to be a devastating but. Because what else could follow I’m happy for you? Other than something that would knock the excitement from my lungs.

“There’s no but.” He shook his head. His words did nothing to convince me though. He couldn’t prove there wasn’t something else on his mind. Especially, not after we made it inside the restaurant. After we sat across from each other hardly saying more than a few words. Finding it hard to find a commonality in our worlds. It was like we were continents apart, but inches away. He shuffled in his seat, shifting from staring at the menu to looking at the wall.

People around us indulged in conversation, laughing, and smiling wide. Eating and sharing bites. Me and Chaz, we sat across from each other like two strangers and not two people who *loved each other*.

When the server offered dessert, I couldn’t imagine suffering through more. Despite how delectable the options looked. “I’ll pass.”

Chaz’s eyes flicked toward mine. And it was like he realized the error in his ways, and he sobered. “You sure? The lava cake looks delicious.”

“I’m positive.” My lips were firm, and the server noticed.

“I’ll grab the check,” she said before hurrying away.

“This isn’t how I wanted the night to go.” Chaz rubbed his chin. “I did this.”

I couldn’t take any of the blame from him. I had to let him process what the fuck happened from one little announcement to where we were. Seated across from each other in total silence.

“It’d be easier if you would tell me what’s on your mind. Instead of trying to hide it.”

“Except all this time I’ve asked you to not think about what’s next. How could I be the one who asks?”

And there it was. Reality biting him in the ass. I wanted to feel relieved. Or justified. But I could feel neither. The thought, although I was trying not to acknowledge it, was deep in the back of my mind. *What about us? What will happen?*

“So now?”

“I still can’t ask, because I don’t have an answer to give in return.”

The emptied table felt like my chest. All the emotions I wanted to feel in that moment oozed out of me. Not even one felt adequate to describe what remained. “Wow,” I uttered.

Dwayne and Whitley had a script. The arguments had appropriate responses. The problems had a defined answer. No matter what scenario crept up between the two there was a conclusion. If only I had a script writer for my life. To tell me what to say or give me a preview of the end. To assure me that no matter what we’d make it there together.

Chapter Twenty-Six

C haz

Valentine's Day wasn't how Journey described—romantic evening with dinner and crafts. For me it ended with making love to her on a bed of roses. Instead, I came home swiping petals from my bed so I could sit on the edge and figure out what the fuck happened. Where things went left, and how for the life of me I couldn't get them to swing right again.

“Bruh, what are you doing?” Marcus stood in the doorway staring at the fallen roses on the ground. “Where's your girl?” His voice was low like Journey would pop out of a corner and scare him.

“Not here.” I didn't look at him. Kept my eyes on the ground, on the mess I had all over my floor. Scattered rose petals looked nice in the movies. In reality, it took forever to pull them from the stems. Then when it was time to get down to business, it was mess to clean up. “I fucked up,” I mumbled with my hand to my head. Then I glanced his way and said, “You alone tonight?” Marcus was hardly ever alone.

He smacked his lips. “On Valentine's Day? Shit, of course I'm alone. Can't give any of these women the wrong impression. I'll catch up with them on Monday. After they are over the holiday weekend.”

I shook my head. “I wish I would have done the same. I wouldn't have messed it all up.”

“The same? Bruh, that's your girl. If you would have done the same you

would be single by Monday.” He leaned onto the wall. “What’d you do so bad anyway? Buy the wrong flowers, forgot to make reservations?”

“I could have recovered from that. Bounced back by the end of the night.” Then I thought about where I did go wrong. How badly I messed up. It started with her telling me she got the job. It wasn’t the announcement alone because that shit was dope. She could stop worrying about what was next, and where she was going. The job she wanted in the city she wanted to live in were within reach. “Reality is starting to settle in.”

“Reality?” Marcus’ face twisted up.

I couldn’t expect him to understand with the bits and pieces I gave him. Catching him up meant telling him everything though. “She is moving to Neveah City. Got a job at a large firm.”

“Okay, so what’s wrong with that?”

Exactly. Why was I tripping? Why did her announcement feel like a ton of bricks barreling into my stomach. Why did all the breath in my lungs depart leaving me speechless. Why did my mind draw a blank? Not a single word could come to me to tell her how proud I was of her.

“I’m not moving to Neveah City.” I hoped that was enough for him to catch up.

Marcus was a little dense when it came to relationships though. Not like I was an expert. Obviously.

“So, the problem is she’s moving and you’re not. Got it.” But the look on his face wasn’t confident. In fact, the way he twisted his lips to the side and his eyebrows bunched together he looked more confused. “Were you trying to be with her after college anyway?” Nope. He didn’t get it.

“I mean. I love her.”

In the four years of knowing Marcus. Sharing space with him and seeing him throughout the day. Through different emotions—which didn’t vary much. Never had I ever seen his eyes stretch as wide as they were staring at me. Deer in the headlights had nothing on my boy.

“Hold the fuck up.” His hand raised in the air. Then his face looked like he was going through an existential crisis. He started walking back and forth across the floor. From the door to the back wall, and back again. There wasn’t enough floor for him to get much traction, so he kept turning around. Back and forth in front of me. “Did you say you L.O.V.E *her*?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.” If love looked like not wanting to go a day without talking to her. Or needing to see her whenever possible. The way my heart

expanded when she smiled. How the hairs on my body reacted when her hand caressed my arm. And that's not mentioning how it feels when I'm inside her. Because that? The closeness, the warmth, the moisture. *Damn.* "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you are a twenty-two-year-old man with a whole sea of women around you." He stopped pacing and threw his hands out. "How'd I fail you?"

I laughed. "Fail me? Question should be how I failed *you*. You act like being with one woman is the end of the world when it's the beginning. Your whole life would change."

He scoffed. "Like yours? You over here having a whole meltdown because your girl got a job."

Okay, so he had a point. I was in a bad place. But I hoped my position was temporary. "I have to figure out what's next for me. That's all."

Marcus sat in the middle of the floor. "Lucky for you, I have time." His wrist tilted up. "About 50 hours to be exact. After that you're on your own. You're a poli-sci major, SGA president..." his nose crinkled. "What exactly did you think you'd do after you graduated?"

It wasn't the first time we had that same conversation. The question wasn't the exact same. But freshman year Marcus assumed I wanted to become president. Why else would I major in political science? For weeks, he'd tell me they fucked up by putting us in the same dorm. That years from then, someone would be digging into my background and find him.

Then, and now, I assured him, "I want to be an advocate."

"For?"

That's where I hung my head. I didn't consider an exact cause, or campaign. I hadn't defined what I wanted to throw my support behind. There were so many causes that affected the Black community, it was hard to decide. "I don't know exactly."

His lips tucked inside his mouth and his eyes flickered side to side. "Bruh, I said I have 50 hours. Not months to help you figure this shit out. I need you to start thinking." He pointed to his head. "You always talking about voting. What about that?"

"That's too general."

"Voting on Sundays."

I laughed but he had a point. "I'm sure there is a group focused on changing the day we vote." I smirked. "But I don't think so."

"Alright, let's act like you know what you want to do. Figuring out what

city is important. Neveah City has a lot to offer, any city you choose would have to lure Journey away from it.”

“What if it’s here?”

“Here.” He pointed to the ground. “Like raggedy ass Hill Mount.”

