

Liberty University

Save Our Love  
Creative Writing Thesis

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### *Abstract*

Andy Crouch wrote in his inspirational book, *Culture Making: Recovering our Creative Calling* that “culture is inescapable” and if we are dissatisfied with it, we must “make new culture” (140). These words have inspired my creativity and influenced my writing in so many ways. Romance literature is constantly growing in popularity, but the genre is not evolving. In a world of monotonous storylines and happily-ever-afters, I seek to shift the romance genre with my project, *Save Our Love*. This is a romance manuscript that tells the powerful stories of Joseph and Denver, two disparate college students who build a bond that they feel is unbreakable. This work aims to shed light on real-life trauma that individuals struggle with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and confront issues in the romantic fiction genre.

*Dedication*

This project is dedicated to Emilee and Jourdan. Your unique life challenges inspired me to create a literary work that honors your stories and gives individuals like you hope. I am grateful for the opportunity to know you both.

### *Acknowledgements*

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## *Artistic Statement*

### Impetus

Writing has always been my favorite pastime. For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed the act of writing itself: taking notes during Bible study or a church sermon, penning my prayers, and even writing my mother's grocery lists. One of my most incredible childhood memories is journaling in our notebooks as we watched tennis matches on our tiny television. While she wrote prayers, I wrote stories. I would create a fictional character in my brain-- usually some unknown, foreign creature-- and bring it to life. Even as a child, I was able to write my characters into sticky situations and eventually, albeit dramatically, get them out of those predicaments with the happiest of endings. I knew that I enjoyed storytelling, but I never believed that I could write something magnificent enough to be published and sold in bookstores or so intriguing that readers wouldn't be able to put it down. Because of this, I decided to pursue writing in college, but not the kind that my heart desired.

Now, I can dedicate real time to crafting my first novel in the form of a creative writing thesis. My thesis project will be an Adult Contemporary novel titled *Save Our Love*. It aims to craft a memorable love story, stimulate spiritual contemplation, and honor a dear friend with my storytelling.

### Vision

*Save Our Love* will primarily take place on a college campus. The initial inspiration for my main character Denver came from a classmate I met during my first year of college. We were both Biology majors who would have rather been doing something else. For me, it was writing,

and for her, it was fashion design. Our reasons for our current majors differed, though. I had always assumed that I'd get the best job opportunities if I majored in math or science.

On the other hand, her father pressured her into choosing a “real major.” I couldn't imagine having a father who didn't support my choices and dreams because I have precisely the opposite. Her life intrigued me because it was different from my own experience. We remained friends throughout our collegiate journey, and she graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Biology degree while I obtained my bachelor's in Print Journalism. I met her father at graduation. He was ecstatic and immensely proud of her. She had gotten into the Morehouse School of Medicines graduate program, and she was well on her way to becoming a successful doctor, only that's not what she wanted. I decided to rewrite her story between graduating with a writing degree that was wrong for me and writing fiction. To give her the life she wanted—the one that she deserved. From this desire, the character Denver was born for my thesis project.

My family members, who had a very different upbringing than I did, inspired Joseph and Joanna's characters. Their background loosely resembles Joseph and JoAnna's, but I knew that I wanted to give each of them a different ending since the day I learned of their awful childhood. My vision for this story goes beyond this inaugural novel. I plan for it to be a three-book series. The first book will detail Joseph and Denver's romantic relationship. In the second novel, the two characters will reconnect and take a second chance at love, and in the third novel, the focus will shift to the life of a supporting character, JoAnna Crews.

## Summary

My thesis project will follow the lives of a young Denver, a new student at a historically Black university, and Joseph, a senior at the same college. The two of them come from entirely

different worlds. Denver has always had the world at her feet. Her father, a well-connected serial business owner, ensured that Denver had every resource and advantage needed to be successful. She was a debutante, a decorated horse-riding champion, and her tutors confirmed that she was at the top of her high school graduating class. Although Denver seems to be living the life that every teenager must dream of, she remains immensely unfulfilled. Denver has always dreamed of designing and creating the most impeccable fashion pieces for the stars. She decorated her undergarments and t-shirts with glitter and sequins as a child. Fashion is her dream.

Unfortunately, her father does not support her non-traditional career goals. He wants Denver to be financially secure on her own when she's out of school, so he let her know early on that he only supported her pursuing a "real" degree, which is a math or science discipline. Denver has always been desperate to please her father, so she dared not to go against his wishes. She enrolls at Trudale University as a Physics major.

Joseph's upbringing was significantly different. Joseph was born in a small Georgia town, and he was raised by an abusive woman named Red. Red is his grandmother, but she presents Joseph to believe that she is his mother. Joseph spent many days and nights severely hungry and neglected as a young boy. His only peace and comfort came from his actual mother—who he believes is his older sister—JoAnna, who was just as broken as he was. Red forced JoAnna into prostitution when she was only twelve, and one fateful night with a client resulted in her getting pregnant with Joseph.

Since Joseph's birth, JoAnna wanted to pry him out of Red's clutches so that he could live a better life. She eventually succeeded when a car repairman and tattoo artist, who had fallen for JoAnna, offered to take Joseph in. JoAnna planned Joseph's escape perfectly, and he was finally free. He lived with Trenton, the repairman, and went to school, never earning a grade less

than an A. He graduated at the top of his high school class and received a full ride to Trudale University, where he studied Criminology and Psychology. His dream was to be an investigative profiler for the FBI. He wanted to understand and put away criminals similar to his grandmother.

When Denver and Joseph meet, their attraction is evident to each other and to Denver's father, who will not approve. He will stop at nothing to keep the two apart, and he will be the catalyst for a lot of the conflict and excitement in the story. Joseph and Denver gradually fall deeply in love. They experience challenges together that cement their love for each other.

Their ever-evolving relationship results in Denver becoming pregnant. Denver worries about how her father will react to this, but Joseph refuses to consider other options besides raising his unborn child. He proposes to Denver, and she accepts. They decide to talk to her father together, and once they do, he erupts with anger and refuses to accept the marriage or the baby.

After an altercation with Denver's father, the couple plans to elope after Joseph's slowly approaching graduation. Joseph rationalizes that he will enter the workforce and that he and Denver will live independently, but this never happens. Denver's father pays Joseph a visit and informs him that Denver has agreed to abort their child and move away to keep her inheritance. Because the Director of the FBI owes him a favor, he arranged a paid internship with the Behavioral Science Unit for Joseph. Joseph must abide by the stipulation that he can never try to contact Denver again. Joseph, who becomes distraught about the death of his unborn child and upset with Denver for agreeing to something so horrid, conforms to the terms, and he moves to Virginia immediately.

Denver's father deals with Denver by informing her that Joseph died in a car accident, and because of his connections, he obtains fraudulent proof of his death. He believes that this

news will convince his daughter to forget about Joseph, abort his child, and continue to live her life by his terms, but Denver refuses. She resents her father for his controlling ways and decides to cut all ties with him. Denver's mother eventually regrets her role in her husband's deceitful plan and resolves to make it up to Denver. Little by little, Denver's mother has been storing money in a bank account under an alias. She grants Denver access to the secret account so that she can move away and support her newborn baby. Denver knows her father won't stop looking for her, but she jumps on this chance to live a free life. The epilogue of my thesis project will take place five years after Denver's first year. She is a single mother and a boutique owner, while Joseph is a successful FBI agent. The two of them cross paths again and learn the truth about what happened to the other.

This is where the second installment of the series, *A Love that Redeems*, will commence. They will be granted a second opportunity for love. However, this chance will not come without significant challenges, including Denver's father still trying to find her and the stress of their demanding careers.

Joseph will not initially be interested in even being cordial with Denver. He will blame her for the time he has missed with his son, and he will deny her the opportunity to explain her side of things. On the other hand, Denver is also not very happy with Joseph. In her mind, he chose his FBI dreams over his love for her, and it will take some time for the two of them to realize that her father manipulated them both. Despite the obstacles, they will end up together by the end of the second novel.

The third novel, *A Love That Heals*, will focus on JoAnna. When her mother, Red, was selling her to men throughout her childhood, there was one who changed her life forever. His name was Joey, and he was a 15-year-old boy when JoAnna was 14. His father felt too weak, so

he paid Red for JoAnna's sexual services. Upon their first meeting, they only talked. They both pretended to have done more to avoid their parents' wrath. After that day, they began sneaking around to meet, eventually falling in love. The result of that young love was Joseph. When Joey's father found out that JoAnna was pregnant by his son, he gave Red enough money to "take care" of the issue. Red felt that she'd eventually be able to make money from her daughter's child, so she pocketed the money, and JoAnna birthed Joseph, never seeing Joey again. Now, she has found contentment in finally being a mother to Joseph, and a grandmother to Joseph Jr. Joseph had researched his biological father during his second year working for the FBI. He knew everything about him, and he even knew where he lived, but he had never pursued the information further. One day, Joseph Jr. asks why he doesn't have a grandad, and Joseph finally decides to confront his father. The third novel will follow JoAnna and Joey as they reconnect and eventually try again at love as adults.

### Purpose

*Save Our Love* has several purposes. Its first goal is to establish the relationship between Denver and Joseph, who will ultimately receive a happy ending together. Next, *Save Our Love* exists as a foundational story two subsequent novels that I plan to add to this series. Joseph must learn the truth about his family in the first book. The fact that his sister JoAnna turns out to be his mother will shift his life in a significant way. This information is also the foundation for JoAnna's story later. I also plan for this story to inspire spiritual reflection amongst readers. While this project is not classified as a religious novel, Christianity is discussed, and it is a source of both conflict and healing in the story.

Lastly, this book sets out to have Denver forge her path. My friend from college could never defend her passions to her father, and she did not live her life the way she wanted; this novel rewrites her story to inspire others to live their dreams.

This project is written in modern times, although the characters do not live in a world where COVID-19 exists because the virus would limit social interactions vital to the story's development. After voicing this story idea to others, multiple people suggested that I set this story in the '70s or '80s because it would be more plausible for a mother to solicit her child's body during that time. I decided not to because I have encountered people in this situation in our current time. I want to shed light on their struggles.

#### Literary Influences and Context

In my writing process, I have had to examine other texts to help me gain a clear picture of where I would like my novel to go. My research showed me that the story I am writing would be a rarity in African American romance fiction. When researching comparable books to aid in developing my creative thesis, the author Darrien Lee stood out. Darrien Lee is a Black fiction writer, and unlike most of the romantic fiction that Black authors produce, Lee's writing is contemporary but not urban. Her novel, *All That and a Bag of Chips*, tells the love story of college students who juggle life and love together, and the characters are like Joseph and Denver in some ways. I began writing a list of similarities between the two novels, and I realized that both Denver and Venice—the character from Lee's story—are heavily spoiled by their parents, they both are in tune with their faith, and they are also a little naive. The male characters of both stories have endured some type of trauma in their lives, which has shaped their personality and way of thinking about love. Lee also made *All That and a Bag of Chips* a five-book series, and

her development of her sub-characters and their stories has given me direction on how I can effectively expand my ideas in the series I am creating.

Another literary influence is Victoria Christopher Murray, who has written several African American Christian novels. Her novels often include romance, but the focus is on the characters' faith journeys. While my thesis project is not a religious piece, it does contain religious themes. Murray's work shows how to blend love and faith in a way that creates an intriguing story. I have generally inspired my African American novelists, such as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. These authors possessed excellent storytelling capabilities, and their writing styles have influenced my own in some ways. For example, in a 1984 interview, Baldwin encouraged writers to "write to find out" so that each time they sit to pen a story or essay, their minds are open to learning new things (Elgrably *The Art of Fiction No. 78*). This is a piece of advice I keep in my heart. I have found it helpful because I learn something new about my characters each time, I interact with them.

My research for this thesis project also includes studying similar screenplays with characters like the ones in my story. I have also conducted five interviews with individuals who inspired my characters. I have visited the historically Black Albany State University, located in a small town. During this visit, I recorded different campus settings. I observed the interactions of various individuals to ensure that my story feels authentic because a large majority of this project will be set on a small college campus. Lastly, I have conducted preliminary research into the Behavioral Science Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation because Joseph chooses this career path.

Importance to Christian Scholars

For several reasons, this thesis project remains exceptionally significant as a Christian scholar and a necessary creative writing piece in a world full of Christian and non-Christian readers.

First, these fictional novels' ultimate topic and the theme will be love. Any work that I have ever written, and will ever write, will shine a light on the supreme Love, our Lord, and savior. Trudale University is a private African Methodist Episcopal Church like the college I attended, so Denver's character will regularly participate in Chapel on the university's campus, making Joseph uncomfortable. Ultimately, Joseph will realize the goodness of Jesus Christ and finally accept Him as his Lord and Savior. Being raised in a Christian church and then moving away to a religious-based college with many non-spiritual people opened my eyes to the need for Christ advocates. Throughout this story, Joshua's spiritual journey serves as a point resonance for individuals like him—people who believe that their experiences and trauma prove that God isn't on their side. Denver's commitment to her faith and spreading God's love to those around her will inspire other lovers of Christ to do the same thing.

My most extraordinary mission in life will always be to spread the goodness of his Gospel to others, and I know that my writing provides a fantastic platform from which to do that. Denver will be a massive part of Joseph's faith journey. He has never considered God much because he reasoned that He must not like Joseph very much if God exists. Denver will be the person who helps Joseph realize how God has been with him for his entire life.

Second, I know that I am called to write and help others. I don't believe that my family members and my college friend are the only individuals who have endured the types of adversities mentioned in my book. I can only pray that my words inspire someone going through

a similar situation to believe in God's promises and never lose faith. The importance of shining His light on each word I write will always prevail.

I am dedicated to this project and committed to creating a thesis that genuinely expresses my artistic vision and my passion for the art of creative writing in the best way possible. I am confident that my research, writing experience, and the story that God has planted in my heart will work together to accomplish the purposes of this piece: to invoke honest spiritual reflection and dialogue amongst readers, to create a love series that inspires others, and to rewrite the tragic story of a dear friend, who never got her happy ending.

## *Critical Paper*

### Introduction

According to American marketing research company NPD Bookscan, romance fiction was one of the top-selling literary subgenres for most of 2021, making up 18 percent of adult fiction unit sales (About the Romance Genre). The genre's steady and constant increase in popularity and revenue makes these novels a significant contender to dominate the literary market. Women authors and readers are the driving force of romance literature. These women are born from various races and environments, making the genre as diverse as its contributors.

African American and White authors are both creating romance literature; however, the works produced by White writers receive a lot more mainstream recognition from both White and minority readers. Evidence of this is in central and small-time bookstores; the covers of the books on the romance shelves usually depict White couples instead of other racial groups. The same is true for online reading platforms like Kindle. One cannot justify this reality by classifying the writers by education or experience because many authors of both groups have both.

As an African American romance writer, I seek to understand why minority romance literature is not as popular as the works written by White authors. I intend to craft literature accessible to readers of various races, so my goal is to identify the similarities and differences in romance novels written by individuals of opposite races and detail how my writing fits this genre.

The inspiring questions for this thesis are: When simultaneously analyzing romance novels from authors of different races, are there any substantial similarities and differences in the

books? Is the difference in popularity because of the manner or frequency in which the novels are produced and published? When women of different environments create literature, how is romance depicted? To answer these questions adequately, I investigate a variety of texts from both Black and White American authors. This critical paper addresses the issues in the romance fiction genre and shows how my manuscript confronts those issues in order to shift the worldview of African American romance literature.

First, I analyze what already exists in romance literature. Because it is impossible to surmise all that exists in romance fiction into one chapter, in this chapter, I will focus on two disparate publishing houses that specialize in romance fiction. The first is Harlequin Romance, a major publishing house that features mostly white writers. The second company, Supreme Works publishing, is a minor publication compared to Harlequin, and they primarily publish African American romance authors. Both companies advertise that they accept all types of romance novels, but there seems to be a consistency in the books that each house publishes. I will explore the content in the stories from both publishers and discuss the similarities and differences in each. I will also inspect the submission guidelines for both Harlequin and Supreme Works Publications and assess how the characteristics of each influence the diversity of their author pool. I consider familiar tropes, the language used in different novels, the rate at which individuals produce books for each publishing house, how writers incorporate sexuality into the literature, and visual aspects, like the cover art. I then examine common themes and ideas in the genre and how they can be problematic to the evolution of romance literature. Lastly, I contemplate my creative work. I will assess how my novel fits into the romance genre and how it contributes to the advancement of romantic literature.

## The Literature that Exists

Today's romance genre is committed to the narrative of heterosexual men and women finding love, but this story is diverse. According to *The Romance Book Buyer 2017*, a study conducted by NPD Book for Romance Writers of America, the subgenres of romance literature include contemporary, erotic, paranormal, spiritual, suspense, young adult, and historical romance. The statistics of this report revealed that 82% of romance readers are female, 72% are White/ Caucasian, and 12% are Black/African American (About the Romance Genre).

Harlequin is a well-established publishing company that primarily produces romance literature. This company is an industry leader, while the other company I examine, Supreme Works Publications, is significantly smaller. In reviewing the submission requirements for both companies, I look at the literature that has been published from both groups, noting how the similarities and differences impact who writes for the companies. These figures propose that predominately Black publishing houses, like SWP, are not as famous as other publishers with mostly White/Caucasian authors because only a tiny percentage of romance readers are African American.

### *Harlequin Publishing Company*

Harlequin authors take significant time and care to craft their novels, which is evident in the time between publishing each book. Most of their writers have several months, even years, between each story. Dee Henderson publishes bestselling titles very sporadically. Before writing *The Marriage Wish* and *God's Gift* in 2010, she hadn't published a book since 2006. The results of this are novels that are rich in length and content.

The Romance Writers of America indicated that erotic romance is becoming more and more relevant in the romance genre. Harlequin's romance genre guidelines advise writers to include the amount of sexual content they deem tolerable. Still, their guidelines assert that sexually active couples *need* to be in committed relationships. The erotica trend influenced Harlequin to create a section where the guidelines for submission are dedicated to erotic novel writers, Harlequin Blaze. The publisher states that Blaze features more contemporary work, which reflects the realities of the times. Blaze stories are more sexually liberated than other Harlequin novels, and in the submission guidelines, writers are encouraged to "push the limits" regarding explicitly and characterization. Blaze submissions also have an age requirement for characters. Because erotic novels generally depict premarital sex, Harlequin states that characters should be in their 20s and early thirties. This detail suggests that sex outside of marriage may not be appropriate for readers outside of this age range.

Steeple Hill is another Harlequin banner for "inspirational romance" (Harlequin). Harlequin makes it clear that all inspirational romance novels are to be "sweet" and "mature in nature. The company also makes it clear that "making love" is only permitted within these novels if the couple is married. Naturism is not to be mentioned, and writers should use euphemisms when mentioning "intimate body parts." All other intimacy like embracing or kissing should "emphasize emotional tenderness" as opposed to "sexual desire." There are also limits to the language used in inspirational romance. For example, words like *need* and *desire* should not be used frequently.

The tremendous difference in the guidelines for each subgenre depicts the opposing views of today's society on sexuality and romance. Harlequin has several imprints, but the others do not contain distinct boundaries in terms of sexual content within the literature. However, they

caution all writers not to go “too far” with sexuality. The guidelines encourage heightened desire between the hero and heroine but note that this chemistry does not result in a sexual encounter. Generally, Harlequin maintains that writers have the autonomy to include or exclude as much sensual content as they prefer. Still, the terminology in their guidelines suggests reticence within the company regarding this issue.

The banners that Harlequin promotes their romance novels show their diversity within the genre, but the books within each category still emphasize heterosexual relationships that end in marriage and children. Also, love is always a requirement, no matter how explicit the story is. The guidelines do not explicitly assert that books must have the traditional happy ending, but this narrative still dominates the industry. The Harlequin American Romance category’s description says that the novels display the “best” aspects of Americanism by providing “heartwarming” books that follow the “pursuit of love, marriage, and family” (Harlequin). Those statements indirectly provide writers with stipulations about their story structure.

Cover art from the Harlequin Blaze category features a White/Caucasian male, usually shirtless. Based on the premise and setting of the novel, the background of these covers varies, but each of them has the title printed in white. Vicki Lewis Thompson’s book *Notorious* features a shirtless gentleman wearing a cowboy hat and standing in front of a horse. This novel tells the story of Keely Branscom, labeled as a “wild child,” as she has done some pretty risqué deeds in her young adult life. Her rebelliousness is purposed to get the attention of hero Noah Garfield, who purposely stays away from her because of her reputation. After many years, Noah determines that it is his job to “save her from herself,” while Keely decides to make his goal as difficult as possible. This novel contains heightened sexual content, but love is the driving force behind the choices of both characters.

The language in this novel is more mature than in stories from other Harlequin lines, but it is not overly explicit. The author uses mild profanity, and the sex scenes are understated with flowery language. Books from more conservative imprints like Steeple Hill intertwine love with other themes like faith. *The Marriage Wish* by Dee Henderson provides readers with a heartwarming romance. The successful and God-fearing Scott Williams is in his late thirties and is single. He wishes to meet the love of his life on his birthday, and eventually, he does. Jennifer St. James is his dream come true, and ultimately the two live happily ever after. This story contains no explicit language or content. The intimate moments that are included only emphasize the characters' love for one another. Love, marriage, and the restoration of one's faith are the themes of this novel, and although it is very different from *Notorious*, they have similar endings.

Many of the romance literature published by Harlequin follow women and men in a realistic world, but novels are far from reality. These novels allow readers to transcend into an alternate world, where an extraordinary escape every day is appealing to many readers.

*Nightwalker* by Connie Hall, which features vampires as characters, is an example.

With all the diversity in the subgenres, there are virtually no novels written by or about people of color. Also, whether the plot is realistic or fantasy, many books published by Harlequin feature successful men and domestic women. Some novels feature independent career women, but many of Harlequin's authors are proponents of the traditional love story, which includes a successful man who meets a submissive woman and fall in love. Traditional love stories often end with the love interests getting married and having children.

*Supreme Works Publications*

Supreme Works Publications has a much more relaxed stance on submissions. Although they “accept all genres,” the bulk of their work is romance novels, and they also self-identify as an “urban publishing company” (Supreme Works Publications). Unlike Harlequin, Supreme Works does not give many restrictions for their novels. Their only requirements are the font type, size, and format to send the first four chapters of a manuscript. Because the guidelines lack specification, a look into their published work is necessary.

The first noticeable difference in the novels published by Harlequin and SWP is the books’ cover art. Many of SWP’s early stories display a Black woman and man. The women on the covers are usually scantily dressed, while the men wear either t-shirts or are shirtless, with sunglasses, tattoos, and heavy necklaces. The fonts on these covers are very striking and are usually in bold colors, like purple, pink, and red. While a lot of their more recent work still has these elements, there are now many more subtle covers. Some newer books display a single woman, usually a close-up picture. Most of these women have natural, curly hair, and the images seem to fade into the covers. The fonts are now a lot softer and seem to be a part of a color scheme. For example, on the surface of *Casualty* by K.C. Mills, the cover art is orange, and the font color is a softer shade of orange.

The content of the novels published by SWP is also a significant contrast from Harlequin novels. They all feature characters of minority racial groups, and sexual content is more important. In *Messiah and Reign* by Nikki Brown, there is a sexual encounter in every chapter. Although many of the explicit scenes within these novels are between individuals in romantic relationships, several meetings happen between strangers and individuals who have no interest in each other romantically. The generalization of sex is a common theme within SWP novels. In most male characters' minds, it is treated as more trivial than romantic until they experience sex

with their heroine. Commonizing sex in this way is a general practice amongst writers from SWP, and it is vastly different from how Harlequin novels describe intimate moments between characters.

Like Harlequin, many of the books published by SWP have similar tropes and themes. One of the most common is a pair or group of dominant brothers as the novel's heroes. Drugs and crime are also a theme in many of the stories from SWP. In one of their highest-selling series, *Southern Kings* by K.C. Mills, three brothers, Keyes, Yeti, and Hayes Masters, had been through a lot of trauma in their childhood. These brothers only had each other and had to depend on themselves to survive, which eventually led them to a life of crime. The novels follow these men as wealthy, well-respected, and rude drug dealers in their young adult life. They are not concerned with others' opinions, and their priority is only each other until they all meet their romantic matches. Another SWP novel, *Beautiful Mistake*, features the Barnes brothers adopted by a sweet woman who provided them with love they had never received before. Her passion and care couldn't keep them from a life of crime, and they slowly but surely rose to the top of the drug industry. Like the Masters' brothers, these men lived carefree until the right women entered their lives. There are very few books published by SWP that do not feature active criminals or brothers. In many of these books, though, like *Law and Love* by K. Renee, the heroines motivate the heroes to commit to fully legal lifestyles. The endings almost always include the traditional marriage and children.

The language in novels produced by SWP is consistently explicit. Unlike Harlequin, SWP writers do not filter their sensual content. Sexual encounters are usually described in detail, and there are no euphemisms used for body parts or sex acts. Profanity is also heavily used. Because many of the heroes in SWP novels come from broken homes and are involved in

criminal activity, there is a lot of slang used in these novels that could be difficult to understand for individuals who are not familiar with Black and urban culture.

While some novels mention religion briefly, most SWP novels do not include faith as a theme. Some authors even seem to mock religion. For example, in *Egypt and Rome* by K.C. Mills, Romello Moretti states that he and “God don’t see eye to eye” (262). In another SWP novel, *You’re my Reason* by K. Charelle, one of the supporting characters calls himself God jokingly.

One significant difference between Harlequin and SWP is how the authors publish books. While many Harlequin authors take time to produce work, SWP writers create books constantly. The most published author from SWP is CEO K.C. Mills. Mills has published novels as frequently as once per month. The most significant gap between her stories is four months. Her books are also much shorter than one would read from Harlequin. Several apparent grammatical and formatting errors are in many titles, and most stories are not available in hard copy. While Harlequin publishes several standalone books, SWP produces series, and writers complete the series in as little as five months.

Based on the reviews left by SWP readers on the publishing site, the Good Reads website, and Amazon, SWP readers are predominately Black. Perhaps this is because there are only Black authors writing love stories about Black heroes and heroines or because the plots and premises of the novels are only relatable to one specific demographic. Ultimately, Harlequin is much more diverse in the subgenres of romance that it publishes. SWP advertises that they are interested in all literary genres, but the lack of guidelines on the site is why the publication has not grown in diversity. The content on their website could also deter different kinds of writers from submitting their work. The novels that SWP has published fall under the erotic subgenre

due to the heightened sexual content. The lack of guidelines on the site could be another reason the publication has not grown in diversity. Without variety, a publication cannot expand, and Supreme Works Publication is greatly lacking in that area.

This small publication is one of many minority romance publications, but they are all homogeneous. Leo Sullivan Presents a much more popular Black-owned publishing company, but its novels are similar in content to the stories posted at SWP. B. Love Publications is another equal company. While this company has more contemporary work, a lot of it with more subtle sexual content, there is still much urban and erotic literature. The themes presented in most Black romance literature, like poverty, crime, and sex, are not accepted by the masses. Perhaps the lack of variety in Black romance is why there are not many minority books on the romance shelves of franchise bookstores. My goal is to craft an affair that breaks racial barriers so that women of all colors enjoy it.

### Issues in the Romance Genre

Harlequin and SWP are different in many ways, but they do share some characteristics which hinders their literature from reaching a more diverse crowd. This section will investigate the issues within the romance literature genre.

#### *Unrealistic*

There is some scholarly debate about the hindrances of romance fiction on women's grasp of reality. Some scholars view readers of romance as incapable of dealing with the real world. A leading relationship psychologist, Susan Quilliam, contends that romance novels can adversely affect a woman's psychology. Quilliam believes that many women who indulge in this

type of literature mistake the fantasies presented in fiction for the ideal love life and often become depressed when reality does not mirror the literature (par. 12). The counterargument is that fiction allows readers a fleeting but necessary retreat from their everyday lives. Whatever one's opinion is about contemporary romance, it is a fact that these novels offer individuals a firsthand glance into the minds of different groups of women and how they feel about and respond to romance, their own identities, and their sexuality. While most of this project will explore contemporary romance, it is important to first reflect on older works and how they affect the romance genre and its worldview. Bestselling author Jayne Ann Krentz asserts that romance novels are fiction, and those who read them are aware of that fact. She states that romance readers do not "substitute" real life with the "fantasies presented" in literature (5). Janice Radway, a respected researcher and literary critic, states that women read romance to escape from their harsh social obligations temporarily, but this in no way means that readers cannot define fiction from reality (113).

Where these arguments agree is in the fact that regardless of if a reader can differentiate between reality and fiction, romance novels can be unrealistic. According to Quilliam, most stories feature incomparably beautiful women and handsome, powerful, and wealthy men (par. 16). Romance novels rarely feature characters with blemishes, crooked teeth, or imperfect bodies. This can create the notion that women must meet impossible beauty standards to find love, and that notion is unrealistic.

### *Overused and Stereotypical Themes*

The overuse of common societal concepts has caused the romance genre of literature to be at a standstill. Some common themes in romance novels are patriarchy, submissive or

subdued women, sex, and the coveted happily ever after. The pattern of events in many novels has become predictable and unexciting.

### *Patriarchy and Submission*

Patriarchy is undoubtedly the most controversial topic when considering romance novels. Its presence has caused several people in academia to condemn the genre. Patriarchy has been a societal norm since the beginning of time, and in the 21st century, this is still a very relevant theme within romance novels. The heroine in these stories generally feels incomplete without the presence of a man in their life, and this idea is considered to be “anti-feminist” by many (Zakreski 5). In *Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction*, Dawn Heinecken points out that most critical writing contends that romantic novels encourage the “patriarchal oppression of women” (149). Many literary scholars believe that romance fiction emphasizes the ideal that women should be subordinate to men and the women who read the literature fall victim to this offense.

Similarly, *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* provides the perspectives of several literary scholars on the commonality of the male love interest being an alpha male whose lover ultimately humbles. Pamela Regis contended that this common trope proves that the theme of most romance novels is women's empowerment (Gleason & Selinger 113). At the same time, the male figure receives a lesson on courtesy and having regard for women. Janice Radway disagrees. She believes that this ending shows the reality of how many women consent to and are trapped by male dominance. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway maintains this perspective on relationships in romance literature while acknowledging that many readers believe reading romance can boost confidence. Radway asserts that romance novels provide women readers with a “promise of patriarchy,” making the woman’s happiness contingent upon the relationship in which she finds herself (218).

Melanie Moreland is a bestselling contemporary romance novelist who addresses both patriarchy and submissive women in her writing. *The Contract* is the first in a series of novels that tell the story of hero Richard VanRyan and heroine Katharine Elliot. The dynamic of their relationship is boss and employee. VanRyan is a wealthy tyrant of a boss who is not concerned with romance or the feelings of others. Katharine is a meek personal assistant who endures the rude behavior of VanRyan daily. This narrative establishes VanRyan as an alpha male and Elliot as a subdued woman. VanRyan eventually finds himself in a situation where he realizes that he needs Elliot, while Elliot begins to understand him emotionally. It is then that he humbles himself to her will and allows himself to fall in love. Elliot becomes the gentle and loving housewife, while VanRyan is the breadwinner and the dominant force in the relationship. Although this couple endures several hardships throughout their story, it ends in marriage and children. Readers see VanRyan's relationship transition into the traditional patriarchal structure in the novels that follow. This novel is one of many examples of patriarchy in romance fiction. It shows the predictable structure of many romance stories, because even with all of the unique challenges presented in the story, the heroine still ends up becoming submissive to the hero.

### *Sex*

Having subservient heroines in literature is only one issue that patriarchy presents. The other problem is how many romance writers choose to remedy the dominant male narrative: with sex. Author and literary critic Jayne Ann Krentz addresses the issue of the gender power order in novels. Her position is that in a "patriarchal society," romance literature demonstrates the true power that woman has over men by reversing the "power structure" (Krentz 5). For many authors, the key to escaping the alpha male hero design is to give the power to the heroine with a heightened sense of sexuality. This statement calls into question where this feminine power lies.

If the answer is in her appearance or sensuality, then the idea of a wholly reversed patriarchy is perhaps skewed.

The author Carol Thurston analyzes the development of romance literature in her book *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*. Focusing on the erotic subgenre romance, Thurston reveals how the women's movement influenced women's portrayal in 1970s and 1980s romance literature. These novels contained a heightened level of sexual elements, and the women were powerful and confident survivors.

Thurston details several stories which show that instead of depicting women as homely, subdued individuals, these characters were the products of struggles and hard work. The characters in the novels she cites also assert more independence sexually and romantically than socially acceptable until ambitious heroines become the standard within this subgenre. Thurston also points out how conventional components like male dominance were still laced into those stories, although the content was more delicate (113). Why is that? Karen Newman, a well-established author and academic leader, refers to Luce Irigaray to answer this question. Irigaray believes that it is because language *itself* is controlled by men and that "women's access to language" can only be "determined by the cultural constructions of patriarchal power" (708). If this is true, perhaps there is a need to revitalize language in a way that reflects the power and influence of women in the literary world.

Sex is so prevalent in today's romantic novels that it is reshaping the genre. Erotic romance is one of the most popular subgenres amongst African American authors, which hinders these writers from reaching major publishers and bookstores. Variety is scarce amongst minority writers, but it is needed in order to reach broader audiences.

### *Happily Ever After*

The final overused theme explored in the section is the happily ever after (HEA). First, I will define what this means and then show some HEA examples in romance literature to emphasize the need for other literature in the genre.

According to literary scholar Anna Michaelson, the happily ever after is the “defining feature of American romance fiction” (184). American culture has deemed this the desire of the masses, and this can be seen not only in literature but much of the television shows and movies produced in America. Is it escapable? Is the happy ending the point of romance novels, or should authors push for something more profound? The HEA trope leaves the reader with the sense that the novel's main characters will remain together after the story ends. Michaelson states that most romance writers she interviewed agreed that this ending is predictable but necessary and “comforting” (185). Many romance writers consider the HEA a requirement for novels in the genre.

Some critics find feminist issues associated with the HEA trope. Newman investigates the assertions of feminist scholars on romance literature. Many critics believe that the HEA signifies “submission to a masculine narrative imperative that has traditionally allotted women love and men the world” (Newman 693). If most romance novels establish marriage as the end goal for the heroine, what does this say about the writer’s view on gender equality? Karen Newman, a well-established author and academic leader, investigate the assertions of feminist scholars on romance literature.

*The Duke and I*, the first novel in the *Bridgerton* series, is an excellent example of how the HEA enforces patriarchy and anti-feminism. Set in high society London during the 1800s,

this novel tells the tale of devastating love derived from deceit. The heroine, Daphne Bridgerton is one of London's most sought-after young women. One of her most appealing assets is that her chastity has been reserved. Daphne's ultimate goal is to be married. Accomplishing this task will solidify her place in society as a woman, and it is what she has been raised to aspire to. Her mother has instilled in her the importance of subservience and domesticity.

Daphne makes great strides toward her HEA when she gains the interest of her brother's best friend, Simon Basset, who is anything *but* pure. He is a duke who has never entertained any thoughts of marriage. He also made a vow to himself to never have children. The two characters go on an exciting journey of challenges together, and in the end, they do receive their HEA—Simon has overcome the trauma of his childhood, which made him oppose marriage and children. Daphne and Simon marry and have a son together by the novel's end. The HEA is very fitting in this novel because, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chastity, marriage, and children were all critical aspects of society. Daphne's submissive nature illustrates the curtailing of female independence in romance literature.

Not all romance novels with 'happy endings' feature submissive heroines. For example, *All that and a Bag of Chips*, by Darrien Lee, breaks away from some antifeminism themes because the heroine, Venice Taylor, is portrayed as strong-willed and determined. Unlike many female characters in romance, Venice is very outspoken and rarely allows the opposite sex to dominate the situations in which she finds herself.

In some ways, Lee reverses gender roles in this novel because the two male love interests in the story become humbled by Venice and stop at nothing to win her affection. Although she had been in love with the same man, Jarvis Anderson, since childhood, when the two move to different states for college, she connects with a new hero, Craig Bennet. For most of the story,

Anderson is thousands of miles away from Taylor, but he always remains committed to his goal of winning her heart. This story exemplifies the “inverted patriarchy” that Krentz discussed (5). The heroine in these stories has power over both male characters that they could not reject. One could argue that the power she possessed was in her beauty because the author frequently describes how taken men are with Taylor’s appearance. She has a sensual appeal that is irresistible to most men. Her power could also be her sexuality because she has intimate moments with both characters. Still, that argument could be countered that her power was never weakened, even with the distance.

