

# *The Rhythm in Blue*

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The Rhythm in Blue

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Mason Joseph was fed up. His fiancée was turning into a wedding-crazed maniac, his career was going nowhere and his days seemed to be one endless loop of nothingness. He knew he was destined to do more, but how could he focus in the midst of sheer chaos? He needed a few days away from his life. Their wedding was in three weeks and he was afraid if he didn't allow himself some time to regroup, he may not be making that trip down the aisle after all.

But how would he get a break? And where would he go? He didn't want to go to a hotel. He couldn't go to his Mama's because he'd be too busy answering questions about why he was there to actually get any rest. In his heart he knew there was only one place he could go: to Jasmine's.

Jasmine had certainly offered her home as a resting place before. She lived just outside of Norfolk in Blue, Virginia, and far away from the hustle and bustle of the city. A part of him wondered if it would be a wise decision to spend a few days with her, given the fact that he was an almost-married man. But "almost" and "married" were two different words. Besides, he hadn't seen Jasmine since her latest breakup, and he knew they had lots of catching up to do. As soon as he dialed her number he began to feel his stomach knot up. The phone rang twice, and just before he was going to hang up, he heard Jasmine's voice on the other end.

"Hey, Mase!" she said, recognizing his number from her caller ID.

"I'm coming," he said. Two words. Nothing more.

Mason stopped home to pack a duffel bag with enough clothes for a couple of days. He scribbled a note for his fiancée Sasha that simply said: *I'll be away for work until Monday*. He hoped Sasha would be so engrossed in

planning the wedding that she would actually welcome this break from him.

But Mason felt selfish running away. Real men were supposed to stick around through the storm, right? Mason wanted Sasha to stop stressing over the wedding, but the more he insisted, the more she stressed. Sasha wanted Mason to take an active role in every decision to be made about their wedding, from the location to the color of the pew flowers. But Mason didn't care about any of that, he just wanted to show up and get married. Going away for a few days was the only thing he could think to do.

The drive to Jasmine's house was always a peaceful one, thanks to the smooth familiarity of Virginia's highways. Mason knew the roads from his college days. He knew the cleanest rest stops and even some of the people working in the roadside diners.

An hour away from Jasmine's house, Mason started getting excited. A warmth always came over him any time he was going to see Jasmine. He chalked it up to friendship and nothing more, but to be honest, he never had the same feeling with any of his other friends. Jasmine was different. She made him remember who he used to be, before he became a lawyer, and long before he became Sasha's fiancé.

When Mason pulled into Jasmine's driveway and noticed the familiar flickering of candles through her living room windows, he immediately felt at ease. Her house was set back from the street, and it always reminded Mason of the gingerbread houses he used to read about when he was a child. He threw his tattered duffel bag over his shoulder and knocked on her door.

"It's open," Jasmine called out from the kitchen.

As soon as Mason stepped inside he could smell what he missed the most these days: dinner cooking in the kitchen. Sasha was far from domestic, and most of their meals came from the local take-out restaurants. Sasha tried

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to cook one time during their entire relationship, and that attempt ended with the fire department being called to the scene. But what Sasha lacked in the kitchen she more than made up for in other ways. She had a great personality and everyone seemed to love her.

Jasmine peeked her head around the kitchen door and waved her hand to say hello, with her phone balancing between her ear and her shoulder. She was wearing the apron he had bought her as a gag Christmas gift last year. The apron read "Full-bodied, sweet and thick. And the wine ain't bad either."

Mason kicked his sneakers off under the coffee table and leaned back onto her sofa. Jasmine's home was the only place he felt relaxed enough to truly sleep. He picked up the remote to change the channel to the game but noticed Jasmine had already done that for him. She was not a sports fan, but she always watched it with him when he visited. He locked his hands behind his head and propped his crossed legs up onto the ottoman. Within a few minutes Jasmine reappeared with a plate of food, and as she put it down in front of him he marveled at the plate and then at her.

He devoured his dinner in what seemed like seconds and before he could even ask, she was already bringing him a second plate. He reached out to find his once-empty glass refilled, and even a pair of slippers sat next to his feet. She was a powerhouse in this city, but when they were alone in her home she was submissive, willing to do whatever it took to make him happy.

Jasmine finally rejoined him with her own plate of food, sitting cross-legged next to him on the sofa. She had taken the apron off and Mason laughed at her alligator-head slippers.

"Where'd you get those slippers?" Mason asked.

"Oh, you got jokes, man? I slaved over a hot stove for you and you got jokes now?"

She pretended to try to snatch his dinner plate from him. He laughed.

“I’m just kidding”

“So, how you been, friend?” she asked, taking a bite of her food.

“Tired,” he said. “Just tired.”

“You’re always tired,” she said, laughing. “Is that why you came here?” She asked.

“That. Among other things,” he joked as he leaned closer to her.

“Now you know we are NOT going there, man. Not even a little bit!” she said firmly.

“I’m not even talking about that! I just needed a break. Sasha is driving me crazy! Every single day she is asking me to pick a color for the flowers and a color for the linens. Who cares about that?”

“SHE does,” Jasmine snapped. “And you should too! Mason, I swear you can be so self-centered at times!”

“ME? Sasha is THE QUEEN of being self-centered.”

“So why are you marrying her?” Jasmine asked.

Mason lowered his head. “I love her,” he said softly.

“I know you do.” Jasmine said. “You just gotta learn how to take the bad with the good. You knew she was a maniac when you proposed to her. Why would she change now?” she asked.

“You’re right. Hey, on another note, I was hoping you would read over my community center idea. I think I can get some funding for it if I can get it completed by the end of the month. The proposal is in my bag,” he said, pointing to his leather messenger bag on the recliner.

“We can check it out later,” she said. “Finish the game, I’m going to my kickboxing class and when I get back, we’ll...chat. Try to stay awake, okay? I know my cooking be puttin’ brotha’s DOWN!”

He watched her walk away. Her hair was piled on

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top of her head, and she was wearing one of his t-shirts, one he had probably left at her house years ago. She was beautiful. She looked back and caught him watching her.

“What are you lookin’ at, man?” she said, with one hand on her hip and her head tilted to the side.

Mason smiled. He was just happy to be there.

Mason dozed off and the next thing he knew, it was midnight. He got up to see where she was, and he found Jasmine sitting in her office with his proposal. She looked up at him.

“This is amazing, Mase,” she said.

“You think so?” he asked.

“Yes!” she said “You definitely could get funding for this!”

“Do you really think it could work?” he asked her, squeezing onto the futon next to her, even though there were two additional seats in the room.

“I don’t see why not. We don’t have anything like that in our neighborhood. And you added a sports component too? I love it! I think it’s ready to go as it is! No one has ever thought to create a community center like this!” Jasmine said.

Mason’s heart swelled with joy. He asked his fiancée Sasha to look over his project idea a million times before and each time she would wave him away for some sort of wedding planning activity. He had been carrying around the folder for months now, and all it took was for Jasmine to know how important it was to him. She didn’t think twice about spending her evening reading his plans. Her selfless love for him is why Mason had always cared so much about her.

As Jasmine continued to read, Mason leaned his head back onto the futon and looked around. Jasmine’s office was more like a sanctuary. The walls were painted a shade of blue that reminded him of the water he swam in when he visited Bermuda the year before. She had citrus

and sage candles burning, which gave the room a warm and inviting feeling. Mason's eyes traveled the length of the room and he read each degree and award that hung on Jasmine's wall. He also looked at the dozens of framed photos of friends, family, and people Jasmine had met over the years. But there was one photo of a person he didn't recognize.

In the picture, Jasmine was smiling bigger than Mason had ever seen before, and there was an unknown man with his arms wrapped around her waist. From the background of the photo, Mason could tell they were either on a cruise ship or on an island. Wherever they were, Jasmine looked happy.

"Who is this?" Mason asked her as he held up the photo. There was a little jealousy in his voice.

"Why you all up in MY business, Mr. I'm gettin married?" she said. She knew immediately that she had touched a nerve with Mason when he fell silent, focusing his attention on the mystery man's massive hands.

"Hey, man, I don't wanna make you all stressed out, I know you have enough of that at home, but have you even talked about some of the things YOU'D like to see at your own wedding? I mean, is it all about her?"

Jasmine decided not to go any further with the conversation because it was none of her business. She didn't even HAVE a fiancé so who was she to make demands on him? She handed his folder back to him.

"Thank you for letting me read your proposal, Mason. You've always been so motivated!" she said, motioning for him to follow her to the living room.

They settled onto the couch and Jasmine slid into Mason's arms with an ease of familiarity. Mason's long arms wrapped around Jasmine as she leaned her head against his chest. Mason missed the feeling of Jasmine against him. They had a comfort level with each other that surpassed friendship.

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Around 2 a.m., Jasmine stood up and stretched, reaching toward the ceiling on her tiptoes.

"I think I'm gonna call it a night. I made up the guest room for you and set the coffee pot to brew at six. You can use the guest shower if you want. What do you want for breakfast?"

"I don't eat breakfast," he said.

"You do now," Jasmine said "well, at least you will while you're here. Sleep tight, okay?" she said.

When Mason stepped into Jaz's guestroom he felt like he had stepped into his own private oasis. The king-sized bed was already turned back, sandalwood candles flickered on the nightstand. Mason couldn't wait to take a shower. He just wanted to wash away the worries of his day. After his shower, he settled into bed and pulled the comforter up to his chin. He was almost asleep when there was a knock at his door.

"Mase?" Jasmine called out through the door. "Can I come in for a minute?"

"Yeah," he said. "Come in!"

Jasmine came in and sat down on the bed next to him. He could smell the coconut oil she always used after she showered.

"I'm worried about you," she started.

"Why are you worried about me? I'm okay!" he said, immediately on the defense.