I snapped, “It’s not that raggedy.”

“Oh, you are considering staying here?” He shook his head. “Well kiss that girl goodbye. Hill Mount could never.” His *never* went on *forever*. “Like ever. So, if you want the girl, you better start convincing her your phone sex game is legit.”

“Bruh. What?”

“That long-distance dick down will have to be superb. Imagine all the dudes, looking all modelesque, and making money. Your voice will have to compete with the in-person men trying to knock your girl’s walls down.”

None of what he said was encouraging. “That’s not helping.”

“Neither is considering Hill Mount an option.” He sucked his teeth. “Like the fuck. I could imagine that conversation now, ‘Hey, baby, I know you have that offer to move to Neveah City. And Neveah City would be a great place for you to live. Offering endless opportunities, cash out your ass, and so many things to do you’ll be busy for years into the future. But... hear me out. You should stay here in Hill Mount where none of that is available to you.’ Then make sure you smile big and wide after that.” He pointed at me and said, “Oh and don’t forget to add, ‘and here you’ll have me,’ because bruh that’s the only thing you’ll have to offer.”

“But there is no way I’d move to Neveah City.” It was a small caveat that made it impossible for me to ask her to make a change. “If I wouldn’t, how could I expect her to be open to living anywhere besides there?”

“And see, that’s why relationships are overrated. Somebody has to compromise. Take two people with different goals and aspirations. Then tell them to live a life together where they may or may not get distracted from what they want.” He huffed. “I’ll pass.”

“So long story short. Even if I figure out what I want to do. I love her too much to ask her to give up her dream of moving there.” It’s not like I had loyalty to a certain city. I was more concerned about the job, the impact, and less concerned about the city. But a big city was not some place I wanted to be.

“Do you love her enough to move to Neveah City?”

My pause was as long as it was when Journey told me she got the job. It

was minutes of the words bouncing around my head. Trying different paths to a response and ending up stuck, finding their way back, and trying another. Until, finally I said, “I guess if I have to think this hard—”

“Don’t feel bad. Your mind is refusing the disillusion of love. Guess it’s not as powerful as people say. I’m going to let you ponder that for a while. All this talk about love. I need a shot.”

He left my room, and alone, the thoughts didn’t stop. There were three scenarios rolling around in my mind. Go with Journey, Journey stay with me, or we go our separate ways. Not one of those options left me with a warm and fuzzy feeling.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Journey

Beaming sun, a cool pool, and time away from Hill Mount. It was the necessary I knew I needed. Spring Break was calling, and I was answering. Almost. My suitcase splayed open on the floor as I threw clothes, and bikinis inside. I didn't need much because I had zero plans of being fully dressed at no given time during the break.

The three years prior, me and the girls picked a random sunny spot to visit for spring break. Most times, we had at least a dozen people with us. Half girls, and half guys. This time was no different. Except we were going bigger. It was our last spring break together after all.

We rented a house near the beach. Something a camera crew could have recorded for one of those college specials. From the pictures, it had everything we needed. A lavish pool, hot tub, huge yard, game room, and enough rooms to sleep all eight of us comfortably. Being the only non-single person in the group, I convinced everyone to let me have the main bedroom. A king-sized bed, a huge soaking tub. The works. Perfect for me and Chaz to make up for our failed Valentine's Day.

Imagine my surprise when he told me, "I can't." I was all doom and gloom at first. Thought the end was near and he was dragging it out for whatever reason. Outside of that though, he was as sweet, and kind, as usual. So, I thought, I could call him one last time, and he'd pack a bag and join us.

“Chaz, there’s still time,” I said while throwing my toiletries into a bag.

“You’re going to have a good time I wish I could join you.” Although his idea of a good time did not include a house full of people.

“Is it because there are so many people that will be there.” I dangled, “We’ll have the main suite. And it has a huge soaking tub.” The two of us in a tub together sounded like heaven on earth.

“How much did y’all drop on this place again?” I could hear the judgment in his voice.

“I mean, a paycheck we have yet to receive. But...” I was going to shout YOLO. We’d been screaming it ever since booking the trip. Chaz didn’t seem like one to care about, only living once. I kept that little commentary to myself. “It’s fine. This is our last spring break before adulthood sets in. Who knows the next time we’ll be able to vacation together. Or have enough money to do something like this.”

He chuckled. “So, you have the money now?”

I groaned. “Let me worry about the numbers. I want you there though. Could you at least come down for a few days? At the beginning or the end. Whichever. I want to see my man with his shirt off walking around the pool.” The thought caused me to pause what I was doing and relish in it for a moment. “Yes,” I added, “I need that in my life.”

Chaz was not convinced. “I’ll be here figuring out what’s next for me. I need to find a job because as is, I don’t have a future paycheck to spend.”

“Fair.” I wouldn’t tell one of the community members to overspend. I couldn’t tell him to do so either. “I hope you’ll find something quick, and all that changes before the break is over.” My glass was not only half full, it was overflowing the brim. I needed to drink in all the optimism I could handle. I couldn’t start thinking about all the ways our situation could end in a month. I wanted us to be together, till and forever. “I’ll miss you insanely.”

“Same.” The somberness in his voice didn’t discourage me.

I was holding on for dear life, even if I only had a strand left to hold on to. “I love you, Chaz.”

There wasn’t a long pause, but still no excitement in his voice when he repeated it back. We hung up before I let his words dampen my mood.

“Car is ready to roll,” Lauren shouted from the living room.

I stuck my head out the door. “Now?” I looked at my phone. “It’s not time.” We agreed on an early start so we wouldn’t miss a minute of our break. But that damn early was not the time.

“You didn’t get the text?” Nia stood beside Lauren with her luggage in hand. “We gotta beat the beach traffic.”

“Okay, I’m coming.” I threw everything in my bag, zipped it and prayed I had everything I needed. Or that I didn’t need much. “Let’s roll.”

The four-hour car drive reminded me of car trips as a kid. With my family piled in the car on our way to a random place Mom picked. It’d be some place we’d never been before and may or may not have a decent hotel waiting on our arrival. There was one time we made it to the hotel in the middle of the night. But we ended up sleeping in the car because she refused to stay there. The next morning, we found a hotel down the street.

“I know you are back there all sad your boo didn’t come on the trip. But I won’t lie, I’m kinda glad he decided to stay back,” Nia turned around from the front seat. “This is it, our last spring break together.”

“Dang, you counting out any future trips together.” Lauren side-eyed her. “I was thinking we’ll have money, actual money, and can do bigger and better trips. Starting next year.”

I stared out the window. The piles of sand on either side of the road reminded me of snow. The crashing waves could have cast me out and let me drift away.

“Right, Journey?”

“Huh?” I looked to the front seat. “What’d you say?”

“Damn is it that bad? You dick deprived back there? Dazing off?” Nia laughed. “I wish I knew what that felt like.”

Nia and Lauren continued their tirade into what it’d be like to have a man. How it would feel to go a week without him. And the more they talked through imaginary scenarios it made me miss Chaz more. I cleared my throat, “How about we talk about something else?”

“I know,” Lauren blurted like she had the perfect suggestion. “We won’t talk about *your man* but how about the guys coming on the trip.” She tapped the steering wheel. “I heard they got that sexy ass barista to come.”

“Sexy ass barista.” I turned my head. “Who?”