As for the happy ending, the heroine ultimately receives the best of both worlds. In the first novel, she chooses marriage and a child with Anderson, but he dies in the second novel, and she and Bennet find their way back to each other. Eventually, she marries Bennett, and the couple has even more children, creating a blended family, which is illustrated a lot more often in contemporary literature. Feminist critics posit that this type of narrative— where the protagonist begins the novel bold and liberated but ends as a wife and mother— depicts a “decline in the protagonist” because marriage necessitates the heroine to “dwindle by degrees into a wife” (Newman 693). This also brings into question the realism of the narrative. Is it believable that a woman who is so self-sufficient and unconventional would transition into a content housewife by the end of the story?

The issue with the HEA is that no matter how submissive or independent the protagonist is, when the result is always marriage, it implies that getting married is the pique of a woman’s existence or the most profound event that she will experience.

One could not engage in a discussion about the HEA in literature without mentioning one of its most prolific contributors— Jane Austen. Her work has impacted the context of the HEA in

romance literature significantly because all her novels ended in marriage. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* assumes the traditional romance structure, with Fitzwilliam Darcy, a prosperous aristocratic landowner, as the hero, and Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman, as the heroine.

This classic novel addresses patriarchy, submission, and marriage in an interesting way. In an article from *The Atlantic*, writer and critic Sophie Gilbert analyzes how Austen shows how marriage can be a fool's dream, a business transaction, or one's destiny through characters Charlotte, Lydia, and Elizabeth. Charlotte Lucas, for example, has always aspired to marriage because of the financial soundness that it provides. On the other hand, Lydia Bennet is not concerned with the finances of a potential suitor. She is very careless in the selection of a husband in comparison to Charlotte. Lastly, Elizabeth truly believes in the power of "true love"; she is not necessarily driven by economic wellness, although she feels that this can be achieved in a marriage based on love (Gilbert par. 8). Elizabeth is a vibrant character who speaks her mind without issue. Her confidence and intelligence set her apart from the other woman in the novel, but this individuality does not grant her a unique ending. The book concludes with the traditional HEA that Austen's novels are known for— a wedding.

Austen also uses Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth's father, to portray a different point of view on marriage and submission. Mr. Bennet is not concerned with his daughters finding suitable wives and mocks his wife's dedication to ensuring marriage for their daughters. His thoughts on marriage are very unconventional for the 19<sup>th</sup> century when this novel was written. Still, this novel ends the way that most romance novels do—with the hero proposing to the heroine and the two living together happily in marriage.

The happy ending varies slightly between different novels, but the commonality in each of them is that the hero and heroine end up in a committed relationship. While this ending can bring comfort to many, it is also not always realistic. It can also be unrelatable to feminist readers who desire more women's equality and empowerment in romance literature. The traditional HEA does not need to be done away with, but there should be more diverse romance literature that shows variations of the HEA that can relate to and reach a greater market of people.

### Save Our Love

Now that some of the novels in the romance genre and the issues present in romance have been explored, I will discuss my own work and where it fits into the romance genre. From my research, I have concluded that much African American romance literature is less popular than White romance novels because not many people outside of the African American community can relate to the challenges presented and the language used in the books. Every African American reader is not interested in reading eroticism published by traditionally African American publishing companies. There is a gap between minority literature and White romance novels that I seek to fill with *Save Our Love*. Andy Crouch stated that if one is dissatisfied with the current state of our culture, we can become "culture makers" (11). This is my goal, and I do this by addressing issues like subdued women in literature, then breaking the characters out of this stereotype in a refreshing way— a way that isn't about women realizing that their power comes from self-love, not necessarily from their sensuality. I want to contribute to romance literature with a novel that breaks the mold of predictability. This novel ties in themes like patriarchy, sex, and submission in a not overbearing or exceedingly explicit way. I also change the rules for the

happily ever after in my work. By the end of *Save Our Love*, the main characters do not find their love ending within each other, but they each find love in their ways. Joseph finds life-changing love in Jesus Christ, while Denver finds love in her newborn child. Even in their heartbreak, the characters find peace and happiness.

Based on the subgenres for romance indicated by the Romance Writers of America, my creative project falls under the contemporary subgenre because it is a modern novel that focuses on “the romantic relationship.” I am an African American writer raised in an urban environment; this story is not urban. *Save Our Love* is not highly sensual, nor is it conservative. Faith is a theme presented in the report, but *Save Our Love* is not religious. The hero in this story is 21 years old while the heroine is 18, but the parts of this story, like Joseph’s sexual abuse as a child, are too graphic to consider it a Young Adult novel.

Although this piece is a unique story, some familiar tropes are incorporated. In her book *The Trope Thesaurus*, Jennifer Hilt labels the tropes used in my project as “Forbidden Love,” “Secrets,” and “Opposites Attract” (1). The characters falling in love “when they are not supposed to” is the classic “forbidden love” incorporated in this project when the heroine’s father forbids her from dating the hero. Usually, when authors use this trope, the main characters are forced apart by either distance, family members, or societal and cultural traditions. In *Save Our Love*, Denver’s father tries his best to keep the couple apart, and ultimately, he succeeds when he deceives Joseph. Joseph moves away, and so does Denver, creating the distance that Denver’s father thought he wanted.

“Secrets and lies” are also popular plot devices used in fiction. This is when a life-altering secret is being withheld from someone. Sometimes the character is kept in the dark about things because another character is trying to protect them, but there are also instances when

secrets are withheld. Lies are told so that an antagonist can use the information against the protagonist later in the story. Several " secrets " are revealed throughout the story, the biggest being that the hero's beloved sister is his mother. Denver's father lies to her and Joseph toward the end of the story to keep them apart. He tells Joseph that Denver agreed to abort the baby she was carrying to keep her inheritance. Her father tells her that Joseph was killed in a car crash, and the truth that Joseph is alive is not revealed until the epilogue. Lastly, "opposites attract" is a trope used in this novel to add depth to the character's relationships. When this trope is employed in a story, it usually shows how the disparate characters complement each other. Many times, the characters make up for the shortcomings of the other, or they teach the other something about themselves. In this story, Joseph, the hero, is the product of poverty and child abuse. At the same time, Denver, the heroine, is the daughter of two wealthy individuals who has always provided her with her heart's desires, but she lives by her father's strict rules, and she is afraid to deviate from his plan for her life. Denver has a strong belief in God, while Joseph believes God left him a long time ago. He also does not think that he is capable of loving anyone else. Joseph helps Denver love herself enough to stand up for her dreams throughout the story. On the other hand, Denver helps to open Joseph's heart to loving God and loving her. These two characters are able to discover parts of themselves in the other that will help to sustain them even in their heartbreak. The story aims to show readers that happiness is not always about romantic love. The HEA in *Save Our Love* is more about their self-love than loving another person. In showing my audience this relatable and unique love story, I am moving the genre forward.

Conclusion

Though many African American romance authors exist, there is a scarcity of African American novels in major bookstores and online reading platforms. There are also some differences in the various romance novels that have been published throughout the life of the genre, there are some aspects of romantic literature that make the novels predictable and redundant. In this chapter, I analyzed an immensely popular White publishing company and a smaller African American publication to provide an idea of what romance literature exists from both ends of the racial spectrum. I then analyzed the problems within the romance genre. From this research, I concluded that this literary genre needs an African American author who can write in a way that addresses the issues in the genre and breaks through the unrealistic and overused themes present in romance novels. This is what I will do in the creative portion of my project.

*Save Our Love* will shift the romance genre by helping to change the worldview of Black romance literature. This romance novel tells the story of two young college students who fall in love but ultimately learn how to love themselves. This story is purposed to honor the people who inspired it and shed light on the individuals who are afraid to step into their purpose, have been sexually assaulted by adults as children, or struggle with their faith. All these themes are present in *Save Our Love*. This piece does not end in marriage, and the characters won't get the happily ever after that most readers may root for, but the series that I have structured is well-rounded and depicts love above all else.

*Save Our Love Manuscript*

## Chapter One

(Denver)

“Recognize that you’re favored, Denver.”

I took a deep breath and tapped my finger on my steering wheel. I was so tired of hearing that. Yes, I was privileged, but favored? Not so much. A pampered prisoner was more like it. Having a wealthy father had its benefits, but I was sure I’d trade all the money for just *a little* freedom. The only time I wasn’t under my father’s thumb was the eight hours a day that I spent in school. Overprotective was an understatement where Carlton Cartwright was concerned. Moving into my first college dorm was supposed to be exciting, but I couldn’t help but feel like this was day one of a life sentence. I wasn’t going to Trudale University to follow my dreams; I was here to follow the Big Plan, as my father called it: high school valedictorian, Physics degree, then medical school.

I didn’t want any of that, but I knew that voicing my opinion was pointless. It had always been my father’s way or the highway. My dream of becoming a fashion designer would likely remain *just* a dream.

“Are you guys going to get out of the car?” my father asked as he rapped against the window of my brand-new BMW. The car was a graduation gift from my father. I had been ecstatic about it until a month ago when my best friend Jazmine and I drove it to a college party that her friend had told her about. My father showed up and embarrassed us both. That was the day I learned that my car had a GPS tracker—pampered *prisoner*.

Taking a deep breath, I unlocked the door and allowed my father to open it for me. Just as I stepped out of my car, a dark gray Tahoe whizzed into the spot next to me so quickly that I stumbled backward. A bright red Chevrolet Malibu screeched to a halt behind the Tahoe when I recovered my footing, blocking it in. The Malibu driver exited her vehicle, slamming the door behind her. The woman was dressed comfortably in a gray sweatsuit and matching sneakers. The snarl on her face said she was looking for a fight.

“You saw me circling back to take that spot!” the woman said.

“I didn’t see anything. Nevertheless, you snooze, you lose. Find another spot,” the man driving the Tahoe said. He was dressed much more formally with navy button-down and khaki slacks.

*So, this is college,* I thought.

“Come on, Denver, let’s start unloading,” my mother said, unfazed by the altercation.

I allowed the strangers’ argument to blend with all the other chatter around me as I made my way to my father’s Land Rover. My cousins Shaun and Brandon were already unloading my things.

“Denver, you realize that you’re only getting half a room, right? Where are all these clothes going?” my dad said.

I mustered up my signature Daddy’s Girl smile and said, “Oh Daddy, just watch me work.” With a wink, I reached into the trunk of his SUV and grabbed the smallest box that I could find, then strolled off toward the dormitory entrance.

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Several hours later, my mom finished making my twin XL bed by decorating it with a few small pillows. I looked around my side of the room, satisfied.

Under my desk, all the school supplies my mother insisted I have were stored neatly in two cubed bins. On my desk sat my brand-new LaserJet printer and laptop, next to an Eiffel Tower-shaped pencil holder. My closet, which was adjacent to the desk, was much smaller than I was used to, but I loved that there was a mirror on the sliding door. I made room for my vintage floor mannequin by moving the small chest of drawers under my raised bed.

Everything was perfect. The only thing left to do was give my beloved sewing machine home on my desk, but I knew that I had to wait until I got rid of my father. For now, it would remain hidden in the trunk of my car.

Looking around at the tiny space, I silently thanked God that I applied for housing early. The Suites was the best freshman dorm at Trudale, and they came with a microwave, mini-fridge, and a half wall that separated me from my roommate, who was my best friend, Jazmine. She had yet to show. We only had to share the bathroom with our suitemates in the adjoining room, which sounded better than sharing with an entire floor of girls. If this room was a suite, I could only imagine how small the regular dorms were.

“I still don’t get how you made all your junk fit,” Shaun said.

I rolled my eyes and smiled. “It’s not junk. And I guess I’m just amazing,” I said.

“Maybe, but I can’t wait to see how long it takes you to break. I know you won’t make it in this broom closet too long,” Shaun said.

“Yeah, she’ll be back at Unc’s house in a few weeks, getting Charles to drive her to class every day,” Brandon said.

Everyone in the room laughed and agreed that I wouldn’t last long. I rolled my eyes but kept quiet. They didn’t understand that I didn’t care how small the room was. This would be the first time in my entire life that I wasn’t under the same roof as my parents. I needed the space. I

knew my parents loved me, but constantly feigning happiness whenever the subject of my future came up got exhausting.

My dad glanced at his watch, then at my mother. “Daughter, I have faith that you’ll tough it out in the dorm just fine. Well, Charlotte, it’s about time for us to get moving. We have dinner with the Prestons in a few hours, remember?” my dad asked.

I tried to conceal my excitement about finally being alone with a pout. “Already, Daddy? I thought you would give me a personal tour of your old stomping grounds,” I said as I wrapped my arm around his waist.

“Maybe another time, but today, duty calls. Come on, walk us out.” My father kissed my forehead and strolled to my door.

As soon as I stepped out of my room, I noticed a gorgeous girl leaving hers. She wore a button-down collared shirt with Trudale’s logo on the front. Under the logo was the name of the dormitory, so I assumed she was a Resident’s Assistant.

“Hi! I’m Regina, your RA. What’s your name?” she asked.

Her bright smile made me flash her one of my own. “Hey! I’m Denver; it’s nice to meet you, Regina.”

“Likewise. I look forward to getting to know you, Denver! We’ll all get together to talk soon, but if you need me in the meantime, you know where to find me,” she said and gestured toward her door.

“Great, thanks!” I said.

She smiled and sauntered off toward the elevator.

I moved ahead of my father and led my family past the long line of people for the elevator. Hours ago, we elected to use the stairs until the move-in crowd cleared out.

Once we made it to the main floor, I realized that it was a lot calmer than it was the last time I came down. Earlier, the entire area was crowded with people. I noticed that the check-in area where I received my keys was a lounge. There were several couches, a pool table, and vending machines. A couple of girls were playing pool, and I wondered if they were upperclassmen who already knew each other.

We continued past the lounge and the resident assistant's desk, and I skipped to the exit, leaving my family lagging behind me. I couldn't wait to get rid of them.

My phone alerted me that I had a text message, and I looked down to check it. My best friend, Jazmine, let me know that she and her parents were twenty minutes away from the school. I grinned and began typing a reply when I ran into a wall.

"Ow!" I grabbed my forehead because the impact kind of hurt.

"You good?" the wall asked.

I jerked my head up and was suddenly staring into the eyes of the most gorgeous person I'd ever seen. The guy I had just collided with had to be at least 6'2. His slanted eyes were so dark brown that they almost looked black. His skin was the color of peanut butter, and his goatee was trimmed to perfection. To top it off, he smelled amazing.

*Oh, my goodness!*

I realized I hadn't responded to him and snapped out of my trance. He had a slight smirk on his face as if he had just overheard someone tell a joke that he wasn't supposed to hear. I would have been embarrassed that I was nearly drooling at him if I hadn't noticed the hint of approval in his gaze as he gave me a thorough once-over.

"Yeah-yeah. Yeah, I'm good," I stammered through my response.

"Yeah?" he said, that ridiculously gorgeous smirk still in place.

“Yeah.”

“Denver, come on and walk us out,” my dad said.

I looked back and noticed that he and the rest of my family had made it behind me. He was staring down at the guy I had bumped into. His glare reeked of disgust and disapproval. I wasn't surprised.

The guy glanced at my dad and chuckled. He then looked at me and said, “See you later, Denver,” before continuing further into the dormitory.

“Daughter,” my dad said, pulling my thoughts away from my mystery guy. “I want you to beware of the possible riffraff around here. You're here for a purpose, remember that.”

His face was stern, and I knew his little speech was because he noticed me gawking at that guy. I held in an eye roll and smiled.

“I'll be fine Daddy. Don't I always make you proud?”

He eventually grinned and wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

“You're right, Baby Girl.”

We made it outside the building, and I hugged my dad, followed by my cousins, then my mother. She hugged me the longest, and just before releasing our embrace, she whispered to me, “I know this isn't your ideal situation, but you don't need to major in fashion to follow your dreams here. You'll figure it out.”

I was shocked, and a little confused by my mother's words. I pondered on them as I watched my family walk toward the parking lot. My mother never went against my father's word, but it seemed that she had just given me her blessing to explore my real dreams while in school.

I decided to worry about it later, and I made my way back to my room to wait for Jazmine to arrive. As I hopped up on my tiny bed, my thoughts drifted to the mystery guy.

*I hope I see him again,* I thought as I drifted into a satisfying nap. It had been a long day already.

## Chapter Two

(Joseph)

“Good morning, and welcome to Physical Science 100. I know that most of you are freshmen, and this is your first class of the semester, so let me be the first to welcome you to Trudale University. This is a tough course, but with hard work and dedication, I’m confident that everyone will rise to the challenge...”

Dr. Simon continued his speech, and I tuned him out. I had heard it a million times. This semester, I was his Calculus TA, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Dr. Simon kept asking, and I did need to satisfy my on-campus internship requirement for my scholarship, so I accepted. The extra money wouldn’t hurt either.

I was good in math, but I wasn’t looking forward to having to interact with the students. I wasn’t very personable, but I knew I’d have to try in this new position.

“... and this young man behind me is Joseph Crews. He is my Teaching Assistant this semester, and if you have any questions that I’m not available to address, you may contact him using the email address printed on the syllabus. He is also available for tutoring hours two days a week if you need it. He’s aced five of my courses already, so you’ll be in good hands,” Dr. Simon grinned and turned slightly to face me. “Joseph, do you want to add anything?” He raised one brow, trying, and failing, to pressure me into speaking. Just as I was about to decline, the classroom door swung open. When I looked at the person bold enough to show up late on the first day of class, I forgot all about Dr. Simon trying to make me speak.

All my focus went to the beauty who just walked into the room. I hadn't seen her since she bumped into me a week ago, and if I was honest, I'd been trying to get her off my mind ever since.

I watched as her hazel eyes scanned the room for a seat. I had already thought that she was beautiful, but today, she looked even better. Her caramel-colored skin seemed to glow today. Her big, hazel eyes almost looked golden, and so did her blonde curly hair. She looked like... sunshine. *Wait, what?* I shook my head and chuckled. This girl's beauty had me using words like *sunshine*.

The classroom had stadium-style seating, so she was standing in the back of the room, at the top of the stairs. Her cheeks were red, probably because everyone's eyes were on her after her grand entrance. Even her blush was sexy.

I saw her about to post up on the wall, so I decided to help her out.

"It's a seat right down here," I said, pointing to the only empty seat in the room. It was on the front row, and ironically, directly across from me.

She made eye contact with me, and I swear the red in her cheeks intensified—if that was possible.

"Thank you, I apologize for being late," she spoke as she began to descend the steps and take her seat. Her voice was soft, yet smooth and melodic. I wondered if she enjoyed poetry. She had the perfect voice for it.

"It's alright, Miss..." Dr. Simon let his voice trail off.

"Cartwright. Denver Cartwright," her sweet voice responded.

"Cartwright. Let's not make it a habit though. Where was I? Oh right, Joseph, do you have anything to add?"

“Nah, I’m good,” I said to Dr. Simon, then I looked right at Denver. “If you have questions, you can hit me up.” She was still blushing. I turned my gaze to the rest of the students and continued.

“My contact information is on the syllabus.”

“Thank you, Joseph. Well, that’s all I have for today. Please make sure you pick up a syllabus from the table before you leave. I will see you all on Wednesday,” Dr. Simon stated before exiting the room.

I remained in my seat behind the podium because I wanted to catch another glimpse of the Sunshine beauty when she walked away. I didn’t have any intentions of trying to talk to her, but I enjoyed the awkward, yet graceful way that she moved. She walked like she was unaware of her beauty, and with all the self-centered girls roaming this campus, it was refreshing. She had me curious, but I wasn’t going to act on it. I was losing my train of thought just by looking at her, so I was sure that getting to know her would be too much of a distraction. I didn’t *do* distractions, so that settled it. Talking to Denver wasn’t happening.

It seemed that the Man upstairs had other plans for the two of us, however, because after she gathered her things, she headed for the door, forgetting to grab a syllabus. I chuckled under my breath and stood, before addressing her.

.....

(Denver)

“You can hit me up.”

I blushed. Here he was. My mystery guy was my new TA, and he was looking directly at me, basically telling me to call him.

I immediately looked down to hide my face. I was so delusional. This man was talking to every student in the room, not just me. I felt my cheeks warm as I shook my head at myself. Dr. Simon finished up, so I began to gather my belongings.

*Why did I empty everything out of my bag on the first day?*

The entire time that I spent packing my Fendi crossbody back up, I felt eyes on me. I refused to look up and confirm because if I was right, and *he* was the culprit, I might have fainted in the lecture hall. He was just *that* perfect.

I needed to get out of there. As soon as I had my notebook back in its place, I headed toward the door with my head down. I didn't want to make eye contact with *him*.

"You're declining my offer?"

The sound of his smooth baritone voice halted me in my tracks. I fumbled with my belongings for about two minutes while packing up, so we were now the only two left in the room. He must have been talking to me. I turned slowly. Sure enough, he stood on the steps holding out a stapled set of papers. His eyes were admiring my body, but his expression showed neither appreciation nor distaste of my appearance. His demeanor was so elusive.

"I don't remember you offering me anything," I said. I hoped that came out with some confidence.

He chuckled, but the humor didn't quite reach his eyes. "I offered you help with this course, which you refused when you tried to leave without a syllabus," he said, handing me the syllabus.

By now, my cheeks felt feverish, so I knew they were bright red, but I tried to shake it off so that he wouldn't notice. His smirk informed me that he did. The first class of my college career and I almost left without grabbing the packet of paper that tells me everything I need to

know. *Who does that?* I made my way back down the steps to meet him halfway and took the syllabus he was handing me. I'm sure I would need his help, because I had never been good at science or math, and I wasn't interested in either.

"Thanks," I mumbled, as I grabbed the paper. He said nothing; he just gave me that cocky smirk that seemed to be his signature. I shook my head and turned to leave. His being as handsome as he was did not give him the green light to be rude. I yanked the door open harder than I meant to, annoyed that his rudeness didn't curb my attraction to him. If anything, it intensified it. Just as the door was closing behind me, I heard him mutter, "No problem, Sunshine."

I couldn't hide my blush if I wanted to, so thank goodness I was away from him. I thumbed through the syllabus as I made my way to my next class. I stopped flipping the pages when I saw the TA's name and contact information. *Joseph Crews* intrigued me more and more with each encounter.

## Chapter Three

(Jazmine)

“Here you go, Darlin’,” the woman behind the counter said as she placed a scoop of buttery mashed potatoes on my plate. I moved forward so Denver could choose her side, and she opted for the rice and gravy. Once we finished making our plates at the soul food section of the cafeteria, we headed to the fountain drink station. I glanced at Denver as I set my tray on the counter and grinned. She was gazing at the drink machine in awe. It was a touch screen soda station that had every flavor of soda that you could imagine. My best friend loved soda, so I knew that this would be her favorite part about Trudale’s cafeteria.

I chose water for my beverage, then watched as Denver tapped through the many soda choices. She chose to mix strawberry, pineapple, and peach together and she couldn’t help but take a sip before placing the cup on her tray. I rolled my eyes.

“That’s awful, Denver. You need water,” I told her.

“Why would I choose water when there’s a perfectly good soda machine here,” she said with a grin. I shook my head and led us through the crowds of people standing around in the cafeteria to one of the small high tables in the back. It was our first time eating in there and I was impressed. I thought the cafe’ at our old private school was nice, but Trudale’s dining hall was top of the line. It was huge, with two levels and stations for every type of food that I could imagine. There was a television the size of an entire wall near the rear of the room, and large screened televisions were positioned throughout the area. There were red, black and white panther paws stamped all over the walls, and a large mural of a panther was painted on the wall behind the balcony.

“So, how has your first day of class been?” I asked Denver, prompting her to roll her eyes.

I knew what that was about. My best friend hated her major and the classes that came with it. She wanted to major in Fashion Design, and I wanted it for her. Her happiness was important to me, and she deserved it. We had been best friends since we were in diapers, and we supported each other through everything. She was always there for me when I was going through one of my many breakups, and I was always her listening ear when she needed to vent about how overbearing her father was.

Denver was one of the best undiscovered designers in Atlanta. She designed a lot of my wardrobe and some of the girls we went to school with would pay her to make pieces for them as well. She had natural talent that she wanted to develop while in college, but her father refused to let her take her dreams seriously.

“Awful. I struggled to maintain my 4.0 in high school and I feel like I’m about to be doing the same thing here. Math and science are not my strong subjects, but that’s all I’m taking. My only piece of peace is the Intro to Design course I’m taking as an elective. If my dad found out, he’d go nuts,” she said with a frown.

“Well, we’re going to make sure he doesn’t. You need something to look forward to, and if that class is it, then you’re keeping it,” I said confidently. She needed a win, and I wanted to make sure she got one.

“If you say so. So, have you heard anything about the chapel services here?” Denver asked.

I thought about it. “Not really. It’s weird, because this is an African Methodist Episcopal school, but religion seems like the last thing on anyone’s mind around here,” I said. I had heard

from one of my classmates that not many people attended chapel on Sundays, but that it was a weekly occurrence here.

My parents and Denver's parents weren't very religious, but Denver's old nanny introduced her to God. Denver introduced me. It took a while, and I still struggled at times, but I had been committed to my faith journey for the past five years.

"Well let's check it out Sunday to see what it's all about. I need that connection while I'm here, or I'm afraid that I'll lose myself."

I looked at Denver for a moment. We had just begun a new life journey that was supposed to be exciting, but Denver's eyes, which were fixed on the plate in front of her, showed her sadness. It tugged at my heart, and I wanted to fix it for her. I grabbed her hand.

"We can definitely do that, and you are not going to lose yourself, Denver. I'll make sure of it. We are going to find a way to make college a great experience for the both of us, you'll see."

Denver took a deep breath and smiled. "If you say so," she said softly.

"I do," I said and winked at her. "Starting tonight. There's a warehouse party that one of my classmates told me about. I think that it'll be fun."

Denver face scrunched up making me laugh.

"Warehouse?" she said. "I don't know about that, Jazz. It sounds creepy."

"So, what if it is? We'll be together, and we can leave if we don't enjoy ourselves. There's a shuttle taking people from campus to the party around 8. That way we don't have to drive," I said.

She sighed. "Well, there's no way that I'm letting you go alone, so I guess I have no choice. Let's go to our room and find something to wear," she said.

“I squealed and clapped. “Yay! We are having so much fun tonight,” I said as I stood from my seat.

*I hoped that that was true.*

## Chapter Four

(Joseph)

*JoJo: I'm coming to visit you soon.*

The text came through as soon as I pulled up to the warehouse party. I didn't want to be there, but Regina had basically begged me to pick her up from the off-campus party. I only agreed because I could use some *physical attention*, and she was eager.

I glanced at the text from my sister again, hovering my fingers on the keypad, trying to decide how to reply. My sister had never made the trip to Atlanta before. I was pretty sure that she had never left Thomasville before. A part of that was because she was a small-town girl at heart, but the biggest reason she never left was our mother-- Red. She had a hold on JoAnna that even I couldn't release her from, and my sister and I were closer than close. I was excited about seeing her but curious about the reason behind her visit.

*Me: I can't wait, but what's up?*

I didn't want her to think that I didn't want her here, so I hope she understood the question that I was asking.

*JoJo: We'll talk soon. I love you, Sweet Boy.*

I shook my head and chuckled. She'd been calling me that for as long as I could remember. No matter how many times I told her that I'm a grown man, she insisted that I'd always be her *sweet boy*.

I quickly typed to JoJo that I loved her, then got out of my car, slowly making my way to the abandoned warehouse. As I got closer to the entrance, the smell of old trash and smoke got stronger. The place was a dump. The old steel that made up its exterior was rusted and bent toward the bottom. Graffiti covered most of the building. College kids would party anywhere. Of course, Regina wanted me to come inside to get her. She was all about appearances. She liked to tell people that we were a couple around campus, and I didn't care enough to set the record straight or destroy her fantasy.

The blaring music and cloud of smoke that hit me in the face when I stepped inside annoyed me instantly. I *hated* marijuana. People swore that it wasn't addicting, but those same people couldn't seem to put it down.

I moved through the thick crowd until I made it to the dingy bar made of plywood and leaned against it. I typed a message to Regina letting her know where I was and to hurry up, but just before I hit send, I glanced up at the dancefloor and saw Denver. *Little Miss Sunshine*.

She was with a friend, who was also beautiful, but a little too thin for my taste. They laughed about something, then Denver made her way to the bar. She didn't notice me as she propped her elbows on the counter and placed her chin in her palms. She wore the silliest grin, and her usually wide eyes were low and hidden by her full lashes and the golden curls that fell in front of them. *She's drunk!*

In a room full of women in short dresses and skirts, Denver was the exception. She wore a black oversized t-shirt that read: *I'd rather be sketching*. It was simple, but different because

the words looked painted on. She matched it with black leather pants and an expensive pair of black-and-white sneakers. She was dressed casually but wore it well. She looked amazing.

I silently reminded myself that I had decided not to bother her, but the reminder became less significant as I subtly admired her beauty.

“How old are you?”

I couldn't stop myself from bending closer to her when I asked. She smelled amazing. Like peaches. The smell reminded me of the fields behind Trent's old trailer back home. Like the fields, her scent drew me in.

“Eighteen, why?” she asked without even turning to face me.

“Yo, why haven't you pushed me outta the way yet? You shouldn't let random guys push up on you like that,” I said, slightly irritated by her naivety. If she let me get this close to her without even turning around, how close were other guys getting all night? *Why did I even care?*

“You're not random,” she said, and turned around to face me, “you're *Joseph*.”

I laughed at her emphasis on my name.

“We've only spoken once. I'm random Denver, but how did you know it was me?” I asked her.

She ignored the first part of my statement, “I smelled you,” she said in that innocent tone.

“Smelled me?” I smirked.

“Yeah, you wear Ralph Lauren Blue,” she said then turned back toward the bar.

She was right. I wondered how she knew, but not for long, because she continued rambling.

“You smell nice. After you bumped into me that day, Jazz and I went to the mall. We smelled a million colognes ‘til I found yours.” As she spoke, she drew circles on the bar with her fingers. My eyes followed her movement.

“Oh really?” I asked with raised eyebrows.

In class, she was stumbling over her words, and now she was making confessions about being borderline obsessed with the way I smelled. Yeah, she was drunk.

“Realllly,” she slurred.

I couldn’t believe that this was the sweet and awkward Denver who stumbled into class. I was enjoying her liquid courage, but I also felt the need to get her to her dorm safely. She clearly couldn’t handle her alcohol and there were plenty of dudes in here ready to take advantage of girls like her. Again, I didn’t know why I cared, but I did. *A lot*, it seemed.

“Let me take you back to your dorm, Denver.”

She frowned, “I can’t go, Jazz is still out there dancing.” She pointed back at the crowd lazily.

“I’ll take both of you. This party is winding down anyway, so come on.”

“No thanks, I’m having fun, she said and shrugged.

I chuckled, and shook my head, trying not to get annoyed. I wasn’t used to debating with anyone about anything, but it seemed like Denver enjoyed testing me.

“Stay right here, while I get your friend,” I told her, purposely ignoring her last statement. With that, I turned and headed towards the girl that Denver had been dancing with earlier. The crowd was so thick that it took me a minute to reach her.

I tapped her shoulder, and she turned around like she was upset, but her eyes softened as they trailed up and down my body.

“You wanna dance?” the friend asked.

“No, I’m a friend of Denver’s, and I’m giving you two a ride to your dorm,” I told her, ignoring her sultry gaze.

Finally allowing her eyes to travel back up to mine, she said, “A *friend*, huh?” she grinned. “Vi’s been holding out on me.”

With that, she turned and began moving through the crowd hurriedly, no doubt so that she could ask Denver about me before I made it back to her. That was confirmed when they both grinned quietly at me as I approached.

“Let’s go,” I said simply and led them out the door.

As soon as I helped Denver into my passenger’s seat, my name was being yelled behind me. “Joseph! *Jo-Seph!* Are you kidding me?!”

*Regina.* I had forgotten about her.

I turned my head slightly and saw her running toward us. I hadn’t yet gotten Denver’s friend in the car, and she was now standing there like she was ready for war. If I wasn’t annoyed by Regina’s yelling, I would have laughed at her small, clenched fists. She didn’t know my situation with Regina or Denver, but she was ready to defend her friend.

“Joseph! Did you *not* hear me calling you?” Regina asked, clearly out of breath by the time she made it to my car.

“Everyone heard you,” I said calmly as I cut my eyes at Regina, and opened my back door for Denver’s friend to hop in. She looked at Regina for a few more seconds, and then glanced at me. I gave her a firm look, and she rolled her eyes before getting into the car.

I shut the door, and made my way over to the driver's side, bypassing Regina. When I opened my door, she ran to meet me on that side of my car, and slammed her fist into my door, knocking it shut. My eyes quickly met hers with a menacing glare.

I didn't play about my car, and Regina knew that. After three years of going to school full time, and working a part-time job at the mall, I was finally able to put a down payment on my 2009 Chevrolet Impala about four months ago. This car and my small apartment were important to me. I grew up not having much. As a child things like college and cars seemed unattainable. I got this car because I worked hard, and this silly girl had just put her fist in it.

Regina noticed my expression, and she must have realized her mistake because she took a couple of steps back, and when she opened her mouth to speak again, her tone was less aggressive.

"You came here to pick me up. Y-you were about t-to leave me," she stuttered through her statement.

As much as I wanted to drive off without another word, the fact that I did promise her a ride stopped me. If nothing else, I was a man of my word. I decided that I would take her home, but I would not join her in her dorm. I was officially done with Regina White.

I got out of the car and opened the back door before I said, "Get in."

Regina looked at me as if I had grown an extra head. Then she looked into the passenger's seat through the open door. Denver was turned to face us, watching the entire scene.

"Wh-what? The back? Tell that *freshman* to come to join her friend back here, and I can sit in the front with you."

I didn't waste another word on the pointless exchange. I got into my car, started the ignition, and turned my music up loud. If she wanted the ride she would get in the car.

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“Thank you for the ride, *Joseph*, see you later,” Denver’s friend Jazmine said with a wink before getting out of my car. I chuckled and waved.

“*Yeah*, thanks for the ride,” Denver said with a little too much attitude. *What’s her problem?*

Just as she reached for my door handle, I touched her arm and said, “Stay put for a minute, I want to holla at you.”

She looked at me and rolled her eyes, then glanced in my back seat. *Oh right*. Regina. She had been so quiet the entire trip that I forgot she was back there. Denver and Jazmine kept the ride lively by their singing every song I played to the top of their lungs the entire time, and they didn’t sound half bad.

I turned around to address Regina.

“Be safe,” I said with a look that I hoped told her to get out of my car.

She didn’t catch the hint because she remained seated. “You want me to wait for you in the lobby?” she asked with hopeful eyes.

“No. I want you to get out.” It was harsh, but I could tell by the way Denver was tapping her foot on the floor that she wasn’t staying in my car much longer. I needed Regina gone.

Regina sat there a few more seconds, before she rolled her eyes, and opened the door to leave. I watched as she stomped into the building before, I turned to face Denver. She was so beautiful. Even with her face all scrunched up and her eyes sitting low because of all the alcohol she’d consumed, she was gorgeous.

“What did you want to *holla* at me about, Joseph? I’m sleepy,” she said with annoyance. I smirked and grabbed her hand. *Who was I?*

What did I want? I had never had more than a physical relationship with a girl, but here I sat, with an urge to ask Denver out. I just wanted to sit somewhere and talk to her. I wanted to get to know her better, but I couldn't bring myself to say what I really wanted, so I just started talking.

"I just wanted to put your mind at ease. In the morning, when you wake up feeling embarrassed about everything you shared with me tonight— don't. I enjoyed experiencing this..." I thought for a moment, as my eyes roamed every inch of her body, "... less reserved version of you. Don't make drinking a habit though," I told her.

She let out a snort, and sarcastically replied, "Okay. Anything else?"

I shook my head, knowing that she would be ready to hide under a rock once she sobered up and remembered tonight. I kissed her wrist and exited the car, then went to the passenger's side to open her door.

She hopped out of her seat and tried to get past me to the building, but I grabbed her hand, gently, but firmly pulling her to me. She looked annoyed, but once her eyes met mine, they softened. We stood there for a moment, looking into each other's eyes until mine dropped to the freckles that were scattered across her nose. I hadn't noticed them before, but now they were all I could focus on, and they were pulling me in. I had an urge to kiss them, but I resisted and gave her some parting words.

"You really shouldn't drink like that in public. There are guys around here who look for girls to take advantage of. You—."

"I want to kiss you," she blurted out.

Her eyes were on mine during her confession, and they were searching for something. She wanted me to want to kiss her too. I did, so I told her.

“I wanna kiss you too,” I said in a low voice. I brought my face down closer to hers and I heard her gasp softly before she closed her eyes and relaxed her lips.

She was inviting me in, and as much as I wanted to experience the bliss, I knew I’d find in her kiss, I granted myself another pleasure and let my lips touch her freckles. I lingered there for a second longer than I should have, then forced myself to pull away.

When I did her eyes flew open and she looked angry for a second, before she touched the spot that I kissed. She closed her eyes briefly before looking at me again. This time, she looked embarrassed. I opened my mouth to say something— anything— but she beat me to it.