"I just feel like you're unhappy. I mean, I've never seen you like this before. And maybe you're just tired. I don't know. I shouldn't have even come in here, it's so late!" she said, laughing.

"Did you enjoy your shower?" she asked, lying back on the pillow. Her arm grazed his as she settled into the other side of the bed.

"Yes! I could have stayed in there all night!"

"I'm glad, I just want you to get some rest while you're here," Jaz said. "You always stay so busy! You're

always on your grind!”

“I try,” he said, “but if I’m so much on my grind then why can’t I get a break? I mean every single part of my life is a mess. Everything. My relationship. My job. The only sanity I have is when I come here or when I actually make it to church on Sunday morning.”

Jasmine looked at him, her lips curled.

“Mason don’t even try to lie and say you go to church. Because you know as well as I do that you ain’t seen the inside of a church in months.”

Mason couldn’t argue; she was right.

“All I know is, I need a break. I need something to happen, and soon,” he said.

Their faces were inches apart.

“I need something to happen soon, too,” she said.

Mason wondered if they were still talking about their lives in general or this very moment. He couldn’t help but to imagine how it would be if they could spend the night together.

Jasmine leaned in, resolving any doubts he had about just what she meant, as soon as her lips touched his, his phone buzzed on the nightstand, bringing them both back to reality.

*Sasha* appeared on the caller ID. It was Mason’s fiancée. Mason and Jasmine froze, lip to lip.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Jasmine said, getting up. “See you in the morning, homey,” she said before clicking the door shut behind her.

“Yeah. See ya,” he said to Jasmine.



The next morning Mason awakened to the smell of coffee brewing. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept so well. At first he forgot where he was, but once he saw the slippers on the floor next to the bed, he

remembered he was at Jasmine’s. Knowing this put a smile on his face. He slid his feet into the slippers and made his way downstairs to the kitchen.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Jasmine said. Even though it was almost 9 a.m., she was not in her normal business suit and high heels. Instead, she had on a grey jogging suit and a pair of white sneakers. Her hair was swept back into a ponytail and she was wearing larger-than-life hoop earrings.

“You don’t have to work today?” he asked her.

“Nope. And you don’t either,” she said, placing a plate of pancakes in front of him.

“What do you mean I don’t have to work? I told them I would work from here!” he asked, startled. Mason had not missed a day of work in years.

“I called them for you. I said I was your sister and I needed you to help me handle some family business in Atlanta. I told them you’d be unavailable until Monday.”

“But today is WEDNESDAY, Jaz!” he said. “I can’t just ‘unplug’ and miss three days of emails!”

“Oh, you can,” she said. “And you are. You need some downtime, and, truth be told, so do I. You can go back home to your fiancée AND back to that job you love so much on Monday, but until then, consider yourself kidnapped.”

Mason was speechless.

“Oh and by the way, you may want to call your fiancée so she doesn’t go any crazier than she already is. You know how she can get all deranged sometimes, especially if she finds out you’re here with me.”

“Yeah,” he said, stunned.

“Call her now.” Jasmine insisted.

“Okay!” Mason said. “I thought I left the nagging at home,” he said under his breath.

“Excuse me?” Jasmine said, folding her arms and looking at him with her piercing brown eyes.

“Nothing!” Mason said as he stepped into the living room to dial Sasha’s number. I’ll call her now.”

Mason dialed Sasha’s number and hoped to be able to leave a message on her voicemail. But instead, she answered.

“Hey, baby!” she said, sounding happy to be hearing from him. “Did you make it okay? Where’d you go anyway?”

“Hey!” he said, “I made it just fine. I’m actually just a few hours away. You know how my boss is- I won’t be back until Monday.”

“Did you forget? Tonight is our cake tasting! We can’t do the cake tasting without you!” she squealed.

“Babe, it’s cake. It’s not rocket science. Whatever you like is fine with me.”

“I will do NO SUCH THING! What if I choose coconut and you HATE coconut? What if you’re allergic? What if---”

He cut her off mid-sentence.

“Sash, whatever you choose is fine with me. I like everything, don’t worry. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Mason returned to the kitchen as Jasmine was throwing her purse over her shoulder.

“I gotta run to the store but I should be back in an hour or so,” Jasmine said.

“You want me to ride with you?” he asked her. He looked like a lost puppy.

“Take it from me, the bags under your eyes tell me that you need some serious rest. You can get that here. Plus, I’m sure you didn’t come all the way here just to follow me around,” she said as she headed for the front door.

Just as Jasmine was pulling out of the driveway, Mason heard her cell phone ringing on the kitchen counter. The name “J.J.” flashed on the caller ID. Mason wondered who “J.J.” was. A rush of jealousy came over him and it

caught him off-guard. Who was he to be jealous when he was three weeks away from being a married man?

As he sat at Jasmine’s kitchen table, he reflected on all they had been through together. He had known Jasmine since the first grade, yet she never became more than a friend. After having a one-night-stand many years ago, they decided to remain friends. But although Mason felt that Jasmine wanted more from him, he also knew she respected his engagement.

He decided to take a shower before Jasmine returned from the store.

When Jasmine pulled back into the driveway, Mason was lying on the couch in his sweats and t-shirt.

“Dang man, when I said relax, I didn’t say turn into a bum!” she laughed as she closed the door behind her.

“Can you open this?” she asked, handing Mason a bottle of wine.

“Jaz, it’s 1:00 in the afternoon!” Mason joked.

“It’s 5:00 somewhere,” she said. “Besides, I thought maybe we could get a game of checkers going so I can kick your tail like I used to back in the day.”

“Um, excuse me, but you NEVER kicked my butt in checkers. Never! Let’s get that straight right now.” Mason said. “You may have cheated your way to a few wins, but your checker skills will never beat mine,” Mason said as he opened the wine and handed it back to Jasmine. Jasmine poured the wine into two glasses.

“Oh, your phone rang while you were gone. It was some dude named J.J.,” he said.

“Okay first of all, you shouldn’t have even been LOOKING at my phone. And second of all, how do you even know J.J. is a guy?” she said.

“Is it a girl?” Mason asked sarcastically.

“That’s not the point! You’re getting married, remember? So that means you can’t be putting your nose in MY business!” she said, picking up her phone to check her

voicemail. After she listened to the message she put her phone back down on the cabinet. "Looks like I have a date tonight!" she said, sitting back down at the kitchen table.

"That's great!" Mason said. "Actually, I'm gonna run out for a few," he said as he suddenly pushed back from the table.

"All of a sudden you have somewhere to go?" Jasmine asked.

"Yeah, I...well...I'll be back a little later. I don't wanna hold you up from getting ready for your date," he said, grabbing his keys.

Jasmine was confused. "Whatever, Mase. I'll see you when you get back," she said, drinking the rest of the wine in her glass.

As Mason drove away, he was confused over the feelings he was having over Jasmine. Why had he gotten so upset? Why didn't he want Jasmine to date?

Mason drove through downtown Blue and discovered that a lot of what he remembered was no longer there. The water fountain that was once the focal point of the downtown area was no longer there. Instead, a drive-thru coffee stand was in its place.

The small grocery store where Mason worked for much of his high school years had been leveled, and in its place was a natural foods store. The shopping mall that had been erected years earlier looked to be busier than ever.

But what impressed Mason the most was his childhood church, Elm Street Baptist. What once was a small, one-room country church was now several church buildings. The sanctuary had a capacity of 2,000 members. Mason drove into the driveway of Elm Street just to take it all in. As he sat in his car, he reminisced about the many nights he had spent in this very parking lot, hanging out after youth service. He had even spent a few evenings in the parking lot with his high school sweetheart. That is, until his grandmother caught him one evening.

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Mason noticed a familiar face on the church sign: Jacob Anderson. Jacob and Mason were best friends in high school and had played sports together from little league football until they graduated. They even went on a double date to the prom together. After high school, Mason kept in touch with Jacob from time to time, but Mason hadn't seen him in several years.

Just then, there was a knock on Mason's car window.

"Good evening, sir." It was a young man, around 18 or 19 years of age. "Would you like to join us tonight?"

"Oh, no, actually, I was just passing through. Besides, I'm not dressed appropriately."

"Well I believe you're here for a reason, no matter how you're dressed." The young man opened Mason's car door. "Come in!" he said, smiling.

Mason couldn't say no. He turned his car off and followed the young man inside.

As Mason stepped inside the doors of the sanctuary, he was met by several young people, who each extended their hands to shake Mason's. "Wassup man?" they said individually.

Mason was taken aback by the friendliness the young people showed. This was not the treatment he was used to when he worked at the community center.

"Come this way," one of the young women said. Mason followed her to an empty seat near the front of the church. She handed Mason a program and said "Welcome!" Her smile was contagious.

As Mason read the program, he felt someone watching him. When he looked up, a woman was standing right beside him.

"Mason?" the woman said.

"Yes...who..." Mason was confused.

"Oh, you don't know me. Well, not really. We went to high school together but we ran in different cliques. You

were with the jocks, and I was with the not-so-popular girls. My coke-bottle glasses probably could have started a forest fire if he wanted to," she laughed nervously. "My name is Keisha. Keisha Jennison. Well, my maiden name was Jennison, now it's Anderson. My husband is the pastor of this church!"

"*You* married Jacob?" Mason said, stunned. He was more surprised over the fact that Jacob had actually gotten married than the fact that he had married Keisha. Mason did remember her. Keisha was popular with the guys when she started high school. But one day she left school and didn't come back until the beginning of their sophomore year. When she returned she was much different. She was withdrawn, and the rumor around the school was that she had had a nervous breakdown.

"I didn't mean it that way," Mason continued, trying to smooth over what he said. "It's just, it seems like everyone is getting married!"

"Are *you* married, Mason? Let me guess: no." Keisha asked smiling and folding her arms.