“Ugh.” Lauren stalled. “I don’t know his name.”

Nia turned and looked at me. “But you know, the one who helped you to the car. From the club that night. When you were drunk.”

I smirked and tilted my head sideways. “Because I remember everything from that night.”

“Right.” Nia laughed. “Guess you’ll see when he gets there.”

Lauren sang, “And here we are.” There were two cars parked out front.

I didn’t understand why we didn’t caravan from campus. That’s what Mom would have suggested. We did it all the time when her sisters tagged along with us on family trips. *No man left behind.*

“Better get inside before they steal our rooms,” Lauren hurried from the car.

I took my time. Getting inside to a room I’d occupy alone didn’t matter much to me. If someone else claimed it, good for them. If I had the bright sunshine, the pool, and good drinks, I could sleep on the couch if I had to.

“Welcome to Bonita Casa la Hillside.” Danielle stood at the front door with her arms stretched.

“Did you fail Spanish?” Nia laughed as she barged her way past Danielle. “My room better be available too.”

Danielle shouted behind us, “Don’t worry, we respected the outlined house rules.” Her words dripped of sarcasm.

It was Lauren who insisted we have ‘house rules.’ After three years of something going wrong, she decided we needed to have a foolproof plan. She wanted to ensure our last and final spring break together went off without a hitch.

I didn’t take myself to the room. Instead, I went to the sliding glass doors and walked out to the pool. I found a seat under an umbrella and flopped down into it. The pool wasn’t the crashing waves, but the still water calmed me.

“I think it’s better out here too.” The deep voice caught me off guard.

I winced as I tried to look up into the mouth it came from. With an arm stretched over my eyes I still had to squint to see him.

“Iced Mocha,” his lips grew into a grin. “Mind if I sit beside you?” With a tank top, shorts, and no shoes, he looked ready to jump into the pool.

“I don’t mind at all.” Then my nose scrunched. “You know, all these times I’ve been in the coffee shop you’d think I’d remember your name. I mean you do wear it on your shirt.”

He laughed. “It’s cool.” He hunched his shoulders. “I mean, in that, you don’t pay attention enough to remember type of way. Or that I’m not memorable enough for you to care.”

I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic, or dead ass serious. My mouth opened to a thin slit before responding. “Was that a joke?”

“Depends. Was it funny?”

I shook my head. "I'm not buckled over or anything."

"Hmm... you crushed my hopes and dreams of being a stand-up comedian."

My eyes popped open. "Good thing you'll have your degree to fall back on."

"Thank God for ol' Hillside." He stretched his hand out. "I'm Malachi." His lips formed around each syllable of his name. "Malachi Moore."

Our hands touched and lingered for a beat too long. I pulled it away, tucking it under my leg before I offered, "I'm Journey. Journey Thompson."

"Journey Thompson," he repeated. "Nice to formally meet you. But this means I can no longer call you Iced Mocha." There was a noticeable frown on his face.

"Do you call everyone by their order?" I tried to think of Lauren's order but it failed me. "Like is there someone out there you call Black No Sugar No Cream?"

"Don't know if I'd want to know anyone strong enough to drink their coffee like that." This time the look on his face was softer, a lift of his lips as he snickered. "But iced mocha coffee..." he subtly licked his lips. "I like that."

I wiped the back of my neck and made images of Chaz flash in my mind. I needed thoughts of his arms holding me, his lips caressing me, his dick invading my most intimate spots. I couldn't be four hours away and have him out of sight out of mind. *Right?*

"So, who'd you come with?" I needed an escape from Malachi.

He pointed over his shoulder. "Denim and Eric. Know them?"

I'd heard of them before. "Denim is a memorable name. But Eric, that could be any number of people." I assured him, "My roommates gave me a brief rundown of the people joining us though."

"I'm curious." He asked, "What'd they say about me?" There was a mischievous grin on his face.

"Said you were the guy who helped me when I was drunk." I hurried, "But I could neither confirm nor deny because, well—"

"Exactly. I guess I was the invisible knight."

Our eyes danced over each other for a minute before he said, "The guys insisted we couldn't stop. But I'm hungry as hell. You?"

"Somewhat. We had a car full of snacks." Courtesy of Nia who would never dare be on a road trip with no snacks. "I'm good for now though." As

he stood my phone vibrated against my seat. If it was Chaz I'd be one pleased person with the universe. When I lifted it, I frowned. "I should take this."

"Sure." Malachi stood and disappeared somewhere behind the sliding door.

"Monroe?" My voice quivered. The last time she made a random call, it shook my world. I didn't suspect she'd call me in the middle of the day to wish me a happy spring break. Not my sister.

"Hey, ugh..." then her manufactured delay. Like she didn't know how to proceed didn't make it any better. "I should have let Dre call you."

"Dre?" I barked, "Why?"

"Or Daddy. He needs to own up to this shit. Take some of the weight of the rest of us." Monroe was malfunctioning. "When's the last time you spoke to him anyway?"

I didn't want to yell, but I had to. "Monroe. What the hell are you talking about?" I looked at the still pool water and considered diving in. Staying a while.

"The house sold. We no longer can call 514 Berry Avenue home." Monroe on her best day would still be the most dramatic person I know. She missed her calling for being in theater. She should have been on someone's big screen. If it wasn't my life playing out, I would have been at the premiere of the movie she acted out now.

"It's done?" It wasn't only that the house sold, but that Mom would be moving. She'd be leaving Lake Side. "Is Mom okay?" I couldn't consider if I was okay. Not yet. The house I lived in for over twenty years wouldn't be *my home* anymore regardless. It'd be the place I went to visit for holidays, random weekends, or whenever I needed to feel the comforts of *home*. But for Mom, it was her home. The place she filled with joy, and laughter. The place she raised three amazing kids. "This sucks." A tear streamed down my face, and I wiped it aggressively.

"It does." For the first time, I heard pain in Monroe's voice. More pain than when she told me they were getting a divorce. More pain than when she said Dad's stuff was no longer in the house. "Mama seems to be doing okay. You should call her though. I'm sure she'd like to know you're okay." Then she insisted like I needed coaching for that phone call. "You're okay, right?"

"Before I call her, I will be."

I heard a snuffle, or a huff. Or some long-exasperated breath batter against the speaker. "I should get back to work." Before she hung up she shouted,

“Oh, enjoy your last spring break. Do everything I would do. You deserve a whole lotta fun.”

I couldn't agree more. But first, I had to let the tears do what they intended to do. “Tears on spring break, where they do that at?” Malachi stood in front of me. “I saw you were off the phone and came to offer this,” he held out a plate. “But I should come back with the bottle.”

I nodded. “That would be amazing.”

He returned with reinforcement—the bottle, and the ladies.

“I know you are not crying on spring break,” Nia said between gritted teeth. “We haven't toasted to the occasion yet. You aren't drunk. Why are you crying.” She leaned down so only I could hear her. “Do I need to drive back to campus and whoop somebody's ass?” Her questioning look made me laugh.

“No.” I shook my head and noticed Malachi standing at a safe distance. “Our house sold,” I said it so he couldn't hear me.

“Well,” Nia turned behind her, “let us drink to *that*.”

“It's not exactly something to drink to,” I argued.