“Goodnight,” she said quietly before backing out of my embrace. She turned quickly and entered the building. She didn’t get away before I noticed her flushed face. I stood there for a moment, before turning to walk away. In just two encounters, Denver had me well past intrigued. The problem was that I didn’t know what to do with that. I knew that my issues ran deep, but that didn’t stop me from wanting *something* with her. *Man*, I knew this girl was going to be trouble.

## Chapter Five

(Denver)

I stood outside of my Calculus class and took a deep breath. Just like every other class day for the last two weeks, I dreaded walking into this room. When I woke up the morning after the warehouse party and all the events from the previous night flooded my mind, I was mortified. I couldn't believe I told Joseph that I went searching for his cologne at the mall. *Who does that?*

I was sure that he thought I was insane, and that was confirmed the Monday after the party when he refused to even look my way in class. It had now been two weeks since the party, and nothing had changed.

Last Friday, I got my first test grade back from Dr. Simon, and it was an F. Although I didn't want to, I emailed Joseph for tutoring, because clearly, I needed it. That was two days ago, and he had not responded, so yeah... I was not excited about walking into class.

Trying to shake off my nervousness, I finally walked into the lecture hall. Luckily, Joseph hadn't made it yet, so I had a little time to mentally prepare for his arrival. I chose a seat near the back and took out my book and iPad, getting ready to take notes just as I heard a deep voice to the left of me.

"You mind if I sit here?"

The baritone voice belonged to a very handsome, very *tall*, caramel dream. I was sure that I had never seen him before. The class was huge, and I kept to myself, so that wasn't surprising. His pearly white teeth were on full display as he flashed me an award-worthy smile.

I couldn't help but smile back as I replied, "No, not at all. I'm Denver."

“Kevin. Nice to meet you, beautiful,” he winked at me as he took his seat, then he turned his attention to the front of the classroom. When I turned forward, I noticed that Joseph had managed to make it into the room without me noticing. He was in his seat at the front of the room, and he was looking right at me. He seemed angry.

*What’s his problem?*

“Good morning class, I hope you all had a restful weekend, because today, we are diving right in. Thank you, Joseph, for having my lesson projected on the screen so that we can get started,” Dr. Simon stated as soon as he entered the room. He approached the podium and immediately began the most boring lesson on understanding vectors, and I swear it was like he was speaking a foreign language. Nonetheless, I took notes as best I could and took pictures of his PowerPoint slides, hoping to understand them better once I studied on my own.

It was difficult to focus on Dr. Simon’s monotone voice because I could feel Joseph’s eyes on me throughout the class period. Unless we were working on a problem independently, and he was walking around to assist, he stayed in his spot behind the professor. I was so thankful when we were dismissed because I desperately needed to get out of the same space as him. Once I had all my things gathered, and prepared to stand, Kevin asked, “Do you have a break, or are you headed to another class?”

“I have to get all the way across campus for my Intro to Design class,” I told him.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise, “Science, then fashion? What’s your major?”

“Physics. Long story,” I laughed a little.

“Well do you mind if I walk you to class, I would love a little more of your time,” he asked, and my eyes unintentionally went right to Joseph. Sure enough, he was still in his seat, staring at me like he wanted to rip someone’s head off. That’s when it clicked.

*He's jealous!*

Joseph could be upset all he wanted. He had been ignoring me for two weeks. I was so over that, and Kevin seemed nice. A walk to class wouldn't hurt. *Right?*

I smiled a little and focused my attention back on Kevin. "Sure, I'd like that."

.....

(Joseph)

I usually enjoyed admiring the effortless sway of Denver's hips as she walked away. Her natural curves were amazing, and the fact that she clearly didn't realize just *how* attractive she really was, enhanced that for me, but today, her exit brought about a completely different set of emotions. Annoyance. Anger. *Jealousy*.

I was jealous. Jealous of the fact that she seemed interested in the clown that she just left the class with. Jealous that he touched the small of her back when they walked out of the door. Jealous that she allowed it. Most of all, I was jealous that he possessed a courage that I lacked. The courage to act on his attraction to Denver. The courage to even admit his attraction to her.

I wasn't used to this—used to *feeling*—but it seemed that it couldn't be helped where Denver was concerned. Even if I *could* admit that I was attracted to her and that she had me feeling things, I still wasn't convinced that I'd be able to act on it. I've avoided her since the party because when I went home that night, she consumed my thoughts to the point of insomnia. If I'm honest, she'd been on my mind every day since I saw her in the Suites, and that reality made me uncomfortable. The sight of Denver made my insides do a weird dance. Her voice made me want to smile. The only person I'd ever smiled for was my sister, JoAnna, and I loved my sister. Something about Denver had me considering that word a lot lately. *Love*.

You don't grow up the way I did and believe that love really exists. My own mother couldn't find it in her heart to love and do right by her children, so as far as I was concerned, I only had enough love in my heart for JoJo.

When I walked out of the classroom, and onto the promenade, I pulled out my phone and opened the email from Denver. I hadn't responded to her tutoring request because I had honestly been busy with my job at the sneaker store for the past few days. My sister seemed committed to coming for a visit, so I had been doing a little overtime so that I could have extra cash when she got here. I wanted her to enjoy her first trip to Atlanta. I was hoping that she'd want to stay.

I sent Denver three tutoring sessions to choose from for the following day, then I slid my phone in my pocket just as Regina approached me.

She must have noticed my hardened expression because her smile dropped instantly. She quickly recovered and stepped right into my path.

"Hey, JoJo! I've been calling you but figured you must've been busy with school and work for the past few weeks." I could tell that her statement was more of a question. She wanted me to give her a reason for ignoring her. A reason that wouldn't confirm what she already knew to be true.

*I was done with her.*

I looked at her for a second, before placing my hand on her shoulder and replying, "Move, Regina."

I continued walking to the parking deck.

## Chapter Six

(Denver)

I paused at the study room Joseph had booked for our session and looked at him through the glass door. He was seated at one end of a small circular table, and his back was turned to me, so I was able to take a second to calm myself at the door. I watched him pull a laptop and textbook out of his messenger bag before I gathered enough confidence to walk in.

“What’s good?” He greeted me with that smooth baritone voice. He hadn’t turned to face me.

“Hi,” I said, lamely. I marched over to the other end of the table, with my eyes trained forward. I awkwardly plopped down in my seat and bent down to open my Louis Vuitton backpack. My heart was thumping so loudly that I was afraid he could hear it. The thought made me glance at him through my curls, which had fallen over my face. He was looking at me with that smirk that he seemed to save just for me. *He’s laughing at you, Denver. Geez!*

I finally took my iPad and textbook out of my bag, and set them in front of me, then I looked him in his eyes. I cleared my throat and folded my hands on the table, trying to look confident and about business. He still had that smirk on his face, but he said nothing. I heard some laughter just outside of the room and looked up to see a group of students passing. This area of the campus library was a hall full of small study rooms, and each of them had glass doors and walls. It made me feel like all eyes were on us, even though that was far from the case.

Joseph slid a stapled set of papers over to my side of the table.

“Here’s your last test,” he said smoothly. “I’ve looked over it, and honestly, your biggest issue was understanding the math behind basic logarithms. Today, I want to work on that. It’s what the pop quiz will be tomorrow.”

I was sure that the color drained from my face with his last statement.

“Pop quiz?” I asked in disbelief.

He chuckled. “Yeah, Denver. So, let’s get started.”

He stood from his chair and started to move toward me. My heartbeat quickened as he drew nearer. Why did he make me so nervous?

He sat in the seat closest to me and leaned into the table. He immediately started talking about one of the problems on the test. As much as I wanted to focus, my attention kept turning to his handsome face.

I also got distracted by the flexing of his muscles every time he gripped the pencil to write something down. The man was gorgeous.

“Denver. Are you listening?”

“Huh?” I asked, my eyes lingering on his bicep.

“You haven’t heard anything I’ve said, have you?” he asked.

“Yes, I did!” I said, quickly. “You said that this is the foundation for the more complex problems, and if I had the basics, I’d be fine. You’ve made it so much easier to understand than Dr. S - I don’t know what he’s been up there talking about,” I said.

He chuckled, “Yeah, Doc is definitely old school with his delivery. Check it, though. I want you to do this problem on your own. Let’s see how much you really picked up.”

I grabbed the pencil from him as I eyed the problem, he had just written for me. I smiled and said, “Watch me work.”

I thought that I hadn't been paying attention, but the problem he gave me was pretty simple. Once I finished working it out, I slid the paper over to him. He looked it over for a second before that smirk appeared.

“Man, I’m good,” he said, jokingly.

I blinked twice.

He noticed my blank stare and shot me a confused one.

“It makes jokes,” I said, feigning astonishment. Every time I had been around Joseph, he was always so serious. I had never seen him even crack a smile, but at my last comment, the corners of his lips turned up completely and his pearly white teeth were on display. He let out a full-blown laugh, but it only lasted a second.

“Funny, Denver. Yeah, I make jokes, just not often.”

“Well, you should. The big, scary, serious guy act is getting old,” I said and laughed.

“I doubt it,” he said and winked. I rolled my eyes to try and mask my blush, but I knew it was pointless.

“You did pretty well on that one, but let’s try something tougher.”

He wrote something else on the sheet of paper and gave it to me. I looked at it and immediately frowned.

I glanced at him again and rolled my eyes. The first problem he gave me must have been to boost my confidence, because it was nothing compared to what he had just put in front of me.

*I'm going to fail!*

.....

(Joseph)

I couldn't myself to look away as Denver quietly worked on the problem. I made it a little tricky because I wanted to really prepare her for the quiz. Dr. S never made them easy.

Her perfectly white teeth were currently tugging at her bottom lip, and her brows were all scrunched up. I could tell that she was a little stumped, but I wanted to give her a minute to try and work it out on her own. *She really was beautiful.*

Our session started kind of slow. I could sense her nervousness, but after a while, she relaxed a bit. I learned that she was beautiful, but kind of quirky. She had been making corny jokes all afternoon, and she laughed at all of them. I couldn't help but chuckle at how much she amused herself.

Just then, she released the hold on her lip and her eyebrows relaxed. A small smile played across her lips, and she wrote something down. She glanced at me with a smirk and slid her paper over to me. I looked it over, and she had gotten it right.

"Not bad. You might be alright for tomorrow's quiz, girl."

"I sure hope so. I can't afford to fail at anything else," she said.

"You'll be alright. I think that's enough work for today, just make sure you bring this formula sheet to class. He'll let you use it."

"Thanks," she said and smiled. When she did, my eyes followed her movement, and I couldn't help but wonder how it would feel to kiss her. That thought made me think of the night of the party.

"It wasn't that I didn't want to kiss you."

Before I knew it, I had expressed my thoughts aloud.

"Huh," she said as she placed her notebook in her messenger bag.

“The night of the party. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to kiss you. I just didn’t want to kiss you while you were under the influence. I wouldn’t mind kissing you at all. I’m sure I’d enjoy it.”

I was shocked at how much of my private thoughts I was revealing to her. It was a first.

“Uh— I uh,” she stuttered before we were both saved by her phone ringing.

I knew that I had just caught her off guard, and she didn’t know how to respond. I honestly didn’t want her to, because I didn’t want to hear her say that she wouldn’t kiss me sober.

She fumbled with her phone and placed it to her ear without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello? Uh,” she glanced at me quickly before continuing her conversation.

*What’s that about?*

“It’s okay. What’s up?”

As she talked to her caller, I indulged in my guiltiest pleasure: admiring her beauty. Everything about her seemed carefully planned, even down to her hair and eyes, which were perfectly matched in color. When my eyes grazed those faint freckles on her nose, they wouldn’t tear away. The memory of her soft skin against my lips when I kissed them consumed my thoughts. My attraction to her scared me. The feelings that stirred inside me whenever she was near was a clear sign that Denver had the power to break me, and I vowed to never let a woman have that power over me again.

Even now, with the distressed look that graced her face, she was gorgeous. Her expression snapped me out of my trance, and I tuned into her conversation, hoping to figure out why she now seemed upset.

Because we were sitting so close, I knew she was talking to a guy. From what I gathered, he asked her on a date, but it didn’t look like she wanted to go.

“Why are you in town, Justin? No, I’m not upset about it, I’m just surprised is all.” She glanced at me again.

“What? No. Yes, Justin, I’m excited. I’ll see you tonight.” Her eyes were glued to the floor when she said, “Love you too, bye.”

*Love?*

I had to work hard to control my own expression. I had just admitted to wanting to kiss a woman who was already taken. A woman who *loved* someone else.

She hung up the phone and twirled one of the curls in her hair.

I said nothing.

“So, you said I’ll be okay for the quiz tomorrow?”

“Yeah. You’ll be straight,” I said and checked the message I had just received from Regina.

**Regina: Feel like some company tonight.**

Why not? I had briefly considered asking Denver to eat after we studied, but she had plans with the man she loved.

**Joseph: I’ll be there in an hour.**

Putting my phone in my pocket, I stood and looked at Denver blankly. I didn’t want to be upset, but I was. She really had a boyfriend.

She stood and gave me a soft smile. “Thanks for helping me today, I really— “

“Don’t even mention it. Later,” I said and turned to leave. I knew that I was being rude, and it was probably unfair, but I couldn’t worry about it. My thoughts were on the fact that I had just played myself by admitting my attraction to her. Hopefully my time with Regina would get my mind off it

## Chapter Seven

(Denver)

“Hey Daddy,” I said as I answered the phone.

I stepped out of my dorm room and locked the door behind me. I was meeting Justin for lunch before my tutoring session with Joseph.

“Daughter, how are you? I haven’t heard from you in days.”

I could hear the smile in his voice, and I immediately felt a little guilty. I had been dodging his phone calls for four days, giving different excuses for why I couldn’t answer. I just hadn’t been in the mood to talk about his master plan for my life. His plan was depressing because it wasn’t what I wanted.

“I know, Daddy, and I’m sorry, I just—.” He cut me off.

“Sorry?”

“I *apologize*,” I rolled my eyes, and pressed the elevator button.

“That’s better,” his voice relaxed.

Since I was a child, my dad had been preaching the same thing: *To be sorry is to be a poor excuse for a Black man or woman. Cartwrights is never sorry.*

“I’ve just been so caught up with class and then tutoring for class. This whole college thing is no joke, you know,” I said, keeping my voice light.

“I know, Baby girl, just don’t forget about your old man, huh?” I giggled.

“I could never! Love you, Daddy.”

“Love you more,” he said and hung up.

The elevator finally opened, and I stepped inside.

“Hold the elevator!” Called a voice that I wasn’t excited to hear. *Regina*.

Ever since Joseph picked us up from the party, she had been unnecessarily rude to me. I wasn’t sure what their situation was, but if I had to guess it was purely physical, and she wanted it to be more. I couldn’t imagine that he’d make his *girlfriend* get in the back seat while another girl rode shotgun.

I held the door and a few seconds later, she stepped in with Sasha behind her. Sasha was a freshman, and she thought that hanging with Regina made her cooler. Because of that, she treated me the same way that Regina did. I was the enemy.

They both looked at me and rolled their eyes before engaging in an obnoxiously loud conversation.

“So, Regina, how was your night? I called you twice, so you must have been *occupied*,” Sasha said grinning.

“You know I was,” Regina smirked. “Joseph couldn’t get enough of me yesterday!”

“You’re so lucky, that man really loves you!”

“I know, right?”

Both laughed as the elevator doors opened and we all stepped off. They probably thought that they had gotten under my skin, but I honestly couldn’t have cared less. Joseph was cute, but he wasn’t mine. I didn’t even think we were friends after the way our tutoring session ended the other day. Besides, entertaining the idea of Joseph would be setting myself up for disappointment in the long run. Even if he turned out to be amazing and we worked out, my dad would never approve. Joseph was smart, handsome, and destined to be successful, but he had *edge*. I didn’t know him very well, but it was obvious that he didn’t grow up in a cookie-cutter environment like I did. His parents probably didn’t have the type of money or status that my dad deemed

significant, so Joseph would never be good enough for him. I would more than likely marry Justin and be unhappy for the rest of my life.

Justin and I grew up together. He was two years older than me, but we had been neighbors all our lives. Both his parents were successful doctors, and Justin was well on his way to following in their footsteps. My dad loved him and was always talking about how I needed to “secure my future” with Justin before it was too late. Justin had been trying to court me since I turned 18, and I was so over it. I had managed to keep him at arm’s length thus far, telling him that I needed to focus on school and could only offer friendship.

His college was in Florida, and I was grateful for the distance. I desperately wanted him to meet a girl at that fancy college of his, so that he could leave me be, but had had no such luck.

He touched down the day of my first tutoring session. After Joseph stormed out, I thought he may have heard my phone call and gotten jealous, but I quickly brushed off that thought, because he didn’t really seem interested in me. There were moments where he’d act like a normal, kind human being, but for the most part he always seemed so distant. His rudeness may have been working in my favor because I knew that I could love him. I had never been in love before, but with Joseph, I knew I would fall. I didn’t want to love him only to lose him when my dad caught wind of the relationship, so I would have to leave things as they were.

.....  
(Joseph)

I glanced at the image that I had swiped from Denver’s social media page before admiring my work again. I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. I’d been drawing since I could hold a pencil. Growing up in Red’s house was chaotic and noisy. When she wasn’t beating me, she was ignoring me. Those were the times I cherished most. I’d find loose paper and sketch different images while hiding in a closet. Drawing gave me peace and kept me sane.

Once my sister got Trent to take me in, he noticed me drawing one day, and bought my first sketch pad. I'd filled it up within a week, then he got me an easel and paint supplies.

Painting gave me that same peace that I found in the closet at Red's house, and it still does.

After realizing that Denver had a boyfriend, I was in a weird space. It was the second time in my life that I had felt jealousy, and again, just like the first time, it was because of Denver. I had resolved to forget about her, only I couldn't. I kept thinking about the annoyed look on her face the entire time she talked to the guy on the phone. She never looked at me like that. I didn't say much around her, but when I did speak, she always seemed interested.

She had been on my mind for the past few days, and when I could no longer avoid it, I found her Instagram page. After looking at the only three photos that were on her profile for about thirty minutes, I sat in front of my easel and created a masterpiece. As nice as it was, it didn't do her beauty justice. I suddenly had a desire to see her in person, and that would be happening in about an hour. We had a session scheduled, and I was looking forward to it. I knew that I needed to address my behavior the other day, I just didn't know what I wanted to say. I could admit that I liked her, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to. I had never had a real relationship before, and something about Denver told me that that's all she would be interested in. I really didn't think that I had the capacity to be in one of those, so I'd just keep my attraction to myself for now.

I stood and stretched. I had been sitting there painting for the last couple of hours and felt stiff. As I traveled the small distance from my living room to my bedroom, my phone rang.

"Yo," I said, dryly. It was Regina.

"JoJo! What are you up to?" She asked, cheerfully.

“I’ve told you to stop calling me that, Regina. What do you need?” I asked, purposely ignoring her question.

“I was wondering if you wanted company later. It’s been a few days, and I miss you,” she purred.

I thought about it for a second and decided against it. It was time for me to cut ties with Regina. She had gotten a little too attached to the idea of a relationship with me, and I knew that I wasn’t interested in more than a physical relationship. I had made a mistake by seeing her after that first tutoring session with Denver, but I wouldn’t be making it again.

“Nah, I have plans tonight.”

“Plans with that *freshman*?” she countered quickly.

I chuckled, and shook my head as I got a jogger suit and sneakers from my closet to dress in.

“Bye, Regina.”

“Wait, no I—” I hung up the phone before she finished.

I had to stay away from that girl.

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(Joseph)

“We can go ahead and call it a night. There isn’t a test next week, and you’ve gotten some good practice in today,” I said to Denver.

Our session had been tense. Neither of us said much of anything outside of me tutoring her and her asking a few questions. She hadn’t looked me in the eye the entire hour that we had been there.

“Okay, thanks,” she said, still avoiding my eyes. I leaned back in my rolling chair and watched her pack her things into her bag. When she picked up her iPad, it flashed with a phone call. She glanced at me, before declining the call.

“Your boyfriend?” I wasn’t sure why I said anything, other than the fact that I really wanted to know if she had a boyfriend.

She glared at me for a moment, like she was offended by my question. I didn’t understand her anger, but I was happy that she had finally let me see her pretty eyes.

“Something like that.”

Her answer wasn’t what I wanted to hear, and my breathing suddenly felt restricted. Like someone had placed a few bricks on my chest. I hated that I cared so much.

Trying not to let my feelings show, I smirked.

“What’s that mean? He either is or isn’t your guy,” I said.

“Who’s he?” she countered. Her glare was fixed on mine. She was challenging me to admit that I had been eavesdropping the other day. I refused.

“That’s what I’m asking,” I said simply.

She looked at me for a moment longer before she focused her attention on one of the many curls in her hair. She twirled it a few times before she sighed and came clean.

“I grew up in an affluent neighborhood, where everyone who lived there was *somebody*. My father didn’t let me date until my senior year of high school, but when he finally did, he pushed for me to date Justin Sky. His parents own one of the most successful private medical practices in the city, and he is on track to be their successor. He’s a nice guy, and my parents love him but...” her voice trailed off.

“But he isn’t who you want.” I finished for her with a smirk.

She kept her eyes fixed on the ground but let out an awkward laugh.

“No, he’s not. As handsome and nice as he is, he just doesn’t do it for me. He doesn’t *get* me. Anytime I’ve ever tried to talk to him about my dreams, he shuts me down, just like my father does.”

” Dreams?” I asked with a raised brow.

“I want to be a fashion designer,” she said.

“Isn’t your major Physics?” I asked, confused.

She gave me a small smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Yeah,” she said softly, before she focused on her curl again.

I stared at her for a moment.

“You hungry?” I asked.

She looked up at me with shock.

“I could eat,” she said, hesitantly.

I stood and grabbed her bag.

“Let’s go eat, then.”

Boyfriend or no boyfriend, I couldn’t keep denying the way Denver made me feel. There was something here, and I was ready to figure out what it was. It was time for me to get to know the woman who had made her way into my heart.



(Denver)

“So, tell me how Physics plays a part in your fashion dreams,” Joseph asked me, smoothly. He took a sip of his water, then placed it back on the table, but his eyes never left mine.

I reached for my water glass, but quickly put my hand back in my lap. My hand was trembling uncontrollably, and I didn't want to drop the glass. I had been shaking since I got in his passenger's seat. The last time I was in his car I was drunk and rambling.

"It doesn't," I said and sighed.

The waitress came back to our table and took our orders, giving me a minute to regroup.

I wasn't surprised when Joseph's eyebrows furrowed in confusion— or annoyance— at my short answer. I was stalling. Talking about my issues wasn't something I did with just anyone. In fact, other than Jazmine and my Nan, no one really knew how unhappy I was with my current predicament. Even still, I knew that Joseph wasn't just anybody. He was Joseph, and the longer he gazed at me, the more I desired to open up to him. His eyes always told a different story than his hard exterior, and today, they were saying that I could trust him. I gnawed on my lip as I stared into his eyes, and before I knew it, I was telling him everything.

I told him about my father's Big Plan and how Justin fit into that; about how I never mustered up enough to tell my father what I wanted out of life, and how I was nervous about my dad finding out that I was taking a fashion elective course. The entire time I bore my soul to Joseph, his eyes were on me, and he was silent. I knew he was listening, because his expression would change slightly during the different parts of my confession. He displayed a little anger when I explained how I have no say in my own life, and annoyance while I was on the topic of Justin.

He seemed genuinely interested, but not at all judgmental. He made me feel as if I could tell him anything.

Our waitress placed our meals in front of us, then left quietly. We were at Aunt Bessie's, a small soul food restaurant near campus. I had never been here before, but Joseph said that the

food was good. My oxtails, rice, and gravy looked amazing. I glanced at Joseph's dish, and the fried chicken and macaroni and cheese he ordered looked just as good. I couldn't wait to bring Jazz here. We loved soul food.

I bowed my head in prayer, quickly thanking God for this mouth-watering meal. Once I opened my eyes again, I glanced at Joseph, and he looked uncomfortable. *What's that about?*

"So, do you think you'll ever let your dad know your true feelings?" he finally asked.

I sighed. "I hope so. As overbearing and controlling as he is, he's still my father, and I love him. I just want us to be okay. My Nan has been on me about being honest with him. She says that I can't hold *him* against him if I haven't shown him *me* yet," I said softly. I glanced at him, and his gaze fell to his plate for a second before he looked at me again. For a fleeting moment, I saw sadness in his expression, but he quickly recovered with a smirk.

"Your *Nan*?" he asked, with a hint of amusement in his voice.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, my Nan. She isn't my grandmother, though. She was my live-in Nanny. Growing up, I spent more time with her than anyone. She's who taught me to knit, then to use a sewing machine. She's the reason I fell in love with designing," I smiled as I thought of her.

"Is she still living at your home? It sounds like you two are still close."

"No. My dad fired her when I was thirteen. He said he didn't like the *influence* she had on me, but really, he was jealous that she had a closer bond with his child than he did. When I was old enough, I started taking the city bus after school to visit Nan at her house. Dad always thought I was at Yearbook Staff meetings instead."

I took a forkful of oxtail and had to close my eyes to fully enjoy the experience. It was *amazing*.

Joseph was quiet again.

“What?” I asked. He looked deep in thought.

“Nothing. I just know something about having a closer connection with others than you do your own parent,” he said.

“You aren’t close with your parents?” I asked quietly. I was a little afraid to probe. He barely talked as is, and I didn’t want him to completely shut down.

He looked at me for the longest minute of my life. He was probably trying to decide whether to let me into his head. I silently prayed that he would.

“I don’t know who my dad is, but nah, I’m not close to Red— my mother,” he said and started in on his chicken.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Red was never interested in bonding with her kids. She had better things to do, I guess,” he chuckled before he continued. “I’m grateful to her for having my sister and me, but she was never really a mother. JoJo was pretty much all I had in the beginning.” He was quiet again, but he didn’t seem to mind my questions, so I asked another one.

“Is JoJo your sister?”

He smiled a little and said, “Yeah. She’s fifteen years older than me, but she always made sure I was cared for. I wouldn’t be here without her.”

His rare smile made me flash one of my own. “That’s sweet,” I said.

“That’s real,” he responded. “When I was six years old, I still hadn’t started school, because Red didn’t want me to. Living with her was hell, and my sister wanted me out. JoJo had this friend, Trent. He always wanted to be more than friends, but JoAnna never allowed it. He would do anything for her, though, and he proved that when he agreed to take me in. He lived

thirty minutes out of the city I grew up in, and Red was lazy. When JoAnna finally got me out, Red never came looking for me, and I never looked back. Trent got me in school, and now I'm here."

He ate a little of his food before he continued.

"None of that would have been possible without JoAnna," he finished.

*Wow.* I was silent as I looked at him in awe. Here I was complaining about my privileged life, and Joseph had been through more than I'm sure I could ever imagine. I felt honored that he shared a piece of his story with me. I knew there was more to it, but *prayerfully* I'd learn more of him in time. I was sure that I wanted to. I wanted to sit up and talk to Joseph for hours. I wanted to see him smile again, like he did when he mentioned his sister. I wanted to be the *reason* he smiled again. I wanted *him*.

"I like you," I said softly.

I wanted him to know my feelings, because I had a feeling that he wasn't used to opening up to people. I had no problem doing it first.

"Oh yeah?" he asked with that smirk.

I rolled my eyes, "Yeah, and I think you like me too." I said that last part with a confidence that I knew I didn't possess. I held my breath as I waited for his response.

After what felt like forever, he finally responded.

"Talking to you is easy. I honestly have never heard myself speak this much," he chuckled. "I wouldn't mind more of that," he said, looking into my eyes in a way that only he could.

"Me either," I grinned.

We ate the rest of our meals quietly, occasionally stealing glances at each other. This was the start of something, and I had a feeling that it would be life changing.

## Chapter Eight

It had been two weeks since I had dinner with Joseph, and I had been smiling every moment since then. We hadn't seen each other a lot since, but we talked on the phone every day. He told me that his sister wanted to visit him, and he wanted to save as much money as he could before she got here, which I thought was sweet. I loved talking to Joseph. As guarded and quiet as he always was, he was different with me. He laughed with me. He asked me questions, and he had even told me that he missed me yesterday. I was slowly, but surely breaking through that hard exterior of his, and I was enjoying the process.

Justin had gone back to college, and I was grateful for that. He came to my campus every day that he was here, and when we got together, he called my father to let him know. It had been an exhausting few days, but I was glad to be done with it. *For now, at least.*

I was currently sitting at my sewing machine with my sketchbook beside me. I had been dreaming up a dress for the school's coronation ball. It was all I had been hearing about since I got to Trudale. During homecoming week, the newly elected Miss Trudale would be crowned as the official queen of the university. Afterward, there would be an extravagant ball, and everyone dressed up for the occasion. It was a month away, but I knew my creation would take some time. It was going to be *perfect*.

Just as I placed the velvet fabric under my needle and pressed my foot against the pedal to begin, my phone buzzed. I glanced at it and grinned before tossing the fabric to the side and answering.

"Hey," I said cheerfully.

“Come downstairs to let me up,” Joseph said prompting me to roll my eyes. He was always straight to the point. I hung up without responding and skipped out of my room and to the elevator.

Once I made it to the main floor, I went to the RA’s desk with my university ID in hand. Joseph was just outside of the main entrance, but when he saw me approaching through the window, he came inside. Trudale’s freshman visitation rules were strict. Only parents and other Trudale students could visit, and everyone had to be checked in.

“Hi, I’m checking him in,” I smiled at Taylor, the RA on duty, and gestured toward Joseph. Taylor looked between Joseph and me a few times before she forced a smile and took both of our ID cards. As Joseph signed the log, Taylor took her phone out and began typing. She then looked up at me impatiently, so I took my time signing my name. When I put the pen in place, I glanced at Taylor, and she was putting her phone to her ear. When Joseph and I walked away, I heard her say, “Regina, where are you right now?”

I chuckled and shook my head. Joseph pushed the elevator button and said, “Ignore it.”

We made it to my floor, and just as we were passing Regina’s door, she stepped out. *I don’t have time for this!*

“JoJo! What are you doing here? Tutoring the freshman again?” Regina asked.

Joseph glared at Regina for a second before turning toward me. I was looking between the two of them. I was curious to know if he was still *spending time* with her. He wasn’t my boyfriend or anything, but I knew that I wouldn’t take that well. I was enjoying having Joseph as a part of my everyday life, but I would have to leave him alone if he was still hanging out with Regina.

When I didn't move, Joseph gently took my key from my hand and walked two feet to my door. He unlocked it and stepped inside, leaving me standing there with her. She glared at me angrily.

"You will not take Joseph away from me, Freshman. I've been working on making him mine for three years, and I won't let you ruin it for me," she said.

I suppressed a giggle, and said, "That sounds exhausting. Bye Regina." I walked to my room and shut the door behind me. Joseph was sitting at my desk with my sketchbook in his hand.

"You're about to make this?" he asked, not looking up from the drawing. I rolled my eyes silently before responding. I knew he wouldn't address what had just happened, so I decided to let it go.

"Yes. It's going to be my coronation dress," I told him.

"It looks dope. You're talented," he said, still staring at my sketch.

"Thanks, hopefully, you still think that once you see the *actual* dress."

"I will," he said. He placed my book back on the desk before looking up at me.

"Don't entertain Regina. She acts that way because I've allowed her to live in a fantasy world where she and I were a couple. It's what she tells anyone who listens, and she knows that I would never care enough to tell people she's lying; but she is. Our relationship was purely physical, and that is over."

His eyes were on me the entire time he spoke. His expression was neutral, but his eyes were searching for my face. I smiled. He was worried about my reaction to Regina, and it was cute. I had already determined the extent of their relationship weeks ago. I truly wasn't worried about Regina.

“Okay,” I said, still smiling.

He maintained his serious facade for a few more seconds before a grin broke out. I loved to see him do that.

“So, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“You don’t want me here?” he smirked.

“Shut up. You know that’s not what I meant,” I said smiling.

“Nah, I wanted to show you this,” he said, pulling out his phone. I walked to where Joseph was sitting and stood behind him so that I could see his screen.

He pulled something up, then handed me the phone over his shoulder.

As I scanned the photo, I smiled. It was a picture of the Fashion Forward interest meeting flyer. Fashion Forward was an organization on campus for fashion enthusiasts. The members of the club were aspiring models, designers, and fashion bloggers. It was the perfect organization for me to be a part of. As I continued to eye the flyer, my smile fell. Joseph turned around in the seat to face me. He furrowed his eyebrows, probably because of my expression.

“I thought you’d be excited,” he said.

I wasn’t. As amazing as the idea of FF was, I knew I couldn’t join. Taking an extra class that didn’t interfere with my major was one thing but being in a fashion club meant that I would be in photos that would be posted not only on FF’s social media pages but on Trudale’s website. My father would flip if he caught wind of me dedicating that much time to such a “useless” activity.

I sighed. “I want to be, but” my voice trailed off.

“But you’re afraid of what your dad would have to say about it?” Joseph finished for me.

I remained silent but nodded my head.

Joseph stood from the seat and pushed it back under my desk. He then grabbed my hand gently and led me to the foot of my bed, where we both sat.

“Denver. It’s a club. That’s it. As long as you keep up with your studies– and I’m going to make sure you do– then everything will be okay. I know that your relationship with your dad is important to you, and it isn’t my place to speak against that, but I think you should go to the interest meeting. Fashion makes you happy, and I like seeing you happy,” he said.

By the time he was done speaking, my cheeks were burning from the intensity of my smile. This guy couldn’t be any more perfect.

“Thanks. I’ll go to the meeting,” I said.

“You better,” he said with a smirk. He was so gorgeous.

“What are you doing tomorrow? I have the day off from work, so I want to spend it with you,” Joseph asked me. I hopped off the bed and walked over to my desk. I picked up the fabric that I had been about to use and folded it neatly, before placing it back in the basket under my desk.

“Uh, I go to Chapel on Sunday mornings, but that’s about it. You want to go with me?” I asked. Once I finished tidying up my work area, I realized that Joseph hadn’t answered me, so I turned to look at him. He was looking at me also, with an unreadable expression.

“Did you hear me? I asked if you wanted to go to church with me tomorrow,” I said.

“I don’t go to church, Denver. Why don’t I just pick you up after?”

I observed him quietly for a moment. He seemed uncomfortable. I wasn’t in the business of forcing my faith on anyone, but I was curious about his thoughts on Christianity. I decided not to pry, because I knew how quickly Joseph could shut down. Instead, I gave him a small smile and said, “I can’t wait!”

## Chapter Nine

(Regina)

As I sat in the passenger seat of Denver's father's expensive SUV, I kept my eyes glued to my phone. I didn't want to be here, but his dominating presence made me feel as though I had no choice.

Mr. Cartwright approached me the day after he helped his daughter move into the dorm. He offered to pay me a thousand dollars weekly if I kept him updated on Denver's campus life. Because I was her RA and next-door neighbor, he felt that I would be perfect for the job. Denver seemed like a sweet girl, so I didn't want to, but the money was a little *too* tempting to pass up. Now that she was trying to steal Joseph from me, I had no remorse for invading her privacy.

"What do you have for me, young lady?" Mr. Cartwright asked. His voice was so deep and commanding. To say that I was intimidated by his presence would be an understatement.

"Uh-uh, nothing much. She's just been going to classes and tutoring sessions. She hasn't done much socially since that party I told you about," I said. I rubbed my palms on the thighs of my jeans to relieve myself of the clammy feeling that had been building since I got in the car.

"Speaking of that party, has she been spending time with the young man who gave you all a ride home?" he asked.

I glanced at Mr. Cartwright, then smirked. He couldn't hide his anger if he tried. Clearly, he didn't want Denver hanging out with guys. That could possibly work in my favor.

"Yes, they've been spending a lot of time together. He's actually her tutor," I said innocently.

"What was his name again?"

"Joseph. Joseph Crews," I said, quickly.

If Mr. Cartwright could keep his daughter away from Joseph, I knew I would have a chance.

Mr. Cartwright was silent for a moment, before he said, “Tell me what you know about him.”

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I stood outside of the classroom that FF had reserved for our interest meeting, trying to get my thoughts together. It had been a terrible day so far, and I hadn't been able to shake it. First, I had to witness Joseph with the *Freshman*, and she didn't seem the least bit concerned about my little threat. Then, I was a little nervous about my conversation with Denver's father. Something about his demeanor made me feel like he could be dangerous. A part of me was regretting getting roped up into this little deal I had with him, but I decided not to dwell on it.

It was clear that he was very protective of his daughter, and he did not think that Joseph was good enough for her. I was okay with that as long as he found a way to keep her away from my guy. I loved Joseph, and it honestly hurt my feelings that he could dismiss me so easily. I knew that his feelings were developing a lot slower than mine were for him, but if he would just give us a chance and some *time*, we could be something really special.