"No. Well, not yet," Mason said. "I'm getting married in a few weeks."

Keisha smiled.

"Well, whoever she is, she's a lucky girl!" she said. "I remember how nice you were to me in high school, even when I left for the *crazy house*. I'm sure that hasn't changed. Well, I better get back so we can get this program started. You gonna stay for a meal afterwards? All visitors can eat for free."

Mason hadn't planned to stay, but realized he could not say no. Besides, Jasmine needed some time to cool off.

"Have you ever known me to pass up a good meal?" Mason asked. "Of course I'll stay!"

"Mama!" a voice called out from across the sanctuary. A little girl ran over to Keisha, and Keisha picked her up. "This is Mia," Keisha said. "I'll send Jacob

back here to say hello!" she said as she walked away.

Mason thought about how it must feel to be married. He hoped he was making the right decision. As he waited for the service to begin, his mind automatically wandered to Sasha. What made her marriage material? And why had Mason decided that *now* was the right time? Sure, they had been dating for over two years before Mason asked Sasha to marry him, but he still felt uneasy about settling down with one woman for the rest of his life.

Pre-engagement Sasha was a joy to be around; however, post-engagement Sasha was a maniac. Her whole personality had changed once Mason placed the engagement ring on her finger. She went from an easy-going and laid-back woman, to a woman who was completely obsessed with having the perfect wedding. Mason knew Sasha had gone over the edge of sanity the night he had planned a quiet dinner at home only to discover that Sasha's definition of a quiet night at home meant a four-hour conversation about what color they should use for the church aisle runner. Sasha carried a three-ring "wedding" binder with her everywhere she went and it drove Mason crazy. After the first full year of their engagement, Mason was ready to elope. He loved the pre-engagement Sasha; he barely liked the new Sasha.

But eloping was out of the question. Mason suggested running away several times, but Sasha laughed it off and handed him yet another invitation or favor sample. Sasha's entire life had become consumed with their wedding and he couldn't wait until the big day. Mason was not as excited about the wedding day itself as much as he was to finally be able to put an end to all of this madness.

The lights dimmed in the sanctuary and the worship team began to play. Mason remembered attending services every Sunday here with his parents and his grandmother and now he truly felt at home. As the band began to play he couldn't help but to tap his sneakers to the beat of the

drums. The churches he visited periodically in D.C. and Maryland didn't have the feeling of home. Although Elm Street was now a mega-church, it still had a small-town church feel to it.

The congregation leapt to its feet and the youth choir began to sing. It was a real celebration!

The service only lasted an hour and when the hall began to empty, Mason looked up to see Jacob making his way over through the crowd. Jacob hadn't aged one bit. In fact, he looked even better than he did in high school. Mason remembered how competitive they were back then, challenging each other in everything from sports, to girls, to who could eat the most pizza in one sitting.

"My man, Mason!" Jacob said, grabbing Mason and pulling him in for a hug. "How you been, man? No, better question- WHERE you been?"

"Living in DC, trying to put my law degree to work and getting ready for my wedding in three weeks."

"What are you doing all the way down here? Who you staying with?" Jacob asked.

"Jaz." Mason answered. Jacob laughed, patting Mason on the back.

"I see some things never change, huh?" Jacob said. "Still a playah! Yo, does she still look as good as she looked in high school?" he said. "Because she was FINE!"

"Of course she does! And man, it ain't even like that. Me and Jaz are just good friends. I'm engaged, remember? And, in fact, Jaz is out on a date right now with some guy, so she ain't hardly thinking about me!" he said laughing.

"Whatever you say," Jacob said, giving Mason a wink. He didn't believe him. "But, hey man, I hope you're gonna stay for dinner."

"Yeah, Keisha already asked me. I'll stay."

"Good. Hey, let me take care of our guest preacher and I'll meet you in fellowship hall," Jacob said.

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Mason made his way through the crowd to the back of the fellowship hall. One of the ushers pointed him toward the swinging door and directed him to go two doors down to find the dining hall. As he walked he looked at the walls and recognized some of the old photos. Mason's late grandmother's portrait hung right outside the nursery. Because of her love of children, Mason's grandmother left an endowment to fund the church nursery. They even named it after her. Mason looked inside to see five or six children sitting in a circle while one of the nursery volunteers read a story to them.

Mason could smell the food before he even made it to the room. Once he stepped inside, Mason basked at the table filled with baked ham, macaroni and cheese and cornbread. It smelled like Easter Sunday!

Mason spotted Keisha across the room and she motioned him over, patting the empty seat next to her.

"Mason do you want me to fix your plate? I know that sounds so old fashioned doesn't it? But I do it for all of our guests. You just have to tell me what you'd like to eat."

"The real question is, what DON'T I eat," Mason said, laughing.

Keisha laughed, too. "Okay! I'll be right back."

Mason looked around the room. He recognized some of the faces but saw a lot of new ones, too. They all looked so happy. He liked the range in ages of all the people in attendance. At almost every table there were senior citizens sitting with the youth group members. As he looked around, he spotted Jacob coming toward him.

"Yo!" Jacob said, slapping Mason on his back. "I am so excited about you being back in town! What made you come here? Did you see us in the paper? Did you see the spot on television about our new seminary? You know we're famous around here, right?"

"Nah, man. I just drove past and saw your giant head on a billboard," Mason said, laughing. "That's why I

look like I've been shooting hoops all day. I'm sorry," he said, lowering his head for a moment to look at his sweatpants and sneakers.

"Man, please. You know you can come as you are. There's no dress code in God's house! And we don't have a cover charge unless you count the collection plate," he laughed. "So anyway, I wanted to see how long you're gonna be in town. I want to shoot a few things by you to see what you think. You free tomorrow?"

"You mean you need some free legal advice?" Mason joked.

"No, nothing like that. I just know you've always been really good at planning and I need someone to help me brainstorm some ideas before I talk to the deacon board. I'll stop by and pick you up in the morning at Jaz's if that's okay."

Jacob was excited, and this made Mason excited, too. Mason felt as though he was put in this place for a reason, and maybe that reason was Elm Street.



Jasmine was excited to be seeing J.J. again; especially after the disaster of a date they had a few months ago. Every time they were together, she always had fun. Jasmine hoped J.J.'s call made Mason jealous but she was unsure if it did. But Mason being jealous shouldn't matter to Jaz, right? He was an almost-married man and Jasmine should have considered him off limits.

Jasmine scanned her walk-in closet and nothing seemed appropriate. Her closet was filled with the latest fashions but this date was special, so she needed to look the part. She looked through each rack and sighed. Even her "little black dress" seemed dull. She decided on her red wrap dress and black stilettos.

As Jasmine held the dress against her curvy frame

and looked in the full-length mirror, all she could see was her stomach. It looked a little more round than normal, something Jasmine chalked up to her overindulgence over the past few weeks. She opened her lingerie drawer and found her favorite slimming tank and figured that should do the job of holding everything for the night, as long as she didn't plan to eat anything. Or breathe.

She jumped into the shower and let the water run over her, quickly washing her hair before getting out. As she wrapped the towel around her head, she heard the doorbell ring.

It was J.J.

Jasmine stood frozen in her hallway. Should she answer the door in her robe? No, that would just give J.J. the wrong idea. But she also didn't want to make him stand outside while she got dressed. She wrapped her robe around her and tied the belt snugly around her waist. "I'm coming!" she called out as she walked to the door.

When she opened the door, J.J. was standing there with a bouquet of flowers and a box of her favorite chocolates.

"Well, hello, miss lady!" J.J. said as he threw his arms around her. Jasmine's robe almost flew open.

"J.J.!" she said, quickly re-tying her robe.

"Girl, please. You act like I've never seen a naked woman before," JJ said, laughing.

"Not *THIS* naked woman" Jasmine said, stepping back to let him in.

J.J. flashed his million-dollar smile as he handed Jasmine the flowers and chocolates.

"You are too much!" Jasmine said. "Thank you."

"Hey, you know I had to get something nice for you, especially after the last time we were together."

"Yeah, about that..." Jasmine started.

"Shhhhhh" J.J. said, placing his finger over her lips. "Get dressed. Let's see what good ole' Blue Ver-gin-nee has

to offer a lil ol' city boy like me," he said, faking a southern accent.

"Don't joke on my city, J.J.!" she said. "Have a seat. I'll be back in a few."

Jasmine went into the kitchen to put the flowers into a vase of water. As she arranged them on her countertop she remembered the first time J.J. gave her gerbera daisies. She smiled.

"Hey, can I use your bathroom?" J.J. called out from the living room.

"Yeah, use the guest bathroom," she said, without even thinking. After a few seconds, she heard J.J.'s voice again.

"What the hell are these?" J.J. yelled, walking into the living room holding a pair of Mason's boxers.

"My friend is visiting," Jasmine said as she peeked her head out of her bedroom door. "He's having a hard time right now with work, his fiancée..."

"And holding onto his boxers?" J.J. said, angrily. "Look, I'm not up for any games. You told me you were single. Why would you have me drive all the way here and you had another man in your bed?"

Jasmine stepped back out of her bedroom. "Mason is not in my bed! He's sleeping in the guest room. And "I AM single. He's just a friend."

Jasmine was beginning to get angry, too. How dare J.J. question HER about her own home?

"MASON?" J.J. fumed. *THE* Mason? The same Mason you've had a crush on since the seventh grade? The same Mason you gush about every time we talk about the past?"

Jasmine was silent. J.J. was right; she did talk about Mason quite often.

"Come on, J.J. I told you Mason and I are just friends. He's getting married in a few weeks! He's just stressed out and he needs a place to rest for a few days.

That's all." Jasmine walked over to J.J.