“Life is all about how we look at it, babe.” She passed shot glasses to all who stood around. With her hand raised in the air she yelled, “To a week full of debauchery before real life starts.” Then she leaned down beside me and said, “To Mama Thompson starting fresh.” She clanked my glass and said, “Drink up.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

C haz

Poolside with the sun beaming down sounded better than scouring websites for opportunities. Hearing all the people shouting when Journey called each day of spring break made me alright with staying back though. If it were only her and me somewhere then maybe.

I had the apartment to myself. And Hill Mount was quiet considering most of the college students were out of town spring breaking. I had a glimpse of what it would be like *living* in the city. I had to admit, sans traffic, staying off campus in an apartment by myself wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

Perfect? Not exactly. If Journey was there, it'd take it up a notch. I scoffed. The thought, as often as it resurfaced was still laughable. Journey in Hill Mount for anything other than homecoming was likely out of the question after graduation.

Still, I snapped a few pictures to show her what Hill Mount had to offer during the off chance she considered it. I was getting ahead of myself though. The meeting Professor Martin coordinated for me was minutes away. I had yet to speak more than a few sentences to the man who planned on running for governor. If he agreed with what I had to offer, and I could stand behind his platform, that was a start.

But we weren't there yet. And if I couldn't find my way through the

office building, we'd be further from it. I circled the lobby looking for an elevator to take me to the third floor when finally, a kind woman stepped to me.

"Lost?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I need to get to Suite 315." I looked at the elaborate signs in front of me. "Nothing is directing me to the elevators."

She smirked. "This building could be easier to navigate." Her eyes blinked before saying, "Follow me, I can show you to the elevators. And" she looked at her phone, "in fact, I can show you to the suite. In case you can't find your way once you're up there."

I wanted to decline the offer, but I was already a few minutes late. "I'd appreciate that."

As she neared the elevators she asked, "Going to see Mr. Bradford?" Her eyebrows stitched together.

A gentle head nod confirmed. "I am." But I hesitated before offering much else. The meeting didn't hold a lot of promise. Only a guarantee to discuss what was possible.

"Hmm... you're either a journalist or a politician." She stared as we each found a corner of the elevator.

Wagging my head I offered, "Would you take neither for \$200?"

She laughed. "Then?"

Because I wanted to own the role I'd like to be in, I declared, "A political *advocate*."

Thankfully the doors re-opened before she could ask for clarity. I didn't have much. Days without classes, homework, or little distraction should have been enough to figure it out. Still, I had nothing.

A set of glass doors greeted us, but she didn't proceed through them. "Go through those doors, then to your right." She held a lot of hope in her eyes as she said, "Good luck with your advocacy. Mr. Bradford is a decent guy."

"Thanks." I waved at her before walking through the doors. Taking the right as she instructed, I gathered my thoughts. I prepared to pitch myself as a candidate for his efforts. My pseudo-accomplishments of SGA president on the tip of my tongue. My desire to shake things up in politics pinned to my heart. And when I walked through suite 315, I was ready to divulge it all.

"Mr. Brown." The white man with the tailored suit surprised me. I expected an assistant, a staff member. Not Mr. Bradford himself to greet me.

I stood tall, shoulders back, head held high though. Like my dad told me

to do whenever I met someone. “Mr. Bradford, my apologies for my tardiness. Couldn’t exactly find the elevator.” I held my hand out for him to shake.

He did so with a firmness that his daddy probably taught him at a young age. “No problem, this building is tricky.” He started walking down a hallway. “But we don’t plan on being here long. In November we plan on moving to a new location.”

Aspirational. I liked that about him. From everything I researched on the man, he was legit. So far, there were no skeletons in his closet. Nothing like spewing racial remarks or taunting inappropriate costumes for Halloween. As far as I could tell, he and his wife were happily married, and he had no side chicks. “I wouldn’t mind helping you pack up for that,” I joked.

In an office, with little furniture, he sat behind the desk. With a wave of his hand, he offered the seat across from him. “If you are half as accomplished as Professor Martin described, I could only hope you’d do that.”

And so it began, I leveled myself for a barrage of questions. A way for him to test my political acumen. To understand where I stood on viewpoints that affected the state. Or my viewpoint on the current occupant of the capitol. But none of that came.

He leaned back in his chair and asked, “Outside of political science, what motivates you?” A mic might as well drop in front of him.

I wasn’t as prepared to answer that. Not exactly. I cleared my throat. Got comfortable in the seat then said, “Knowing that the people around me are well and thriving.” Then I transformed from a so-called advocate to an activist, adding, “You know it’s one thing for a few of us to graduate from college and start successful careers. It’ll be something when every kid from the high schools around here has that same opportunity. Kids from all backgrounds and especially those from underprivileged communities.”

“And you believe that it’s possible?”

“If it’s not, it’s worth making it possible. Taking a chance. Driving the change we want to see.” I squared my face. “Otherwise, what is the point?”

There was silence in the room. In that moment, I realized there was silence surrounding the office too. I assumed someone running for governor would always have a team of people around him. I imagined people running in and out of his office, a campaign manager spewing out statistics. An analyst giving him the most up to date poll results.

“That’s right.” There was a small smirk on his face. “If anyone is in politics to keep the status quo, it’s time for them to vacate their position.” He leaned forward. “What are your thoughts on that?”

“Oh, I agree.” I didn’t want to get caught up in how much that was my jam. I could have gone on for hours about the topic. Poured out every indecent act of recent politicians who refused to push the ball forward. But I settled with, “That requires accepting things that we’ve championed may need to change too.” I challenged, “Is that something you are willing to do if you win?”

One thing about politicians, they were often full of lies. Half the time discerning the truth from a falsehood was challenging. They spewed dishonesty like they were stating their name—simply, with a straight face. Mr. Bradford was no different. But until I could call him on his shit, I had no reason not to trust him.

So, when he said, “I have a task team dedicated to doing that. Reviewing policy to determine what no longer serves us as a state.” He chuckled. “I’ll admit that list is longer than I expected, we’ll have to prioritize it. A commitment from not only me but future governors too.”

“Mr. Brown.” He held his hands together in front of him. “I already made up my mind before you arrived. I want you on my team. I want someone like you who can bridge the gap between us and the college students.”

As a recent college graduate that would make sense. But there was no doubt there were other reasons Mr. Bradford wanted me on his team, and I had to call it out. “And the diversity turn out...”

He laughed unexpectedly. “That’s a bonus, but I’m hoping that isn’t your goal on the campaign. I’m hoping you could work with the team across many initiatives.”

I couldn’t help but look out to the hallway. Through the small window that gave us a glimpse beyond the walls of the office. “And where is this team of yours?”

“At our campaign office near the capitol.” He added, “And if you’d like to meet any of them before making a decision, I’d make that happen.” He stood, “You’ll be hearing from someone with details. But if you have any questions feel free to reach out.” He raised his phone in the air. “Unfortunately, I’m glued to this thing.” He winced. “Not to my wife’s liking.”

He walked me to the glass doors, and after we shook hands I stood in the

empty elevator with a lot on my mind. Much to consider. With a few days left of spring break, I decided not to tell Journey. Not yet. Not until I had the official offer, and a decision.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Journey

The cloud I floated on stuck around after we made it back to Hill Mount. Spring break did what spring needed to do. It refreshed me, eased my nerves, and had me more than a little excited to see my man.