I shook my head and took a deep breath. I had to worry about my personal life later. Right now, I had to host the interest meeting as the organization president. I loved fashion, but I loved the power that came with being president even more. All decisions that were made about our events and activities had to be approved by me and the executive board, but as president I had the final say so when the board couldn't come to an agreement. Our club advisor was a Biology professor at the school and had no real interest in micromanaging us. That gave me free reign to do whatever I wanted.

Pushing the door of the classroom open, I walked confidently to the front of the room. All of the people interested in our club were seated at the students' desks, and the E-Board members were behind the table in the front of the room. I arrived late on purpose because I loved making an entrance. Without looking at the interests, I turned to the E-Board and placed both palms on the table.

“Have you guys seen any good prospects yet?” I asked them with a smirk.

“I’m not sure yet, they all look so nervous,” said Julia.

“Good,” I said with a sly grin.

Julia shook her head. She was the club financial secretary. Out of all the members on the board, she was the nicest. She always tried to make others feel welcome and I hated it. Being nice was a weakness. People took advantage of weaknesses.

“Well, there is one girl out there who has a lot of potential. Her outfit is fierce, and she didn’t come in here trembling like everyone else,” said Jaden. He was the social media coordinator, and one of my favorites. He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind and he was the best dressed male at the university.

“Hmph, we’ll see. Where’s she sitting?” I asked.

I turned and looked in the direction that Jaden pointed his well-manicured finger, and almost lost it. *Denver!*

Her outfit was nice. *Better* than nice. She paired black leather pants with a varsity jacket blazer and silver boots. It was professional but edgy and it was the perfect outfit to wear to a meeting like this.

*Man, I hated this little girl.*

I eyed her for a second longer before composing myself with a fake smile. FF was my domain, so I had no reason to worry. All candidates had to go through a month's worth of fashion challenges before we selected our newest members. I'd make her challenges extra interesting. Maybe she'd do us all a favor and drop out of the running.

I cleared my throat and prepared to begin.

“Good evening, everyone. I'm Regina Lancaster, a junior Fashion Design major here at THE Trudale University, and I also serve as the president of Fashion Forward. Let's get started, shall we?”

## Chapter Ten

(Denver)

I skipped to the dorm's entrance, still reeling from my lunch with Joseph. Each day that we spent together confirmed for me what I already knew: he was *the one*. We had agreed to take things slow and get to know each other. He hadn't asked me to be his girlfriend, and he hadn't even kissed me yet, but I just knew that he was it for me. My time with Joseph felt like a breath of fresh air. I didn't have to hide from him or change myself to make him happy. The only other people I had ever been able to be myself around were Jazz and my Nan. I felt blessed to have found happiness in our friendship.

I was still smiling when I pulled open the heavy door, but as soon as I stepped inside, my smile dropped. When my timid eyes met my father's angry ones, I stopped breathing. I could tell that he was upset, and I wish that I hadn't decided to come to my room for a nap. He gave me a small smile, but it didn't match his eyes.

"Daughter. Let's go chat in your room," he said. Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heels and headed for the elevator. I slowly followed. Our ride up to my floor was silent, and so was the short walk to my door. My hands shook as I retrieved my key from my bag and put it into the lock on the door.

"What's the matter, Daughter? You seem nervous about something," he said.

"Uh, no, I'm fine. Come on in," I said, trying to calm myself. He just chuckled and walked inside behind me.

"So, what's new? What have you been up to?" he asked. He sat on the end of my bed as I walked to my mini-fridge and got two bottles of water. I handed him one, then twisted the cap on the other. I took a long gulp before responding.

“Just classes, tutoring, and— “

“And Joseph?” he asked, cutting me off.

I almost choked on the water as I swallowed hard. *Why does he always know everything?*

“Jo-Joseph?” I asked, innocently.

“That’s who you’ve been spending all your time with, right? I warned you about getting distracted, Denver,” my dad scolded.

“I promise I’m not distracted. I’m more focused than ever, actually. Joseph is the TA for my Calculus class, and he tutors me. Ever since I started working with him, I’ve been making A’s, and you know how hard math is for me, Daddy,” I said. I knew I was rambling, but I needed to put his mind at ease about Joseph. I had no plans to stop seeing him, so I didn’t need my father to try and give me any ultimatums.

My dad stared at me for what felt like an eternity.

“It’s nothing other than tutoring, Daddy. Promise,” I lied.

Eventually his expression softened, and a small smile graced his face.

“I trust you, Daughter. Just be careful. Guys like him are only after one thing, and it isn’t your heart. Stay on track with Justin. You’ll be happy with him,” he said with a nod.

I forced a smile as he stood and approached me with open arms. I fell into his embrace, and he patted my back awkwardly. As close as my father always wanted the two of us to be, he wasn’t the best at showing affection or spending quality time.

Before he released me, he said, “I’m glad to know you’re on the right track, Daughter. I’ve gotten you too far for the plan to sway now.”

I held back an eye roll as I stepped out of his arms. As calm as his tone was, the warning I saw in his glare made me nervous. Maybe I needed to slow things down with Joseph for a

while. I didn't think that I was prepared to endure my father's wrath if he ever found out the extent of our relationship.

.....

(Mr. Cartwright)

I walked into the sneaker store and looked around, frowning. My daughter had all the advantages in the world. She had the best education, everything her heart desired, and a promising future ahead of her. She also had Justin, who was surely going to be successful, and he was in love with my daughter. I was grateful for that, because he is exactly the type of young man that my daughter needed to marry. I wanted her future to be prosperous and secure, which is why I couldn't understand why she had gotten mixed up with a scholarship kid who worked at a sneaker store.

I had looked into Joseph when the Resident Assistant that I was paying mentioned his name. I wasn't impressed. His family was poor, and whoever his father was didn't even bother to sign his birth certificate. That was enough for me to know that he wasn't good enough for my Denver. She could only have the best, and Joseph was clearly scum. I scanned the store and noticed him placing a pair of shoes on a display rack. With a smirk, I approached him. I stood about a foot away from him and waited for him to acknowledge my presence. Once he turned around and met my gaze, I saw a hint of recognition in his expression. *He remembers me. Good!*

"Good evening, sir. Can I help you with anything today?" he said in a professional tone. His eyes stayed on mine as he spoke.

"You can help me by staying away from my daughter," I said, bluntly. I had no intentions of beating around the bush. My time was too valuable.

"Excuse me?" he asked, his tone still even.

“You heard me. Denver. Stay away from her. She has a future ahead of her that doesn’t involve you,” I said.

He chuckled, but kept his eyes trained on mine. I could tell that he wasn’t easily swayed, but I wasn’t concerned. *Neither was I.*

“Is that right?” he asked.

“That’s exactly right. I’m here as a courtesy to you. Leave my kid alone. You may not know me, but I have a lot of influence at Trudale, and I would hate for something to happen to your scholarship. I’m sure you don’t want to pack up and go back to Thomasville without your degree,” I said with a smirk.

I could see the anger in his eyes, but he remained silent. *Fine by me.*

“I don’t need you to respond if you heard me loud and clear. Stay away from Denver or suffer the consequences.”

With that I turned around and headed out of the store and into the main area of the mall. I figured I’d pick up my wife’s favorite chocolates before I headed home. My mission had been accomplished.

## Chapter Eleven

(Joseph)

“Here’s your order, Joseph. Enjoy, honey,” Miss Bessie said as she handed me a takeout bag with two plates inside. I couldn’t help but smile because I had only ordered one dinner.

Miss Bessie had been fond of me since I moved to Atlanta as a freshman. I loved the food so much that I ate here often. It was a nice break from campus food, and nothing was too expensive. She would always strike up conversations with me, and as reserved as I usually was, I enjoyed talking with her. I never had a grandmother, but if I did, I’d want her to be like Miss Bessie. We bonded quickly, and she always made sure I was well fed.

“Thank you, Miss Bessie. I appreciate it,” I said.

“Oh boy hush. Get out of here,” she said with a huge grin.

Just as I was turning to leave, I caught a glimpse of those golden curls. Denver was in a two-person booth, and her back was facing me. I had been in the front of the small restaurant waiting on my food, and I hadn’t noticed her before. Now that I had, I couldn’t help but stare. I felt my anger building as I observed the body language of the guy who was sitting across from her. It was Kevin from the Calculus class. He was leaned into the table and laughing at something she said.

It had been two weeks since Denver’s father showed up at my job, and I hadn’t spoken to her much since. When her dad left the store, I texted her to tell her that he had paid me a visit and threatened my scholarship. When she didn’t respond, I called. I called again once my shift was over and again, she did not answer. I had decided not to call again, since we had to see each

other in class the following day, but when we did, she avoided eye contact with me the entire class period. When Dr. S dismissed everyone, she bolted out of the door. The next day, she failed to appear for our tutoring session. I realized that her avoidance had to be because of her father. Based on the things she told me about him, I knew that he wouldn't be a big fan of me, and his visit only confirmed that. I also knew that she had a hard time standing up for herself and her desires where he was concerned. I had to admit that my feelings were hurt, but I knew I'd get over it. If it was that easy for her to ice me out, then we never would have worked anyway. I just hated that I allowed her to get close to me, only for her to prove to be just as inconsistent as everyone else in my life.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Miss Bessie asked.

I had forgotten that she was even standing there. “Nothing Miss Bessie, I’m fine,” I lied.

To say that I was upset would have been an understatement. I was furious. I watched Miss Bessie glance over to where Denver and Kevin were sitting. I’m sure it’s because I had been staring.

“You’re sweet on that girl?” she asked, knowingly.

“No, nothing like that,” I said.

“Mhmmm, boy. Tell me anything,” she said and walked toward the kitchen area.

Just then, Denver stood up and Kevin nodded his head. She turned and headed for the restroom, and I stayed put, because she had to pass me to enter. She was typing on her phone, but when she got close enough, she looked up, and locked eyes with me. She looked shocked, but happy to see me. Her expression slowly transitioned into one of guilt, and she opened her mouth to speak.

“Joseph,” she said.

I looked at her for a second more before I walked out of the restaurant.

.....

(Denver)

I watched as Joseph walked out of the door and fought back a few tears. I was going to the restroom to call Jazz. I was having the worst time on this date that she insisted I go on. I had been sulking for the past two weeks, and she was tired of it. She wanted me to call Joseph, but I just couldn't. When he had texted, me saying that my dad showed up at his job, I knew I had to end things. I knew that my father had influence at our small university, and I was sure that he could cause trouble in Joseph's life. That was the last thing I wanted so I just stayed away. It was killing me, and Jazz wanted to see me smile again. She said that if I was really going to be done with Joseph, then I needed to go out with someone to get my spirits back up. This date was having the opposite effect on me, and now that Joseph had just seen me out with another guy, I was officially crushed. As much as he tried to hide it, I saw the hurt in his eyes, and I felt awful.

I also missed him. Talking and spending time with Joseph had quickly become my favorite pastime. He was an amazing listener, and his advice was always well-thought out and insightful. Not having him around left a void that no one else could fill. We had only known each other for a short time, but he had already made such a huge impact on my life.

"What have you done that's got my Joseph all out of sorts?"

The voice of the old woman who owned the restaurant startled me. I was still gazing at the door that Joseph had walked out of, so I didn't notice her approach me.

"Ma'am?" I asked, although I had heard exactly what she said.

Joseph told me that he and the woman were close, and judging by the angry look on her face, I knew that it was true. She loved him, and I had hurt him.

“I saw the way he looked at you and that young man over there,” she gestured to Kevin who was looking at us with a confused expression. I had to fight back an eye roll. I was *so* over this date.

“For as long as I’ve known him, he’s never looked at a girl like that, so you must mean something to him. He looked crushed to see you on a date, so I need to know what’s going on,” she said. Every time I saw Miss Bessie, she was walking around the restaurant smiling with patrons. She always seemed so sweet, but right now, she meant business. I wasn’t sure why, but I took a deep breath and told her everything. I told her about how well Joseph, and I had been getting along, about my father’s threats, and about how my father had basically been dictating my life *all* my life.

“Well, sweetheart. You seem like a nice girl, and you have a good head on your shoulders. I understand demanding parents more than anyone. My parents were as strict as they came,” she said and chuckled lightly.

“But I’m going to tell you this: no one can live your life but you; not even your parents. If something happened to your father today, God forbid, he’d be gone, and you’d be right here. If Joseph makes you happy, then go after happiness. Do it for you.” She smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back. Her expression suddenly turned serious.

“But if you plan on following your dad’s marching orders, then don’t drag my Joseph along. He’s been through enough heartache for an entire lifetime. I won’t have any more of it,” she said. She eyed me for a second longer, then headed back toward the kitchen.

I just stood there for a second before gathering my thoughts and returning to the table with Kevin.

“Is everything okay? That looked pretty intense,” he said. He genuinely looked concerned, and I felt a little guilty. My mind and heart were set on Joseph, and I had no room in either for Kevin.

“Kevin,” I exhaled before continuing, “I need you to take me home.”

.....

(Joseph)

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

I looked up from my sketchbook, confused. I never had visitors. In fact, no one really knew where I lived. A lot of Trudale students lived in my complex, so it wasn't a secret, but I didn't really have friends. Someone knocking on my door was odd. I walked toward my front door, then looked out of the peephole. Denver. *How did she know where I lived?* I had never brought her to my apartment because we usually hung out around campus. Once I walked out of the diner, I came straight home to draw. I needed to get my mind off things, and this was the best way to do that.

I opened my door and glared at her silently. She immediately started rambling.

“Um, I still had your location on the Find my Friends app, from the day that we shared locations with each other because you said that I should always share my location with three trusted friends,” she said. Denver looked at me as I folded my arms and tilted my head to the side. She was talking so fast that I could barely keep up. Her nervousness made me want to smile, but I contained it.

She slowed her words down as she continued, “You never stopped sharing your location, and I needed to talk to you. I hope you don’t mind,” she said softly. I continued to stare down at her, without words. She shifted from one foot to another uncomfortably and her eyes were now trained on my welcome mat. After a few seconds, she looked back up at me, and inhaled deeply. When she exhaled, the nervousness was gone, and a look of determination graced her face. *She was so beautiful.*

“Can I come in, Joseph?” she asked confidently.

I stared at her for a few more seconds, making her sweat. Finally, I stepped back a little and allowed her room to enter my apartment. She looked around silently as she stood in the entryway. I watched her eyes scan my small kitchen and living room area, before glancing at me briefly. Her eyes then went to the television, which was playing an episode of my favorite show, *Criminal Minds*. I continued to observe her as she feigned interest in the television before she looked to her right. When I noticed what had now caught her attention, I closed my eyes in annoyance. I should have put the painting of her in my bedroom before I let her in. It was on a large canvas and was resting on the wall beside my sofa. I wasn’t sure what to do with it, but the day I dumped it in the garbage outside, I ended up going back to retrieve it. Now, I was regretting that decision.

Once she noticed the painting, it was all she could focus on, and I wanted her attention somewhere else, so I spoke up.

“You said that you wanted to talk, Denver.” I was still standing behind her, but she didn’t turn to face me when she responded.

“You painted that?” she asked. Lazily pointing at the portrait. She seemed to be in a daze.

“I did. What do you need, Denver?” I asked. I really wished that she would look anywhere other than at my artwork.

Finally, she turned to look at me. I walked to my kitchen and opened the refrigerator to retrieve a bottle of water. I grabbed two and handed one to Denver on my way to the sofa. I waved my hand at the empty spot on the sofa, letting her know that she could have a seat, but she remained standing. She opened the water and took a big gulp of it before she spoke again.

“Joseph, I’m sorry. When my dad popped up on me, I panicked. After you texted me that he had done the same to you, I panicked even more. I know my father. He’s a very determined man, and I think that he would really try to get your scholarship pulled. I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if I were the reason that you couldn’t finish school, so I did what I thought was right,” she said.

I sat on the sofa, silently processing what she said. I wasn’t worried about my scholarship when he made his threats. I didn’t care how much influence he had; I had to sign a contract to receive the funding that I did, and as long as I followed the requirements outlined in the agreement, no one could take that away from me. I made sure of that when I went to my dean’s office the Monday after he threatened me.

“Denver, you should have—” I was interrupted by my ringing phone. It was Trent. He rarely called, and it was kind of late, so I immediately answered the phone, feeling like something was wrong. That hunch was confirmed as soon as I said, “Hello?”

“Joe, I need you to get home as soon as you can. Your sister’s been hurt pretty badly, and she’s in the hospital,” he said. His voice was calm, but I could hear the worry in it. It made me panic.

“Hurt, what do you mean hurt, Trent? Who hurt my sister?!” I yelled.

Denver jumped back a little at the sound of my voice, but I couldn't focus on her. I needed Trent to tell me that JoJo was going to be okay.

"I'll fill you in once you get here, but I need you to calm down, son. You have to drive carefully. I can't worry about you both. Just get here, Joe." He hung up. I walked the short distance to my bedroom and yanked a sweatsuit off of a hangar in my closet. Quickly dressing, I walked back out to the living area and grabbed my keys from the coffee table. Just as I was headed to the door, Denver spoke up. I had forgotten that she was even there.

"Let me drive you," she said.

"What? No, Denver. I gotta go." I yanked my front door open and waited for her to walk out, but she didn't. She walked up to me and touched my arm lightly. I hated the way that my entire body relaxed at her touch.

"Joseph, you're upset, and you shouldn't be driving like this. I'm going to take you."

The tears that I had been trying to hold back began to surface and I closed my eyes briefly.

"My sister." My voice cracked as I spoke, so I just closed my mouth. I couldn't take this.

"I know. Let's go see about her, Joseph," Denver said softly. She took the keys from my hand and locked the door behind us.

All I could do was nod and follow her lead.

## Chapter Twelve

(Joseph)

“Which hospital are we going to?”

Denver’s question broke the silence that we had been riding in for the past three and a half hours. I had been staring straight ahead the entire ride, but not really paying attention. My mind was on my sister, and that wouldn’t change until I knew she was okay.

Finally taking in our surroundings, I realized that we had made it to Thomasville. Denver had gotten us here in no time, and for that I was grateful.

“It’s only–,” I paused to clear my throat. My words came out lower– weaker– than I had intended.

“It’s only one hospital. Once you get to this light, make a right. It’s going to be the only building on the next street. Can’t miss it,” I said.

I saw Denver glance at me out of the corner of my eye, but she said nothing. She followed my directions, and as soon as I saw the hospital sign, I removed my seatbelt. The parking lot was fairly empty, so she parked my car in front of the small building. I hopped out before she turned the car off and rushed to the entrance.

The hospital was small with only one floor, and there was one attendant at the desk, who was currently on the phone. I approached the desk and said nothing as she carried on her conversation without even acknowledging my presence. The smile that played on her lips as she listened to the caller infuriated me. I placed both palms on the counter and stared at her intensely, trying not to erupt. The last thing I needed was to get kicked out of the hospital without seeing

my sister. My glare did nothing to gain her attention, so I cleared my throat and said, “Excuse me, ma’am, I—”

She held up her index finger, without making eye contact, and continued her conversation. I clenched my fists and slowly released them, trying my best to calm down, but I knew that if I didn’t get a response soon, all bets were off.

“Excuse me, *Julia*, but we’ve just driven four hours because a family member is in critical condition. Her name is JoAnna Crews. As you can see, he’s very worried, and I don’t think your personal phone call takes precedence. Once you find her name and point us in the right direction, we’ll be out of your hair, and you can continue to slack on the job,” Denver said.

I glanced at her. She was smiling, but her eyes were fixed on Julia. Julia glared at Denver for a few seconds before she typed something into her computer.

“Go down that hall right there, and you’ll find a small waiting area close to her room. The doctor isn’t allowing visitors right now, but you can wait there until he does,” Julia said snidely.

I took off in that direction before she finished her statement. I wanted to be in place before a doctor came out with an update. I had been so focused on getting down the hall that I had once again forgotten about Denver until she caught my hand and pulled me back a little.

“We passed the waiting area. It’s back that way,” she said softly. I closed my eyes briefly and took a deep breath. I needed to get a hold of my emotions so that I could be there for my sister.

“Well, if it ain’t Lil Joseph. What are you doing here, boy?”

My body stilled at the sound of her voice from behind. *Red*. I tried to take another deep breath, but it turned into several shallow ones. I cursed the sudden chill that consumed me and the tingling I felt under my arms. *Why wasn't I over this? Over her?*

Releasing Denver's hand, I slowly turned around and faced the devil herself. I took her in from head to toe. This was the woman who gave me life, and all I felt for her was contempt. *Hatred*. It wasn't until Denver grabbed my wrist that I realized my fists were clenched and shaking. I watched as Red's eyes followed Denver's movements. She grinned, smugly. I hated the power that she still had over me. It had been thirteen years since I had seen Red. I was a grown man now, yet here I was, feeling like the same seven-year-old boy who found comfort drawing on receipts in a broom closet.

Red began walking toward us, and instinctively I took a step back. I noticed movement in my peripheral and glanced to my left. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Trent approaching from the other end of the waiting area. His presence coupled with Denver's touch calmed me. Trent saved me from Red all those years ago, and seeing him now gave me the assurance I needed to survive this encounter with Red. *For JoAnna*.

"How is she?" I asked Trent.

He eyed me for a second before grabbing the back of my head and pulling me in for a brief hug.

"We don't know right now. Red found her in an alley near the house, unconscious. She was beaten pretty badly, and they immediately took her in for surgery once they got her here. They haven't given us an update since then."

I ran my hand across my face. *This couldn't be happening*. I felt Denver lightly touch my shoulder, and again, some of the tension I felt relaxed in response to it. The connection was

keeping me sane, and I didn't want it to end, so I placed my arm around her shoulder to keep her close.

I looked around the waiting room before asking Trent, "Where's Mya?"

He sighed, "She's out of town for a case, but she'll be back tomorrow. She wants to be here, though. You know she loves JoAnna like a sister." It was true. When Trent first met my mom, he had a crush on her, but when he realized that she didn't feel the same way, he moved on and they built a strong friendship. A few years ago, he met his girlfriend Mya. I really liked her, and she and JoJo had grown close over the years.

"Trent, this is Denver. She drove me up here," I said, glancing at her.

Trent smiled at her and said, "Nice to meet you, young lady. Thank you for getting him here safely."

Denver smiled back and opened her mouth to respond, but Red beat her to it.

"I don't even know why either of you is here. This is a time for family. Y'all ain't family, so you can go," Red said, glaring right at Trent and Denver.

"Be quiet, Red. The only one who should leave is you. I'm sure my sister isn't going to want to see you anyway. I know you're the reason she was in that alley in the first place," I said. The tremor in my voice as I spoke annoyed me, but I couldn't control it.

"Sister huh? That's still what you think." Red laughed sarcastically. "Stupid."

My entire body tensed at her statement. *Still, what I think?* What did that mean? Was she trying to say that JoJo wasn't my sister? My *family*? That couldn't be. Red was delusional. *Right?* I looked over at Trent. I expected his expression to display the confusion that I was feeling, but it didn't. The only emotion on Trent's face was *worry*.

"Red, *don't*," he said. Why was he pleading with her?

Red looked into Trent's eyes, still wearing that grin. The two of them held a secret that Trent wanted her to keep, and that angered me.

"Joseph, breathe," Denver said, softly.

I took an aggressive step toward Trent, releasing my hold on Denver.

"Don't *what*, Trent? You know what she's talking about?" I asked.

"Of *course*, he knows what I'm talking about! You're the only dummy with your head in the clouds," Red yelled.

Years of verbal and physical abuse from my mother had conditioned me to block it out. To block *her* out. I kept my eyes on Trent and tried to let Red's screechy voice fade into the background. Red wasn't having that though. She jumped in front of me and snapped her fingers close to my face.

"What are you asking him for? I'm the one who's talking to ya!" she yelled. I raised a finger of my own and was about to respond when Denver pushed me back slightly. She stopped in front of me so that her back was touching my chest. *That connection*. In the midst of all this drama, she was my calm.

"That's unnecessary," Denver said, sternly.

Red smirked. "Oh, look at you, defending your little boyfriend. Well, this doesn't concern you, little girl. It's between my *grandson* and me." She had a satisfied smile on her face like she had just won a war. I didn't understand why until Denver's next words.

"Grandson?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at me.

"Yeah boy. I'm not your mama. I'm your *grandmama*."

At those words, everything went black.

.....

(Denver)

“Joseph... Joseph!” I said softly, but urgently as I shook his shoulders. After the bomb Red had just dropped, he fainted and had been out for about thirty seconds.

“Hmph. And you thought you were doing him a favor by taking him from *me*? You raised him to be a punk who passes out at a little news. I would have made him a *man*,” Red spat. I looked over my shoulder at her in disgust before focusing on Joseph again.

“Joseph,” I called again, still shaking him.

He moved his arm a little at first, then he lifted it completely and ran it across his face. His eyes fluttered open and connected with mine. He looked around for a moment, before sitting up abruptly. I was kneeling beside him, so I stood, and Trent helped him off the floor. He turned to sit in the seat behind him, then he just stared at Red, whose expression hadn't changed since she shared her big secret.

Now that he was awake, Red must have decided that she hadn't caused enough havoc, because she continued.

“That JoAnna that you love so much has been lying to you all this time. She begged me to claim you as my own because she didn't want to raise you,” she said and laughed an evil laugh.

“That's not true, and you know it!” Trent yelled at Red. He glared at her for a moment before looking at Joseph with tender eyes.

“JoJo is my mother?” Joseph asked Trent. His voice was low, but the tremble was still there.

Trent opened his mouth, but no words escaped it. He looked conflicted as if he were battling with his own thoughts. If what Red was saying was true, then I understood his frustration. It wasn't his story to tell, and the one person who *could* tell him was lying unconscious in a hospital bed.

“She is,” Trent finally said. “That part is true, but nothing else is. JoAnna loves you more than life, Joe. You know that. Red forced her to give birth at home, and she kept the both of you secluded for the first years of your life. That's why we had to go through all of that trouble to get you a birth certificate made. Anyway, when you were born, Red controlled the entire situation and threatened JoAnna's life if she told you that she was your mother. She's been wanting to tell you the truth for years, she just didn't know how.”

By the time Trent was done speaking, tears were streaming down my cheeks. This woman, *Red*, was pure evil, and my heart ached for Joseph. I knew that Trent's confession was overwhelming, and to make matters worse, his sister—*his mother*—was badly hurt.

“Family of JoAnna Crews,” a doctor said as he approached the waiting area.

Joseph stood immediately and we all turned toward the doctor and waited on the news. Joseph positioned his body directly behind mine.

“JoAnna was beaten pretty badly with some sort of heavy object. She was unconscious because of the blow she suffered to her head. The most severe injury that she has endured was blunt force trauma to her abdomen, but we were able to stop the bleeding. There is still some swelling, and it will take some time for her to heal. She will be okay.”

I was still standing in front of Joseph, so I felt his breath when he exhaled in relief.

The doctor smiled briefly and continued, “Unfortunately,” his face grew serious, “she miscarried as a result of her injuries, and—”

“What did you just say?” Joseph cut the doctor off. He stepped around me and moved closer to the doctor.

“Uh- she miscarried,” the doctor looked at Joseph apprehensively. I grabbed his hand with my left one and used my other hand to rub his back. I was trying to calm him enough to let the doctor finish.

“I’m so sorry. Because she has sustained such painful injuries, we have her heavily sedated. She will more than likely wake sometime tomorrow. You may visit two at a time, for about ten minutes each. She is right down this hall in room 102.” He bowed his head slightly at each of us before disappearing down the hall again.

Joseph stood there motionless for a second, before turning to Trent.

“Did you know?” he asked simply.

“I had no clue,” Trent said. He looked just as dumbfounded as Joseph.

“I need to go see her,” Joseph said, and started toward the hallway.

“Me too,” Red said, but the menacing look that Joseph delivered halted her in her tracks.

“Red, you’ve caused enough trouble. Go home,” Trent said as Joseph turned back around and continued to JoAnna’s room.

“No. That’s my baby, and—”

“And you don’t care anything about her. I’ve let you get away with a lot over the years because JoAnna has begged me to stay out of things, but that ends today. When JoAnna wakes up, she will *not* return home with you. Do not test me. Go. *Now*,” Trent said sternly.

Red looked shocked, and a little frightened by Trent’s statement. She simply left the hospital without another word. As soon as she was out of sight, my focus was on the door that Joseph had just walked in. I was so glad that his sister was going to be okay, but I know that the

events of the evening opened up some wounds that he likely didn't know existed. I just wanted him to be okay.

.....  
(Joseph)

“What happened to you, JoJo?” I asked.

A single tear slid down my cheek as I looked at her still body, silently willing her to wake up. I needed to know what happened. If it had anything to do with Red, she was going to regret it.

“Sir?” a sweet voice called from the door of JoJo's small hospital room.

I turned to face her but said nothing.

Her gaze shifted to the floor, uncomfortably before she met my eyes again.

“The uh- the doctor said only ten-minute visits. You've been in here for fifteen,” she said hesitantly.

My expression hardened and I turned to look at JoJo. How could I leave her alone all night? What if she woke up? She would want to see me, and I *needed* to see her. I contemplated debating the issue but decided against it. I kissed JoJo and whispered that I loved her before walking out of the room silently. I wasn't prepared or in the mood to deal with Red again, so I planned to grab Denver and head out of the hospital until the morning.

As soon as I reentered the waiting area, Denver and Trent stood. My eyes met with Trent's first. He smiled, but his red-rimmed eyes and the worry lines that creased his face showed his true feelings. He loved my sister and was worried about her well-being. Their bond was strong. He was her escape when things got overwhelming at Red's house, and for that I was grateful.

I couldn't take the heaviness that I felt when I looked at Trent, so I shifted to Denver. She was worried also, but it was more about me than my sister. The small wrinkle in her forehead and her quivering lip had me wanting to smile. *She cared about me.*

"I'm gonna go see her," Trent said, his voice cracking as he spoke. I patted his shoulder before he walked away, then grabbed Denver's hand to lead her out of the hospital. Once we got outside, I breathed in the humid air and just stared at the parking lot. *My sister had to be okay.*

Denver was standing silently behind me, so I turned to face her. She was so beautiful. Admiring her was one of my favorite things to do, and I had been denied that for the past two weeks. Her father told her to stay away from me, and she did. To make matters worse, she was filling her time—time that should have been spent with me—going on meaningless dates. Any guy other than me was meaningless to Denver as far as I was concerned, but she clearly didn't feel the same way. I opened up to her. I let her in, and she walked away from me without even a conversation. My thoughts must have shown on my face, because Denver frowned at me.

"What's the matter?" she asked. She sounded genuinely concerned, but I didn't answer her. I couldn't without sounding rude because *she* was the matter.

"Nothing. I'm not leaving until I know my sister is okay, and I'm not sure when that will be. You can take my car back to Atlanta, and I'll get there another way," I said. The disappointment that washed over her face was too much to bear, so I looked away as I awaited her response. The truth was that I didn't want her to leave. I actually felt that I *needed* her there. I couldn't deny the effect she had on me whenever she was near. The calm she brought about felt necessary, but the anger that was building the more I thought about how she had been avoiding me was stronger. She had to go.

“I want to stay,” she said softly. There was some hurt mixed in with her disappointment, but I couldn’t worry about it. She hurt me too.

“I don’t need you to stay. I’m sure your dad wouldn’t appreciate you being here, anyway,” I said. I tried to mask my anger, but it dripped from my every word.

Her expression softened with understanding, and she opened her mouth to speak, but I stopped her. I didn’t need her to make me feel better about her walking away. I just needed her to do it again, so that I could get from under her spell and care for my sister— my *mother*. *Walk away, Denver*.

“Joseph, I’m sorry. I’m *really* sorry. You have to understand that I’ve lived my entire life by my dad’s rules. I’ve never seen him make a promise that he couldn’t deliver on, and I knew that he would do everything he could to get you out of school. I know how important school is to you, so I did what I thought was right. I don’t even know how he found out about us. He has to have someone watching me. That’s why I avoided you. I shouldn’t have, and I’m sorry,” she said. I was looking at the ground while she spoke, but when she paused, I glanced at her— she was crying. I put my hands in my pockets to resist the urge to embrace her and tell her that things would be okay. I wasn’t convinced that that was true, but her tears were breaking me. I looked away.

“But Joseph,” she continued, “if you give me another chance; if you let me back in, I swear you won’t regret it. No one— not even my Nan— has ever made me want to stand up to my father, but you do. If you aren’t worried about his threats, then neither am I. I want this, Joseph. I want *you*.”

I stood there with my hands still in my pockets, looking at the ground. I stayed that way for a while, processing her words. I hated how much I wanted them to be true. I hated how

desperately I wanted to mean as much to her as I was realizing she meant to me. I must have been silent a minute too long, because when I looked up, her face was in her palms, and she was sobbing.

Against my better judgment, I released my hands from my pockets and wrapped my arms around her. I let my chin rest on top of her head, and after a while, I felt her labored breaths steady. Her loud sobs ceased, but when I pulled back to look at her face, she was still crying. At that instant, my only concern was her happiness. The desire to make her smile again outweighed my anger, and that scared me. What I felt had to have been love. I was convinced.

Knowing that I wasn't ready to tell Denver how I felt, but needing to lift her spirits, I kissed the top of her head, then wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

"Let's get something to eat," I said.

## Chapter Thirteen

(Denver)

“Come on!”

I jumped at the sound of Joseph yelling and slamming his hands against the vending machine. He pressed a bunch of the buttons then began shaking the machine vigorously. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, so the hospital's waiting area was a lot fuller than it was last night. I heard several whispers as I jumped up from the seat I was in and rushed over to him.

When I made it to him, I touched his arm and asked, “What did you try to get?”

He cut his eyes at me before he continued to shake the machine.

“Joseph,” I said sternly. “What did you try to get?” I squeezed lightly on his arm, and he stopped assaulting the machine. He let out a sharp breath and aggressively put his finger on the machine, pointing to a bag of chips that were hanging from the dispenser, but wouldn't fall. I got a dollar out of my bag and gently pushed him out of the way. Once I inserted the dollar and selected the snack he wanted, the machine pushed out the bag he paid for plus another one. I retrieved the chips and handed him both bags.

“Now you have two,” I said, making my way back to my seat. He followed and plopped down into the seat next to me. He opened the bag and ate a couple of chips silently before he threw the bag on the floor and slouched in his chair.

“You wanna talk about it?” I asked, picking up the chips he wasted.

“Nah,” he said.

“Okay.”

He ran his hand over his face before letting out a heavy sigh.

“They said she'd wake up today. It's almost three o'clock,” he finally said.

I grabbed his hand and held onto it in my lap.

“They also said that the timing was up to JoAnna. The day isn’t over, Joseph. We know she’s going to be okay; we just have to wait it out a little longer,” I said softly. I wanted my calmness to somehow rub off on him. I rubbed his hand in soft, circular motions, and just looked at his face. Even with all the tension that he was holding on to, he still looked handsome.

He glanced at me and gave me a half smile.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“I was thinking the same thing about you,” I grinned.

That made him laugh.

“I can’t wait for you to meet her. She’ll love you.”

The thought made me frown a little. I had already met Trent, but JoAnna was the most important person in his life. I was beyond nervous.

“You think so?” I asked.

“I know so,” he lifted our hands, which were still intertwined and kissed mine.

“Don’t be nervous. My sister is the sweetest person I know,” he said. He smiled when he said it, but the smile dropped instantly.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He rubbed his thumb across my hand and focused his eyes on the movement.

“I called her my sister. I guess I need to get used to calling her my mother, huh?” he asked.

“I think *JoJo* will do just fine, for now. You can worry about that after the two of you talk,” I said.

“*If* the two of us talk,” he said,  
solemnly.

I took in a deep breath before releasing it slowly.

“Joseph?” I asked softly.

“Yeah?” he asked. He was still looking at our hands.

“Can I ask you something, without you shutting down on me?”

He stopped caressing my hand and looked into my eyes.

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly.

I took another deep breath and just decided to roll with it. “How is your relationship with God?”

I cringed at how quickly his expression hardened. He was shutting down. He just stared at me for a moment, before relaxing a little. He took my hand back into his and focused on that while he responded.

“God left me a long time ago,” he said simply.

I had to fight back the gasp that tried to escape. *How could he think that?* I wasn’t judging him, I just felt bad that he had been living his life believing that.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

He chuckled, arrogantly. “You don’t think so? Last night, you got a crash course in how messed up my family is. My mother, who isn’t actually my mother, abused both of her children from birth. My sister—no wait—my *actual* mother had been forced into prostitution by that same woman, and apparently, I’m the result of one of those hook ups. I was about to have a little

brother or sister who I know was conceived the exact same way, but someone beat the baby out of her, and now she's in a coma down the hall. Where's God in all of that?"