J.J. began to calm down as he saw Jasmine coming toward him in her robe.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Positive!" Jasmine said, looking J.J. straight in the eyes. "Now, give me a few so I can get ready, and we'll see what Blue has in store for us this evening.

"Okay," J.J. said. "You sure know how to calm me down, girl!" he said, laughing.

"It's my specialty," Jasmine said, winking.

J.J. sat on Jasmine's sofa and began to look through Mason's proposal.

When Jasmine re-emerged, J.J. was speechless.

"Well, hello!" J.J. said as he stood up.

Jasmine spun around. "You like?"

"I LOVE!" J.J. said. "Maybe we can just stay here and order in," he said with a chuckle.

"And waste all of THIS?" Jasmine said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Girl you are tight!" J.J. said.

*And so is this girdle*, Jasmine thought. "Thanks, baby. Let's go!"

As they walked toward Jasmine's front door, the door opened before Jasmine's hand touched the doorknob. It was Mason.

"Mase!" Jasmine said, surprised. "I didn't expect you back here until..."

"Until your date was gone?" Mason said sarcastically as he stepped toward J.J. "I'm Mason," he said, holding out his right hand.

"J.J.," J.J. said coldly. "I've heard a lot about you, man," J.J. said.

"That's funny," Mason began, "Because I'm JUST hearing about you today."

"Well I'm sure you've been busy, you know, with your wedding and all. Your *fiancée* is probably missing you

right about now, huh?"

"Don't worry about my fiancée," Mason said, stepping closer to J.J.

"Oh, did I hit a nerve, playboy?" J.J. said.

"Not at all," Mason said, trying to sound like he was not upset.

"Okay, so we're gonna go!" Jasmine said as she pulled on J.J.'s sleeve.

Mason's phone began to ring. Sasha's number flashed on the caller ID.

"Hey, baby! I'm on my way home," he said, thinking Sasha was on the other end of the line. But it wasn't Sasha.

"This isn't Sasha, Mason, this is her father. I'm not sure where you are right now, but we need you to come back as soon as you can."

"Didn't Sasha tell you I'll be away for a few days?" Mason said. "I hope she didn't put you up to calling me so that I'd drive all the way back for the cake tasting. Did she tell you tonight will be the EIGHTH cake we have tasted?"

"Mase, this has nothing to do with the cake..."

Mason noticed the strange tone in Mr. McCarthy's voice. "Did something happen? Mr. McCarthy, did something happen to Sasha?" Mason asked.

"There's been an accident. You need to get here as soon as you can. We're at Baptist Hospital on Jerome Avenue," he said before hanging up.

"What is it, Mase?" Jasmine asked, seeing the panic on Mason's face.

"It's my fiancée...she's been...in an...I have to go!" Mason said as he started out the front door onto Jasmine's porch.

"Mase, wait! Let me go with you! You shouldn't be driving in the state that you're in!"

But Mason was already outside and getting into his car.

## The Rhythm in Blue

"I'll call you when I know something," he said.  
Jasmine and J.J. stood in her doorway and watched Mason drive away.

## two

There was an awkward silence between Jasmine and J.J. as Mason disappeared into the night.

“So, do you still want to go out? Get something to eat?” J.J. asked.

“Why don’t we do what you suggested before? Order in? Maybe order a movie, too?” Jasmine hated to waste her perfect outfit on a night at home, but she knew she would not be able to enjoy her evening. Besides, she couldn’t wait to get out of her girdle and into her yoga pants.

“That sounds good.” J.J. said.

“I’m gonna go change. Look and see what movies are available to order.”

Jasmine sat on the edge of her bed and wondered what happened to Sasha. Was she hurt badly? Was she dead? Jasmine couldn’t wait for Mason to get to the hospital and call her with the details. When her cell phone rang, she jumped back to reality. It was her mother.

“Hi, Mom!” Jasmine said, in her most cheerful voice.

“Jaz! Well, bless your heart. How are you doing?”

Jaz’s mother lived just a few hours away, but Jasmine still didn’t see her as often as she wanted to.

“I’m awesome! I have a houseguest this week, so I took a few days to hang out with him.”

“*Him?*” Jasmine’s mother sounded surprised.

“Yes, Mom. Him. You remember Mason, right? Mama Joseph’s son? Well he’s visiting me for a few days.”

“Now Jaz, you know he’s an almost-married man.

## The Rhythm in Blue

You shouldn’t have another woman’s husband layin’ up in your house.”

“Mom, he’s just a friend. I promise you that nothing is going on here.” Just then, J.J. called to Jasmine from the living room.

“How about watching *The Boogeyman Strikes Back?*” J.J. asked.

“Is that Mason? Tell him I said hello!” Jasmine’s mother said.

“Actually, no. That was my friend J.J.”

“Jasmine, what on earth are you doing down there? Running a brothel?” Her mother was obviously upset.

Jasmine knew it sounded worse than it actually was.

“A brothel? Come on, mom!” Sometimes Jasmine wondered whose side her mother was actually on.

“Well, all I know is what I hear, since you never seem to have time for me.” Jasmine rolled her eyes on the other end of the line as her mother continued. “And right now, it doesn’t sound good, what with one man in your guest room and another in your living room.”

“Mom, I gotta go. I’ll call you back later on,” Jasmine said. She was trying to end the conversation before it became heated.

“I’m not done talking to you yet!” Jasmine’s mother fumed.

“Well I have to go. I’ll call you later, I promise!”

Jasmine ended the call and changed into her yoga pants and zip-up jacket. When she stepped back into the living room, J.J. was looking at her take-out menu folder.

“What do you feel like? Chinese? Italian?”

“I don’t care,” Jasmine said. She didn’t really feel like eating.

“So, Chinese it is!” J.J. said. He didn’t notice that she was still upset.



Lucille Jennison had always been the source of stress in Keisha's life. Even though she was a wonderful mother to Keisha and her little sister Frankie, as Lucille aged she became more and more demanding. Frankie never seemed to be stressed about Lucille's care, but Keisha was constantly worried.

When Lucille was diagnosed with leukemia a few months ago, Keisha didn't know how long she would have to live. Lucille's health began to decline, and with each passing day Keisha felt more and more relieved. She loved her mother, but she was also afraid her mother would reveal the secret she had been keeping on Keisha's behalf for more than twenty years.

As if on cue, Keisha's phone rang. It was her sister Frankie.

"Hey, Keish!"

"Hey! I was just thinking about you!" Keisha said.

"Funny! I was thinking about you too. I was wondering when you're gonna come and see Mama?"

"Tomorrow, actually," Keisha said before thinking first. "I was gonna drive up in the morning. Is that good?"

"Is that good? Are you serious? ANYTIME is good, Keish. Besides, mama said she has to talk to us about something."

Keisha's stomach turned.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then. Are you bringing the girls?"

"Of course I am!" Keisha said. "Where else are they gonna go?"

"True. Okay well I'll see you tomorrow!" Frankie said.

The next morning, Keisha woke up bright and early to drive to Frankie's. It had been almost a month since she had seen her last.

The ride to Frankie's was always peaceful when Keisha remembered to pack activities for the twins to do.

## The Rhythm in Blue

They played car bingo, colored dozens of pictures and napped.

Frankie was already standing in her doorway when Keisha pulled up. Frankie's smile widened as soon as she saw the twins. They ran toward her yelling "auntie!" and she scooped them up in her arms, picking them both up off the ground.

"Hey sis!" she said to Keisha, kissing her on her cheek. Frankie swept her dreadlocks into a bun on top of her head and stepped back inside the house to motion them in.

"Is that new?" Keisha asked her, pointing to the tattoo on Frankie's left foot.

"Yeah, you like it?" she asked, holding up her foot.

"What is it?" Keisha asked.

"It's a prayer bead. See? The strands go..." Frankie stopped talking when she realized Keisha wasn't listening. She was too busy tying Mia's shoe.

"Why'd you ask if you didn't even care? Dang, Keish! You can be so rude!" Frankie said as she flopped down on the beanbag chair.

"Whatever. What you got to eat?" Keisha asked. As Keisha opened the refrigerator and looked inside, she laughed and said "are you kidding me?" The refrigerator was bare, aside from a few oranges and a bottle of wine.

"What do you eat, Frankie?" she asked.

"I eat at work!" Frankie said. "Don't worry about me. Besides, I could stand to miss a few meals," she said as she raised her shirt to reveal her stomach. "See these?" she asked, pinching her tiny love handles.

"Girl, please! That's nothing a few weeks at the gym won't take care of," Keisha said. "So, what's up with mama? Have you been to see her this week?"

"Yeah, I went by there on Saturday. She's okay, I guess. She said she wants to see you, though. All she talks about is Keisha this and Keisha that. I'm like 'jeez, Mama,

I'm your daughter, too!"

"You know she's getting older, Frank. Don't sweat it okay? You ready to go see her now?"

"Yep! Let me grab my jacket. I'll meet y'all in the car."

As Keisha buckled the twins into their seat belts, she thought again about their mother. Keisha hoped Lucille would be able to keep the secret at least long enough for Keisha to be able to talk to Jacob first. Keisha also wondered why Lucille would decide to reveal it now, after keeping it hidden for so long.



With Keisha and the twins away for the day, Jacob finally had some time to relax. As he lay on the sofa and prepared for a full day of doing absolutely nothing, he began to think about how much he had been through with Keisha. He loved her, and he was thankful to have her as his wife. But he always felt she was on guard, even when they were relaxing at home. When he married her 11 years ago, he promised to always be faithful. But lately, she was even turning him away in the bedroom. She always seemed to be worried about something.

As he dozed off to sleep, there was a knock at the front door. He expected it to be the landscapers, but instead he found a young boy standing on his front porch. The boy looked to be around nine or ten.

"Are you Jacob Anderson? Um... PASTOR Jacob Anderson?" he said.