That was until he answered the call sounding like he was knocking on death's door. "Are you okay?" I sat on the floor near my opened suitcase and braced for the bad news. Whatever it was he was about to tell me that would drop me from the cloud. My legs curled into my chest, and my arms wrapped around them.

"Can you come over?"

I had more questions but no answer to his very simple one. "Not until you tell me what's going on."

"In person, Journey. I promise to explain it all."

He cheated. It was the only explanation to his somber mood, wanting to see me in person. Wanting to *explain*. He was here in Hill Mount, got bored, lonely, or both. Fucked around with some chick he hardly knew. And ruined everything. Ruined us.

It was Dwayne going out with that girl for coffee. *It was me about to break everything off because of it.*

I sighed. "Okay. I'm on my way." I didn't bother changing into a cute outfit. Didn't bother adjusting my ponytail. If he was about to tell me

devastating news, the last thing I wanted was to waste a cute outfit on it. The whole drive from my apartment to his place I was fuming. And everything that had me a little upset on spring break, had me furious before I pulled into a parking spot. He didn't want to come with us for spring break. Didn't want to spend the last break we had together. Hardly spoke to me while I was gone. When we were on the phone we didn't say much. He sent random pictures of Hill Mount in response to my bikini shots by the pool.

I got to his door with my arms across my chest. My face contoured into a scowl when he answered.

"You okay?" His head tilted to the side. "Did you have to park far? Everyone is back now those good spots go fast." He was blabbering. Likely trying to cover up his grave mistake.

"No." I pulled my lips firm. "I need to know what's going on."

He pulled me by the hand and closed the door behind us. He led me to his room and closed that door too. When his arms wrapped around me I melted. Wanted to fight myself for letting one simple hug dissolve my anger. He held me out in front of him. "You're tense. You okay?"

"Chaz," I shouted. "What's going on with you? A few minutes ago, you sounded like you were at your own funeral."

A grimace molded his face. He sat at the edge of his bed and patted the place beside him. "That's a gruesome ass parallel." He shook his head. "And nothing is wrong." He placed his hand over mine. "Not entirely. I missed you like crazy though. And..." he licked his lips and I wanted to release all the pent-up sexual energy. "I'd much rather sex you down than tell you what I need to say."

Then it diminished. "Chaz..." The next breath caught in my chest. "Did you cheat on me?"

"What?" He blurted. "No." His head shook back and forth. "Is that what you think." He rubbed his face.

"Then what? You have me worried." At least it wasn't that. *But what was it?* "You're breaking up with me?"

"Journey," he placed his hand on my shoulder, "Okay I see you aren't going to give me a chance to do what I want first so I'll get it out."

I pleaded, "Please."

"Mr. Bradford's campaign offered me a position."

My eyes widened and my hands flew out. I wrapped my arms around his neck and yelled, "Congratulations, that's amazing. I knew you'd figure all

this out.” Then it dawned on me. The name. It sounded familiar. But couldn’t be the name I saw on billboards and signs up and down the street. Not the flyers littering campus. “Mr. Bradford?” That’s when the ball dropped. Everything inside me felt like it oozed down to the ground. “Here? You are going to stay here?”

“Here. In Hill Mount.” The capitol of the state. “It wasn’t the opportunity I was expecting, but it would lead into so many others.”

All that sounded good, great even. Still, “You want to stay in Hill Mount after graduation?”

“I don’t know if I could find a similar opportunity elsewhere.”

I argued, “Have you looked? Or was this the plan all along? You planned to stay right here?”

His face wrinkled, and his darkened lips tugged to the side. “I had no plans. When I stayed here for spring break it was to figure it out. That wasn’t a lie.”

I wanted to believe everything he was saying. Wanted to trust that if there was a way for us to be near each other he exhausted all those options. That this plan, the offer, only came after he applied and got rejected to all others. Others that would have moved him a little closer to me.

“Professor Martin was able to put in a recommendation. He suggested a meeting, and from there this happened.”

None of that sounded like any effort on his part to find something. It sounded like it dropped into his lap. A blessing for sure, but still not the effort I’d expect if he was trying other avenues. “Did you look for anything near Neveah City. Anything at all?”

The subtle shake of his head. A soft whisper when he said, “I didn’t.” His eyes as he stared at me waiting for a response.

It all felt like he uttered the words, “I cheated.” It hurt as bad. Felt just as shitty. A lot like betrayal. Something like telling me we were over. Like, “It’s me not you. I want you to go into the world and be happy. One day find a man who will give you everything you need.” Each passing moment between us as neither of us spoke made my heart ache more.

Finally, I said, “Nine hours by car. Three hours by plane. That’s how far we’ll be from each other. Is that feasible?” I had the answer I thought he’d give me. The one he couldn’t seem to formulate.

But if he wasn’t willing to get close to me. Could I give up Neveah City...*for him*? Like a slide show, images of Neveah City, my dream job,

navigating the big city, and all it had to offer, flashed in my mind. Since forever, moving to the city was my dream. Much like meeting a husband in college and living my happily ever after.

I had both in my hand. But I never thought I'd have to release one. *Which one was more important?*

The room felt smaller, the air stale, his cologne overwhelming. The warmth from his body raising the hair on my neck. "Should I find something here?" The words felt foreign. A nauseating feeling followed.

Our fingers wrapped together. My chipped nails, his needing a little TLC. But we connected. For an entire week, I missed his touch. I missed him more than I wanted anything else, I wanted him.

"If that's not what you want, then no."

Defending what I wanted was difficult. Even with our fingers interlocked, with the throbbing in my chest at the thought of losing him. I couldn't tell him staying in Hill Mount was something I wanted. I did want him. But not the city.

"How about we get through graduation, then we see what happens."

My lips puckered. "Graduation doesn't sound as exciting knowing we could be living in different cities." I omitted the more obvious fact. The one that mattered more than the distance that would separate us. *Could we survive long distance?*

He stood from the bed, edged me down onto my back. "Four years. Eight semesters. Countless exams, projects, and extracurriculars." He kissed my forehead. "It's worth celebrating. Can't let anything overshadow it." He kissed my cheek. "Not even this." He hovered near my face. "Okay?"

He had a point. Regardless of what happened to us. I accomplished something major. He did the damn thing. We would go into the world and do amazing things.

As his lips nibbled on my collar bone, I prayed we'd do it together.

"Those bikini pictures you sent me." He tugged on my shirt, "Were too much of a tease. A reminder of what other men saw." He growled. "Nobody tried anything did they?" His hand dipped between my thighs. "I couldn't blame them if they made an attempt."

My body couldn't care less about the guys on spring break. Or the questions Chaz had. It didn't care about the future, or the past. It only wanted the moment to deliver on the promise of his tease. The stroke of his fingers over my panties alone were about to drive me wild.

I pulled his head into my neck. Kissed along his jawline and caressed his back. “No attempt,” I managed to say between moans. “Now give me what I’ve been missing all week.”

“Oh, I can do that.” He swiped my shorts and panties down my legs. Stuffed his face between my thighs, and unraveled my body as his tongue went to work.

The moisture of his mouth, the warmth of his breath, the strokes of his fingers between licks. It was the reason every night of spring break was torturous. I could only think of him and those licks. And after a week of not having a single touch, every one of them had my senses heightened. With a hand on my foot, he pulled my legs further apart, then dug his tongue deeper inside.