By the time he had finished speaking, he was shaking, and his eyes were red. I was shocked into silence. I knew most of that, but he had never told me that his sister was a prostitute, and that Red was forcing her to do it.

"I didn't know," I said softly. He glanced at me, and after a while his eyes relaxed, and he leaned over to kiss my cheek.

"Yeah. Red has never worked a day in her life. Any money she's ever made comes from the horrible things that she has forced my sister to do since she was a child. JoJo is 35 years old now. A grown woman, who still feels like she has no choice but to live by Red's rules. I've been trying to get her to move with me for years now, but she never does. Red has a hold on her that I will never understand, and if God cared anything about my family, he would have saved her a long time ago."

I just sat there for a moment, staring at the row of chairs in front of us.

"There's this guy I know of. Ironically, his name is Joseph too," I finally said.

Joseph cut his eyes at me. "I don't want to hear about you and some other guy, Denver."

I giggled. "It's not about me. There's a point to this story, so listen," I said.

"Anyway, Joseph had some family issues too. His brothers hated him. Like really hated him because his father favored him more than the others. They despised him so much that they set him up to be taken by some people who treated him terribly. As a result of that, he went through some tough times *for years*— he even went to jail."

I paused and looked into Joseph's eyes for a moment. He was leaned toward me, and his eyebrows were slightly furrowed. He was hanging on to my every word.

“Is he still in jail?” he asked.

“No,” I said and smiled. “Like you, Joseph was meant to do great things, and he did. Like *really* great things. But before he did all that, he endured *years* of bad treatment. Years, Joseph,” I said.

“How do you know him?” he asked, curiously.

“I said I know *of* him. I read about his life in the Bible,” I said. He tensed when I said that, but I didn’t let that stop me.

“Joseph, you’ve been through a lot. I honestly can’t even imagine, and I won’t try to act like I understand. Your life hasn’t been all roses, but God *has* been with you. He still is. God gave you JoAnna, who loved you enough to find a way to give you a better life. He gave you Trent, who loves you like you’re his own son. He gave you your intelligent mind, which got you a full ride to a great school, and because of all these blessings, you’re going to graduate and have an amazing future. I’m sure of it.”

He was staring at me so intensely, but I kept going. Placing my hand on his cheek, I continued.

“You hate Red. You’ve told me before how much you hate your mother. Well guess what Joseph,” I said.

His voice was barely above a whisper when he asked, “What?”

“Red isn’t your mother.” I said and grinned. He tilted his head and squinted his eyes, as if he had just considered that fact.

“Red isn’t my mother,” he repeated.

“Nope. Your mother is the ‘sweetest person you know’,” I said, using his words from earlier. “And that’s the best blessing of all.”

He didn't respond, and I said nothing else. We just gazed into each other's eyes, and I could literally feel myself falling deeper in love with Joseph Crews.

"Uh, excuse me," Sarah, JoAnna's attending nurse said, snapping us out of our trance. We both looked at her, and her smile had my heart rate quickening.

"She's awake."

---

(JoAnna)

"JoJo."

As soon as I heard his voice, I tried to turn toward the door, but my entire body felt like I had been hit by a car. My back was toward the door, but I needed to see his face.

"No, no. Don't move," Joseph said. Seconds later, he was standing in front of me, and even with all the pain I felt, I smiled. *My Sweet Boy*.

He just looked at me for a second, concern and worry etched on his face.

"Get down here and give me a kiss, boy. Quit looking at me like that," I said. My voice sounded raspy, and my throat felt dry. He must have noticed it because he walked out of my line of sight for a second and returned with a cup of water and a straw. Joseph leaned down and placed a kiss on my cheek, before holding the cup up to my mouth. I took a short sip because even drinking from the straw hurt. My eyes shifted back to his face, and the concern was replaced with anger.

"Sit down. Let's talk."

He stood there a second longer, before grabbing the chair from the corner of the room. He pulled it close to my hospital bed and sat beside me.

Running his hand over my hair, he whispered, "What happened to you, JoJo?"

I let out a shaky breath. Instinctively, my hand moved to my stomach, and I teared up. My Sweet Boy covered my hand with his and repeated his question.

I couldn't even look him in the eye.

"Gerald," I whispered. "Red set me up with him a few months ago. He turned into a regular. He refused to use protection, and Red told me that he didn't have to because he always paid extra." I paused because my throat felt like it was on fire. Joseph put the water up to my mouth again, and this time, I ignored the pain and took a few long sips.

"We can talk about it later, JoJo. Save your strength," he said.

"No. I want to get it out. A few months ago, I knew something felt different, so I bought a pregnancy test. I kept it from Red because," my voice trailed off, and I looked into my son's eyes. *How could I tell him?*

"Because what, Jo?" he asked. His voice was low, and his eyes were full of emotion. I wanted to tell him, but I was afraid he'd hate me.

I shook my head and immediately winced at the pain.

"I kept it from her. The night this happened, I had a date set up with Gerald. I decided that I needed to tell him the news. I didn't expect him to want to be a happy family, but I hoped that he would at least want his child safe. I was wrong. He was so furious," I said. I had to pause again so that I wouldn't burst out in tears. Joseph stroked my hair in silence, and I closed my eyes and smiled. *My Sweet Boy.*

"He beat me; badly. He just wouldn't stop. He took a book and kept hitting my stomach, and at some point, I blacked out. That's all I remember."

By then, Joseph's eyes looked murderous. I knew he was furious, but I didn't need him trying to take matters into his own hands. His future was too bright to be tainted by this. His

anger made me think about Trent. He had to know about this because I was sure that Red hadn't called Joseph. I was nervous about how Trent would react when he found out who had done this to me. I knew it wouldn't be pretty.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Joseph asked.

"I planned to. As soon as I took the pregnancy test, I sent you that message about visiting you. I wanted to tell you in person."

"I'm not talking about that, Jo," he said. His tone was stern, but there was a tremble in it also. When our eyes met, it dawned on me. He *knew*.

"Red was here?" I asked.

Trent would never tell him without my blessing. It had to be her.

"Yeah," was all he said. He removed his hand from my hair and sat up straight in his seat. I knew my son well enough to know that he was in defense mode. Whenever he felt a bad situation coming, he would try to mentally prepare himself to deal with it. He shut off his emotions completely.

"Baby, you have to know that I wanted to tell you."

"BUT YOU DIDN'T," he yelled. "Why?" he asked in a much quieter tone. I could feel the hurt radiating off of him. I was distracted by the door opening. My nurse, Sarah walked in with a look of concern.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yes," I said quickly. "Thanks for checking in," I said and forced a reassuring smile. She looked at me and smiled softly before leaving the room. I focused my attention back on Joseph.

“At first, it was because Red threatened my life, and I was afraid of her. Before I met Trent, and he agreed to take you in, I had never done anything against Red. When I got pregnant with you, she saw you as a gold mine. She wanted you to live the same life she forced me into, and she felt that it would only work if you thought that *she* was your mother. I didn’t want to go along with it, but I was scared. On your seventh birthday– your last night at the house– she decided that it was time for you to ‘become a man’ as she called it. When I walked in on her touching you like that, I knew I had to act fast. I had already been talking to Trent about you staying with him but witnessing that gave me the courage I needed to act.”

Tears were streaming down my face as I confessed my darkest secret to my little boy. My heart. *My Joseph.*

“Once I got you out, it took you so long to get adjusted. You wouldn’t speak, smile, or eat. You wouldn’t even cry. When we got you in school, you made straight A’s, but you just wouldn’t adjust socially. I didn’t think that dropping that bomb on you would help the situation at that point. When you did adjust, I rationalized that the news may have set back your progress. Once you grew up, I was just scared that you’d hate me for not coming clean sooner, or even worse, be ashamed of your prostitute of a mother, so I kept the secret. As badly as I wanted you to know that you were *my* son– my greatest blessing– I kept the secret.”

By then, tears streaked both of our faces, and we just sat in silence for a while.

Finally, Joseph said, “I could never hate you. I am where I am because of you JoJo. I owe you everything, and I love you more than anything.” He started stroking my hair again. “And ashamed?” He looked at me as if he were disgusted. “To know that you’re my mother, makes me prouder than I’ve ever felt in my life. I’ve got the best mother in the world. I’ll tell anyone that, JoJo. Anyone.”

I smiled at him and reached my hand out toward him. He brought his face closer to me, and I caressed his cheek. *My son.*

Sniffing a couple of times, he wiped his tears.

“I brought someone here. I know you probably aren't up to it today, but I want you to meet her.”

“Her,” I said quickly, and he laughed.

“Yeah, her. It's crazy, I've only known her for a few months, but her presence in my life seems like a necessity; not just something I want. When I'm not with her, she's all I think about, and when she's near me, she shifts my whole mood. I *smile* around her,” he said, and I laughed. That was definitely a big deal. Joey has never smiled for anyone but me.

“Well, that was a mouth full, but even if you hadn't said that I know she must be special. She's here, for goodness sakes,” I said. “Did she meet Red?”

He let out a harsh breath. “Yeah, she was there for the showdown last night.” He glanced up at me and smirked. “She defended me.”

“Against Red? Bring her in here. I need to get to know your future wife,” I said and smiled.

He smiled back and said, “Are you sure? I told her that she may have to wait until you're a little more rested.”

“I'm fine, Joey. Bring the girl here.”

He smiled and pulled his phone out. After tapping a couple of times, he held it up to his ear.

“Hey, you still here? Okay, come inside the room. Would I have called you if I wasn’t sure Denver? Come here,” he said, blushing the entire time. *Denver*. He hung up the phone and stood. Seconds later, a gorgeous young girl pranced into the room with a nervous smile.

“Hi, JoAnna. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, and I’m so glad that you’re okay.”

“Likewise, sweetheart. Joey, go get us a little lunch. I need to get to know Denver a little bit,” I said, still looking at her.

His eyes went straight to her, and he raised his brows. *Oh, he’s in love*. She gave him a soft smile and a small nod. *Smart girl*. I knew that I had my fair share of issues, but Joseph’s happiness had always been my priority. I could clearly tell that my son was in deep with this girl, but I needed to make sure those feelings weren’t one sided.

“Be nice, JoJo,” he said playfully.

“Get out of here, Sweet Boy.”

I smiled as he walked out of the door, then focused on the young lady.

“So Denver, tell me about yourself.”

## Chapter Fourteen

(Joseph)

“She likes you,” I said randomly, glancing over at Denver before refocusing on the road.

Denver looked at me and smiled softly. “I like her too.” We fell into a comfortable silence again. After staying in Thomasville an extra day after JoJo woke up, we were now on our way back to Atlanta, and this time, I was driving.

I fought a smile as I replayed the weekend in my head. It had been a whirlwind of events and emotions, but I was satisfied with how everything turned out. JoJo was okay, and she was moving in with Trent and Mya until she could get on her feet. They lived in Moultrie, which was about 45 minutes away from Red, so I was ecstatic about that. He had already talked to his cousin who owned a law firm in Moultrie. He needed help around the office and didn’t mind starting JoJo off with something small.

To top it all off, Denver and I seemed to be in a good place. She had met what little family I had, and they both loved her as much as I did. *Love*. The feeling was new but undeniable. I loved everything about her. Like the way she wrinkled her nose when she was in deep thought and how hilarious she found herself—even though all her jokes were corny. I loved her honesty. If Denver felt it, she expressed it, and she didn’t care what my response would be. I loved the way she loved me. We had only known each other a short time, and even though she hadn’t said it, her actions showed me exactly how she felt about me.

The entire time that we were in Thomasville, she had been so attentive to me. When I felt like talking, she was willing to listen, and when I needed a moment to myself, she gave it to me. She took care of me. Making sure I ate and slept. She even called my job to let them know I had

a family emergency. If she didn't appreciate the way anyone— even the waitress at a restaurant— spoke to or treated me, she made sure they heard her thoughts on it.

She even had me considering things that had never even been a thought before, like God. I had never considered all the way that He had been looking out for me until Denver laid them out. She had opened a door of curiosity within me, and I felt like I needed her to enter it with me. I loved her, and it scared me. I was afraid to get attached because if she chose her father over me, I didn't think that I'd recover well.

“Homecoming starts tomorrow,” she said, breaking the silence.

I glanced at her but said nothing. Denver never needed help getting to the point of a matter.

“The coronation ball is Thursday,” she said. From my peripheral, I saw her turn in her seat to face me. She said nothing else, so I assumed she was looking for a response.

“Oh yeah?” was all I said.

“Joseph!” she whined. I loved her voice.

I laughed and said, “What, man? Say what's on your mind.” I had a feeling about where this was going, but I was stalling, as I considered what my response would be.

“Will you go to the ball with me?” she finally asked.

I knew that I was going to say yes, because I was pretty sure that I'd do anything to make her smile. I was just hesitant about the event itself. Coronation was a big campus event, and there would be several girls there who *knew me* better than Denver might appreciate. None of them would be excited about seeing Denver on my arm, because I had never been one to take girls on dates. The biggest issue was going to be Regina. She was my most recent— and vocal— fling. Me

being seen with Denver would expose her as a liar to everyone she sold her fantasy to. I couldn't worry about that though, Denver's happiness definitely trumped Regina's ego.

"You know I will," I said, and glanced at her briefly. Her entire face lit up, and it made me smile. *Yeah, I was in love.*

She continued to grin at me until her phone rang. The way she looked at it, and then back up at me told me exactly who it was. "Answer it, I told you I was cool," I said coolly.

It was her father. Denver and I had decided to give a real relationship a try, and I told her that that would mean no more Kevin or Justin. I also let her know that she would have to tell her father about us at some point, because I wasn't one to be sneaking around. Plus, I honestly felt that Denver was it for me. This relationship had the potential to go far beyond college sweethearts, but that was only possible if she claimed me to the people who mattered the most to her. I understood her position with her father, so I told her that I would give her time to work things out, as long as she didn't disappear on me again.

"Daddy! I was just thinking about you," she said in a voice that was foreign to me. Her chipper tone sounded forced, and she was also louder than she normally spoke. I chuckled, and she cut her eyes at me, before continuing her conversation.

"You what?" she asked. This time though, her voice wasn't upbeat at all. She sounded nervous, which caused me to look at her again. She looked alarmed and scared. I didn't like it at all. She closed her eyes briefly, right before I listened to her tell her father a complete lie, effortlessly.

"Since it was Fall Break, Jazz and I went to Savannah for a shopping weekend. I forgot to tell you, and I'm sorry. You know I did, Daddy, work will always come first. I will. I love you moreeee," she sang, before hanging up.

She looked over at me, but I kept my eyes fixed on the road. She had told me before how she had to be a different person to please her father, but actually witnessing it was different. I hated it.

“Joseph,” she said, hesitantly.

“Denver.”

“You said you understood,” she said.

“I did,” was all I said.

“But you’re mad at me now, so—”

“I’m not mad at you Denver. I’m annoyed that I had to witness the conversation. I said I understand your ‘dad situation’ and I do. I’m going to be patient, but that doesn’t make conversations like that easy to hear.”

“Are we okay?” she asked. Her voice was low. I glanced at her. She looked worried, and I couldn’t help but smile. Her beauty was effortless.

“Did that conversation change how you feel about me?” I asked her.

“Of course not,” she said. She sounded offended, which made me laugh a little.

“Are you still rocking with me?” was my next question.

“You know I am,” she said, and this time, her tone was relaxed.

“Then we will be,” I said. I winked at her before grabbing her hand and kissing it. That must have been good enough for her, because she smiled and relaxed in her seat, but kept her hand in mine.

*I could get used to this.*

## Chapter Fifteen

(Denver)

“Get these Jazz, they’ll go so well with your dress,” I said pointing at a gorgeous pair of emerald earrings. She eyed them for a moment, before she smiled.

“I need to start paying you,” she said with a pout. “I would be a fashion disaster without my best friend.”

I just laughed and kept looking through the exquisite jewelry display. We were at the mall, getting accessories for the coronation ball later that night. It took a few sleepless nights, but I had created both of our gowns, and they were perfect. I couldn’t wait for Joseph to see it.

“Girl are you listening to me,” Jazz asked.

“Huh?” I looked up at her and frowned. Was she saying something?

“Never mind; I know exactly where your mind was. Your red cheeks say it all,” she grinned.

I smiled and rolled my eyes. I couldn’t deny that Joseph took up a lot of space in my thoughts these days.

“So how is his mom? It’s been two weeks since the whole thing happened, right?” Jazz asked.

“Yep. She’s doing well. I talked to her earlier, and she’s starting her new job next week. She seems excited about it,” I said. I smiled thinking about how well JoJo had recovered. She seemed happy, and Joseph said that her voice sounded a lot less stressed than usual. I was happy for her.

Jazz cleared her throat and I looked up from the jewelry. She was smiling, but her arms were folded, and her head was tilted. I let out an exaggerated sigh.

“What Jazz?”

“You talked to his mom this morning?” She asked with a raised brow.

“I did,” I said, and resumed my search for earrings of my own.

“You and Joseph are getting pretty tight, Vi,” Jazz said. I glanced at her again, and she was still standing the same way, staring me down.

“I guess we are,” I said, nonchalantly.

“You definitely are. I just want to know exactly how close you’ve been so far,” she said.

“Excuse me, sir,” I called to the associate who was behind the counter. He was reorganizing some rings at the other end of the counter.

He looked up at me and smiled, quickly walking over. Once he made it to our end of the counter, he placed his elbows on the glass surface and rested his chin in his palm.

“I’m Marc. How may I help you, dear?” he asked.

“Could I look at those earrings a little closer?” I asked, pointing to the gorgeous pair of garnet earrings.

“Sure hon,” he said. Marc used the small key on his lanyard to open the glass case, and he carefully pulled out the earrings, placing them on the counter.

They were bezel studs encased in gold with diamonds scattered along the perimeter. The deep red matched my gown perfectly.

“I’ll take them, and she would like those,” I said, showing him the emerald pair. I pulled out my American Express card and handed it to Marc.

He smiled brightly and said, “Great! I’ll get them boxed and ready for you!”

Marc grabbed both pairs of earrings before he sauntered off toward the back of the store.

Jazz cleared her throat. “Hellooo? How close are you two, Vi?” She asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said innocently, and checked my text message from Joseph.

Joseph: I miss you. Let’s go eat something.

I smiled and began to type my reply right before my phone was snatched away from me.

I glared at Jazz, and she just shrugged and rolled her eyes.

“You can talk to Joseph later. You’ve been spending all your days with him, so he’ll be okay. This is my time, and I’m taking advantage of it,” she said. She said it jokingly, but I could sense a hint of seriousness in her eyes. She was right. I hadn’t been spending much time with her and that was unusual for us. I would have to do better.

“I’m sorry Jazz, I— “She cut me off.

“You have a boo, and I’m happy for you. Now focus. You know exactly what I mean, Vi. Have the two of you had done more than kiss yet?”

I felt my cheeks warm with embarrassment. I wasn’t sure why, but I didn’t want to admit to Jazmine that we hadn’t even kissed yet. She must have noticed my hesitation because she placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, you know you can tell me anything. I’m the last person to judge.”

I smiled at her and nodded. Jazz was a lot more experienced than I was when it came to romance.

“I know I can, it’s just,” my voice trailed off.

“Just what, girl?” She asked urgently.

“We haven’t kissed yet,” I said softly.

Her eyes widened as she said, “Really?”

“Really,” I said, dryly.

She laughed and said, “Don’t be like that, I’m not judging. Just surprised. Why haven’t you?”

Marc made his way back to us with my card and receipt and two small bags.

“Here you are ladies, enjoy your new pieces and have a great day.”

“Thanks,” we both said and made our way out of the store.

“Let’s go to the food court, I’m starving,” I said.

Once we got there, we both ordered sushi and got settled at a table in the busy food court. It wasn’t until I ate a piece of my Spider roll that I decided to resume our conversation.

“I’m not sure why we haven’t kissed. I want to kiss him. To be honest, I want to do more than kiss him. It just hasn’t happened yet. When we’re together, we have a great time, and it’s never tense or awkward, but he hasn’t kissed me,” I said. I took a sip of my sweet tea and stared at my sushi, deep in thought. Why hasn’t he kissed me?

“Wait, back up for a second,” Jazz said, picking up a piece of her shrimp tempura roll with her chopsticks. “You want to do more than kiss him?” She asked in disbelief. Her shocked expression made me laugh, loudly.

“Don’t look so shocked,” I said.

“How else am I supposed to look? My sweet and innocent best friend is saying things I’ve never heard her say before.”

I sipped my tea and shook my head. “I know, but I’ve been thinking about it for a while now. I never *really* said that I wanted to remain a virgin until I was married. I just wanted the person to be the one. Joseph is the one. It’s only been a few months, but that I know for sure,” I said with certainty. Call me crazy, but I knew that Joseph was the man I’d marry one day.

“Have you told him?” Jazz asked. She was still holding the same piece of sushi in her chopsticks with that shocked expression on her face.

“Told him what? “I asked, confused.

“That you’re in love with him,” she said.

I blushed.

“Of course not. I can’t even kiss the man.”

We both laughed loudly, before she finally began to eat.

“I think you should. Joseph doesn’t strike me as the inexperienced type, so if he hasn’t kissed you, I think it’s because he feels the same way about you. He doesn’t want to ruin it by moving too fast for you. Tell him where your head is at, so that he knows you two are on the same page.”

I pondered over her words for a second. Maybe she was right.

“Can I have my phone back please,” I asked softly.

She rolled her eyes but handed it over.

I saw that I had a missed call from Joseph, and it made me smile. Instead of calling, I texted him back.

Me: I miss you too, but I’m at the mall with Jazz. We’ll see each other later for coronation.

Joseph: I guess. Have fun with your friend. I’m sure she’s been missing you too.

I blushed.

Me: She has. But I need to ask you something...

Joseph:

My hands hovered over my keypad as I contemplated my next message.

“Girl, what are you over there typing? You look like you’re about to have a heart attack,”

Jazz said.

I rolled my eyes. “Leave me alone”

Me: I want to stay at your place tonight.

My ears were burning, and my heart felt as if it was beating out of my chest as I waited.

A full minute passed before he responded.

Joseph: That’s not a question Denver.

He was mocking me. I rolled my eyes in aggravation as I texted back.

Me: Never mind, Joseph.

I tossed my phone on the table and stabbed my fork into my sushi roll. I never learned how to use chopsticks.

“What’s wrong,” Jazz asked, with a concerned expression.

“Nothing,” I said, and continued to eat.

My phone lit up with another message from Joseph. I wanted to ignore it but knew that I wouldn’t.

I snatched the phone from the table and opened the message, apprehensively.

Joseph: Too late. Pack a bag. I’ll pick you up at 7.

“All better now?” Jazz asked. I looked up at her and she was grinning, and apparently, so was I.

“Yeah,” I said, “all better.”

.....

(Joseph)

“It’s so pretty in here,” Denver said.

I glanced down at her and chuckled. We had just walked into the ball hand in hand. She was looking around the room in awe.

“You’re so pretty,” I said. I lifted our interlocked hands to my lips and placed a kiss on hers.

She blushed as I led us further into the ball. It *was* nice. Someone had worked overnight to transform our school’s huge multipurpose room. The whole room looked like it was dipped in glitter. The plain white walls were covered in what looked like silver curtains; there were high tables in a few areas, each with a sparkly centerpiece on top. A huge chandelier now hung from the center of the room, and there were two dramatic thrones front and center. It would take them all night to get all this stuff down.

Because Denver and I left the coronation ceremony early, we were amongst the first people to make it to the ball. I chose the high table furthest away from the throne area and pulled out Denver’s chair. Once she was sitting, I took the seat across from her. I admired Denver’s beauty as she continued to scan the room.

*She could break me.*

I had no doubts about my feelings for Denver. I was in love with her. My issue was that I kept thinking about the day that I knew she would walk away. I knew it was inevitable, so I tried to prepare myself for it every day. I had talked to Trent about my thoughts, and he thought I was paranoid. He and JoJo believed that Denver was just as into me as I was her. I wasn’t so sure. I knew that she cared about me, but it couldn’t possibly match my feelings for her. There was no way that *anyone* loved a person as deeply as I knew I loved her. I was scared, and that was a first. Trent said that I just needed to embrace the blessing God gave me. I was trying, but it was hard to accept that I could have something *this* good.

I was struggling my way through my feelings about *God* anyway. I had been reading up on the Joseph guy that Denver told me about, and if nothing else, his story was interesting. I had questions, but I didn't want to ask Denver. I had a feeling that she would jump all over the fact that I was intrigued, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings if I decided that the whole Christian thing wasn't for me.

"What are you thinking about over there?" Denver asked. She reached across the table and took my hands into hers.

"You," I said, looking into her eyes. That was half-true.

"Good things I hope." I chuckled at her grin.

"Always," I told her.

I looked around and realized that a lot more people had made it into the ball. The soft jazz music that was playing before transitioned into hip-hop music. The lights had dimmed, and there were now disco lights shining around the room.

"Alright Trudale students, welcome to this year's coronation ball!" the DJ said. Everyone in the room clapped and cheered.

"Now, I need everyone to stand to their feet as we welcome our new Mr. and Miss Trudale University," he continued.

Everyone stood promptly, including Denver. I slowly rose from my seat. The DJ switched the music to a smooth sounding R&B song. Seconds later, the large doors opened, and the king and queen entered.

"I now present to you Jazziah Hayes and Anastasia Howard, Mister and Miss Trudale University!"

The crowd roared as Jazziah and Anastasia walked to the dance floor and began their dance together. Once the song was over, the DJ played a more upbeat song, and people started making their way to the dance floor. I guess the party had officially begun.

“Hey girl!” Denver’s friend, Jazmine squealed.

She had approached our table from behind me, so I turned to greet her.

“You look sharp Joseph! Did my best friend style you?” she asked after I released her from a short hug.

I chuckled, “No, I dressed myself.”

“Hmph,” she said, making me laugh again. She walked over to Denver and the two hugged like they hadn’t seen each other in years, even though they had just spent the entire day together. I shook my head just as someone behind me cleared his throat.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Vi, this is Jamison. We have a few classes together and he asked me to the ball earlier,” Jazmine said. Her eyes were on Jamison the entire time she spoke, and she was smiling lustfully. I glanced at Denver, and she had a confused look on her face for a second, before she smiled and extended her hand to the guy.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Denver and this is my boyfriend Joseph,” she said.

I shook his hand next and said, “What’s up, man?”

“Boyfriend, huh? Y’all are too cute. Anyway, Jamison and I are going to go dance, I’ll catch up with you later Vi. Bye, Joseph,” she sang and winked at me. I just laughed and nodded to her.

Once they walked away, Denver’s face transitioned back to the confused expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“She has a boyfriend. They’re long distance, but they’ve been together forever. He would flip if he knew she was on a date,” Denver said.

Just then, the music slowed down. I stood and grabbed Denver’s hand, leading her to the dance floor.

Once we made it, I held her waist and we fell into our first dance together.

“Worry about your friend’s love life tomorrow. Tonight, is about you and me,” I said.

Denver smiled and placed her hands on my chest as we swayed from side to side to the music. I had never danced before but doing it with her felt kind of nice.

She laid her head on my chest and we continued to dance in silence for a moment before she broke it with a question.

“Why have we never kissed?”

“Huh?” I asked. I heard her; I just wasn’t sure about how to respond. I wasn’t sure what I expected her to ask me, but that wasn’t it. Why *hadn’t* we kissed? If I was honest, I hadn’t thought much about it. I had never connected with a woman the way that I did with Denver. Hearing Denver speak— about anything— excited me. I couldn’t get enough of learning more about her. All of that was new for me, and I had been enjoying it. There was also the fact that I’d never kissed anyone before. I had had my share of sexual experiences, but kissing seemed too intimate for any situation I’d ever been involved in. I never wanted a woman to get the wrong idea about my intentions, but that had changed.

She lifted her head from my chest and looked into my eyes.

“Why haven’t we kissed? You say I’m your girlfriend, but you can tell me if we moved too fast with titles. I really care about you, but if you don’t feel the same, I—”

Lifting her chin with my finger, I cut her off by pressing my lips lightly against hers. *Wow*. If this is what I had been missing, I had been missing *out*. Being connected to Denver in this way intensified every feeling I had for her. It was like nothing I had ever experienced. She would never have to worry about not being kissed again, because just like that, I was addicted.

.....

(Denver)

When his lips met with mine, I stopped breathing for a second. Everything about this moment was perfect. Everything about *him* was perfect.

I moved my hands from his chest to his face, then parted my lips, inviting him to deepen our connection. I had never been kissed like this before. He tightened his hold on me and I melted. By now, we had stopped dancing, and it felt like no one was in the room but us. To my disappointment, Joseph pulled away, causing an involuntary pout to grace my face. Opening my eyes slowly, I gazed into his.

“You took my breath away,” I said. I was serious, but he let out a hearty laugh.

“Denver, what?” he asked, still laughing.

I hit him in the arm but repeated, “You took my breath away.”

He kissed my cheek and smiled. “You’re so corny,” he said.

I grinned. “I’m so serious. I stopped breathing for a minute because you took it away!”

Joseph kissed me again, but this time it was short lived.

“Whatever you say. You should have brought up this kissing conversation a long time ago, though. I didn’t know what I was missing,” he said and smiled.

I buried my face in his chest to hide my blush.

“Can we go?” I asked.

Grabbing my shoulders gently, he pulled me slightly back so that he could look into my eyes.

“We haven’t been here an hour, Denver,” he said.

“You care about staying? I thought you hated things like this,” I said, confused.

“It’s not my thing, but you’ve been talking about this the entire time I’ve known you. I want you to get the full experience,” Joseph said.

I looked into his eyes and couldn’t help the smile that consumed my face. *Could he be any more perfect?*

“I appreciate that, but I got my experience. It’s pretty in here, the queen looks amazing, and I got to dance with the most handsome guy here. I’d much rather order a pizza and watch movies with you,” I said.

He stared at me for a few seconds, likely trying to gauge if I was being honest or not. I was. The party was okay, but I was over it.

Joseph kissed my cheek and finally gave in.

“Alright, let’s get out of here.”

He grabbed my hand and led me through the thick crowd of people who had gathered on the dance floor. The lights were dim, but I could still see everyone. I got a little distracted admiring some of the girls’ gowns and bumped into someone.

“Oh, sorry,” I said. Joseph looked back at me to see who I was talking to, just as the girl I collided with turned around. *Oh no!* I felt like hiding under a rock. I had just bumped into the new Miss TU. She gave me a bright smile and I watched as she gave my appearance a once-over.

“No worries. Cute dress, girl. Where’d you get it?” She asked.

I glanced at Joseph, and he had an impatient look on his face that had me holding back a laugh. He was ready to leave!

“Thanks, uh- I made it,” I said.

She bucked her eyes and reared her head back.

Frowning a little, she said, “Excuse me?”

I gave her an awkward smile and said, “I made it. I design clothes.”

She lifted her eyebrows before smiling again.

“Wow! Well, it’s beautiful. What’s your name?”

“Denver Cartwright.”

“Denver, got it. I’ll see you around. Enjoy the party!” She said before turning back to her group of friends who were dancing and cheering each other on.

I turned to face Joseph, who hadn’t let go of my hand, and said, “Thanks for being patient. I’m ready.”

“Anything for you,” he said, and he led us out of the ballroom.

.....

(Joseph)

“Here you go. Let me know if you need something else,” Joseph said, handing me a towel and washcloth.

“I’ll wait for you in here,” he finished.

“Kay,” was all I managed to reply.

With my toiletry bag and pajamas in hand, I walked the short distance from the living area to his small bathroom and prepared for my shower. Once the water temperature was to my liking, I stepped inside and got lost in my thoughts.

Our night had been perfect. After leaving the dance, it was only 8:30, so Joseph suggested that we go to the movies. We loaded up on snacks at the grocery store and went to the last drive-in theater left in Atlanta. He insisted on a horror movie, and we had the best time yelling at the characters on the screen and getting to know each other even better. Now we were back at his place, and my thoughts were on the rest of the evening.

*Would tonight be the night?*

Joseph and I had been spending time together for about three months now, and as new as we were, I was surer about him than I had been about anything else in my life. He encouraged me to go after my dreams, and his confidence in my potential made me feel invincible. For the last month or so, all of my journal entries were about him and my thoughts on taking the next step in our relationship. I had never felt like sex was something I'd never do, but I had never encountered a person who made me consider going there. With Joseph, it was a constant thought. I loved him. I was in love with him, and with those feelings came desires that had never mattered to me before now.

I felt conflicted about my prayers, because I wasn't sure that God supported what I seemed to have my mind set on.

I was curious to say the least, and I wondered what his thoughts on the topic were. He didn't need to tell me that he had been intimate with more than a handful of girls, because it was obvious. Ever since we had made it official, he had been walking me to my classes when he

could. I had received glares from more girls than I could count, so I assumed they knew him in the way that I wanted to.

Shaking my thoughts, I finished my shower and completed my nighttime hygiene before dressing and leaving the bathroom. When I reentered the living area, Joseph was sitting in the center of his sofa with both his arms spread across the back of it. His long legs were spread lazily, and his handsome face was focused on the television. I glanced at it and chuckled at the fact that he was watching *Criminal Minds*. It was his favorite.

“You smell nice,” he said.

I glanced at him before walking over to my overnight bag and neatly putting my things away.

“Thanks,” I said. He rose from the sofa, and we passed each other as I claimed his seat.

“I’m gonna shower. Be right back,” he said.

“Kay,” I said for the second time that evening.

Crossing my legs on the sofa, I got comfortable and focused on the show. I had never watched it before I started hanging out with Joseph, but it was actually pretty interesting.

It wasn’t until the next episode began that Joseph came back into the room with a T-Shirt and basketball shorts on. He plopped down on the sofa next to me and stared at me for a moment. He did that often, and I usually ignored him, but tonight I glanced at him and asked, “What?”

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“You too,” I replied, grinning. He burst out laughing.

“Nah, I’m not. Handsome maybe, but not beautiful,” he said, smiling.

I laughed too and an involuntary yawn escaped my mouth.

“You sleepy?” He asked, placing his hand on my knee. That simple gesture sent chills up my spine.

“A little, it’s been a long day,” I said, honestly.

“Let me get you set up then.”

He stood and reached for my hand, which I gave him before standing. He led me to his bedroom. His bedroom was just as neat and orderly as the rest of his apartment. There was only a full-sized bed, a small dresser with a television on top, and a bedside table. On it was an alarm clock, a remote control, and a sketchbook. He turned down his gray comforter and reached for the remote control.

After he turned on the television, he approached me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I held my breath, anticipating his next move, and he didn’t disappoint when he lifted my chin and pressed his lips gently against mine. He released our lip lock and kissed my nose before he whispered, “Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Joseph stepped away and walked to his closet, coming out with another comforter and a small pillow. I frowned, confused.

“You’re not sleeping in here? With me?” I asked.

He smiled a little and said, “I think it’s best if I don’t. I don’t want us moving too fast, Denver.”

“Well, I do,” I said quickly.

“If I wanted to sleep alone, I’d be at my dorm, Joseph.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Joseph walked to the foot of his bed and took a seat. He patted the space beside him, and I obliged his request. Once I was seated, he glanced at me and reached for my hand, which I gave him.

“I love you,” he said simply. I snapped my head up and looked at him. We had never said those words to each other before, and even though I felt it, hearing him confess his feelings for me had tears welling in my eyes.

He kissed my hand before he continued.

“I’m in love with you, if I’m honest, and that’s new territory for me. I’ve been physically intimate with more than a few women, but I’ve never felt about any of them the way I feel about you. We’ve never had the conversation before, but I know that you’ve never done it before. I want that experience to be special for you, and I don’t want you to have any regrets after,” he said.

“But I won’t. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, and it’s what I want. With *you*. I didn’t text you randomly earlier. I’ve given this a lot of thought. I love you too. I’m in love with you, too, and I want to experience all of you. It will be special because you’re special to me.”

He stared at me for a moment, before smiling.

“You’re special to me too, and that’s why I want to do things differently. Taking things slow isn’t what I’m used to, but it’s what we need. It’s what *I* need. So let me have that, okay?”

I rolled my eyes and pouted, but I didn’t give him a response.

He laughed and kissed my cheek.

“I’ll sleep in here with you, but sleeping is *all* we’re doing. Let’s revisit this conversation in the morning, with clear heads. It’s been a long night, and I don’t want anything clouding your judgment. *Kay?*” he asked, mocking me.

Again, I rolled my eyes and snatched my hand away from his. I climbed into the bed and aggressively pulled the covers over my shoulders, turning my back to him. He just laughed and

after a moment, the lights were off. Next, I felt his hands wrap around me, and as annoyed as I was that he was being such a gentleman, I snuggled closer.

“Goodnight, beautiful,” he whispered.