"Yes. Who are you, son?" Jacob asked, wondering who this young man could be.

"Oh. Well, hello sir. My name is Joshua," he said as he extended his right hand to Jacob. "Joshua Hiwassee. My mama Sarah said she knows you?"

Jacob didn't think he knew anyone named Sarah. Then he remembered the waitress he met eleven years ago when he spent the summer in Seattle.

"Sarah Hiwassee?" Jacob asked. "From Seattle?"

"Yep! Can I come in?" he asked. Before Jacob could even answer, Joshua pushed past him into the living room.

"Wow, nice house!" Joshua said as he dropped his duffle bag on the floor. "Yo, preachers must make A LOT!" he said, laughing.

"Well, not really. I'm just very frugal," Jacob said. He still didn't know why this young man was there. "How did you get here? How did you know where I live?"

"Oh, my auntie dropped me off. I wanted to meet you!"

"Well, you've met me. Now what?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we can hang out? My mama's not doing so good. She's not eating, and her doctor said she may have to go away for a long time," he said as he ran his fingers along the staircase banister.

"What's wrong with her?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know. People always whisper when I'm around."

"I'm sorry about that, son."

"It's not your fault, dad."

"I'm sorry, did you just call me 'dad'?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah!" Joshua answered. "Is that okay?"

"It would be okay if I was your dad, but I'm not. Why would you call me that anyway?"

"Because you ARE my dad! Duh!" Joshua answered. "Do you have any snacks?" he continued.

"There must be some sort of mistake. I'm not your dad, Joshua. Your mother must have me confused with someone else."

"Nope. She's not confused. I've always known you

were my dad. Since I was little!” Joshua said. “Every time we pass your billboard Mama says ‘wave to your daddy!’ And I do!”

“There’s been a mistake. Can I have your mother’s number? I need to call her.”

“Sure!” Joshua said. “You can use my phone!” he said, handing the phone to Jacob. “Call Mom,” Joshua said into the phone’s mouthpiece as he handed it to Jacob.



“Joshua? What did your father say?” Sarah said, instead of saying hello.

“This isn’t Joshua, Sarah. This is Jacob. What is going on? What kind of games are you trying to play? And why did you tell him I was his father?”

“Oh, Jake, I am so sorry. It’s a long story. We lost touch...it’s been so long. Jake, I’ve just been so sick. I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“So you leave him on my doorstep like a newspaper? Not cool, Sarah. Not cool.”

Sarah was quiet.

“I’m bringing him right back to you, Sarah. You should already know I’m not one to be played with. I have a family now. What we had was a long time ago. I knew I shouldn’t have even dealt with you in the first place!”

“That’s harsh, Jake! And he IS your son! But if you wanna be a deadbeat, bring him back. And you call yourself a man of God!” Sarah said.

Jacob began to respond but realized Sarah had already hung up.

“Get your bag, Joshua. I’m taking you home.”

“But mom said THIS IS my new home. You have plenty of space for me! You have like twenty bedrooms!”

“We have four bedrooms. But that’s not the point. You’re not my son. I’m almost positive. But until we can

figure this all out, you can’t stay here. Not until I’ve had a chance to talk it over with my wife Keisha.”

Joshua hung his head low as he picked up his duffel bag.

“This isn’t fair!” he said as he walked toward the front door.

“I know, son, I know,” Jacob said as they closed the front door behind them.

As they drove down the highway, Jacob glanced over at Joshua from time to time. His jawline was definitely the same as Jacob’s, even the way he held his mouth when he spoke. But that didn’t mean anything. Jacob still needed to have a DNA test done as soon as possible.

“Turn here,” Joshua said, pointing to Chesney Rd, which was a small one-way street that Jacob used to visit when he was participating in a door-to-door ministry. It had been years since Jacob had been on this road, but not much had changed. The houses still looked abandoned, and most of the lawns were overgrown.

As Jacob drove down the narrow road, he was careful not to hit any of the numerous potholes along the way.

“Slow down,” Joshua said. As they slowed to a stop, Jacob was amazed at the condition of Sarah’s home. It looked like it used to be a nice home, but that was in the past. Now the home was falling apart. As Jacob stepped out of the car, his foot crushed a syringe.

“You live here?” Jacob asked. Now he knew why Joshua wanted to live with him so badly.

“Yep! This is home sweet home,” Joshua said sarcastically.

As Joshua fumbled for his keys, Jacob took another look at him. He was almost Jacob’s height, and he shared the same tall, slim build. But Jacob still couldn’t be sure that Joshua was his son. The only way to prove it for sure was to have a DNA test.

Joshua opened the door and motioned for Jacob to follow him.

As soon as Jacob and Joshua stepped inside, Jacob was overwhelmed with the smell of marijuana. There were piles of laundry on the sofa and loveseat, and the trash was spilling out of the trash can in the kitchen.

“What’s up with the trash?” Jacob asked Joshua.

“Mama hasn’t had a chance to take it out,” he replied.

“Don’t you have two hands? Please take out the trash. No one should have to tell you to take the trash out in your own home. You live here, too!”

“Yes, sir,” Joshua said as he did what he was told.

“Sarah?” Jacob yelled, wondering where Sarah was.

“Back here, Jacob! Third door on your left.”

Sarah’s bedroom door was ajar and she was sitting on the edge of her bed, smoking a cigarette.

“Jacob!” she said as she stood to her feet, throwing her arms around him. She looked as though she only weighed about 90 pounds.

“Hi Sarah” was all Jacob could muster up. He was shocked over the condition of Sarah’s home, and even more upset over the way Sarah had let herself go. She looked like a drug addict.

“So this is why you dumped your son on me? So you can lie around all day, smoking and watching television?” Jacob was upset.

“Are you kidding me? I’m SICK, Jacob. I’m an addict. I’ve been an addict for years. A little cigarette smoke never killed anybody,” Sarah said as she took another drag.

“Well the least you could do is put that cigarette out when you have company. Or when your son is in the room.”

“Okay, *DADDY*,” Sarah said, putting the cigarette

out on her headboard. “But, wow, look at you! You made a very nice looking man, Jake. I remember you all those years ago when you weren’t much more than a twig with raging hormones. The way you chased me around that summer still makes me laugh!” she said laughing.

“Well, that was a long time ago,” Jacob said as he stood with his arms folded. He searched Sarah’s face for any resemblance of the woman she used to be. Her once-thick mane of hair was now thinned and dry. Her olive-toned skin now had a dark, muddy appearance. And her once-voluptuous body was now little more than skin and bones.

“Mama, can I come in?” Joshua asked from the doorway.

“Not right now, baby. Give me and your dad some time to talk, okay?”

“I’m not his...” Jacob said, but stopped before he finished the sentence. He moved the pile of clothes that was on the chair next to Sarah’s bed and sat down.

“Jacob, I didn’t know what else to do. I have no family here. I don’t even have any friends in this city. Joshua has been my life for the past 11 years. I can’t leave this earth unless I know my son will be taken care of. You’re the only person he should be with.”

“Sarah, don’t talk like that. You’re not gonna die! You just need to go to rehab,” Jacob said. “And I can’t take Joshua. I already have a family!”

“I know all about Keisha and the twins,” she said.

“How do you know about THEM?” Jacob asked.

“Blue is a very small town. Why do you think I moved back here after Joshua was born? And besides, you’re all over the paper at least once a month. Your church is doing so well. Your wife looks like a sweet woman, Jake. Believe me, the last thing I’d ever want to do is upset your wife or your congregation.”

“I appreciate that. So then you understand why I

can't take Joshua back home with me."

"You have no other choice. You've seen the condition of my home. I catered to him so much as a child, that he doesn't even know how to do ANYTHING on his own! You have to take him."

"Yeah, I just noticed the trash falling over on the kitchen floor," Jacob said.

"Jake, you know I've always been independent. Always. And honestly, if I hadn't gotten sick, you would have never even known about Joshua! But I'm sick. I can't take care of Joshua right now. And Lord knows, I don't want him in foster care!"

"Sarah, I'm really sorry about you being sick. But I can't take care of another kid. My wife would skin me alive if she found out I had a relationship with you the summer before we got married."

"Relationship?" Sarah laughed and then began to cough. "I'd hardly call what we were doing a *relationship*."

Jacob laughed nervously. "Yeah, you're right about that."

## Jacob and Sarah, 11 years ago

*Seattle, Washington,*

*"Excuse me, did you drop your name tag?" Jacob said, handing a packet of sugar to Sarah.*

*"Sugar?" she asked.*

*"Cause you so sweet!" he said, laughing. It was the corniest pick-up line she had ever heard, but she had to admit, it was unique.*

*"What's your name?" Jacob asked.*

*"Sarah. What's yours?" she asked.*

*"Jacob. You come here often?"*

*"I WORK here, A LOT" she said.*

*"Oh yeah," he said, remembering where he was and what she was doing.*

*"Anyway. I was thinking maybe I could come back and see you after your shift is over? We could go have a cup of coffee or something?"*

*"At midnight? Come on, man. Ain't nothin' happening at that time of night but trouble," she said, walking away.*

*"So how 'bout in the morning. Before you go to work? Would you meet me then?"*

*She stood and looked at him for a full minute before saying, "If you can find me, you can take me to breakfast."*

*Sarah went back to the kitchen and told her co-workers not to reveal her last name or where she lived if he returned the next morning.*

*The next day there was a knock at her door at 7 a.m. "Who is it?" she asked.*

*"Jacob. You ready for breakfast?"*

*She was almost scared of her own reflection; she certainly couldn't open the door this way!*

*"Sarah!" he called through the door. "Come on, let me in. You said if I could find you, I could take you to breakfast. What gives?"*