Somewhere between the cloud I found myself on again, and his guttural groans, I released. My body caved, but my mind wanted more. So much more. “I want you,” I whispered when he resurfaced.

A devilish grin remained after he licked his lips. “And I want you.” His pants dropped and the memory of his dick had nothing on reality. He slid on a condom and hovered between my thighs. Tempted me with his longing stare.

I fidgeted waiting on the reminder of how good he felt inside me. As he inched in, my body eased. It was better than the feeling of that first shot going down my throat. Of having no cares, no worries. Nothing to turn in, or nowhere to be. As he went in and out, our connection made for a better sensation than a week poolside.

But hearing, “I love you,” in my ear on repeat sounded like waves crashing the beach—calm and excitement fighting for attention.

“I love you,” I said back and felt the beat of my heart get a little faster. Thump a little harder. Then I caved, my entire body tensed, all the way down to my toes.

His stroke didn’t slow, not until I felt his body tense too.

After we laid on his bed, neither of us able to move. A small distance between us. Loud breathing was the only sound until he said, “If distance brings us together like that, then...”

“But imagine having it whenever you wanted it.” I would have had it all five days of spring break.

He twisted his lips and uttered, “True.”

Chapter Thirty

C haz

The sixty-day countdown to graduation felt like six. Four years felt like forever as the days passed, but sitting at the end it wasn't long at all. Not long enough for me to meet all the people in the row beside me. Not enough time for me to have a class with all the faculty or staff standing guard beside us.

And the last year, not long enough to appreciate meeting Journey in the end. If I would have met her freshman year, it still wouldn't be long enough. Long enough to know everything about her.

It didn't matter as we sat listening to the commencement speaker. *But what was her favorite food?* I knew her favorite color was yellow. And as chipper as she was on most days, that made sense. She was like sunshine on a cloudy day, enough to chase away the darkest blues. And her fragrance, the one I loved to smell, I could have used more days to take that in too.

But no. We were sitting at the end of it all. The end of our collegiate career. The place where we sent worry to hide until we were ready to face it.

So, for that reason alone, I could have gone back to freshman year and started my matriculation all over again. To give me more time to avoid it.

I looked over my shoulder, to the back of the crowd. Somewhere back there the business majors sat. Amongst them, a familiar face, if I could find it. I couldn't. And for that, I'd take a few more days too. To stare at her beauty. The sultriness in her eyes, the way her lips perked up when she was

in deep thought. The softness in her brows when she was at ease. The crinkle in her nose before she buckled over in laughter. A few more days to commit each of her expressions to memory.

We didn't have a few more days. Not as college students. Our time together on campus was over. I rubbed my hands together thinking whether the two college students, who fell madly in love, could survive beyond it.

The row ahead of mine stood. The time was nearing for me to cross that stage and face whatever it was the other side held for us. With each person that crossed before me, I had an excitement bubbling on the inside.

As much as I would have done it all over again, for the chance to have more time with Journey, I was glad it was over. At least the part with studying, and test taking. That part I'd disregard every time, even in the chance I started all over.

Our row stood, and I straightened my gown. Tugged on my tie to ensure it centered beneath. Held my head high to balance the cap. As I neared the stage, I searched the crowd again. Tried to find her smiling face, her reassuring grin, her comforting eyes. I couldn't.

So, I straightened my back, looked ahead, and marched forward. I heard a distinct, "Go, baby," yelled from somewhere in the stands. *My mama for sure.*

Off the stage, I posed for a picture with my diploma. Then, there she was. A few sections behind me, staring at me. *Gorgeous.* Even with a cap covering her long hair, shadowing the shape of her eyes, she couldn't conceal her smile. It was wide and welcoming as I winked in her direction.

Her hand lifted to her mouth, and she blew a kiss toward me. One I gladly caught and placed near my heart. I tucked it there. Just in case.

The students between me and Journey went across the stage. Seemingly taking as long as the four years for me to get there. But when they called her name, she walked across the stage to a rupture of cheers. Because Journey was *that girl.* My girl. And I wish we had longer for us to be *that couple.*

As she passed my row, it was time for me to send a kiss her way. Her feet slowed as she stared, catching the kiss and placing it on her cheek. I'd replace that one with a few others if the rest of the students could hurry.

That's the thing about time. One minute I wanted it to pass slowly, the other I wanted it to speed up.

At the end of the ceremony, we needed to stand to cross our tassels. To officially become graduates. I wanted time to drip through a thin sleeve. And

as I navigated through the crowd to find Journey I wanted it to gush out bypassing all barriers.

“Congrats, baby,” I said as she turned toward me. My hand on her elbow. “We did it.”

She wrapped her arms around me and repeated, “We did it. Congratulations, Mr. Brown.”

Her smile didn’t last long, and I would have liked to say mine did anyway. It didn’t. Our knowing stare didn’t succumb to the inevitable though. I offered, “We should find our families.”

“Yeah, then meet back up later?”

I nodded. “Let’s do that.”

I’d be hoping time bent in some other dimension. So, I could both hurry to see her, and wait years for the moment to arrive. My shoulders slumped as I walked through families, classmates, faculty. My family grouped together at the top of the arena. “Chaz,” my dad was the first person to greet me. “You did it, son.” He held my shoulders staring into my eyes. “Congratulations.”

“My turn,” Mama shoved him out the way and wrapped me in her arms. “I’m so proud of you, honey.” She kissed my cheeks, then her eyes closed. “I’m so happy for you.” When she re-opened them she stared before asking, “And where is Journey?” She searched over my shoulder, behind my back, around my sides. “We have a card for her.”

Carter approached inching Mama out the way. “That can wait. Let me get this one in with my brother.” He smacked the shit out of my back. “Inspiring.” He nodded as he pulled away. “I know for sure I have to get in this last year now.”

Mama scoffed from behind me. “Oh, that was a guarantee anyway.” She smacked her lips. “Dropping out should never cross your mind.”

Carter and I exchanged a look. Once Mama was on one, she rode that shit out. She was still going as we neared the parking lot. As people passed us by she realized we were beyond the point of no return.

“Wait. We didn’t see Journey.” Her voice a soft whisper as she cornered me near the car.

“She’s around here somewhere.” I faked a look over my shoulder. What me and Journey needed to discuss next didn’t need to unfold in front of my family, or hers. “I’ll call her,” I mumble when Mama’s expression urged me to pick another answer.

“God,” Journey groaned into the phone, “this is the worst.”

My eyes narrowed and I looked at the screen. “Huh?”

“They haven’t been together in months. And for one night, you’d think they didn’t spend over thirty years together. Like being near one another would kill them.” I could hear arguing in the background. “I’m over it,” she finally said.

“Ugh. Are you still at the arena?”

“Unfortunately.” Then she asked, “Are you? I’ll find you. Let them figure out how they’ll manage sitting across the dinner table from each other. Or not at all.” The last sentence sounded like it was more for her parents than for me.

“We are in the parking lot.” I guided her to our car. And when she was there she crumbled into my arms. “Sorry they are ruining what should be a good night,” I whispered into her ear.

“Journey.” Mama pulled me away from her. “Congrats, dear.” She snapped her fingers and looked between the two of us. “A power couple if I’ve ever seen one.” Mama’s grin was wide. Almost as if the idea of me attending an HBCU and finding a woman like Journey was her plan all along. Not like she would have preferred I attend any other school in the country.