“Goodnight, handsome.”

I was out in no time.

## Chapter Sixteen

(Denver)

It had been about a month since coronation, and life was good. I had gotten more involved with campus life, and I felt that I was finally finding my place at Trudale. Fashion Forward had begun their membership intake process immediately after homecoming week, and I was exhausted. The club didn't accept everyone, and all the candidates had to go through a series of challenges for the entire month, to see who would be selected. Most of the challenges were fashion related, but some were just for the entertainment of the selection committee. Like one day they sent us to the mall, and we had thirty minutes to select an outfit that would be appropriate to wear to a fashion show, but once we all came back to show the outfits, they asked us to model the outfits while singing the song of their choice.

It had been a lot of work, on top of juggling my course load, but I didn't mind it. It was actually kind of fun. I had also joined the campus activities board, so I had been attending a lot more campus related events. Regina thought that she was getting to me with all of the extra things she had me doing, like randomly asking me to go all the way to the cafe' to get her lunch or giving me a smaller window of time to complete some of the challenges, but I took it all in stride. Her immaturity was laughable, but I knew that I'd be an asset to this organization. Just as soon as I got in.

Regina was the FF president, but the entire executive board had to vote on the new members. I had made a good impression on most of them, despite Regina's antics. Even Jaden seemed to like me, and he was like Regina's minion.

As I made my way to the Fashion Department building, I took deep breaths. I really wanted to be a part of this club, but I knew that they were only selecting five new members. There were twenty of us competing against each other, so as good as I felt that I'd been doing, it could go either way. The announcement would be made in about fifteen minutes, but I had been a little early, at Regina's request. I spotted her immediately when I walked inside. She was sitting on a bench in front of one of the large windows in the lobby. She was talking on the phone but when she spotted me, she said a few more words and hung up.

I made my way over to her, knowing that she wasn't going to meet me halfway, and plastered on a smile.

"Hey, Regina. You wanted to see me?"

Regina took off the oversized sunglasses that adorned her face and gave me a once-over. She put the tip of the glasses in between her lips and tapped them with one of her long nails.

"Yes, I did. We have been deliberating about who would make the cut, and we just about have our list picked out. You've worked pretty hard over the last month, but so has everyone else.

Why should you get one of the spots?" she asked with a raised brow.

I cleared my throat, prepared to play her little game.

"Well fashion is in my blood. It's a part of me, and I love everything about it. I have so many ideas to contribute about events and—" She cut me off.

"All that sounds nice, Denver, but I'm not sure that you have the time to really invest in FF. All of our members have to be committed 100% and I'm not convinced that you're up for it."

“I’m definitely up for it. I’m a hard worker, and I fully intend to be an engaged member of FF,” I said.

“If you’re selected, that is.”

I exhaled and refreshed my smile. “Yes. If I’m selected,” I said.

“Here’s the thing. I’ve expressed to you before my hurt behind my breakup with Joseph,” she started.

*Breakup? They were never a couple. This girl was delusional.*

“And as a woman, I’m sure you can understand how hard it was to see him move on so quickly. If you’re going to be a member of this team, we’ll be spending a lot of time together. FF is like family. As family, I’m willing to forgive you for distracting, then stealing my boyfriend away from me, but only if you terminate the relationship,” she said matter-of-factly.

I almost choked on my own breath. *Was she serious?* I could hardly believe that she was giving me an ultimatum. Joseph or FF.

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“I most certainly am not. Once I made my concerns clear to the board, they agreed that it’s the only way we’ll be able to move forward. It’s your choice, Denver,” she said. Her expression displayed triumph, as she folded her arms and waited on my answer.

I refused to give her the satisfaction. I simply turned on my heels and left the building. There was no need to stay for the announcement since I already knew their decision.

Once I made it out of the building, I pulled out my phone and dialed the only person I cared to speak to right now.

“Hey baby, what’s up?” Joseph asked.

Tears welled in my eyes as I thought about what had just happened to me. I had worked for an entire month to be a part of this group, and Regina was denying me acceptance because of her entirely made-up relationship with my boyfriend.

“Can you meet me?” I asked. My voice shook involuntarily as I spoke.

“What’s wrong? Are you crying?” he asked. His voice was full of concern, and even in my sadness, I smiled.

“No, I’m not crying, but I do want to see you. Can you meet me in the cafe?”

He let out a sigh. “I can’t right now, Denver. I’m about to walk into this career fair, and you know that a representative from the Georgia Bureau of Investigations will be there, I—.”

I cut him off. “I completely forgot about that, I’m sorry. Good luck, I know you’ll do great.”

“Denver, are you sure you’re alright? What happened? Wait— the FF announcement is today. Is that what this is about?”

I smiled sadly. “We’ll talk later, go in there and kill it. I love you,” I said.

He hesitated for a moment before saying, “I love you, too. I’m picking you up as soon as I’m done.”

I hung up with him and called my best friend.

“Hey Vi! I just bought some cupcakes and ice cream to celebrate your good news! I know you got in,” Jazz said as soon as she answered the phone.

Her excitement caused the tears to start flowing as I walked through campus.

“No, I didn’t,” I said. I couldn’t mask the sadness in my voice.

“What?! Don’t cry, Vi. Forget about them, they don’t deserve you. Where are you?”

“Walking to the dorm?”

“Okay, good. I just got here too. We don’t have class tomorrow, so we can just have a girls' night. Me and you,” she said.

I liked the sound of that. Since I had started spending so much time with Joseph, Jazz and I hadn’t seen much of each other. I missed her.

“Me and you,” I confirmed.

As I continued to walk to my dorm, I decided not to worry about Regina or FF. Other opportunities would come, and I’d be ready when they did.

I sent Joseph a message saying that I’d see him tomorrow. Tonight, belonged to Jazz.

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(Joseph)

“Meet me outside of the Suites,” I said and hung up. I was furious. Denver and I hadn’t gotten a chance to talk last night, because she was enjoying time with Jazmine. I called her this morning because I missed her and wanted to take her to breakfast. It had become our thing to talk on the phone while we prepared for our day, and this morning, she told me about what had her upset. I couldn’t believe that Regina would stoop so low. Well, I guess I *could* believe it, because I never felt that Regina was that good of a person. It’s the main reason that I could never take her seriously romantically. I told Denver I had a stop to make before I picked her up, but actually, I was outside of her dormitory. I had a few things to say to Regina, and she was going to hear them now. She seemed excited about me calling, but all that was about to change. She skipped out of the front door smiling. I was sitting on one of the swing benches outside and she decided to sit right next to me, causing me to stand quickly. She frowned a little, but quickly recovered.

“JoJo! I’ve been missing you, what made you call?” she asked, innocently.

“I told you to stop calling me that, Regina. I’m here to ask you why you can’t leave well enough alone?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, your little girlfriend came crying to you because she wasn’t *good enough* for FF?” she asked.

“Good enough? Denver’s better than that stupid club, and you know it. You are the one who’s missing out by not choosing her. She’ll be fine, you can trust me on that,” I said, coldly.

She glared at me for a second before her eyes softened and tears began to form. *Here we go.*

“Why her? Why am I not good enough for you? I never complained, I always made myself available to you, and I even kept my mouth shut when I knew you were talking to other girls. Now this freshman walks in, and you make her your girlfriend? Something that you’ve never done with any girl,” she cried. “Why her and not me?”

I took a deep breath, trying not to lose my temper. “You and I had some fun together, but you were never my girl, and you know that.”

“Because you NEVER GAVE US A CHANCE,” she yelled. I glanced around the lot. It was about 8:00 in the morning, so there were only a couple of people outside, and they were now focused on us.

“Look. I don’t know what to tell you, Regina. I love Denver, and that’s all I can really say. I can apologize for hurting your feelings, because it wasn’t my intention, but Denver did nothing to you. I didn’t treat you as well as I could have, and for that, again, I’m sorry. I really hope you find some happiness, but Regina, you’re not going to find it with me. Okay?” I asked her.

I could admit that I hadn't been the best guy to Regina. I always treated her how she allowed me to. I had no issue admitting my faults, but I needed this vendetta she had against Denver to end.

"It's really over, huh?" She asked. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yeah, it is." My voice was gentle, but I said it with finality.

She wiped her tears and exhaled. "Okay. I won't bother you anymore. Have a nice life, Joseph," she said. Without another word, she turned around and stormed into the building.

I stood there feeling unaccomplished. I wasn't sure what I thought would come of our conversation. I half-hoped that she would offer Denver a spot in FF, but I should have known better. I'd have to settle for her agreeing to leave us alone.

I sent Denver a message telling her that I was outside and sat back on the bench. I let all thoughts of Regina fade away as I prepared to spend the day with my girl.

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Denver and I had gotten to my apartment about an hour ago after an eventful day together. After breakfast, we went to the mall and walked around for hours. I learned that window shopping was one of her favorite things to do, because looking at other people's designs "sparked her creativity". After the mall, we went to Valetti's, which was an indoor karting place. We played games, drove go karts, played laser tag, and ate a bunch of junk food. It was the most fun that I had had in a while. Now we were sitting in my living area, in our own worlds. She was on the sofa sketching out a design, and I was at my easel, painting a portrait of her from the night of Coronation. The picture I was referencing sat beside my easel and I couldn't wait to finish it up. It was going to be one of my best yet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Denver close her sketchbook and stand. She made her way behind me, and stood silently for a moment, likely observing my work.

“You didn’t tell me that you were painting me,” she said. I could hear the smile in her voice, but I didn’t turn around.

“I wanted to wait until it was done,” I said.

“Well take a break. I’m bored,” she said.

“Hold on.” I wanted to finish the bottom of her dress before I stopped for the night.

She let out a heavy sigh, and when I glanced at her, she was pouting. I shook my head and started cleaning my materials. She could get anything she wanted from me, and I was slowly beginning to accept it. I ignored her while I cleaned up, but I saw her grinning out of the corner of my eye. *Spoiled!*

Once I finished and sat on the sofa, Denver came and sat on the floor in front of me, with her legs crossed. She just stared at me smiling, which made me curious about her thoughts.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m going home tomorrow,” she said. Her smile dropped and her eyes grew sad.

*Don’t remind me.*

*Home* for Denver meant her parents’ house in Milton. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving, and she was waking up early in the morning to make the trip.

“You’ll be back in no time,” I said. I was attempting to reassure the both of us with my statement. I’d definitely miss her while she was gone.

Denver shrugged. “I guess.”

“I don’t want to talk about you leaving, Denver. Let me enjoy having you here,” I said.

She nodded and got up from the floor to stand in front of me. I knew something else was on her mind, so I just looked up at her and waited for her to express it.

“Today was fun,” she said.

“It was,” I said, still waiting.

“How do you end such a perfect night?” She asked with a shy smile.

I knew exactly what she was thinking. When I picked her up from breakfast, she came downstairs with an overnight bag. She hadn’t stayed the night at my apartment since coronation night, but Denver never had a problem saying what she wanted. She was looking to take this relationship to the next level physically, but I wasn’t so sure.

“With a movie?” I asked with a smile.

Denver hit me in the arm and rolled her eyes.

“What do you want, Denver?” I asked, just to mess with her. She hated when I asked her that because I usually knew the answer already.

Instead of responding with a sly comment, she lightly grabbed my face in between her palms and kissed me. She broke away for a second, stood and stared into my eyes, before leaning down and kissing me again. This kiss was different— a little more intense. As much as I wanted us to take our time to make sure she’d have no regrets, it was only so much temptation that I could take. With her determined lips pressed against mine, she drained every ounce of restraint that I had left.

*I wanted her.*

I broke away from our embrace and she looked disappointed.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked her. She had to be sure.

She kissed me again, lightly.

“Yes,” she said, with a confident smile.

That was all I needed.

I stood and reached for Denver’s hand before leading her into my bedroom and closing the door.

*She was right.*

It was the perfect end to a perfect night.

## Chapter Seventeen

*I needed to know.*

After the weekend with Denver and the memory of our first time, I was kind of on a high. She was at her parent's house for Thanksgiving Break, and I had been grateful for the space. I'd been at work every day, lost in my thoughts. Nothing about my life made sense right now.

As good as Denver and I had been, a part of me still felt like it was too good to be true. She came into my life like a whirlwind and made me... *feel*. She awakened things in me that I didn't know existed. I loved her, and I didn't love anyone— not outside of my family. JoJo and Trent were the only good things in my life, and the only people that I had ever felt for. The day that I almost lost JoJo is the same day that Denver and I fell into a groove that felt inevitable. Predestined. *Blessed*.

That word had been on my mind since the day that Denver spoke it to me. *Was I blessed?* I never believed that God wasn't real, just that he wasn't on my team. I just couldn't understand why He allowed me to experience the things I did as a child. I couldn't, however, ignore the fact that JoJo surviving her attack seemed to be a miracle. I felt like Denver was *my* miracle— my *blessing*. Was *He* behind that? Did He *give* me Denver? And if so, why? Was it because He finally decided that I deserved a win? *How kind of Him*. I didn't want to be disrespectful, but how would He justify the kind of stuff I carried from my past?

I had so many questions, so here I was, outside the doors of University Chapel. I didn't know what to expect, but I felt like I needed to confront God on my own. There were some

things about Him that I wanted to understand, so while I had the Sunday to myself, I took it as my opportunity to try to find out what He was all about.

I walked through the double doors just as the preacher started reading the scripture. As I took my seat, I heard him mention the name Lazarus. I focused on his sermon and felt myself settle as he gave the title of the sermon: "He Whom You Love." *Love*. there it was again. But this preacher was saying that aside from my family, aside from Denver - this Jesus loved *me*.

Tough. I reflected on the words of Lazarus's sisters I heard the pastor reference in the scripture. *If you would have been here*. And immediately, I was aware of all of my anger, and all of my *hurt*. If this Jesus loved me, where was He before? If He loved me, why would He let my life be so empty up 'til now? If He loved me, why would He let someone like Red anywhere near me or JoJo? If He loved me, why did I still feel trapped by all of this pain? I felt my eyes fill with tears, for the old and the new - I was upset about how ugly my past had been - so much so that I was struggling to accept the present at face value. I heard that familiar defeat whisper to me: *you don't deserve good things - you never have. This God's love isn't for you*. The tears betrayed me and slid down my cheeks. I was just about to leave my seat when I heard the man say, "He wanted you to know that the things He loves the most, He *kills* - the thing He loves the most, He lets suffer." That stunned me, and I was locked in. The pastor went on to talk about the sufferings of the "called." That as much as Jesus loved Lazarus, He intentionally let Him die so that He could have a moment for glory - so that other people would believe in Him. *Believe what*, I wanted to know. What was there to believe about Jesus? Was *I* one of the called? I surely knew suffering. What if God wanted to use my life for His glory? What if He wanted even *me* to believe?

I couldn't stop the tears. I felt my entire body heat up, and my mind frenzied with more questions, plus one sure decision: *I wanted to know Jesus.*

## Chapter Eighteen

(Denver)

"Hey Denver, how have you been?"

I turned around when I heard my name and saw Kevin heading my way on the promenade.

I gave him a small smile.

"Hey, I've been good, what about you?" I asked. He fell in step with me, and we began making our way to Calculus. Ever since I ended our date early, he had been avoiding me. I was sure that it was because he knew about Joseph and me. He always made sure to sit far away from me in class, and he never looked my way. I understood, so I just accepted the fact that he didn't want to be friends.

"I've been alright, just trying to manage all these classes," he said.

"Aren't we all," I said with a laugh.

An awkward silence fell upon us before he broke it with, "So you and our TA are a thing, huh?"

I glanced at him. I could tell that he knew the answer, but he wanted me to confirm.

"Yeah, we are," I said.

"Oh."

I took a deep breath before continuing, “Look Kevin, I think you’re really nice and I should have never accepted your date. I knew that I had feelings for someone else, and as handsome as you are, I couldn’t shake them. I’m sorry.”

We approached our class building and he held the door open for me. Once he entered behind me, he said, “I get it, and it’s cool. I guess I’m just kind of bummed. You’re a great person. I hope he knows what he has,” he said.

“He better,” I said and grinned.

We made it into the lecture hall and Joseph was already seated in his spot behind the professor. He looked from me to Kevin a few times, and I could see that he wasn’t a fan of me walking to class with him. I didn’t care. Joseph knew that my heart belonged to him. I’d never tell him who he could or could not be friends with, and he wasn’t going to do that to me. I grinned at him and blew him a kiss, forcing a smile on his face.

Kevin and I got settled in our chairs, just as Dr. S walked in and delved into his lesson.

We were reviewing for the final that we had to take in just two weeks, before Christmas Break, so I tried my best to focus. So far, this was the only course that I didn’t have an A in, and I was hoping to change that in these last few weeks.

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I was done with classes for the day and heading to the campus activities board meeting when my phone rang. It was an unknown number, but my phone filtered out spam calls, so I answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Denver Cartwright?” The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t yet tell who it was.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “Who am I speaking with?”

“This is Anastasia Howard. I’m— “I cut her off.

“Miss Trudale University!” I said, excited about the call. Every time I saw Anastasia on campus, she looked flawless. She truly carried herself like a queen, and she always had a smile on her face. She had been hosting really impactful events all semester and seemed like a nice person. She was one of those people that you just wanted to *know*.

She laughed and said, “Yeah, so I’m sorry to bother you, but I got your number from my friend Jaden. He usually styles all of my looks for my events, and when we were discussing gown ideas for the University Queens pageant, I immediately thought of you. You said you made your coronation gown, right?”

“Yes,” I said. I could feel my excitement building. The University Queens pageant was a big deal. Queens from historically black colleges all over the country competed in Atlanta for the title of Miss University. If she asked me to design her gown, it would allow a large population of people to see my work.

“Well, do you think that you could design something for me? The school gives me a budget for my gown, so I would pay you, of course, and it could be a great opportunity to get your work out there,” she said.

I screamed a little on the inside. This is something I’d do for free, but she was actually offering me a stipend. This day couldn’t get any better.

“Of course, I would, I’m so excited,” I admitted, making her laugh.

“Good! Well, I won’t take up any more of your time. Save my number, and we can discuss details soon. The pageant is right after Christmas, so if we could get the dress done before we leave for Break, that would be great.” Christmas break was in about three weeks. I would need to start sketching immediately, but I knew that I could get it done.

“That’ll be no problem, thanks so much for the opportunity!” I told her.

“No problem, talk to you soon.”

We hung up and skipped the rest of the way to the meeting. Today had been a good day.

## Chapter Nineteen

(Denver)

I sat on my bed journaling the many thoughts that had been consuming me for the past few weeks. I had been so busy creating a gown for Anastasia and preparing for finals, that I hadn't been able to process everything that had been going on with me. Now that finals were over and the dress was done, I was trying to sort my thoughts.

I hadn't told anyone, not even Jazz, that Joseph and I had had sex. I didn't have any regrets about my decision, I just wasn't ready to share it yet. We had been intimate on four different occasions after that, and we used protection every time. Every time except the first time. That was about a month since that time, and I had been noticing changes in my body. I didn't want to stress Joseph with my paranoia, but something was definitely different, and I needed to figure it out before I drove myself crazy.

"Do you want to go to the Kappa's party tonight?" Jazz yelled from her side of our suite. I closed my pen inside my journal and got up to walk over to her side of our room. Since there was a room divider between our beds I couldn't see her from mine, and she knew that I hated talking through the wall.

Plopping down on her bed, I said, "Sounds like fun."

I stared up at her ceiling, but I felt her eyes on me.

"What's wrong, Vi?"

"What do you mean?" I asked innocently.

She sat up and looked down into my face. "You've been a little quiet over the last couple of weeks. I know you've been busy with school, designing, and Joseph, but I think it's more than

that. I'm your best friend, Vi. What's up?" I looked at her, and the concern in her expression made me tear up. The tears made her frown even more if that were possible.

"Who did it? Was it Joseph? Did he break your heart? I'll kill him," she rambled. She looked so serious that I wanted to laugh, but my stomach lurched, and my mouth suddenly tasted like pennies.

I jumped up and ran to the bathroom, making it to the toilet just in time to release the contents of my breakfast. As soon as I flushed, I felt that same lurch in my stomach and I began heaving. I stayed in that spot, kneeled in the bathroom for what felt like hours.

"Here," Jazz said softly. I looked at her and she had a damp washcloth and a cup of water in her hand. I took both and sat down on the floor, leaning against the bathtub. She sat next to me in silence.

"I did it," I said simply.

Frowning, she looked at me and said, "Did what?"

I took a sip of the water and looked at her.

"I did it with Joseph."

I watched as understanding washed over her face.

"When?" She asked.

I stood, went to the sink, and began brushing my teeth.

"About a month ago," I said after I finished rinsing out my mouth wash.

"Oh," was all she said.

I looked at her and reached for her hands.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was processing it myself to be honest. It's like I'm so sure about Joseph and my relationship with him, but I can't act like God wanted me to do this. Now, I'm

hurling in the toilet with three pregnancy tests in my purse. Maybe it's my punishment," I said sadly. I began to sob uncontrollably, and my best friend pulled me into her embrace and rubbed my back as I released all the anxiety and fear I'd been harboring alone all week.

"Denver. No matter what you've done, you know that God isn't punishing you. That's not His style," she said. I could hear the smile in her voice on that last part.

"If you're pregnant, then we are going to focus on the blessing that comes with having a child. A blind man can see how much Joseph loves you, and you know that I have your back forever." Jazz sounded so confident, and I wanted that surety for myself. The truth was that I was scared out of my mind.

"And my parents?" I asked. I pulled away from her and looked into her eyes. Her face said it all. This wouldn't go over well with them.

"They love you, Vi. That's what I know for sure. The conversation is going to be hard, and I think you know that, but you're their child, and they are going to love you through this. If you need me there when you tell them, you know I will be," she said.

I wanted to believe that it was going to be okay, but my thoughts wouldn't allow it.

Jazz hugged me again then left the bathroom. I followed her to my side and watched her open my purse. When she turned to me with the pregnancy tests in her hands, I felt more tears spill from my eyes.

"Whatever these tests say, we'll figure it out. You don't have to tell anybody until you're ready, and no matter what, this situation isn't the end of you, Denver. Okay?" She said.

I nodded silently.

We went into the bathroom, and I took all three of the tests. While we waited on the results, Jazz prayed, and so did I. The minutes felt like hours, and I was stuck in a state of limbo. I just

felt so unsure about my future, but when the timer went off and we looked at the results, one thing was clear: *I was pregnant.*

## Chapter Twenty

(Joseph)

“Merry Christmas, Beautiful,” I said before running my hand across the top of my head.

Denver smiled and replied, “Merry Christmas, Handsome.” I frowned a little because although she was smiling, I sensed a sadness in her voice that I’d been noticing every day that we had talked while on Christmas Break. As I stared into her eyes on our video call, I felt helpless. Something was going on with her, and I could do nothing about it from Moultrie. Trent, JoJo, and I were celebrating Christmas together. I worked at the store for most of the Break, but I came down yesterday to spend time with my family. Denver had been home with her parents for the entire Break, so to say that I missed her was an understatement.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?” I asked.

She sat on her bed in silence, just holding the phone.

“Denver?”

“I’m okay. Well, there are some things I want to tell you— I need to tell you, and I will. I just want to do it in person.”

I felt a tightening in my chest. Had her father gotten to her? Had he finally convinced her to get rid of me?

My thoughts must have been all over my face because Denver said, “Joseph, I love you, and unless you no longer want me, I’m not going anywhere.”

I let out the breath I was holding and smiled. “I wasn’t thinking that.”

She rolled her eyes. “You definitely were, but I have to go. I love you and I’ll call you a little later,” she said.

Just as I was about to tell her that I loved her also, my phone was taken from me. I turned around to see JoJo now talking to Denver.

“Hey Sweet Girl! Merry Christmas,” my mother said cheerfully.

“Merry Christmas! I hope you have a great one,” Denver replied.

“You too! We miss you down here. When are you coming for a visit?” JoJo wasn’t happy that Denver wasn’t here for Christmas. It was our first time actually celebrating, and she was excited about it.

“I miss you guys too, and I will visit really soon, I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” JoJo said and handed me my phone.

Denver’s smile seemed a lot brighter after talking to my mother and it made me a little jealous.

“Well, I’m glad someone can get you to smile,” I said, only half-teasing.

Denver laughed. “Oh hush, crybaby. Just the thought of you makes me smile,” she said, cheesing.

“You’d tell me anything. I’ll let you go though, and I love you too.”

I hung up the phone and made it back into the kitchen.

JoJo and Trent’s girlfriend, Mya had the kitchen smelling amazing. I looked into the different tins and saw a turkey, ham, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and so many other dishes that I couldn’t wait to dive into. JoJo came over and popped me on the hand, so I recovered the tin of dressing and backed away from all the food.

“When are we eating? I’m starving,” I complained.

“Boy go sit in there with Trent, we’ll bring plates to y’all in a minute,” Mya said, taking a cake out of the oven.

“Exactly,” JoJo added.

I did as I was told, but not without swiping a piece of cornbread off of the platter the JoJo had just prepared. I laughed at the two of them yelling my name as I made my way to the living room with Trent.

He was sitting on the sofa in front of the TV, so I plopped down in the recliner adjacent to it.

He was watching a basketball game that he had recorded, so I tuned in and ate my snack.

“How’s everything been, Jo?”

“It’s been alright. I’ve been working a lot and applying for jobs so that I’ll be set once I graduate.”

He glanced at me, “Two more semesters and you’re out. We’re proud of you, son.”

My heart swelled at his words. We weren’t the most affectionate bunch, but we were family, and we loved each other. Making them proud made me happy.

“I know,” was all I said.

“How’s Denver?” He asked, still looking at the television.

My mood shifted a little at the mention of her name. I must have taken too long to respond, because Trent paused the television and sat up on the sofa.

“What’s up?” He asked simply.

I let out a heavy breath and shook my head.

“I don’t know. Something’s up. She’s been acting different lately, and she won’t tell me why. She says that it isn’t about us, but I’m not so sure.”

Trent was silent for a minute before he spoke up.

“Why aren’t you sure?”

“Because she’s been home for a whole week. Her dad hates me, and he doesn’t want us together. I don’t even know if she told him about us, but what if she did, and he finally convinced her to stay away from me?” I asked. Even speaking the words had my breathing feeling restricted.

“I highly doubt that son. I saw the way she looks at you. That girl loves you. A lot.”

“Yeah, but she loves her dad too,” I said and sighed again.

“Let me ask you this,” he started. I looked his way and waited for the question. “If she does decide to leave you alone, for the sake of her family, will you be, okay?”

*No.*

I shifted my gaze to the ground and said, “I’d be alright.”

“Oh really?” He asked.

I looked up at Trent again and he was smirking.

I shook my head and came clean. “Nah, I’m not gonna lie, it would mess me up.”

Trent’s grin transitioned into a full-blown smile. “I know. It would mess her up too though, son. She isn’t going anywhere, but whatever is bothering her, she’ll tell you when it’s time. For now, don’t stress about it. Let’s enjoy Christmas as a family, cool?” he asked.

“Cool,” I confirmed.

Mya walked into the room followed by JoJo. They handed each of us a plate, sat down on the sofa, and prepared to dig in. Right before Trent grabbed the remote to press play on his game, I spoke up.

“Uh- do y’all mind if I bless the food?”

All three of them looked at me surprised.

I hadn't told them that I had gone to church or that I had been doing a lot of research on faith in general. I wasn't ready to have the conversation, but I couldn't deny that the more I read the Bible, and listened to people speak about God, something in me was shifting.

Eventually, JoJo smiled and said, "Go right ahead."

"That would be really good, son" Trent added.

"Cool." I cleared my throat and bowed my head.

"Lord, thank You for my family. It's not many of us, but our bond is strong, and I'm realizing the blessing in that. Thank you for allowing us to be together today and thank You for making sure JoJo and Mya didn't mess up the meal, in Jesus's name, Amen."

They laughed and said in unison, "Amen."

We ate our meal, made small talk, and enjoyed each other's company. It was the best Christmas that I had ever had.

.....

(Denver)

"I'll get it," my dad said. He wiped the corners of his mouth with one of the Belgian linen napkins of our dining room table and stood to his feet. He was smiling, so I assumed he knew who our guest was.

"Would you like more iced tea, Miss Cartwright," Cynthia, one of the catering staff, asked me.

"No, thanks," I said and smiled.

"Are you okay, honey? You barely touched your food, and iced tea is your favorite," my mother said, concerned.

“She’s trying to watch her weight, Auntie. You know she’s probably scared to gain that Freshman 15,” my cousin Brandon joked. I rolled my eyes and his mother hit his arm.

“Hush, boy,” Auntie Wanda said.

“I’m just not feeling well today, Mom,” I said.

The truth was that I was afraid about my morning sickness. Since the day I found out I was pregnant, it had been difficult to keep food down. I also didn’t have much of an appetite. I was waiting until I got back into the city, and until I told Joseph-- to go to the doctor. I figured another week wouldn’t kill me. Joseph and I had plans to spend New Year’s together, so I’d tell him then.

My dad walked back in with his guest and I immediately felt nauseous. Not because of my baby, but because Justin was standing beside my father, wearing a suit and tie, with his eyes on me. He was smiling and holding a small velvet box. Whatever was in it better not had been for me.

“Look who decided to stop by, Daughter,” my dad said. He smiled and patted Justin’s shoulder, and Justin gave him a nod, but kept his eyes on me.

“Thanks Mr. Cartwright. It’s good to see everyone. How are you Mrs. Cartwright?” Justin asked in his prim and proper tone.

“Good baby. I’m doing good,” my mom said as Justin walked over to her and kissed her cheek. He greeted each of my family members before making his way around the long table toward me.

He leaned down and kissed my cheek.

“Hey, Beautiful,” he grinned.

I cringed at the sound of the word coming out of his mouth. That's what Joseph called me, and it just sounded *wrong* leaving Justin's lips.

I cleared my throat and forced a smile.

"Hello, Justin."

He reached for my hand, and I glanced at my father, who gave me a stern nod. I held in an eyeball and took his hand. When I was on my feet, Justin addressed my family.

"I have to admit that I didn't just come by to be social, I'm here on a mission—," he paused and looked at my father who signaled for him to continue.

"As you all know, Denver and I have been friends since childhood, and over the years our bond has gotten stronger and stronger," Justin said. He looked at me and smiled, while I tried to take deep breaths to calm my nausea.

*What was he talking about? Our bond sucked.*

"At some point our friendship turned into more, and I think that I can speak for the both of us when I say, we truly love each other."

He turned to me and got on one knee. When he grabbed my hand and opened the velvet box, I felt my breathing pick up, and I started to taste pennies. *Oh no.*

"I love you so much Denver, and I want to join our families and build the greatest partnership that Atlanta has ever seen. Denver Cartwright, will you marry me?" He finally asked.

*This couldn't be happening.*

"Uh, I don't feel so good," I managed to blurt out, before bolting out of the dining room. I made it to the half bath down the hall just in time to spew the iced tea I'd consumed into the toilet.

(Carlton Cartwright)

“I’ll go check on her,” my wife said, rising from her seat. I put my hand up.

No, it’s fine. I’ll go,” I said.

I had had enough of my daughter and her antics. I knew that she was seeing the Joseph boy romantically, even if the little pest Regina had stopped taking my calls. I was trying to be patient with her, but it was wearing thin.

A perfectly fine young man had just offered her partnership, and she ran out on him.

I heard her heaving in the guest restroom, so I stood outside the door for a second trying to calm my annoyance. I had already determined that the best way to get what I wanted was to play nice with my daughter. I had a plan in the works to get Joseph out of the picture, but I’d only go that far if it was necessary.

I knocked lightly on the door.

“Daughter, are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she said, breathless.

I pushed the door open gently. She was sitting on the floor, and she looked pale.

“I think I have a stomach bug or something,” she said quickly. “It must be the Mexican food from last night,” she continued.

“Let me get you to bed, sweetheart.”

I helped her to her feet and led her to the elevator. Once we got off on the second story of our home, I got her into bed and sat beside her.

I rubbed her back in silence for a moment before speaking.

“That proposal was unexpected, huh?” I tried. My daughter looked at me for a second before covering her eyes with a pillow.

“So, you had no clue that that was about to happen?” She asked.

I chuckled. She was smart. “He asked me a few days ago, and I gave him my blessing. He’s a great young man, Denver.”

She removed the pillow and sat up to make eye contact with me.

“But he isn’t for me, Daddy. He isn’t who I want. He never was,” she said softly.

I let off a short sigh.

“But how do you know that sweetheart, if you don’t give him a chance?”

“I know—,” she paused before continuing, “I know because I already have who I want, Daddy.”

I couldn’t help the scoff that I let escape.

“Oh, you know huh. And who is that?” I asked, even though I was fully aware of who she was talking about.

“It’s Joseph,” she said quietly.

“Joseph the *tutor*, you mean. The one who you assured me was only doing his job?”

“Yes him, daddy.” She let out a heavy sigh. “Look, it did begin as him just being my tutor, but I’ve gotten to know him so well over the past few months, and daddy, I really feel like he’s, my person.”

*Oh God.*

“He’s so kind and family oriented. His family may not have as much money as ours, but Joseph is at Trudale on a full academic scholarship. He is so intelligent. He’s the reason I got an A in Calculus. I just know he’s going to go on to do great things, and I really think you’d like him, daddy,” she rambled.

Denver grabbed my hand, causing me to look at her.

“I love him. And he loves me. He hasn’t been anything less than respectful and sweet to me since I’ve known him. I’m going to be with him, daddy,” she finished.

*Over my dead body.*

If her feelings for this boy had her standing up to me like this, then he definitely had to go. My mind started working overtime, trying to process how quickly I could set my plan into motion. If he wouldn’t leave my kid alone on his own, then I’d just leave him no other choice.

I forced a smile as I stared into my daughter’s determined eyes and lied through my teeth.

“Okay, Daughter. If you feel this strongly about him, then I’m willing to see what he’s about. I can tell that you really care about this young man.”

She smiled and looked relieved. *My sweet, naive, gullible little girl.*

“I do, daddy.”

I hugged her and tucked her back into bed.

“Okay, Sweetheart. I’m going to send Justin home if he hasn’t left already, and I’ll let the family know that you took ill. Get some rest.”

She smiled at me again as I patted her bed and headed toward the door. Once I had it closed, I headed to my study to make a call. I smiled as I dialed the number, because Agent Cheevers was going to help me get Joseph *far* away from my daughter.

“Hey, Special Agent Cheevers, Carlton Cartwright here. I was calling to discuss that student we talked about a few weeks ago.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

(Denver)

“5...4...3...2...1. Happy New Year!”

When the big peach dropped, Joseph grabbed me up and placed the sweetest kiss on my lips. I laughed and turned to Jazz, giving her a hug.

“Happy New Year, best friend,” I said.

“Happy New Year, Vi,” she responded, hugging me back.

“I don’t get one of those?” Joseph asked. I rolled my eyes and glanced at Jazz who just grinned.

“Happy New Year,” we both said to him in unison.

“Crybaby,” I added and hugged him right after.

“Jazmine, Denver, we’re about to go to ClubEleven. Isaac said that they aren’t checking for IDs tonight,” Adrienne, our suitemate said. A group of us agreed to meet at the Peach Drop ceremony, so that we could bring in the New Year together. We had had a lot of fun together, but I had no plans on trying to sneak into a 21 and older club. Looking at Jazz though, I knew she wanted to go.

She glanced at me and grinned. “I already know you’re going to say no, Miss Goody Two Shoes,” she joked. “I’m going to go with them, and I’ll call you once I get back to the hotel,” she said. Since the dorms didn’t open up until next week, Jazz and I had gotten a hotel, because we were both tired of being at home.

“You’d better,” I warned. She hugged me first, then Joseph.

“Be safe,” he said firmly, hugging her back.

“Yes sir,” she giggled. Before stepping away. I hugged my friends and told them that I’d see them when we all moved back on campus.

“What do you want to do?” I asked Joseph.

He kissed my forehead and responded, “As long as I’m with you I’m good. It’s up to you.”

“Pancake Shack?” I asked, prompting him to laugh. Pancake Shack was a small breakfast diner that stayed open 24/7. He had taken me there before and I fell in love with their pancakes and hashbrowns.

“Let’s go, Beautiful.”

We made it to his car, and he opened my door for me, as usual. Once we were on our way to the restaurant, my mind began to wander. In the last week, my morning sickness had ceased and was replaced by a monstrous appetite. I was so excited about the food I was about to order. I was also wondering if now a good time would be to tell Joseph about the baby. Call me crazy, but I didn’t think that he’d be upset. Not with me at least. I was hoping that he could be the calm in my storm of emotions because I was freaking out. Even with all the fears and anxieties I had, I knew that keeping this baby was the only option for me. I was afraid, but ever since the moment I looked at those positive results, I’d felt nothing but love for my unborn child. I just hoped Joseph felt the same.