*“How did you find me? Was it my co-workers? My boss? I’m gonna kill them!”*

*“Nope, you’re wrong. Now, are you gonna leave me out here or are you gonna let me in?”*

*“Give me five minutes,” she said.*

*Sarah ran into the bathroom to brush her teeth, washing her face at the same time. She yanked the rollers out of her hair and slid into a tank dress. Within four minutes she was back at the door. She swung it open to find Jacob standing there with a bunch of daisies and a Kit Kat chocolate bar.*

*“What’s with the Kit Kat?” she asked.*

*“I saw you eating one on your break last night. I dig them, too.”*

*Sarah smiled. She noticed Jacob kept looking at the top of her head. She immediately knew why.*

*“I still have a roller in my hair, don’t I?” she asked.*

*Jacob nodded. They both laughed.*

*“What do you feel like for breakfast?” he asked her.*

*“How ‘bout pancakes?” she said, taking the roller out of her hair.*

*“Sounds good to me!” Jacob said. “Maybe we can check out that diner on the corner.”*

*As they walked to the diner, Sarah asked Jacob her standard date questions. He answered them all with ease. He was 21 years old and originally from Blue, VA. He was a Global Outreach major at Seattle Bible College, graduating in less than a year. He had three sisters, two brothers and his parents had been married for thirty years. He didn’t like cats, he had a secret crush on Mariah Carey, and he once slept outdoors to raise money for the homeless. He wanted to move back to Blue when he graduated to preach full-time, preferably at his home church, Elm Street Baptist Church. His father was the current pastor at Elm Street.*

*But for the first time in Sarah’s life, her questions*

*were returned to her. Where was SHE from? What did SHE want to do?*

*She told Jacob she was 25 years old and originally from Nashville, TN. She attended college in San Diego before dropping out to make a go at becoming an actress. Three years and 134 casting calls later, she was a waitress at the Stop and Eat, a truck stop on the outskirts of Seattle. She loved all types of animals, owned a couple of cats and a dog and was a volunteer at the local animal shelter. She had a crush on David Bowie when she was a teenager, had one sister and her parents divorced when she was six. She once skinny-dipped on a dare, only to get caught by the campus security guard. Her dream was to become an actress and live in Beverly Hills. But she knew her chances of this destiny were dissolving with each heaping portion of corned beef hash she served.*

*“I’m only here until September- four more weeks. Why don’t we just hang out while I’m here?” Jacob asked her. He liked her. He didn’t have family here and she seemed like someone he would like to spend time with, even as friends.*

*“Now why would I do that? So you can sleep with me and throw me away after four weeks?”*

*“Sleep with you? Who said anything about sleeping? I have my own bed at my apartment,” he joked.*

*“Yeah I’ve never heard THAT one before,” she laughed. “Real nice, Jacob.”*

*“I try, I try,” he said, blowing his breath on his fingernails and rubbing them on his shirt.*

*They talked for hours about their lives and what they hoped to become. There were no worries about school or social obligations, just the two of them, enjoying their morning. As Jacob walked Sarah back to her apartment, he thought about just how amazing this girl was, and how comfortable he was in her presence.*

*Sarah was usually guarded, but there was*

something different about Jacob. His wide smile seemed to welcome her into his heart and life, much like an old friend. On any other date, she would have ended it at her front door, but not this time. She decided to live carefree for the next four weeks. As they stood at her front door, Jacob leaned in to kiss her. But instead of kissing him back, she opened the door and led him inside. "Sit on the sofa. I'll be right back," she said.

Jacob was excited! He had never gotten this far in one day! Even back at school, the girls would usually put up a front and make him wait at least a week or two. Then they would say "I've never done this before." That always made him laugh. He checked his pockets for a mint and smoothed the wrinkles in his shirt. He contemplated taking his pants off, but decided to leave them on.

But once Sarah reappeared, wearing only a t-shirt, he proceeded to unzip his pants. Then, he thought about Keisha. Sarah was already kissing him when he pulled away suddenly.

"Wait! I have to tell you something!" he said.

"What?"

"I have a girlfriend. Actually, she's more like my fiancée. We're getting engaged soon, and I wanted you to know." He braced himself, expecting her to smack him or kick him out.

"And?" she said. "What's she got to do with me?"

"I wanted you to know, I didn't want there to be any lies between us," Jacob said.

"Well, thank you for letting me know!" she said.

"Now where were we?"

Jacob didn't have time to wonder how on earth he had gotten so lucky. A woman THIS fine, AND she was down on the first date? He didn't think about it, he just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

Once they entered her bedroom, they didn't leave her apartment for two whole days.

Jacob and Sarah spent the next four weeks together. For 28 days they swam in the ocean and danced and acted like a real couple. Deep down, Jacob believed they were soul mates, destined to be together.

They would lie awake every night and talk about their plans for the future and Jacob would go on and on about his dreams of becoming a preacher. But there was one thing he thought would stop him.

"What is it?" Sarah asked him one night.

"My lust for women," he said.

"Your lust? What do you mean? Everyone likes sex."

"No one likes it as much as I do," he continued. "I want it every day. I'd have it all day long if I could. And I'm afraid Keisha won't want it as much as I do. She's a virgin. What if she doesn't even like sex? Then what? Will I then step out and get me a jump off, just to stay sane? I don't wanna be that guy."

"You'll never be that guy, Jake. Never," she said. "I believe that once you are married to Keisha and you can have a regular sexual relationship with her, you won't need anyone else. Does she turn you on like other women do?"

"She does, but it's different. Like, she doesn't have her breasts all hanging out or her legs showing too much." He looked at Sarah's plunging neckline. "No offense"

"None taken."

"But you know, she's real modest and I like that. In fact, that's what made me like her so much when we first met. I met her at a weekend Bible intensive. It was the first time in my entire life that I was forced to spend time with a woman and I didn't try to sleep with her. Every single woman I met up until that point just had their goods all out in the open for anyone to see. She didn't. I could tell she had a banging' body beneath her clothes, and I could imagine what it looked like without actually seeing it. All weekend she wore this standard church garb- a long skirt,

*a turtleneck and low shoes.”*

*“She sounds so.....um.....inviting,” Sarah joked.*

*“Don't make fun of her, Sarah. She's not a prude, she's just modest. She can't help it. Her father is a preacher, her grandmother too; almost everyone in her family has some connection to ministry. Honestly, her outward appearance made it easier to date for so long without having sex, because I could really focus on her and on what she was saying, instead of what I wanted to do to her. Let's be real, when I'm around women who don't cover their...assets...it's real hard for me to concentrate. And when they put it out there for me to check out, I do and I almost always try to see how far I can get with them. The more they show, the less time it takes for me to get what I want and go.”*

*Jacob sat up in the bed and continued.*

*“So what happens when I'm pastor of my own church and I have a whole room full of women dressed provocatively for me?”*

*Sarah laughed.*

*“Okay, hold up. You think women dress that way for YOU? Get over yourself, man!” she said, laughing.*

*“Yep. I do,” he said.*

*“We dress this way because we WANT to feel sexy. We WANT to feel WANTED. And sometimes men don't see you if you're not showing your sexy side. Now, me? I love to show off my breasts. I am proud of them. They have gotten me a free upgrade when I cruised last year, a raise in my last job and so many dates I can't even count them.” She poked out her chest for an added effect.*

*“Are you serious? That's kind of crossing the line.”*

*“Okay, so what made YOU approach me the first time you met me, my intelligence?”*

*Jacob didn't answer. The truth was, he was drawn to her cleavage and the way her jeans hugged her hips.*

*“And if you hadn't approached me, we both would*

*have spent the last four weeks bored out of our minds, sleeping in a cold and lonely bed” she laughed.*

*“But check THIS out. Just because I dress the way that I do, doesn't mean I'm gonna sleep with you. I mean of course I'm sleeping with you, but that's not always the plan. I dress like this because I feel sexier, more womanly. Maybe she's onto something, Jacob thought.*

*“But back to what I said before- what happens when I meet another woman like you, when I'm already married.”*

*“Oh, baby, you'll never find another woman like me. When God made me he not only broke the mold, he rolled over it with his bulldozer and set it on fire.”*



*“Look, take him to have a DNA test done. I'll even pay for it! I have no reason to lie to you, baby. And I don't want to mess up your perfect life either. But fair is fair. Josh deserves to have at least ONE stable parent in his life!”*

*Jacob didn't know what to say. He sat on the edge of Sarah's bed with his head lowered. Sarah reached out and put her hand on Jacob's face.*

*“Don't look so sad. It's not that bad! Josh is really responsible! He does everything on his own. Do you have a spare room?” she asked.*

*“Of course we do,” Jacob said. The spare room wasn't the issue, telling Keisha was.*

*“Do you want Josh to stay here until you tell your wife? Can you tell her tonight?”*

*“No, I can't tell her tonight. She's not coming back home until late.”*

*“Can't you just say you've taken in an orphaned kid? Don't y'all do that at your church all the time? I see commercials on T.V. about it,” Sarah joked.*

*“It's not the same!” Jacob was aggravated. “Look, I'll take him with me for the night. But Sarah, I swear, if*

that DNA test comes back and says that he's not my son, so help me!"

"What are you gonna do? Kill me?" Sarah laughed. "Well you better move quickly if you wanna kill me before the drugs do!"

Jacob stood up and smoothed his pants. He felt off-balance.

"You really look good, Jacob! You haven't aged one bit!" she said.

"Thanks," Jacob said as he walked to the door. He couldn't say the same about her. "I'll be calling you on Monday."

### three

When Frankie and Keisha arrived at their mother's nursing home, Keisha stopped before they entered their mother's room. She placed her handkerchief over her nose.

"It smells really bad in here, Frankie," Keisha said.

"Really?" Frankie snapped. "I guess because I come here ALL THE TIME, I don't notice it."