“Thank you, Mrs. Brown.” Journey smiled. The way she hid all her frustration amazed me.

By looking at her I couldn’t tell that she was anxious about our conversation. Not like I was. It wasn’t like she was counting the seconds until we had time alone to discuss us.

“Here, this is for you.” Mama handed Journey a card. Then said, “And I know your family is here, but I hope we can see you before we pack up and get down the road.” Then if all the seconds on the clock collided, it wouldn’t surprise me. Mama asked, “By the way, what’s next for this dynamic duo?”

Carter whistled and politely opened the car door. I didn’t have the luxury to escape like he did. I stood there staring at Journey, waiting for a syllable, a consonant, an utterance to fall from her lips.

She made no declarations though. Her answer was simpler than the situation. “Time will tell.” Her eyes cut toward me. “I should go find my parents. Make sure they haven’t dragged one another across the arena.” She laughed but Mama stared wide eyed. “Chaz, I’ll catch up with you later.” Her lips met mine but only briefly.

I had my hand on the car door, ready to proceed with the rest of the night when Mama stopped me again.

She cleared her throat. “Not so fast.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Yes?”

“Only time will tell?” She shook her head. “You two haven’t discussed what’s next? Didn’t you say she’s moving to Neveah City.” The crinkle between her brow was deep. “Chaz Boris Brown. You better not be leading that girl on.”

My head jerked back, and I dropped the handle of the door. “Leading her on?”

“If you have no plans of making this work. Coming to a compromise. Something that doesn’t look like the two of you hundreds of miles apart. Let her go. She’s already dealing with her parents divorcing. She doesn’t need to deal with an indecisive boyfriend too.”

My eyes propped open. “Indecisive? What if long distance works?”

From behind her my dad barked, “Long distance.” With a chuckle, he shook his head.

Up until then I didn’t think it was a crazy idea. Not the most ideal. But not insane. Not the way my parents made it seem as they discussed it. Like us together miles apart was the worst thing she would have to endure. But what about the two of us not being together? Wouldn’t that be worse?

For me, it would be.

Chapter Thirty-One

Journey

Going home for summer was always bittersweet. There was freedom from classes, homework, projects, practice. But there was separation from best friends, partying, hanging out. Being back home with parents—being treated like a kid again—could be top three among the worst things to experience in life.

I didn't consider how I'd feel leaving campus the last time as a student. How sad it'd be to walk through the courtyard one last time. To pass the café where I spent too much money on decent coffee. I paused in front of the library. I wouldn't miss the time I spent there. Hours studying. But I would miss the building. The time I spent with the people studying beside me.

Then I made it across campus. To the dorms, where I wanted one last look at where it all started. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes. I felt the air struggling to fill my lungs. The sun beaming on my back didn't help what already felt like my body melting into a pool of emotions.

"This is it." I stood in front of the building.

A swell of students, boxes in hand, parents behind them filtered passed me. And when one hovered before me I smiled.

"One year down," she said with a semi-smile. One I recognized. She was in that bittersweet moment. For a few months, she'd be leaving it all behind.

"Thought I would have seen more of you this year." I stepped to the side

and waited for her to join me.

“I expected I’d have more questions.” She laughed. “That first day it was all so overwhelming.”

“One thing I’ve learned is to get rid of expectations.” It was the biggest lesson of my last year of college. “The next three years of college will be much smoother if you do that.”

Her smile reached her eyes, and when she said, “Thanks. I’ll do that,” I felt a little lighter walking away from the dorms.

I had to utter, “No expectations,” as I left campus. With me and Chaz’s conversation finally about to happen I didn’t want to set myself up for failure. I didn’t want to go into it thinking we’d come to the same conclusion.

Although, my decision varied minute by minute. And the closer I got to my apartment the more I didn’t want to decide. I didn’t want to be the one to tell him we had to go our separate ways. That as Monroe put it, *who wants a long-distance lover*. I also didn’t want to be the one to tell him we had to at least try. Because like Lauren insisted, *what’s the point of all this if you walk away easily in the end*. She tried convincing me I had more fight than that.

I wasn’t sure if I did. Or not.

There wasn’t a lot I was sure about anymore, and that might have scared me the most.

Chaz’s car was the only one I saw in the sea of them in front of my apartment. Laser focused as I parked beside it. He wasn’t inside. So, I took a minute. I could have taken sixty. But I stepped outside the car and walked up the stairs.

Chaz wasn’t in the living room, and when I got to my bedroom door, I stalled. His head hung low. But when our eyes met, that crossroads didn’t seem as divided. There was one path that seemed right.

“Hope you don’t mind.” He stood from the edge of the bed. “Nia let me in on her way out.”

My room was a mess. Boxes all over, clothes in piles, books stacked high. “I don’t mind. It’s a mess in here though.”

“Moving kinda looks like this though. Right?” He would know if he was leaving. Instead of staying behind while everyone around him left. “Pretty sure Marcus has no idea what moving means. He hasn’t packed a single box.”

The small talk occupying the space we needed to figure things out felt necessary. I don’t think either of us wanted to get to the conclusion. “Somehow I’m sure he’ll figure it all out.” I stuffed my hands in my back

pockets.

“You know. Driving over here. The few miles took longer than it should because of traffic. It still only took minutes to get to you.” He stepped a little closer. “I’m going to miss that.” His hand reached for the bulge in my pocket. It stayed there till my hand gripped his. “In the best-case scenario, it’ll take hours for us to get to each other. And that doesn’t include the planning involved beforehand.”

I huffed. “No late-night texts asking if you can come over. Or telling me you’re on your way.”

“No run ins on campus. Can’t stalk you after class with an iced mocha in hand.”

I smirked. “What will I do without my iced mochas?”

He pulled me close to his chest. I wish I could have stayed there in his arms forever. Listening to the thump in his chest. My head rising and falling with his breaths. It was warmth, comfort. It felt like home.

In my hair he whispered, “What are we going to do?”

I was standing on one side of the path, certain it’s the way I wanted to go. But knowing I couldn’t have any of what we had in that moment, I wasn’t certain anymore.

He pulled me to the bed and we sat side-by-side. Both staring at the wall in front of us. Void of all the pictures, all the memories of my four years in Hill Mount. The boxes still open contained those. The others piled in a corner held the childhood memories from my parents’ house. The memories between me and Chaz were still nestled in my head. We didn’t have long enough for anything concrete to memorialize us. *Another regret.*

“I wish things were different. That we met freshman year and had more time together. That by now, I made it obvious that you couldn’t live without me. Not sitting here thinking what it’ll be like to not have me down the street but hurting thinking how bad it’ll be without me in your life at all.”

His breath stuttered as his head turned toward me. His mouth opened then shut. What could he say?

I wished I could have made it through that conversation without the tears. Without the outward expression of the pain gripping my heart. It was impossible though. “That’s how it is for me right now. I’m thinking about how bad it’ll be to not have you. I know you have no plans to move to Neveah City.” I hummed. “And I have none to return here.”

I asked, “What’s the compromise?” Because that’s what couples did,

right? They compromised. Someone sacrificed a little, or a lot. The other person gave an inch, and hoped they got one in return. Somehow we should meet in the middle. Inch by inch. “How can we get closer to each other?” The campaign would be over in the fall, and unless he stayed on to work for Mr. Bradford, he was free to roam. But would he come to me?