Joseph glanced at me and asked, “What’s on your mind?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He glared at me before focusing on the road. We weren’t far from the restaurant, and I was contemplating whether or not to call in our orders, so that it would be ready when we arrived.

“Denver, something is up with you. Something’s been up with you for a while now. I told you that I’d let you wait until we were together again for you to come clean and now, we are. The

only reason I didn't bring it up earlier is because we've been with your friends all day. What's up?"

I took a deep breath and looked at him. "Can I tell you at the restaurant?" I pleaded.

He let out a harsh breath and muttered, "I guess, Denver."

(Joseph)

I watched as Denver started on her third pancake. She moved it from the stack to her eating plate, as she called it, then she cut it into tiny pieces. Once she drenched it in syrup, she took a forkful and stuffed it into her mouth. I wanted to smile at how cute she looked, but I was too annoyed for that. Whatever she had been keeping from me was bothering me more than I wanted to let on. Despite what my family told me, I was thinking the worst, and I needed her to spit it out so that my mind could be put at ease. *Or so that I could start picking up the pieces of my broken heart*, I thought, lamely.

"I'm listening, Denver," I said, prompting her to stop chewing and put her fork down. She began chewing again, slowly, before she knocked the wind out of me with her next words.

"I'm pregnant, Joseph."

I blinked a few times, and just stared at her, silently processing.

*Pregnant?* But how? We had always used protection... *didn't we?* My head dropped as I recalled our first time together.

I looked into her eyes, and instantly felt terrible. I could see her heart breaking because of my silence. A tear slid from her eye, but she wiped it quickly. I rose from my side of the booth, and slide in next to her.

Wrapping her into my arms, I kissed her forehead, both cheeks, and then her lips.

I held her tightly and she sniffed a few times before asking, "Are you mad?"

I pulled back a from her, only enough to look her in the eye.

“No, not at all. I was just processing the news. It’s still sinking in, but I promise I’m not mad.”

She nodded her head and sniffed again, before laying her head back on my chest.

“I’m keeping the baby,” she said.

“You’d better be.” I wanted this. I never counted out having kids, I just never thought much about it. I shut myself off to love, so I guess I just figured that children would never happen for me. I hadn’t had the best upbringing, but my sister and Trent were great examples of how to love a child. All I had to do was follow their example, and I was sure I’d be fine.

“Have you made a doctor’s appointment?” I asked her.

“Yeah, it’s on Tuesday. Are you going to come?”

“You know I am,” I said, and kissed her forehead again, before releasing her.

She picked up her fork and started back eating.

“I’m scared,” she admitted.

“As long as you have me, there’s no need to be afraid. I promise that I have you both. Forever,” I vowed. I meant it too.

She gave me a small smile. “I know.” She continued eating, and I watched her silently, until she said something that I hadn’t considered.

“What about my father?”

“What about him?” I countered quickly. I knew that he wasn’t a big fan of me, but now it was bigger than the both of us. I was about to become a father, and he’d be a grandfather. I could understand how this situation may make him feel, since Denver was his little girl, but I couldn’t worry about it. He would either accept us or not, but the *us* was happening.

Denver sighed. "I'm just kind of nervous to tell him. I told him that you and I were a couple while I was home, but he doesn't know that we..." her voice trailed off.

"I'll be right there with you when you tell him. I told you I got you. I need you to trust that. Okay?"

She looked at me, and I wasn't feeling the uncertainty that I saw in her eyes, but I'd prove to her soon enough that I meant what I said.

I was in love with Denver and this baby. *They were mine.*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

(Denver)

“You’re my best friend, you should be loyal to me,” I said folding my arms. Jazz decided to ignore me and turn the music on the radio up. I felt myself pouting but I couldn’t help it. It was Valentine’s Day, and I was sitting in the passenger’s seat of Jazz’s car with a blindfold over my eyes. She had been conspiring with my boyfriend to pull off whatever surprise he had in store for me, and I was so over it.

Last week, she told me that I needed a red dress, which I had to buy, because there wasn’t enough time to make my dress and do my schoolwork. Now, we had been in the car for about thirty minutes, I couldn’t see anything, and I was starving! *We had better be on the way to a restaurant.*

I felt the car slow down and she lowered the music’s volume.

“Hey, we’re parking now. You want to meet us out here or should we come to you? Got it, okay bye.”

“Ugh!” I groaned.

I heard Jazz laugh. “You are such a spoiled and dramatic brat!” I listened as she turned the car off and unbuckled her seatbelt. Then I heard the car door open and seconds later, I felt the cold wind against my cheek because she opened my door. I was holding on to my phone and she grabbed it out of my hand.

“Hey!” I yelled.

She ignored me for the second time in about ten minutes, and I felt tears building in my eyes. I sniffed to try and stifle them, but one escaped anyway. I had been crying way too much lately.

I heard Jazz laugh again. “My little niece or nephew really has you on an emotional rollercoaster. Come on now Denver, be a good sport. Your boyfriend is trying to do something nice for you, and I’m being a great best friend by helping him with his surprise. Once you see it, you’re going to love it, so save these tears for the big reveal.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled.

She sighed. “Here.”

She put my headphones on my ears and my favorite R&B artist began singing softly in my ear. *Great!* Now, I can’t see *or* hear. Jazz grabbed both of my hands and helped me out of the car. I had on flat shoes, but there were heels in my bag. I was glad because I felt like I’d fall at any second. Surprisingly, Jazz did a great job of leading me to our destination and shortly after what felt like a quick elevator ride, she let my hand go and the music stopped.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Duh!” I snapped. My attitude had also not been the best lately.

She just chuckled and removed the headphones and blindfold.

*Oh. My. Goodness.*

Jazz was right. *This* is what I needed to save my tears for. It was perfect and I was speechless.

I was standing at the entrance of a really nice hotel suite, but it had been transformed into something magical. Red, white, and gold balloons covered the entire floor and ceiling, and a single red rose hung from each balloon string. The suite had a kitchenette with a bar that housed several food tins, and I noticed a bottle of sparkling apple cider chilling in an ice bucket. Beside

the ice bucket was a painting of Joseph and me. It was the one that he was working on from coronation night, and he did an amazing job.

It was all so beautiful, but the *best* part was the man standing in front of the window. With his hands folded behind his back and the cutest smile I'd ever seen, Joseph looked like perfection. His hair and goatee were freshly trimmed. This was the second time that I had seen him in a suit, and I made a mental note to encourage him to wear them more often. To say that he cleaned up nice would be an understatement.

"Come here," he said softly. I kept my eyes on him as I made my way through the balloons. I bypassed the bed, then the kitchenette. Finally, I had made it to him. He reached for my hands and kissed them, before clearing his throat.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Beautiful," he said smiling.

Unable to speak, I pressed my forehead against his chest and let my tears fall. His chest began to vibrate, and I looked up to find him laughing.

"It's not funny," I whined.

"Your dramatics are *very* funny but you're cute, so I'll let it slide."

I released one of my hands from his grasp so that I could pat my tears away. I hoped that my make up wasn't ruined.

"How much did all of this cost?" I asked.

"None of your business," he said.

"I can't believe you remembered," I said. One day I was looking through my social media app and saw a hotel suite decorated similar to this one. I thought it was the sweetest thing ever and I showed it to Joseph. He laughed and called it corny, but he must have kept it in mind. I told him

that I wanted the exact same thing if he ever decided to propose to me. *Wait*. Is that what this was?

Slowly, I took a step away from Joseph and eyed him carefully. I zeroed in on his pockets, and they looked to be empty. Hmm... no ring box there. Maybe I was crazy, and he really was just doing something nice for Valentine's Day. I looked back into his eyes, and I saw amusement dancing inside them. Almost like he knew exactly what I was doing. No, I wasn't crazy. *It was here somewhere*.

"Looking for something?" He asked, clearly tickled. I didn't give him the satisfaction of letting him know that I was searching for a potential ring.

My response came out slowly, because I was still trying to think of where he might be holding a ring. "No, I was just—," I paused. Wait! Jazmine! Obviously, he gave it to her for safe keeping so that I wouldn't see it immediately.

I turned around quickly and saw my best friend still standing at the door and she was grinning like the Cheshire cat. Something on the wall above the bed caught my eye and when I looked over at it, my knees buckled. I felt Joseph's arms around me immediately to hold me up. On the wall in red balloon letters read the question, "Will you marry me?" I saw a flash come from the door, and it was Jazz taking pictures on her phone. I dropped my eyes to the rose petals on the bed and noticed that they were in the shape of a heart. In the center of the heart was a small black box.

"Are you okay to stand?" Joseph asked from behind me. I simply nodded, and he let me go and walked toward the bed. He grabbed the black box, then approached me again. My tears were burning my face, but they wouldn't stop flowing. Was he really about to do this?

Joseph opened the box, and inside was the most beautiful princess cut diamond I had ever seen. It wasn't extravagant, but it was elegant and *perfect*. I looked from the ring to his face and the humor had been replaced with a look of nervousness.

“Luckily for me, I’ve been working on my credit since freshman year. When I saw this, I knew that you had to have it. It was expensive, but Trent helped me with the down payment for it. I don’t know how long I’ll be paying this ring off, but if it makes you half as happy as you’ve made me, then it’ll be worth every penny. It would probably take a lifetime to tell you how much you mean to me. Before you, I was a cold, rude, recluse, who never thought I had the capacity to love a person. *Since* you, I’m a man who smiles. I’m still getting used to the sound of my own laughter, because I never did that before I met you. You make me feel like I deserve happiness. You’ve opened my eyes to things that I had never considered. Before you, I felt like God had abandoned me. I really thought He hated me, but now I’m convinced that I have to be one of His favorites, because he blessed me with the girl of my dreams. I know we’re young, and this is only your first year of school, so we don’t have to make it official until you’re ready, but I *know* that you’re it for me. I want you to know that I’m in this. I’m committed to you and the family that we’re about to start. I love you so much. Marry me, Beautiful,” he said.

When he finished his speech, I began sobbing uncontrollably. He hugged me tight, and I cried harder. *He really loves me.*

“Tell that man yes, girl!” I heard Jazmine yell from the door.

Remaining in our embrace, I looked up at him and whispered, “Yes.”

Jazmine started screaming and Joseph laughed while wiping my tears. I pulled away from him and let him put the ring on my finger. *Perfect fit!*

Wow. I couldn't believe that I had a fiancée'. I wasn't sure about what my future held, but I knew that I could face it with Joseph beside me.

After composing myself a little, I smelled the air and my stomach growled. I glanced at the tins of food and back at Joseph.

"Can we eat now?" I asked.

He and Jazz burst out laughing, but he got a plate from the bar and said, "Anything for you, Beautiful."

.....

(Denver)

"No matter how this conversation turns out, you're going to be okay."

I looked over at Joseph and he seemed carefree. I wanted that for myself.

"You think so?" I asked him.

He glanced at me before taking his right hand off of the steering wheel to grab mine. He kissed it and nodded. "I know so, Beautiful."

We were headed to talk to my parents about the developments in our relationship and our lives in general. I had been to the doctor and our baby was doing well. I was officially 13 weeks along, and it had become slightly noticeable. My belly was only going to get bigger, so it was time for me to tell them. You could really only see that I was pregnant if I had on a form fitting, blouse, so I had been avoiding those. Today, I wore a black oversized collared shirt dress with long black boots. I had changed a million times, because my paranoia had me feeling like my belly protruded more today than it had in the last few weeks.

Joseph pulled into one of the parking spaces, and I felt my heartbeat quicken. I couldn't remember the last time I had morning sickness, but I was positive that I'd hurl if I even opened

my mouth. Joseph exited the car and came around to let me out. He kissed my cheek and grabbed my hand, sliding the ring off. I frowned at him, confused. "I know you're nervous, and I think it'll be better for you if we ease into all the news we're sharing today. I don't need you stressed, and if the first thing they see is this ring, it might cause that." He placed it in his pocket, and I let out a sigh of relief. I had accepted the ring from Joseph, so I wasn't going to take it off, but I was glad that he had thought to do it. Seeing the ring could definitely start this conversation off on the wrong foot.

Joseph held the door open for me, and I headed straight for the hostess. "Welcome to Melon! Do you have a reservation?" She asked.

I smiled. "Yes, four for one o'clock. The name is Cartwright."

She checked her list, then smiled again.

"Got it. Right this way." She led us to our booth and Joseph allowed me to slide in first before sitting next to me.

"As soon as your other guests arrive, I'll seat them promptly. A server will be here shortly for your drink orders. Enjoy your lunch at Melon," the hostess said.

"Thanks," I smiled brightly. I loved great customer service.

"Are you alright?" Joseph asked me.

"I'm getting there," I said, honestly. I kept reminding myself that no matter what my father said, the end result was not changing. I *was* having a baby, and when I was ready, I was going to marry Joseph Crews.

The server came and took our drink and appetizer orders. I got water and iced tea, and Joseph stuck with water only. I ordered crab fondue while Joseph elected to have no appetizer. Once she

brought our drinks out, I saw my parents approaching the table, my mother with a bright smile and my father with a scowl. Joseph saw them coming and stood.

When they approached us, he said, “Good afternoon, I’m Joseph Crews. Nice to see you both. He shook my mother’s hand first, but she pulled him into a hug before leaning into the booth to kiss me on my cheek. My father glared at Joseph for a long minute before glancing at me and letting out a harsh breath. “Hello, Joseph, good to see you,” he said and shook Joseph's hand.

I smiled. *Maybe this won't be so bad.*

My parents took their seats across from us, and the server came out promptly to place my appetizer on the table and take all of our food orders. I quickly blessed my food and dug in. The fondue smelled amazing.

“So, what’s this about, Daughter. From our conversation on the phone, I assumed that this was a parent-daughter date. I didn’t expect anyone else,” he said in a professional manner.

“I know, daddy, but I didn’t know if you’d show up once you knew I was bringing company. Joseph wanted to see you guys,” I said, sweetly. As much as I had grown up this year, I still reverted back to my ‘innocent daughter act’ whenever I was around my father. It was automatic it seemed.

“Is that right?” My father asked, focusing on Joseph.

“That’s right,” Joseph said, confidently. “I care a lot about your daughter, and I wanted to make my intentions with her clear. If I’m being honest, I love her, and I know that it’s important to her for you to be okay with our relationship. She’s important to me, so I want to do all I can to make that happen,” Joseph said. I had to bite the inside of my cheek so that I wouldn’t smile. He was respectful, but he clearly wasn’t kissing up to my father. I wasn’t sure how Carlton Cartwright would feel about that, but I was loving it.

“You love her, huh? And how is this love going to benefit my daughter’s future? It isn’t so great when you’re *in love* and homeless because you can’t support yourself.”

“Daddy!” I interjected, but Joseph placed his hand gently on my thigh.

“It’s okay, Denver,” Joseph said.

“You may be right about that, but I don’t intend to be homeless. I didn’t come from the most ideal home environment, but I’ve worked hard to be where I am today. I support myself just fine, and I maintain a 4.0 grade point average to ensure that I can do that on an even grander scale once I graduate. I’m not rich, but I *am* determined. I’m going to be just fine, and if Denver chooses to stick with me, I can assure you that she will be too.”

I glanced at my mother first. She was smiling and nodding at Joseph’s words, but my father just stared at him with an arrogant smirk.

“I hear you young man. I guess time will tell. So, is that what this lunch was about, so that he could present that little speech?” my dad asked, looking at me.

Just then, the server came out with a tray of mouth-watering dishes. I ordered the lollipop lamb chops with broccolini and red-skin mashed potatoes, while Joseph got a salmon filet with the same side dishes as me. My mom chose to order only a shrimp Caesar salad, while my father ordered a 16-ounce ribeye.

I blessed the food for the table, and we ate silently for a while before I took a deep breath and decided to respond to my father’s last question.

“No Daddy, that wasn’t the only reason that I asked you to lunch today. I took a deep breath and reached for Joseph’s hand under the table. I looked at both my parents, and my mother looked concerned, while my father looked angry.

“Spit it out, Daughter,” he said impatiently.

“During Christmas, I told the both of you that I don’t just care about Joseph, I love him. Well, a result of the love that we share is the baby that I’m carrying, and—.” My mom cut me off.

“What did you just say?” she asked with her voice shaking. I was afraid to look at my father, but I did anyway. He wasn’t looking at me though, his eyes were trained on Joseph, and they looked deadly. Joseph maintained eye contact with my father, but he squeezed my hand supportively.

“I’m pregnant. I know that it isn’t ideal, but I fully intend to still get my degree and be just as successful as you planned for me to be,” I said.

“You sure will be, because you’re not keeping it,” my dad said in a cold tone. He was talking to me, but still looking at Joseph.

“Yes, I am, Dad. I know you’re disappointed, and I can’t say that I don’t understand that, but I’m not running from this. Joseph and I—.” This time my dad cut me off.

“Are done. I’ve been playing along with this pointless relationship, but I’m bored with it now, and it’s over.” My father finally peeled his eyes away from Joseph and looked at me. “You’re my daughter. Everything that you are, I allowed you to become. You move to the beat of my drum, not his. You aren’t having the baby of some Thomasville bred low life who’s the son of a prostitute!” My dad yelled.

Joseph stood quickly. I looked up at him and his eyes looked just as threatening as my father’s. When he spoke, his voice was low, yet powerful, and it was laced with venom. “You’re her father, and I respect the role you play in her life but watch yourself. You don’t know anything about my family, and you never need to let me hear you speak an ill word about them again,” Joseph finished. My dad simply smirked, arrogantly.

“Is that a threat, son?”

“I’m not your son, but she is your daughter, and she loves me. That baby she’s carrying, that’s happening, and I pray that you can get off your high horse long enough to love and support Denver the way that she desperately wants you to. She wants your blessing, but I don’t need it. Do the right thing for your daughter.”

Joseph looked at me and said, “Stay as long as you need to. I’ll be right outside.” He pulled out his wallet and placed three crisp twenty-dollar bills on the table. I stood and exited the booth.

“No need, I’m ready to go, now.”

My dad laughed. “Denver, sit down. You’ve gotten yourself in enough trouble as it is. Don’t make it worse.” He began eating his food like he didn’t have a care in the world.

My father’s words hurt me, but even more than that, they made me angry. He really didn’t think much of me at all. He felt that I was his little puppet to do with as he pleased. Well, those days were done. It was time for me to grow up and *stand* up for myself. It was time to show my father that although I respected him, I made my own decisions, and the first step was leaving this restaurant with *Joseph*.

“No, I’m leaving, Dad. I never realized how small I am to you, but I can see clearly now. I love you both, so much,” I started and looked at my mom. She had been quiet this entire time, but her cheeks were stained with tears. I continued, “but if you can’t accept the direction in which my life is moving, then I’m not sure where that leaves us. I am having this baby. I am marrying Joseph. I hope that one day you both can accept that.”

I turned and grabbed Joseph’s hand and we began to walk away, but my father’s words stopped me cold.

“Over my dead body, Denver. I will never accept the mess that you insist on making of your life. If you walk out that door with that boy, you are no longer my daughter.” My heart shattered

at his words. Did he really want his plan for my life more than he wanted our relationship? His ultimatum broke something inside me, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing how badly he just hurt me.

I kept my back to my parents and looked into Joseph's eyes. They were filled with hurt, concern, and love... *for me*. That was going to be enough to get me out of this restaurant without completely breaking down.

"Let's go," I whispered. He stared at me for a second longer, before leading us away.

Just before we walked off, I heard my mother cry, "Carl, do something!"

He responded with, "No."

Joseph helped me into the car, and I waited until he made it inside before I broke down. He lifted the armrest that separated us and pulled me into a warm hug. I cried for what felt like forever, and he let me. After my loud sobs turned into quiet weeps, Joseph spoke up.

"Just give it time, Beautiful. Your dad loves you, and he will come around. It won't be today or tomorrow, but he will. You have to trust that." I shook my head aggressively.

Looking into Joseph's eyes, I said. "No. He won't, and I don't want him to. He just said that I'm not his daughter anymore, Joseph."

"He didn't mean that," Joseph said.

"He did, but that's okay. You told me that as long as I had you, I'd be okay," I reminded him.

"I meant it too," Joseph said, his eyes serious.

"I believe you. The only thing he can take from me is his money. I have a full ride to Trudale, so he can't take school from me. When you graduate, I'm with you. Thanks to you, I've been able to maintain my 4.0, and I'm sure I can get into school almost anywhere. For fashion, this

time. I'm done living for him, Joseph. I have a child growing inside me. It's time for me to stand on my own."

Joseph stared at me silently and he looked conflicted. I was sure that he was trying to choose his words carefully. He didn't care for my father, but he still respected the fact that he was my father. He didn't want to play a part in a decision to cut ties with my father, but I didn't need him to. The decision was mine and I made it. Finally, he kissed my forehead and then started the car.

I sat back in my seat as Joseph drove us to our next destination. Things were a mess and a part of me felt broken, but as I looked out the window, I smiled. Making the decision to actually live my life made me feel like a burden had been lifted. I didn't know what would happen next, but whatever it was, I was facing it head on.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

(Denver)

“Denver, this is going to be amazing! I’m so excited,” Tressa said. I smiled as I made my way back to my seat. We were in a campus activities meeting, and I had just presented an event idea to the team. National Poetry Month was slowly approaching, and I felt that it would be a great idea to host a poetry slam on campus. Our school was full of talent, and I felt that we needed to highlight more of it. I told the team that it didn’t have to stop at the poetry slam. We could host showcases regularly to highlight different avenues of art, like dance, drama, painting, and even fashion. I told them about my experience with Fashion Forward and how so many other talented fashionistas don’t get to show their talent because FF is so selective. They were the premiere fashion organization on campus, but they didn’t have to be the *only* group who hosted fashion related events. The team loved my ideas, and were now talking amongst themselves, brainstorming other creative showcases that we could host.

The meeting was officially adjourned so I gathered my things and headed for the promenade. I sent Jazz a message asking if she wanted to go shopping the next day. It was Friday, and I was looking forward to a relaxing weekend. I had had a long day of classes, then I had my club meeting, so now I was ready for a nap. I never took naps before I got pregnant, but now, it was my favorite pastime.

“Denver, hey!” I looked up and it was Anastasia.

I gave her a warm smile, “Hey! How are you?” I asked.

“I’m pretty good, just trying to manage school and queen life,” she said and smiled. “Have you been on your social media app lately?” She asked me.

I frowned, trying to think of the last time I posted on social media. It had been a while. If I wasn't in class, tutoring, or doing something for the campus activities board, then I was napping or eating.

"Not in the last few weeks, no. What's up? Have I missed something?"

Anastasia grinned. "You definitely have. Go check it right now," she said, giddily.

Confused by her excitement, I frowned and opened up my app. I assumed that she wanted me to check her profile, but before I could, I noticed that my direct message icon had over 20 new messages. I didn't have many friends, so that large number wasn't normal for me.

"Do you have a lot of messages?" Anastasia asked. I glanced at her before looking back at my phone. She was still grinning.

"How did you know?" I asked as I clicked on the icon.

"Read one," she prodded, ignoring my question.

The first message was from Miss Texas College. She said that she loved Anastasia's dress for the pageant and wanted to know if I could design one for her for a gala that her school was hosting. I clicked another and it was from the queen at Cromell College. She wanted to know if I designed anything other than gowns. A woman named Mrs. Childress who owned an event coordinating company, messaged me. She explained that she specialized in college coronations and a big part of her job was grooming and styling collegiate royal courts. She wanted to know if I was interested in designing specifically for the courts that she worked with. There were several more messages from University queens all over the country and they were all talking about Anastasia's dress. That design was some of my best work. I had put a lot of time into it and put my focus on making her stand out from the rest of the queens in the most elegant way. I guess that mission was accomplished.

“Oh my God,” I said quietly as I opened the messages one by one. “Did you do this?” I asked Anastasia.

I looked up at her and she shook her head. “No, you did that. All I did was post a picture of myself looking beautiful in your gown. The picture got 15 thousand likes and hundreds of comments. People I met at the pageant had been asking me about my designer, so I gave them your social media handle, but a lot of them had said that they hadn’t heard from you. If you really want a career in fashion, this could be a great opportunity to jumpstart it. If you feel like you could balance picking up a few jobs with your course load, then you should do it, girl. This is big!” She squealed.

I laughed because Anastasia and I barely knew each other, but she seemed genuinely happy for me. I knew I liked her.

“Thank you so much, Anastasia. None of this would be possible if you hadn’t given me the opportunity in the first place,” I said holding up my phone.

“It was my pleasure, you just remember to put me at the top of the list once you make it big,” she joked. I laughed and assured her that I’d always make her fashion needs a priority before I walked away.

I called Joseph to share the news, but remembered that he was at work, and would be there until they closed later that night. He was scheduled to work all weekend, and he never had time to check his phone during his shifts. He had been taking on as many hours as possible lately, and I knew it was because of the baby. He had been applying to so many jobs in his career field, but nothing had come around yet. He was getting stressed but tried his best not to show it. I was confident that everything was going to work out just as it should, and I was trying to get him on the same wavelength.

When I made it to my dorm, my phone rang, and I glanced at it before pushing the entrance door open. It was my mother. I hesitated before answering the phone, because it had been almost a month since we had spoken to each other. She never reached out to me after the disaster of a lunch, and it hurt my feelings. I knew that her distance was because of my father, but I had hoped that just maybe she would have chosen me this time. Against my better judgment, I answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Baby! It’s so good to hear your voice. Miss you so much,” my mom said.

“You haven’t had to miss me. You chose to,” I said, defensively.

“You’re right about that, but I want to fix it now. Please let me, Denver,” she pleaded. She sounded sincere, and I broke easily. I loved my parents, and I wanted them in my life. If my mom really wanted to mend what was broken, I was all for it.

“Okay,” I said simply.

“Seriously?” She asked surprised. I guess she expected me to give her a hard time.

“Seriously,” I confirmed.

“That makes my heart so happy, Denver. So, are you busy this weekend? I was thinking that I could pick you up and we could go to our favorite spa resort like we used to. I’m sure you and that baby could use some relaxation, and I just want some time with you,” she said.

I pondered the idea. I could use a getaway, and I loved Chateau Milan. It was a secluded resort about two hours away and they offered an array of luxury services. My mom and I used to go once a month to get away from everything. Phone service was spotty and there were no other buildings around the resort for at least a mile, but for the money that you had to pay to stay there, everything you’d ever need would be on hand.

Joseph was working all weekend, and Jazz had just texted me back saying that she was going to visit her parents, so I guess I could spend the weekend getting pampered with my mom.

“Okay, mom. When are we going?” I asked.

“I’m about to get in the car to pick you up now. Go ahead and pack a bag,” she said.

“Okay, see you soon,” I said and hung up.

I tried to call Joseph again, but his phone was going straight to voicemail. I hoped that I would get a chance to speak with him before we got to the resort, because it was so hard to make phone calls out there. I decided to send him a text message just in case.

**Me: Hey, Handsome. I’m going somewhere with my mom this weekend. Call me when you leave work. xoxo**

The message wouldn’t deliver, which made me frown. His phone must have died while he was at work. I made a mental note to make sure it was sent in a couple of hours.

I made my way to my room to pack a bag and wait on my mom. This impromptu getaway was unexpected, but I was looking forward to it.

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(Charlotte Cartwright)

“I’m really glad you called, Mom,” Denver said and smiled.

I glanced over at her and smiled before looking out of the window. Charles, our driver, made eye contact with me through the rearview mirror, and I quickly looked away. Charles and I had been friends since college. Because of financial issues, he had to drop out of school, but we always kept in touch. Years ago, when Carlton decided that he wanted a family driver, I thought of him, because he was such a good person, and I wanted to help him get on his feet.

He was our driver, but he was my friend. He was always honest with me and gave me great advice. He knew exactly what this weekend was all about, and he didn't agree with it one bit.

*Neither did I.*

I was heartbroken about how lunch ended with Denver and her boyfriend. I tried to talk to Carlton about it and remind him that loving our daughter needed to be our first priority, but he wouldn't hear anything I said.

I was proud and a little envious of the way my daughter stood up to her father. She mustered up the confidence to do something that I had never been able to do. For as long as I could remember, I went along with anything that Carlton Cartwright said. This trip was evidence of that. Carlton had instructed me to get our daughter away from Joseph long enough for him to carry out the awful plan that he'd been concocting for months. Once we got to Chateau Milan, I needed to get her phone and block Joseph's number so that she couldn't call him. He said that his plan was contingent upon Denver not being able to reach Joseph all weekend. He wouldn't tell me exactly what his plan was, but I knew that he was presenting some sort of ultimatum to Joseph. I honestly didn't think Joseph would accept. I saw the way he looked at my daughter. He loved her. She loved him, and here I was, conspiring to break them apart.

Carlton kept telling me that we were doing this for our daughter's well-being, but I wasn't convinced. I truly wanted her happy, and Joseph seemed to make her happy. No matter how I felt though, I had yet to speak up and put a stop to my daughter's first heartbreak, and as much as I wanted to, I knew that I wouldn't.

Once we made it to the resort and checked in, we did a full tour of our suite, like we always did. We only had one bedroom this time, but there were two queen sized beds, a small living area, and kitchen, a very spacious bathroom, and a large balcony outside. Room-service was

included in our entry fee and so were all the services that we planned to receive. I loved this place, and I wish that I could be happy about being here, but I couldn't even bring myself to crack a smile. This was so wrong.

"Hey sweetheart, do you mind if I use your phone to call your father? I seemed to have left mine in the car, and Charles has already left," I called from the bedroom. Denver was sitting on the sofa, flipping through the television.

She walked into the room and unlocked her phone before handing it to me. "Sure, but I'm going to go down to one of the restaurants while you chat. I'd rather not be a part of the conversation," she said, sadly. Her expression made me feel even worse.

"I understand," I said with a nod. She turned and headed out of the room. Once I heard the front door shut completely, I made quick work of finding Joseph's contact information. It was easy to do, because he was the last person, she sent a message to. I hesitated to follow through with the plan as I read some of the sweet things that they said to each other, but I shook it off and got to work. I checked to see if they shared locations with each other, and I was glad that I did. I turned Denver's location feature off completely before blocking Joseph's phone number. Then I called my husband.

He answered but said nothing. Likely waiting to see if it would be Denver or me speaking.

"It's done," I said, simply.

"Good. Now get rid of her phone. It's not enough to block him. She'll find out as soon as she gets ready to call and check-in with him."

I sighed. "How am I going to do that, Carlton? She will notice that I never returned her phone to her."

“Figure it out, Charlotte. I shouldn’t have to think of *everything* for you. This is our daughter’s future at stake. Do not mess this up for me,” He said firmly, before hanging up. *For him*. It was always about him.

I stood there for a minute, weighing my options, then an idea struck me. I went into the restroom and dropped her phone in the toilet. Fishing it right back out, I made sure it wouldn’t turn back on before dropping it in there again. I’d simply tell her that I was leaning over to grab a towel while holding the phone between my shoulder and my ear. I would make a huge deal of having her a new phone delivered to the resort, but that phone would never arrive. My job was done.

Before leaving the bathroom, I glanced at myself in the mirror. A single tear slid down my face and I shook my head. I took a deep breath and headed downstairs to find Denver. I was determined to cherish our time together, because I was certain that after this weekend, she would never speak to me again.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

(Joseph)

I let out a heavy sigh as I hung my keys on the hook beside my front door. It had been an exhausting day of work, and the thought that I had to do it again had me ready to turn in for the night. My phone died while I was at work, so as soon as I left, I headed to Denver's dorm, but the RA on duty informed me that she wasn't there. I was confused but decided to just come home and charge my phone, so that I could call her. Walking over to the side table in my living room, I used the charging cable that I kept there to plug my phone up.

It had been dead for hours, so I knew that it would take a few minutes for it to power up. While I waited, I grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and twisted the cap open. As soon as I placed the bottle to my lips, someone knocked on my door. *Denver*.

I walked to the door and opened it with a smile that disappeared as soon as I saw my visitor.

*Mr. Cartwright.*

He had a smirk on his face that annoyed me, but when I looked past him to see that he wasn't alone, my annoyance grew times ten. "Was I not who you were expecting?" Mr. Cartwright asked, snidely.

"What is this?" I asked and gestured toward him and whoever the guy behind him was.

"*This* is an opportunity of a lifetime. May we come in?" Denver's dad said. I thought about it for a moment, then decided to play along. He didn't intimidate me, and no matter what, Denver made it clear that she was with me. He couldn't touch that.

"How can I help you?"

“Wrong question,” the other man said with a grin. “The better question would be how I can help you. My name is Special Agent Devin Cheevers. I am the section chief of a unit on the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI. Carlton told me a lot about you.”

*What?*

I was beyond confused but decided to remain silent until they got to the real reason they were here.

You are graduating this year with a double major in Criminology and Psychology. You're at the top of your graduating class, and you've successfully completed two internships in the field. Impressive.”

“Thanks,” I said, respectfully. I didn't know where he was going with this, but if he was impressed with my resume and giving me compliments, maybe this wasn't a hostile visit.

“The BSU has an internship program. Room and board would be covered, and you would receive a monthly stipend. Students who successfully complete the internship are often offered real positions within the Bureau. The program isn't advertised because we are very selective. I am selecting you. What do you say?” he asked with a smile.

Was he serious? I searched his eyes and saw no hints that this might be a joke.

“What's the catch?” I asked, turning my attention to Denver's father. He was the one bringing the opportunity to me, and I knew that strings had to be attached. I had a hunch about what the stipulations would be, but I wanted him to say it, so that I could turn this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity down with a good conscience.

“No catch,” Mr. Cartwright smirked. “Well, not really anyway. I'm honestly trying to do you a favor. I realize that my daughter leaving you may be hard on you, and even though it's what I wanted, I figured I could throw you a bone as a consolation prize of sorts. Your resume' speaks

for itself, so Cheevers offering the job is strictly based on your merit, but since he and I are such good friends, I just put a little bug in his ear so that he would check you out. It's a great opportunity. I'd consider it if I were you," he said. He looked sincere, but I didn't trust easily. The only thing that really stuck out to me from everything he said was that his daughter *left* me. What was he talking about?

"Your daughter didn't leave me, and I don't need a consolation prize."

He frowned as if he were confused. "You don't know?" He sighed heavily. "She mentioned that she didn't want to face you about it, but I told her that as a Cartwright we always confront our issues head on," he said. He sounded frustrated, like he really didn't like that Denver hadn't said anything to me.

I felt the tightening in my chest that came whenever I thought about losing Denver and I felt my anger building.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. I was careful to keep my tone even and controlled, even though I felt like tearing the room apart.

"Denver and I talked this morning. I let her know that as her father I was willing to accept her discretions, but only if she made it right. Becoming a mother at the age of nineteen was never my plan for my daughter, and it still isn't. I gave her a choice between her inheritance plus a bright future or you, that baby, and poverty. She made the right choice. She got an abortion today, and although that wasn't something I had ever wanted my daughter to experience, it definitely trumped her throwing her future away. She is at our family estate right now, recovering, but I told her that she owed you a phone call. I guess she decided against it," he finished.

The tightening in my chest began to burn, and I felt like I needed to take a seat. The only thing that kept me on my feet was my pride, because I refused to let this man see how badly his words were breaking me.

“You’re a liar,” I said simply.

“I may be a lot of things, but a liar is *not* one of them. As a matter of fact, I can prove it to you. Give me a second,” he said, and he walked out of my front door. I stood there, motionless.

“Look, son. I’m not aware of what’s going on with you and Cartwright’s daughter. He called me a while ago bragging about this intelligent young man that would be a great addition to the Bureau’s program. I checked you out for myself and was thoroughly impressed. Every professor and internship supervisor that I’ve spoken to of you sang your praises. We want you in our program, and it has nothing to do with Cartwright or his kid. I want you to know that” Agent Cheevers said, and I nodded. I appreciated that confession, but I couldn’t even focus on the opportunity until I wrapped my head around all of Cartwright’s confessions. Did Denver really abort our child? Was she walking away from us?

Cartwright came back into my apartment and handed me an envelope. I didn’t reach for it.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking him in the eye.

“It’s proof. If you need it.”

I opened the envelope and saw copies of several documents signed by Denver. I had never been to an abortion clinic, but these papers looked like an agreement to have the procedure done and they provided more information about what happens after. Every single paper was signed by Denver. I knew her signature, and this was it. I dropped the papers on the floor and went to grab my phone. I went straight to my text message thread with Denver and realized that I had no messages from her all day. I went to my missed calls and had none from her. I pressed her

contact and held the phone to my ear. The operator announced that my call could not be completed. I looked at her father as I called again, just to make sure I had heard the right words.

She had either blocked me or changed her number. Whichever the case was, it aligned with her father's story and those papers that were scattered on my floor.