"Don't do that to me, Frank. You know I'm busy with my family, church and..." Frankie cut her off.

"I'm busy, too! Just because I don't have any children doesn't mean I'm not busy! Jeez, Keish. I swear, sometimes you can be so selfish!" Frankie walked into her mother's room and sat next to her bed. "And besides, church was never meant to replace actual LIVING, you know."

"Girls, cut it out!" Lucille said as she sat up in the bed. Her hair was wild and needed to be brushed, so Frankie began to brush it.

"Get away from me, girl!" Lucille said as she smacked the brush out of Frankie's hand. "I may have cancer, but I can certainly brush my own hair! Where are my grandbabies?"

"Right here!" the twins said as they jumped onto her bed.

"Hi, Mama," Keisha said, leaning in to kiss Lucille on her cheek.

"My babygirl! I'm so glad you came! It feels like it's been years since I laid eyes on you!" Lucille said as she hugged Keisha. Lucille squeezed Keisha a little harder than normal.

"It hasn't been years, Mama. More like a few weeks or so," Keisha said.

"Well when you're in a place like this, a week is

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like a year. But it doesn't matter now. You're here, and I'm happy." Lucille reached out and held Keisha's hand.

Frankie will you get me a cup of coffee?" Lucille asked.

"Of course!" Frankie said.

As Frankie left the room, Lucille whispered "So, did you tell Jacob yet?"

"Tell him what, Mama?" Keisha asked.

"Oh, come on now. You know what I'm talking about. Don't play dumb with me!" Lucille said.

"I'm not playing dumb!" Keisha pretended not to know what her mother was talking about, even though she knew full well what was going on.

"Well, whatever you're doing, you better get it together before Sunday. I'm calling Jacob if you don't tell him by then. My days here on earth are numbered, and I can't get into heaven carrying your secret!"

Just then, Frankie reappeared with the coffee for Lucille.

"Sunday, Keisha. Sunday," Lucille said.

"What is she talking about, Keish?" Frankie asked as she sat the cup of coffee down on the nightstand.

"What's happening on Sunday?"

"Oh, who knows? She needs some sleep!" Keisha said as she motioned for Lucille to lie down. "Besides, Jacob and I are going to come back next weekend to see her."

"Really?" Lucille said. "That's wonderful! Jacob hasn't been to see me in ages! I can't wait to see him! Oh, and Frankie, you can go now that Keisha is here with me."

"Are you sure?" Frankie asked.

"Yeah, Frankie. You're here all the time. I can hang out here for a few hours with Mama," Keisha said.

"Whatever you say!" Frankie said, grabbing her purse. "I'll come back after lunch. I'll take the girls with me."

"Are you eating lunch with me?" Lucille asked

Keisha. "We're having meatballs!"

Keisha's stomach churned over the thought of eating meatballs in this place.

"Sure. I'd love to."

"Well, I'll be back then!" Frankie said as she left the room with the twins.

Lucille readjusted her bed and began to fall asleep, just as the nurse came to check her blood sugar.

"Your blood sugar is 245, Lucille!" the nurse said.

"What did you have for breakfast?"

"Oh, not much," she said. "Some eggs and toast. And a donut. And a soda. And some peanut butter crackers."

"Mom!" Keisha said. "It's only 9:30!"

"Well I'm ALWAYS hungry! And these nurses don't give me enough to eat!"

"Where are you getting the extra food from, Lucille?" the nurse asked.

Lucille was silent.

"Well, wherever you're getting it from, please ask them to stop bringing it to you!" The nurse looked directly at Keisha.

"I didn't..." Keisha started to explain, but the nurse was already on her way out of the room.

"Is the coast clear?" Lucille asked.

"Clear for what?"

"This," Lucille said as she revealed a shoe box filled with snacks.

"Where did you get that from?"

"My friend keeps me well-stocked with my snacks," Lucille said. The box was filled with candy bars, potato chips and hard candies. Lucille was on a strict diet, and was not supposed to have additional snacks.

"Mama you know that's not good for you!" Keisha said.

"Girl, hush! If I'm gonna die, let me die happy!"

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Lucille said as she opened a chocolate bar and began to eat it. "Want one?"

"No, thank you," Keisha said as she looked in her purse for a granola bar. "Besides, stop saying you're gonna die! You said you'll have a bone marrow match within the next week, right?"

"Right. At least that's what they said," Lucille said. "Why do you eat that rabbit food, Keisha?" Lucille joked. "I guess that's how you keep your figure, huh?"

"Yeah, kind of," Keisha said as she unwrapped the granola bar. *That, and worrying myself sick wondering when you're gonna drop the bomb on my husband,* Keisha thought.

Lucille fell asleep soon after she ate her candy bar, and Keisha decided to lean back in the recliner and close her eyes for a few minutes. She realized she had fallen asleep when she was awakened by someone tapping her on her shoulder. It was an older Latino man wearing a Fedora and carrying a bunch of daisies and a shoe box. Daisies were Lucille's favorite flower.

"Buenos Dias, senora," he said. "My name is Dalmacio Perez. I'm an old friend of your mother's," he said as he took Keisha's hand and kissed it.

"Really? That's funny, because she's never mentioned you to me!" Keisha was on the offense because she felt her mother had been keeping a few secrets of her own.

"Well, she had no reason to," he said. "We've been friends for 40 years, but we just reconnected a few years ago."

"A few years ago? When?"

"Three, maybe four," Dalmacio said.

"My father died three years ago. Was it before or after his death?" Keisha sat up in her chair to get a closer look at the man.

"After. Oh, what does it matter? Lucille's back in

my life now, and I've never been happier."

Keisha looked at the shoe box in Dalmacio's hand.

"So YOU'RE the culprit who has been supplying my mama with all that junk food? You know she's a diabetic, right? Have you even noticed how much weight she's gained?"

"I am well aware of her diabetic condition," he said, "And to be honest, a little weight is good on a woman. You should try it," he said, winking at Keisha.

"I'm fine just the way that I am. And my HUSBAND thinks so too," she said.

"To each his own," Dalmacio said. "I don't wanna wake her. Can you give her these?" he said, handing the flowers to Keisha. "And this?" he said, placing the shoebox on the table. "Have a good day," Dalmacio said as he exited Lucille's room.

Keisha opened the shoebox to find dozens of chocolate bars, chips and other snacks. She took the box out to the nurse's station and placed a sign on it that read "HELP YOURSELF." Within thirty minutes the box was empty.

When Lucille finally woke up, she noticed the daisies on her table. "Dalmacio came?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Yep," Keisha said coldly. Lucille scanned the room, obviously looking for the shoebox. "He didn't bring anything else?" she asked.

"Nope," Keisha lied.



Later that evening, Keisha drove home. As she sped down the highway, she didn't realize just how fast she was going until she saw blue flashing lights in her rear view mirror.

"Shoot!" Keisha said as she slowed down to pull

over.

"Mommy's in trouble!" Mia said, laughing.

Keisha was nervous. She hadn't been pulled over in years, and she was afraid of getting a ticket. She reached over to open her glove box just as the police officer knocked on her window with his flashlight.

"License and registration please," he said sternly.

"Yes, of course," she said, trying to remain calm.

"Sit tight, I'll be right back," the officer said.

Keisha's phone began to ring. Mia answered it before Keisha even had a chance.

"Hi daddy! Mommy's goin' to jail!" she said.

Keisha grabbed the phone from Mia's hand but it was too late. The call was already disconnected.

The officer came back to Keisha's window and motioned for her to roll the window down again.

"Mrs. Anderson, did you realize you were going ninety miles per hour?"

Keisha shook her head. "No, officer. I was just in a hurry to get home. I'm really worried about my mother. She's ill."

"That's no reason to speed. You could have killed someone! And you need to think of your children as well!"

"I know. I'll be more careful, I promise!" she said. The officer handed her license and registration back to her.

"Okay, ma'am. I don't want to see you driving at this speed again."

"Yes, sir," Keisha said.

"You'll just be getting a warning tonight, Mrs. Anderson. But next time you'll definitely be getting a ticket."

As she drove the rest of the way home, Keisha was careful not to go above the speed limit. She made it home within the hour.

As she pulled up to her house, she sensed something was awry. She could see Jacob through the window and he

appeared not to be alone. Jacob came out to meet her.

“We have a house guest,” Jacob said before he even kissed her hello.

“A house guest?” Keisha asked. She was in no mood for visitors. “Is it someone from church?”

“Not exactly. Come in. We’ll talk.”

Keisha didn’t know if she could take one more stressful situation.

“Girls, go to your room and let mommy and me have some quiet time,” Jacob said. The girls obeyed.

Keisha sat down on the couch and kicked off her shoes. She leaned back and allowed the cushions to envelope her body. “I’m beat, Jake. Can we talk about this tomorrow?”

“Actually, no. Joshua isn’t just a regular house guest. He’s my...cousin’s son.” Jacob was making it up as he went along. But then he realized lying was not the way to tell Keisha what was really going on. “Actually, his aunt dropped him off here this morning. His mother and I... well...we have a bit of a history together.”

“What kind of history? When?” Keisha asked, suddenly upright.

“Long before you and I got married. Remember the summer I went to Seattle?”

“Yep. We got engaged that summer BEFORE you went,” Keisha said.

“Well, that’s when I met her.”

“So you had sex with her while you were engaged to me? Jacob how could you?”

“Babe, you know all about my wild days. I never kept that a secret from you.”

“So what does that have to do with the boy who’s here?” Keisha asked. Suddenly her eyes widened. “Wait a second, Jake. Is he your *son*?”

“Honestly, babe I don’t think he’s mine. His mom seems to be strung out on some type of drug and I think

she’s just looking for someone to take care of her son.”

“Well, Jacob you know we’re not in any position to take care of anyone else! We have the girls, Mama...”