“What if there is a city somewhere either of us want to be. Not here. Not Neveah City. Somewhere else?” His eyes searched mine, and I’m not sure what he found, but his drooped. The hurt I saw in his pained me.

“What if I love Neveah City?” I pulled a hand to my forehead. “What if it is everything I dreamed it could be, and more. What if we keep working toward this and I don’t want to leave?” *Could I give it all up for him?*

“And if I love you? If I wanted to marry you?”

The words didn’t ease the pain. Not when they were still a distant *what if*. How could they excite me when there was no guarantee we could compromise on the *where*? Or figure out the how.

“Love shouldn’t be this hard...” My eyes pulled together tightly. “My parents left Hillside, found a common city they both loved. Got engaged, and lived—”

I felt his hand on my knee. He sucked his teeth before saying, “I don’t want to state the obvious but...”

I shook my head. “Don’t mention it.” We stared at each other. “So, for us, is this how our happily ever after begins? Me and you in different cities, hoping and praying one day we’ll converge on a random spot somewhere we both can be happy.”

There was a long, comfortable silence. I’d like to think we were both standing at the crossroads. Somehow we couldn’t negotiate on which route to take, but accepted we’d be okay taking different paths. In that silence there might have been hope that those paths converged at some point. That we’d end up at the same destination. Ultimately.

Chaz stood from the bed, and I looked up to him. “You deserve that dream you’ve always wanted. It doesn’t look like you compromising on the city. It looks like you being with someone who is exactly what you pictured when you were a kid.”

If I closed my eyes I couldn’t visualize that person. In my heart though, I knew how I wanted to feel when I met him. And Chaz checked those boxes. With one small exception. “What if that looks like you?”

His lips twisted to the side. “Does that mean we can unpack these

boxes?” His finger landed on the tip of my nose as it scrunched up. “Go follow your dreams. Don’t let anyone stop you. Not even me.” He reached for my hands and pulled me to my feet.

His lips landed on mine, and I captured the softness, the intimacy, the way my heart expanded with love. It was a memory I wish I could have captured in a picture. Hung on a wall to remember what was.

His chin rested on the top of my head and after a long sigh, he said, “I love you, Journey. And I want so badly for everything to work out for you.”

With tears streaming down my face, I said, “I love you too, Chaz. And I want nothing but the best for you too.”

Epilogue

3 months later...

Journey

Walking hand-in-hand through the park. Trees casting a beautiful shadow, blocking out the setting sun. Catching side glances, and intimate smiles. The couple I watched from my fifth-floor apartment looked perfectly happy.

But if I learned anything from my relationship with Chaz, it's that happiness has a different meaning based on the context. It could be solely defined on what you perceive in the moment. And not what you expected it to look like.

At least not what I expected. Not half my life thinking my post-college career would look a lot like Whitley's. Or possibly my mom's. The irony was that my life did look more like my mom's—we were both single. Starting a new chapter.

I sighed and moved away from the window. After work it became my favorite spot. To sit in my chair, and gaze out at the people strolling through the park. Looking out at the restaurants and boutiques that lined the streets nearby. It's why I wanted to be in Neveah City. It was the constant

movement, the hustle and bustle, the thrill of everyone being busy that attracted me most.

It was different from the mundane life of Lake Side. Hill Mount was a slight upgrade, but it still didn't give me everything the city gave me.

Or everything I expected it to give me. Sitting in my apartment every day after work wasn't exactly my idea of *living the life*. Certainly not alone. Maybe if I had a man sitting beside me. If I had Chaz, that whole dream would be a little more solidified.

I didn't have him. And hardly had any friends in the city. My days at the firm were long, and finding friends in Corporate America was challenging. Unless I wanted to hang with someone my mom's age. It wasn't as easy as I hoped. So, getting around the city wasn't happening as often as I would have liked. Not how I dreamed.

Instead, I gazed out of the window most nights and tried to imagine new dreams. With less boundaries. No expectations.

As I opened the fridge to find something to cook, my phone rang. Before looking at the screen, I already knew who it would be. "Hello, Nia," I said with a wide smile.

"I don't hear anything in the background." Meanwhile hers was bustling. Sounded like she was in the middle of a busy intersection, cars whipping past her. "Don't tell me you're staying in on another Friday night."

"About to cook myself a meal and binge a movie." It was my norm. Weekends weren't like they were in college. There weren't parties, events, friends to kick it with. It was me, myself, and I. I started to think if that was any better than being in Hill Mount. At least there I would have been with Chaz. Binging a movie cuddled up with him sounded like a better plan. "Let me guess, you are about to go out?"

A company back in her hometown hired Nia. Fortunately for her, she was from a big city. So going home wasn't as daunting as it would be for me. She had her family, a built-in set of friends, and knew exactly where to go on a Friday night.

"You know this. There's this happy hour, then after I'm hitting the club." As happy as I was for her, it only reminded me that I had a long way to go before I could do anything similar. "When are you going to fly out to visit? I'm worried if you don't get out the house soon you'll turn into an old cat lady."

"First of all..." I laughed. "I'm nowhere near old. And I hate cats."

“Then get out the house. Even if it’s by yourself. You wanted to be there...”

Nia and Lauren couldn’t understand how Chaz and I ended things. They couldn’t grasp the fact that we had love for each other but couldn’t figure out how to make long distance work.

“You’re right. I want to be here. It’s not past tense. I love the city. It’ll take some getting used to, but that hasn’t changed.” My love of the city grew after I got settled into my apartment. Like anything else, it wasn’t perfect. But still, I loved it. It reminded me a lot of my relationship with Chaz actually. We weren’t perfect, not as I would have described perfect then.

“Well then you better start acting like it. Stuck in your apartment is not the move.”

“I’ll get around to it soon enough.” I didn’t have long before winter set in, when I’d be fighting snow and freezing temperatures to get out. “Before the summer is over.”

“Ugh...” she grumbled. “You know that’s in a few weeks, right?”

“Listen, I might be out with fifty-five-year-old Sharon listening to stories of her kids in college, but I’ll be out,” I joked. “It’s all about redefining what life looks like for me now.”

Nia’s sigh let me know she was about to end the call. Before I got too far into my *feelings* as she liked to say. “On that note, girl, if all else fails, you could move back to Hill Mount and reclaim that man you let walk out your life.”

I leaned against the counter. “No. He was right when he said I can’t let anyone stop me from reaching my dreams. Not him...” I bit the side of my mouth. “Or me.”

“When you put it like that, I’m excited to see you do that. To chase those dreams and embrace that city. To find a group of friends, who could never replace me and Lauren, but will be good stand-ins when we aren’t around. Lastly, to find a man who will dick you down, and love you up.”

If I had a glass in my hand I would have toasted to that. “Thanks, Nia.”

The noise in the background increased and she shouted, “I love you, girl. Call you later.”

After I sat the phone on the counter, I mumbled, “I love me too.” I didn’t have the man and wasn’t walking down the aisle soon. But I understood more about myself and wasn’t willing to compromise my dreams. I had enough compassion to know when it was time to let go. It took some time, but I

realized what me and Chaz had was beautiful. Because he loved himself too. Enough not to be in a city he hated. Our love for each other was strong. Strong love happened to feel like a broken heart though.

This is not the end...



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