She had really left me. And she killed my unborn child. As I stood there with my phone in my hand a rage consumed me that I had never felt before. Nothing that I had ever endured compared to the pain I felt in this moment. I threw my phone into the wall, and I heard the glass shatter then fall to the ground.

The burning in my chest was becoming unbearable, but I ignored the pain. I finally sat on my sofa and placed my head in my hands.

“Get out, please.”

“I will, but I'm not done making my offer. My daughter chose me this time, but who's to say that she won't have a change of heart in a year or two and try to reach out to you. I can't have that. If you accept this offer, you leave this weekend. I have a lot of money, and I can afford to move you and your family immediately. I have also arranged for you to finish the last of your college courses virtually, so that you still graduate. Your dean was more than willing to make this adjustment for you since you've been an exceptional student. I want this chapter of my daughter's life closed, and that can only happen if you're completely out of the picture. When you leave, you cannot come back. Understand?”

I didn't care if Denver reached out to me tomorrow. I'd never forgive what she had just done to me, and I never wanted to see her again. I thought about everything he had just said, and as much as I didn't want to accept anything from him, I felt that getting something out of this messed up situation was the least that Denver and her father could do. I was taking it.

“Deal,” I said, in a low tone. “I need to talk to Trent and JoAnna first, but you have yourself a deal.”

“That’s been taken care of. I let them know what has transpired between you and my daughter, and that I was willing to make your lives extremely comfortable if they agreed to move with you. Your mother is not my biggest fan, but she loves you, and they assured me that they were on board with whatever you chose to do. Your mother, Trenton, and his girlfriend are on the way to Atlanta to help you get your things ready to move. You all leave Sunday afternoon. I’ll be in touch.”

With that, Cartwright walked out, but Agent Cheevers walked over to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. I tensed at the contact. “I know that none of that was easy for you to hear, and I’m ashamed that Cartwright has roped me into something so terrible. You have to know that this is the first time I’m hearing any of this. Regardless of the circumstances, this will be a great opportunity for you. I look forward to seeing you in Virginia soon.”

Agent Cheevers patted my shoulder and walked out. I simply stood, closed and locked my door, then went to get into my bed. I was broken, angry, and hurt, but I decided to deal with it in the morning. Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, I fell asleep before my head even hit the pillow.

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(Denver)

“I had a great time this weekend, Mom. We need to hang out more often,” I said sincerely. Since neither of us had our phones, it had truly been just us for the entire weekend. It was relaxing and fun, and it helped me realize that I missed my mom. I didn’t want to *not* be a part of

her life. We were currently sitting in the back seat of our family car, and it was parked in front of my dorm. Our time together had come to an end, and I was kind of sad about it.

She looked at me and smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I enjoyed it too, sweetheart. Listen," she started and grabbed my hands. I turned in the plush leather seat and gave her my attention.

"No matter what, please know that I love you more than anything, and anything that I have ever done or will ever do, is because I love you. Okay?" She said. Her eyes were pleading with me to accept what she was saying, but I wasn't sure why. I never felt as if my mother didn't love me. I just wished that she would do a better job of standing up for me to my father. She did that this weekend by hanging out with me against his wishes. I felt that we were on the right track.

I gave her a reassuring smile. "I love you too, Mom. Now let me go so that I can head to Joseph's. I know he's probably worried sick since somebody dropped my phone in the toilet," I grinned at her.

She was so apologetic about dropping my phone, but I didn't get upset. Accidents happen. She had that sad look in her eyes again, and I didn't like it, so I gave her a tight hug, before getting out of the car. Charles already had my door opened, and my bags ready.

"Hold on," my mom called as she rounded the car. Let me help you take your bags. You shouldn't be carrying so much," she said with a soft smile.

"Thanks," I said and smiled.

We silently made our way into my dorm and to my floor. Once I unlocked my door and stepped inside, I got the shock of my life. My father was sitting on my bed. He had a solemn look on his face and it had me immediately concerned.

“Dad. What are you doing here?” I asked as I walked further into my room. My mother trailed behind me and closed the door.

“I came to speak with you. I’ve come across some news that may be hard for you to hear,” he said.

“What kind of news?” I asked hesitantly. He ran his hand across his head and looked back up at me. Whatever it was couldn’t have been good at all.

“It’s about your friend. Joseph,” he started.

“Joseph?” I asked quickly. “What could you know about Joseph?”

I started to panic because of the distressed look on my father’s face. Had something happened to Joseph while I was away? How did my dad find out about it? Was he okay? *What was going on?*

“He uh—,” my dad paused and cleared his throat before continuing, “His family came to visit him this weekend—.” I cut him off.

I walked closer to my father with a frown in place. “How do you know that?” I interjected.

He continued with his story, ignoring my question. “They were all in his car on the way to dinner when they collided with an 18-wheeler. There was a defective fuel tank and the car exploded. None of them made it.”

My knees gave out and I plopped down on my plush carpet in front of my father. My breathing pattern became erratic, and I started to feel like I couldn’t take in oxygen. My dad lowered himself to the floor and wrapped me up in his arms.

He kissed my forehead, and I finally took in a large breath. It was more like a cough because my mouth was wide open, and I let out a cry that felt like it came from the depths of my soul. My

mother came over and hugged me from behind, and I lost it even more. *Is he telling the truth?* Is Joseph really gone? I looked at my father again and I knew my answer.

I sobbed loudly and hysterically for what felt like an eternity. My entire body felt like it was on fire, and I was hurting all over, but I couldn't stop the cries. I cried for my unborn child who would never get to know his amazing grandmother. He'd never meet Trent, the guy who helped raise his father to be the man I fell so deeply in love with. He would never get to know his father. His *father*, who was more excited to meet this baby than anything in the world. I cried for my own loss. Never again would I hear Joseph call me beautiful. He'd never kiss my forehead or wrap me up in his arms. I'd never get to watch him paint a masterpiece or sketch or tutor me. *I lost him*. I cried until I felt like there was nothing left inside of me, and when I was empty, I just sat in silence, shaking in my father's arms.

Once my cries silenced, my father kissed the top of my head and said, "I know how tough this has to be on you, Daughter, but you know your mother and I have your back no matter what. I know that you can't see it now, but everything happens for a reason, and maybe this occurred so that you could have the future you've worked so hard for."

I jerked away from him aggressively and looked at him in disgust. Standing to my feet, I placed my hands on my hips before I lit into him.

"Are you insane? Joseph was my future. Him, this baby, and my dreams. I DON'T WANT WHAT YOU WANT FOR ME. CAN'T YOU SEE THAT?!" I screamed at him. "Joseph is the only person who has EVER motivated me to do things for myself and stand up for my own happiness. He loved me for who I am, not for who he felt like I needed to become. You're disgusting, and I'm ashamed to say that you're my father," I spat. My entire body was shaking,

and my voice trembled, but I kept my eyes on his. I wanted him to feel what I was saying and *know* that I meant it.

My dad stood to his feet and so did my mother. She looked distraught and afraid, but he looked livid.

“I’m going to excuse the way you just spoke to me, because I know that a part of you is hurting, but that will not happen again. You may not want to hear what I’m saying, but it’s true. Joseph was leading you along a downward spiral and that *bastard* in your belly is evidence of it. I’m standing here offering you forgiveness and you’re spitting in my face. You are not making any more decisions. We are taking care of that fetus first, and after that you are focusing on school only. Got it?”

We stared each other down for a long minute before I let out a laugh. It was low and guttural; in it was hurt, pain, mixed with the hatred that was growing inside me for my father.

“Get out.” I said. It was low, but he heard it.

“I will not,” he said, indignantly.

“Get. Out. Take everything that belongs to you and get out. I don’t need your money, your approval, or your love. I don’t need you. I don’t want you either. Get OUT OF MY ROOM BEFORE I CALL THE COPS,” I screamed.

He stared at me for a moment longer before saying, “I’ll give you a few days to calm down,” he said before walking out.

I stood there staring at the door, before my mother spoke up. With tears in her eyes, she said, “I’m so sorry this happened to you, Sweetheart.”

“Me too,” I said, dryly. “Goodbye.”

Without waiting for a response, I got in my bed and pulled the covers over my head. Minutes later I heard my front door closed, and steaming hot tears ran down my face.

*God, help me.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

(Denver)

It had been about two months since I lost Joseph, and I was still devastated. I stayed in bed for a full week after the whole ordeal but realized that I couldn't give up on life. I had a child to think about, and I needed to be okay for him.

*Him.*

Last month, I found out that I was having a boy, and I was ecstatic. It was what I had been praying for. After losing the love of one's life, some people may have wanted a baby that looked nothing like their lost partner, so that they wouldn't be reminded of the tragedy. No, me though. I prayed that my son would be the spitting image of his father. I was definitely going to do my best to raise him to be just as great of a man.

Once I ended my weeklong pity party, I traveled down to Thomasville, because I needed closure. I found Red, and she informed me that my father paid to have both Joseph and JoAnna cremated. She said that he did the same for Trent and his girlfriend, but that their family had their ashes in their possession. She had the nerve to say that their deaths were their punishment for cutting her out of their lives. Red told me that she threw most of their belongings away, but that I could keep what she had left. For some reason, she kept two of his paintings, and both were of me. She was also more than happy to get rid of their ashes, so I took them and went to Savannah to spread them at the beach. Jazz came with me, and it was the closure I needed.

I began attending church again, and with the help of God, I was slowly but surely rebuilding myself and my faith. My father had cut me off financially, but I was sure that I wouldn't use his money if my life had depended on it. I successfully finished my first year of school but had

applied and gotten accepted to NYU's fashion program. My grades earned me a full scholarship, so I was excited about that.

I had been doing a lot of designing for the individuals who reached out to me on my social media app. The money I earned from those jobs was helping me a lot with my move. I set up a portfolio website to showcase my work and asked all the people I had worked with to leave reviews about my work, and it really helped out. I now had a paid internship that was going to pay for the studio apartment I had gotten near campus. New York was going to be a fresh start for Baby Joseph and me.

I rubbed my belly as I looked around my empty dorm room. I teared up as I reflected on the whirlwind of a year that I had had. I went from being a timid Physics major who didn't have the guts to stand up for my dreams, to a mature and confident Fashion major and soon-to-be mother. I had found and lost the love of my life, and I was embarking on a new journey in life independent of my parents. I glanced down at the breathtaking engagement ring on my finger. I was sure that I'd wear it forever. I couldn't imagine parting with it. I let out a sigh and stifled my tears. I had made the decision to be strong for my son. It's what Joseph would have wanted.

A knock at my door shook me out of my daydream. Frowning, I went to open it, because I had no clue who would be at my door. The movers had already gotten all of my things to transport to New York, and Jazz had moved out the day before. She and I had a tear-filled goodbye, but she assured me that she would be in New York to visit her nephew and me every chance that she got.

I went to answer the door and was surprised to find my mother. She gave me a timid smile and said, "Hey Baby, can I come in?"

I hesitated for a second but decided to step back so that she could enter. Her eyes dropped to my belly, and I began rubbing it subconsciously. “Wow. You’re so beautiful pregnant,” she smiled.

“What do you need?” I asked, cutting to the chase. I needed to hurry and call a car service so that I would make it to the airport in time.

She sighed, before getting to the point. “I spoke with Jazmine. She isn’t very happy with me,” my mom said and laughed lightly. I stood in silence, unamused.

“And?”

“She told me that you’re moving to New York. Congratulations,” she smiled.

“I also told her how horrible I feel about always going along with your father and not standing up for you.” She took another deep breath before continuing. “I came here because I need to come clean to you, and I also want to try to make it right.” *Where was she going with this?*

“The weekend that I took you to the spa, it was at your father’s request. He wanted you away for the weekend, so that he could try to convince Joseph to take a bribe and leave you alone.”

“What?” I whispered in disbelief.

“I felt awful about the entire thing, but it didn’t stop me from doing it. For that I do apologize. Anyway, messing your phone up wasn’t an accident. Your father needed to cut off your access to Joseph until he carried out his full plan,” she explained. I felt a tightening in my chest at what I felt like she was insinuating.

I swallowed hard. “Are you saying that your husband has something to do with Joseph and his family dying?”

If that’s what she was saying, then I was going straight to the police. My father would rot in jail for this.

She looked genuinely horrified. “Oh no. God no! He never even got to present the idea to Joseph. He went to his apartment to talk to him, but he wasn’t there. He tried to track him down, and that’s how he learned about what happened to him and his family. Your father is a lot of things, but he isn’t a murderer.”

I looked into her eyes and saw the sincerity within them. I also didn’t think my father would resort to murder. Bribing sounded like it was more his speed.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked. All I wanted to do was try and move forward so that I could make a good life for my son.

“I’m telling you because I needed you to know that I’m sorry that I never chose you. I let your father and his intimidation tactics keep me from standing up for my own daughter. I’m done with that. I’m divorcing him, and I very much want to be a part of you and my grandson’s life. I know that it may take a while for you to forgive me, but I will wait as long as it takes. I will do whatever I need to do to prove to you that I will choose the two of you from this day forward.”

She had tears in her eyes, and I felt that she was being sincere, but I had no tears to shed on this situation. If she was divorcing him, then that was good for her. Maybe one day I’d be ready to let her back in, but today was *not* that day.

“I need some time, but I’ll think about it,” I told her.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Well, I need to get going, I have a flight to catch,” I told her.

She wiped her tears and smiled sadly. “Oh, of course. Before you go, though, I wanted to give you this.”

She reached in her purse and pulled out an envelope.

“What’s that?” I asked, glancing at it.

“It’s my gift to you and my grandson. Hopefully it will help you on your journey,” she said.

I opened it and took out the contents. There were bank documents transferring a checking account she owned to my name. There was also a debit card. I looked at it and saw that it had my name on it. I looked at her in confusion. “You’re giving me a bank account?”

“With two million dollars in it. I’ve been putting money in this account for years, just in case I had the courage to actually leave your father. I always had your name on the account, but yesterday, I signed it over completely to you. All I need you to do is sign here,” She pointed at a blank line at the bottom of the page. I continued to stare at the document, before looking up at her.

“Mom, I can’t take this,” I said, putting the contents back in the envelope. “If you’re really divorcing him, then you should keep this to start a new life. I’ll be fine.” I tried to hand it back to her, but she shook her head.

“No, I don’t need it. Our prenuptial agreement had an infidelity clause. I hired a private investigator and got all the evidence I needed. I’m getting half,” she chuckled.

I laughed and said, “Good for you.”

“It is good for me,” she said. “So, sign the paper and take the card. It’s the least that we can do.”

I thought about it for a second longer before I opened the envelope again and walked to the counter.

“Do you have a pen?” I asked my mother. She grabbed one out of her bag quickly and I signed before handing the papers back to her. She shuffled through them and handed me two of them.

“Here’s all the account information so that you can set up online banking and things like that.”

“I really appreciate this, Mom. I have to go though, so that I don’t miss my flight.”

“Okay, Sweetheart. Have a safe flight,” she said. She smiled, but I could still feel her sadness. I sighed and pulled her into an embrace.

“Let’s walk out together,” I said. Her smile brightened a bit at that statement, and I smiled back. I wasn’t all in, but if she truly wanted to repair our relationship, then I wasn’t about to deny my son the opportunity to have a grandmother.

Once we made it downstairs, my mom offered to drive me to the airport. I accepted, so that I didn’t have to wait for a car service to arrive. Once we got there and said our final goodbyes, I headed into the airport excited about my next chapter in life.

It wasn’t going to be picture perfect, but for my son’s sake, I’d make sure it was close.

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(Joseph)

“Joseph, do you have a minute to chat?”

I was in the Academy’s gym running on a treadmill but slowed it to a stop when I heard my name being called. I stepped off and turned around to see Agent Cheevers leaning against the weight rack. He was in an all-black tailored suit, just as he had been every other time that I had seen him.

I reached my hand out and he shook it firmly. “How are you, Agent Cheevers?” I asked.

I’d been at the Academy for about three months for my internship. We had just finished up the last week earlier today, and I was waiting to learn whether or not I’d be offered an invitation to

the FBI Academy. I was hoping that I would because I thoroughly enjoyed my internship experience.

“I’m well, how about you? From what I hear, you’re doing great,” he said and smiled.

Every intern was assigned to a different office, and unfortunately, I didn’t get to work directly with Agent Cheevers. He checked in on me when he could, but for the most part, I hadn’t seen him a lot.

“Yes, I’m good. I’ve learned a lot, that I know I’ll be able to utilize in whatever is next for me.”

“What do you want to be next for you?” he asked.

I thought about how I should answer him, then I decided that honesty was the best way to go.

“Honestly? I’d like to be here. I always wanted to make a difference and I’ve always loved understanding the way the mind works. I know that I could do both of those things here.”

He smiled with pride and said, “I think that we might be able to make that happen.”

I looked at him and grinned. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. Your supervisory staff have been raving about you. They said that they hadn’t had an intern as good as you in years. This is your official offer to train at the Academy. You make it through, and you’ll be placed into a unit. How’s that sound?” he asked.

Was he kidding? That sounded like a dream.

Aloud I just said, “That sounds good.”

He gripped my shoulder then patted it a couple of times and said, “Good. You’ll have a little time to yourself before training begins, so go spend time with your family and wait on the call,” he instructed.

“Thanks, I will,” I said. He walked away, and I gathered my things to leave. I couldn’t wait to go home and tell my mother.

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“Wow son, that’s exciting. When do you start?” Trent asked. We were at one of our favorite Virginia steakhouses sharing a meal together. I had just told them about my FBI Academy invitation.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “He just said that I’d have a little time to myself.”

“Well good, because you’ve been too busy lately, you need some time off,” JoJo said.

“I know that’s right, we haven’t seen you in three weeks,” Mya added.

I laughed and nodded. The internship was rigorous, and the hours were extensive, but I was studying interesting cases and working on meaningful projects, so it had been worth it. My family and I had adjusted to Virginia pretty well. At first, I found myself apologizing to the three of them constantly. If I hadn’t gotten involved with Denver, they wouldn’t have had to uproot their lives and start over in a new place.

They continuously assured me that they didn’t blame me at all, and that the fresh start was exciting for them. Cartwright kept his promise and had everyone living comfortably. Trent and Mya shared a three bedroom two and a half bath town house, and so did JoJo and I. JoJo had basically been living alone because I had to stay in a dorm at the academy, but now it looked like I would be able to stay there with her for a little while.

Mya had just paid the down payment on a property so that she could start her law practice in Virginia, and Trent was renting a space to open up a tattoo parlor here. He was still getting the equipment that he needed, but everyone was going to be up and running in no time. JoJo had studied hard for the GED and passed it with flying colors. Now, she was preparing to start her

first semester of school. She was entering an associate degree Nursing program and I was proud of her. Despite all the turmoil that came out of this situation, the blessing was that all of us had an opportunity to do big things.

I was still on my faith journey and had even found a church home here. I thought that I would have been done with God after my situation with Denver and her family, but for some reason, my heartache drew me closer to Him. I remembered what I learned about suffering, so I felt confident that He was stretching me again. Plus, after seeing all the good that had come out of our move, I couldn't deny that it was all thanks to Him. I hadn't heard anything from Denver, and honestly, was happy about that. I was working on forgiving her in my heart, for my own sake, but I hadn't quite gotten there yet. I mourned the loss of my unborn child every day since I found out that I had lost him. I wasn't sure how long it would take for me to be okay with what happened, but I was trying to grow and evolve daily.

The server brought the check that Trent requested, and he paid in cash. After thanking Trent for the meal, JoJo and I headed home in my car.

"I'm so proud of you, Sweet Boy," she said softly.

I glanced at her and she had a smile on her face.

"I'm proud of you," I said to her before refocusing on the road.

"How are you doing, though?" She asked with concern in her tone.

JoJo asked me the same question every couple of weeks. I had been in a dark place for about two weeks after we moved here. In a lot of ways, I had transitioned back into the little boy who refused to talk and stayed locked away in a broom closet. Once I realized that my behavior wasn't going to change my circumstances— and that it was hurting the people who loved me the

most— I worked hard to snap out of it. I understood her concern; she just didn't want me to slip back in that place.

"I'm good, JoJo. I promise," I assured her.

She was silent for a minute before she said, "Okay."

We were silent for the rest of the drive home. Once we arrived, she went straight to her bedroom, and I went to the guest room. JoJo had transitioned it into a mini art studio for me, and even though I hadn't used it since we moved, I appreciated the gesture. I hadn't painted since the last portrait I started of Denver. It was unfinished, and tucked away under my bed, but for some reason I couldn't part with it. I hated leaving art unfinished, but I also couldn't bring myself to look at the painting. I didn't know if I would ever be able to complete it, but I kept it just in case.

I set up a blank canvas and started sketching. When I started, I didn't know what I was going to create, but as I continued making lines on the canvas until the picture became clear. I wasn't sure how many hours had passed by, but I didn't stop working until the portrait was complete. I stood and took a step back to admire the piece, just as the door opened and JoJo stepped inside.

She was smiling at first, but then she frowned, and looked a little worried.

"What's wrong, JoJo?"

"That's what I was about to ask you," she said.

"Why? I'm good."

She walked over to me and touched my face lightly with her fingers. Then, she held them up for me to see, and they were wet. "You're crying, Sweet Boy," she whispered.

*Was I?*

I quickly wiped my eyes and cleared my throat. "I didn't realize," I said.

She turned to my canvas and tears welled in her eyes too. We both stood there for a moment, admiring the art in silence.

Finally, JoJo said, “He’s beautiful.”

The painting was a miniature version of myself. The young boy I painted looked to be about three or four years old, and he looked just like me. I knew it wasn’t a self-portrait, though, because this boy had Denver’s hazel eyes. *My son.*

My chest tightened and the familiar feeling made me cringe. I wasn’t doing this. Not today.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I told JoJo.

“Okay, Sweet Boy,” she said, barely above a whisper.

I left the room silently and headed for the shower. While I was in there, a few more tears escaped, but I tried not to dwell in the sad place I was finding myself in.

Once I was done and dressed, I sat on the edge of my bed with my head in my hands. I let out a heavy sigh and prayed silently.

*Lord, I’m struggling. I want to be okay, but valleys seem to keep finding me. I appreciate everything You’ve been doing for my family and me, and I swear I’m not trying to question Your plan. I’ve gotten enough advice against that, so I’ll just ask You humbly to make it clear to me. If You’re not ready to remove the hurt from my heart, show me what to do with it. What else do I have to gain from this experience? I promise I’ll do whatever you say. Please just make the call, I swear I’ll answer.*

With that, I got in bed and tried to get some rest. I’d been in some rough spots in my life, and this may have been the roughest, but this time I had something that reassured me that I would come out of this better than ever. I had *faith*.

## Epilogue (Five Years Later)

(JoAnna)

“Can we stop to get something to eat? I’m hungry, Ma.” Joseph said.

My heart warmed the same way it always did when he called me *Ma*. Four years ago, he had come into the kitchen and randomly asked if I thought it would be weird for him to refer to me as his mother. I told him that I was his mother, so I didn’t think that anything was better. To that, he replied, “Okay, *Ma*.” Ever since that day, it was what he called me.

“Boy, you’re an FBI agent, walking a couple of blocks should be nothing for you,” I teased.

“It’s been more than a couple of blocks, and I shouldn’t have to work too hard during my vacation time,” he said and smiled.

I was so proud of him. He had been a Supervisory Special Agent for four years and had had a pretty successful career thus far. He worked extremely hard, and it didn’t go unnoticed by his superiors. They forced him to take the next month off, because in the years that he had been there, he never took a vacation. Since I had the week off from the hospital, he and I took a trip to New York, because I had been wanting to come here for such a long time.

We were currently in Downtown Manhattan walking around and doing a little shopping. We had been at it for about an hour, so I agreed that we needed to take a break.

“Okay, look up a place to eat nearby,” I told him and kept scanning the shops, trying to choose the one I wanted to walk in next. We kept walking and the name of a store caught my eye.

*JoeC’s Fashion Emporium*

“I found a burger joint. It’s a few feet away,” Joseph said, with his eyes still on his phone’s screen.

“Let’s go in there first,” I said.

He groaned. “Where?” He asked, annoyed. I laughed at his dramatics.

“Right there,” I pointed to it. “Come on, we gotta go in. It’s literally named after you,” I said.

“My name is Joseph Crews. Not JoeC, or however you pronounce that,” he said. “You have about five minutes in here before I leave you, Ma. I mean it.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed his hand, dragging him into the store. “Fine.”

The store looked a lot bigger on the inside than it seemed on the outside. Looking around, I knew that I was going to buy something. The pieces were gorgeous. I walked around and stopped in the dress section. I needed something to wear to Joseph’s recognition dinner. He had played a major role in closing a high-profile case a few weeks ago. His unit was having a surprise dinner in his honor, and had called to invite me, Trent, and Mya. I was excited about it.

Just as I had gotten my hands around the hanger of a beautiful emerald green dress, something bumped against my foot. I looked down and saw that it was a football, then I heard tiny footsteps quickly approaching. A young boy appeared from behind the blouse rack. His head was down like he was searching for something on the floor. I picked up the ball and said, “Hey Sweetheart, is this yours?”

I smiled as he looked up, but when his eyes met mine, my smile dropped, and my eyes grew wide. *I know this face. I made this face.*

“Yes ma’am,” his sweet little voice replied. He looked a little scared, and then I realized that my facial expression probably didn’t seem friendly at all.

I smiled and bent down to his level.

“Do you like football?” I asked. He searched my face for a second, but eventually smiled and replied, “Yes ma’am.”

“Awesome, so do I. I’m JoAnna, it’s nice to meet you.” I said and stuck my hand out. He surprised me by giving me a quick hug. When he released it, he said, “I’m Joseph, but my mommy calls me Two.”

I tried to keep my composure, but I felt tears well in my eyes when I said, “Does she? That’s a really cool nickname. Is your mommy here with you?” I asked. I needed to see his mother. I was sure that this little boy’s face, his name, and the name of the store were all just coincidences, but I *needed* to be sure.

“Yes ma’am,” he said. Just then I heard a familiar voice call his nickname. “Two? Two! Where did you go?”

“Right here, Mommy,” he called back. He started walking toward his mother’s voice, and I followed with my heart racing. I was determined to see his mother’s face. Once I caught up to where the little boy had gone his mother was bent down rubbing his head. I couldn’t see her face, because it was nuzzled against his, but that gold curly hair gave me all the confirmation I needed. She raised her left hand to stroke the young boy’s hair, and on her fourth finger was the same ring that my son had sent me pictures of five years ago. The one he said was *perfect*.

Just as I was about to call her name, I heard Joseph behind me.

“Ma, I gave you fifteen minutes, let’s go,” he said firmly. I couldn’t even respond to him because I was frozen in that spot. Staring. Joseph’s voice caused the little boy and his mother to look up. When they did, Little Joseph smiled, while his mother dropped the football that she was holding and covered her mouth with her hands. She looked at me for a long while, before she looked past me, and tears welled in her eyes.

*Joseph.*

I turned around to see if my son was looking our way, and realized that he was standing right behind me, and he was frozen also. His eyes were glued on the little boy, and they didn't waver until the woman whispered, "Joseph?" Joseph looked at her just as the little boy said, "Yes ma'am?"

A single tear ran down my son's cheek and I rushed to his side to hold his hand and comfort him. Joseph wiped the tear and cleared his throat. After what seemed like forever, he finally said, "Denver."

### *Annotated Bibliography*

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Random House, 2008.

*Pride and Prejudice* is a romance novel written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel is unique because it confronted the societal norms of women needing to find husbands. This story contributed to my research on happily ever after endings in romance literature.

Brown, Nikki. *Beautiful Mistake: The Rise and Fall of the Barnes Brothers*. Supreme Works Publications, 2017.

This is a romance fiction novel featuring African American brothers Kayson and Jaako Barnes. Jaako's complacent relationship with his girlfriend Krista inspired the dynamic between Denver's parents, Carlton and Charlotte Cartwright. They endure many challenges while balancing running their family's business and their love lives. They are at a standstill in their relationship but are too afraid of change to leave each other.

Brown, Nikki. *Messiah & Reign*. Supreme Works Publications, 2020.

*Messiah & Reign* is a romance novel that spotlights two couples. The heroes in the book are cousins, and the heroines are sisters. Reign's character inspired Jazmine in my manuscript. Like Reign, Jazmine is a bold, confident individual who always speaks her mind.

Charelle, K. *You're my Reason*. Supreme Works Publications, 2021.

*You're my Reason* is a romance novel that is a part of a three-part series. The story mildly influenced the flow of my manuscript. I gained insight into how to divide the sequence of events between multiple novels to keep the readers intrigued enough to read the next book.

Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Intervarsity Press, 2013.

This nonfiction work inspires Christians to be “culture makers” (Crouch 11). This book influenced my writing in a significant way. Crouch’s words helped me realize that I can bridge a gap in African American romance fiction with my novel.

Elgrably, Jordan. “The Art of Fiction No. 78.” *The Paris Review*, 5 Nov. 2021, [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2994/the-art-of-fiction-no-78-james-baldwin).

In this interview, James Baldwin encourages authors to write to find out. Whenever I sat to note a part of my manuscript, I made sure to keep this advice in mind. This advice influenced my writing by inspiring me to make a plan for my writing and keep my mind open to learning new things about my characters.

Gleason, William A., and Eric Murphy Selinger. *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* Routledge, 2017.

This collection of essays provides the perspectives of many literary scholars on romance literature. Many of the contributors to this book discussed patriarchy in their articles, and I gained a lot of knowledge from reading these essays. The information on alpha males in literature influenced my portrayal of Carlton Cartwright because it helped me ensure that his character was authoritative and influential.

Hall, Connie. *Nightwalker*. Harlequin Mills & Boon, 2012.

This fiction novel influenced a few areas of my manuscript. In my story, Joseph grew up without a father, and after the life-changing events that take place in my account, he develops a desire to find his biological father. Similarly, the sisters in *Nightwalker* set out to find their mother, and their journey has inspired me to create other Joseph's search in

the second novel in the series I am creating. The book also has a character who is a spy, which is similar to Joseph's desired career path.

Heinecken, Dawn. "Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction." *Romantic Conventions*, edited by Anne Kaler and Rosemary Johnson-Kurek, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999, pp. 149-172.

This section of *Romantic Conventions* provides academic criticism of patriarchy within romance literature. The points presented in this text helped me put into perspective the history of patriarchy in society and literature. Understanding how other authors depict this societal issue within their novels helped me to determine the direction I wanted to take in confronting it in my manuscript.

Henderson, Dee. *God's Gift*. Steeple Hill Books, 2011.

*God's Gift* is a Christian romance novel. Its contents helped me craft the dialogue about faith present in my story. This novel specifically influenced Denver's conversation with Joseph in the hospital about his belief in God.

Henderson, Dee. *The Marriage Wish*. Steeple Hill Book, 2006.

*The Marriage Wish* is a faith-based fiction novel that influenced my writing process. Reading the book prompted me to reflect on my faith journey and thoughts on marriage. This contemplation led to me determining how I wanted to end my story. *The Marriage Wish* guided me to realize that I didn't want to give my characters the traditional happy ending.

Hilt, Jennifer. *The Trope Thesaurus*. Jennifer Hilt, 2021.

This is a craft book that explores the use of several tropes in fiction writing. This book was influential in my manuscript because it guided me in planning my manuscript. I was

able to put specific names to my ideas and research other novels that used the same tropes I had selected.

Krentz, Jayne Ann. *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

This book contains the thoughts of several well-established romance writers. Their goal in writing this was to dispel several stereotypes that romance readers, writers, and critics have about the genre. The book inspired me to write my manuscript with confidence. In reading this book, I learned that there is more than one way to write romance.

Lee, Darrien. *All That and a Bag of Chips*. Strebtor Books International, 2001.

This novel influenced my manuscript in many ways. Like my manuscript, *All that and a Bag of Chips* features a college student who falls in love and understands life-altering challenges during her first year of school. It is the first romance novel that I ever read, and I believe that, in some ways, my manuscript is a tribute to that experience.

Michelson, Anna. "The Politics of Happily-Ever-after: Romance Genre Fiction as Aesthetic Public Sphere." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2021, pp. 177-210., <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-020-00126-7>.

Michaelson elaborates on the Happily Ever After prevalent in romance literature in this publication. Her writing helped me understand what the HEA meant in literature, and I learned that there are several ways to achieve a happily ever after in romance. This article inspired me to brainstorm ways that I could craft an atypical yet satisfying ending to my manuscript.

Mills, K.C. *Egypt and Rome*. Supreme Works Publications, 2016.

This is the first novel in a three-book romance series. The main character, Egypt, influenced the development of my characters' backstories. Egypt had a very harsh upbringing, which caused her to do undesirable acts to provide for herself. Her childhood is similar to JoAnna and Joseph's, and reading this novel provided me with ideas on how to reveal the backstory throughout my story.

Mills, K.C. *Southern Kings*. Supreme Works Publications, 2016.

This urban romance novel influenced the way I developed my antagonists. The main characters of *Southern Kings* are brothers, and their mother was killed by their father, which forced them into the foster care system. The father's characteristics in that story helped me develop Red's character as an abusive mother in my manuscript.

Moreland, Melanie. *The Contract*. Melanie Moreland, 2016.

*The Contract* is one romance novel of a three-part series. The dominance of the main character, Richard VanRyan, influenced Carlton Cartwright's character significantly. His mannerisms and a lot of the language he uses in the story helped portray his alpha-male persona, and I referenced this novel when crafting Carlton's character.

"About the Romance Genre." *Romance Writers of America. The Voice of Romance Fiction.*, [https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance\\_Genre/About\\_Romance\\_Genre.aspx](https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx).

This webpage contained statistics on the literary romance genre. I used the data I gathered from this site to better understand the genre's diversity. The statistics from this webpage served as a basis for the topic of my critical paper. Because of this research, I decided to delve deeper into the popularity of African American fiction.

Quilliam, Susan. ““He Seized Her in His Manly Arms and Bent His Lips to Hers...”. the Surprising Impact That Romantic Novels Have on Our Work.” *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*, British Medical Journal Publishing Group, 1 July 2011, <https://srh.bmj.com/content/37/3/179>.

This article contained the researched-based opinion of leading relationship psychologist Susan Quilliam. Her insight on the effects that romance literature has on some women contributed to a section of my critical paper. It influenced my manuscript because I strived to create a novel that did not negatively affect any woman’s psyche by writing a relatable and realistic story for women.

Quinn, Julia. *The Duke and I*. Avon Books, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2015.

This is a romance fiction novel set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I used this novel as a resource during my research of the happily ever after theme in romance literature. *The Duke and I* addresses several of the points I raised in my critical paper, and it provided great insight in the components of the HEA.

Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance*. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Radway’s book provides an in-depth discussion of why many women enjoy reading romance literature. Much of the research Radway includes in this piece influenced my thesis project. Her work helped put into perspective the type of readers that I wanted to target with my manuscript.

Renee, K. *Law and Love*. Supreme Works Publications, 2017.

Law and Love is a romance novel featuring two characters who were childhood friends and fell in love in their adulthood. The characters in that novel build a romantic

relationship slowly, but their attraction to each other is eventually undeniable. The descriptions in the story describing the budding romance between the characters helped me craft Denver and Joseph's first few encounters with each other.

“Submissions – Supreme Works Publications.” *Supreme Works Publications-*,

<http://www.supremeworkspublications.com/submissions/>.

This webpage contains the submission guidelines for Supreme Works Publications.

Because I focused heavily on this publishing company in a portion of my thesis project, this resource helped me gain insight into the company's inner workings. I used the information I discovered in their guidelines to assess the significant differences between this publication and Harlequin.

Submittable. “Harlequin Submission Manager.” *Harlequin RSS*,

<https://harlequin.submittable.com/submit>.

This webpage contains the submission guidelines for Harlequin Publishing Company. I dedicated a section of my thesis project to this publishing company, and the articles on this web page provided me with a plethora of information about Harlequin. I used the data I gathered from this site to compare Harlequin with Supreme Works Publications.

Thompson, Vicki Lewis. *Notorious*. Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 2017.

*Notorious* is an erotic romance novel published by Harlequin. The rebellious nature of the book's main character influenced Regina's character in my manuscript. Similar to the main character in *Notorious*, Regina enjoys doing unnecessary acts to gain the attention of others.

Thurston, Carol. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*. University of Illinois Press, 1987.

This book spans the evolution of romance literature. It influenced my thoughts on where my manuscript fits within the romance genre. The details in the book about the subgenres of romance helped me determine which category my manuscript falls under.

Zakreski, Tricia. "Tell Me Lies: Lying, Storytelling, and the Romance Novel as Feminist Fiction." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2.2 (2012).

This article details how an author changed aspects of romance literature to create novels that supported feminism. The author details how lies and storytelling are used to create a world that fits a storyline. This influenced my decision to craft my story in a world without a global pandemic so that my characters could interact freely. The article also helped me determine how to address feminism in my manuscript.

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