“I know! Look, let’s just let him stay here for a couple of days. We’ll figure it all out on Monday.”

Keisha thought Jacob had finally lost it. She knew he was passionate about helping others, but this was above and beyond what he had ever done before.

“Well, where is he?” she asked.

Jacob led Keisha to the guest room. As he opened the door, Joshua was changing his shirt and Keisha noticed a birthmark on Joshua’s back. It looked to be the same as the birthmark the Jacob also had on his upper back.

“Hello, ma’am,” Joshua said as he extended his hand.

“Hello, young man,” Keisha said. “I’m Keisha, Jacob’s wife.”

“I know!” Joshua said, “I saw your photo in the newspaper.”

Keisha turned and looked at Jacob. Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

“Joshua, would you mind if I took a look at your birthmark?”

“Sure!” Joshua said as he lifted his shirt. “It’s cool, right? Mama says it looks like Florida. But I’ve never been there before, so I don’t know.”

“Jacob, it looks JUST like your birthmark!” Keisha said. She pulled out her cell phone and took a photo of Joshua’s birthmark. “Lift up your shirt so I can take a photo of yours too,” Keisha said. Jacob obliged.

“Are birthmarks hereditary?” Jacob asked as he raised his shirt.

“Who knows?” Keisha said. “But it sure looks like yours.”

Keisha showed both photos to Jacob and Joshua. They were stunned.

“See, dad? I told you I was your son! We have the same birthmark!”

Jacob was speechless.

“Well, that is definitely a coincidence, but we still need to have some blood work done on Monday,” Jacob said.

“Well, get some sleep. We’re right down the hall if you need us,” Keisha said.

“Okay. Goodnight Miss Keisha! Goodnight...um... Mr. Jacob?”

“Just call me Jacob,” Jacob said.

Keisha and Jacob closed the guest room door and walked to their bedroom.

“I think I need a shower, a cup of tea and my warm bed,” Keisha said. “Can you get the girls ready for bed?”

“Of course I will. Get some rest,” Jacob said.

“I love you, Jake,” Keisha said as she kissed him.

Jacob stood in the doorway for a few seconds and watched Keisha as she prepared for her shower. He felt badly about dropping this on her while she was already going through so much with her mother. But if Joshua was his son, it was better to find out sooner rather than later.



“You know you can’t stay here tonight, right?” Jasmine said to J.J. as the movie credits began to roll.

“Oh, but Mason can, huh?” J.J. asked.

“Are we going there again? Really?” Jasmine fumed.

“Whatever, Jaz. I’ll go. You wanna do something tomorrow? Maybe go to brunch or something? After church?”

“I don’t go to church,” Jasmine said, immediately feeling guilty.

“Oooo! I’m gonna tell your mama!” J.J. joked.

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“I just haven’t found the right church, that’s all. Believe me, I still have God on speed dial,” she said.

“God shouldn’t only be on speed dial, he should be in your daily call list.”

“Since when did you become all religious?” Jasmine asked.

“I’m not religious. God and I have a *relationship*. There’s a difference, you know. Once you figure that out, you’ll be able to find a church that is just what you need.”

Jasmine watched J.J. as he gathered his jacket and keys. *He sure is handsome*, she thought.

“Okay so I’ll call you in the morning,” J.J. said as he kissed Jasmine on her cheek.

As Jasmine picked up the empty food containers to throw them away, she thought about Mason and wondered how Sasha was doing. She decided to try to call him.

“Hello?” Mason sounded tired.

“Did you make it to the hospital?” Jasmine asked.

“I’m pulling up right now. Can I call you back when I find out what happened?” Mason asked.

“Definitely!” Mason hung up before Jasmine could say goodbye.

As Jasmine sat on her sofa, she re-read Mason’s proposal for the youth program. With everything happening so quickly, maybe it was a sign that Mason belonged back in Blue.

It was well after 1 a.m. when Jasmine finally climbed into bed.



When Mason arrived at the hospital, he ran to the emergency room entrance. Sasha’s mother met him at the door.

“You have some NERVE!” she said as she lunged toward him

“What did I do?” Mason screamed pushing her

away from him. "What happened to Sasha?"

Sasha's father cut in.

"Mason, Sasha had an accident on her way to the cake tasting tonight. She was hit head-on by an SUV. They don't think she's going to make it! Mason, you KNOW how terrified Sasha is of driving at night, especially when it's raining. Why weren't you here? Why weren't you with her?"

"I had to go away for work," Mason said, starting to tear up.

"You're a LIAR!" Mrs. McCarthy screamed. "You weren't away for work, you were at Jasmine's house! That girl has always wanted to come between you and my baby girl. Well, tell her she finally succeeded! I hope she's happy!" Mrs. McCarthy screamed as she tried to hit Mason again.

"How did you know I was at Jasmine's?" Mason asked.

"Never you mind about that," Sasha's mother said. "But I know where your priorities lie, and it's not with my daughter."

"Mrs. McCarthy, please let me explain," Mason pleaded.

"You don't need to explain anything to me. You just better hope she lives because if she doesn't, you're gonna be in a world of trouble," Mrs. McCarthy said as she stormed away.

Sasha's father patted Mason on the shoulders.

"Mason, I don't know why you went to Jasmine's, especially now. I know how crazy things can be when you're preparing to get married, but I also know that Sasha is my only daughter, and that anyone who purposely hurts her, also hurts me. I am disappointed in you, Mason. And for your sake, I hope she makes it," Mr. McCarthy said as he walked away, shaking his head. "I'm gonna take my wife to get some coffee so you can have a few minutes with

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Sasha."

"Thank you, Mr. McCarthy. I appreciate that,"

Mason said.

When Mason walked into Sasha's room, his stomach dropped. Sasha's face was almost unrecognizable.

"Oh, Sasha!" Mason cried out. "Why did I leave you? Why did I let this happen?"

Just then, a nurse came into the room. "Are you her brother?" the nurse asked.

"No, I'm her fiancé," Mason responded.

The nurse looked confused. "Really? I thought her..." her voice trailed off.

"You thought what?"

"Never mind," the nurse said.

"You thought what?" Mason asked.

"Look, this is none of my business. But she did have a male passenger in the car with her when she crashed."

"Who?" Mason asked.

The nurse looked at her clipboard. "Clarence. Clarence Johnson? Do you know him?"

Mason tried to remember ever hearing that name before; he hadn't.

"Where is her engagement ring?" Mason asked.

"She wasn't wearing a ring when she was brought in," the nurse said. "I'll leave you with her so you can have some quiet time."

Mason knelt down at the side of Sasha's bed and took her hands in his. "Baby, I don't know what you were doing with that guy, but I love you. I can't wait to make you my wife. Please don't leave me."

Mason spent the next few minutes praying for Sasha until his cell phone vibrated.

It was a text from Jasmine.

JUST CHECKING IN. WANTED TO MAKE

SURE SASHA IS OKAY. CALL ME LATER.  
LOVE YOU, JAZ.

As Mason was reading the text message from Jasmine, Sasha's mother walked back into the room and snatched the phone out of his hand.

"Are you kidding me?" she said. "You're texting your girlfriend while you're sitting at your fiancée's deathbed? You really ARE a piece of trash!"

"Mrs. McCarthy, Jasmine was just checking on me. You're overreacting."

"I'M overreacting? My daughter is dying! And you're texting some tramp!"

Sasha's father took the phone out of Mrs. McCarthy's hand and gave it back to Mason.

"We're gonna go home to shower and change," he said. "When we come back, don't be here, okay?"

Sasha's mother hesitated, but she obliged. "I'll be back, Mason. You better not be texting your little girlfriend again while I'm gone."

Mason just lowered his head without saying anything.

The next hour was a blur of nurses coming in and out of Sasha's room, checking her vital signs. Mason was exhausted after driving all night, but he didn't want to leave Sasha's side. Just as he was beginning to nod off, a nurse tapped him on the shoulder.

"Sir, can we ask you to step out for a few minutes? We need to change Ms. McCarthy's bandages. You can come back as soon as we're done."

"No problem," Mason said. "I need to get some fresh air anyway."

As Mason walked down the corridor, he heard a doctor mention Sasha's name. He began to walk more slowly to see if they said anything else about her.

"She is barely hanging on," one of the doctors said.

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"But her passenger died. They're taking him to the morgue now."

A few minutes later, Mason heard a page overhead. "Code blue, room 334! Code blue, room 334!"  
Room 334 was Sasha's room.



"How did you sleep?" Jacob asked Keisha as she turned over in bed.

"Good...just not enough," she said.

"You wanna stay home today?" Jacob asked.

"We can't stay home. It's Sunday and you have to preach today!"

"No, I don't. Greg said he'd fill in for me, so we can just relax today. Besides, I don't want to have to explain who Joshua is until we know for sure that he's my son."

"Wait a second. You're gonna miss preaching today? You've never missed a Sunday!"

"Well, there's a first time for everything, I guess," Jacob said. He leaned over and kissed Keisha on her cheek. Just as Keisha leaned in to kiss him on the lips, they heard the sound of voices coming from the living room.

Keisha had already forgotten about Joshua. She thought it was all a dream.

"Stop it! That's MINE!" It was their daughter Mia, obviously arguing with her sister Mikayla over something.

"I've got this," Jacob said. He pulled his robe around him and left the room.

Keisha dozed off again and when she woke up, the scent of waffles floated into her bedroom. When she opened her eyes, Joshua was standing next to her bed with breakfast on a wooden tray.

"My mama loves breakfast in bed," Joshua said, placing the tray on the bed.

“That is so sweet, thank you!” Keisha said. Joshua turned to leave the room, but Keisha stopped him.

“Joshua, come back,” Keisha said. “I don’t like to eat alone!” Keisha said, smiling.

“Oh, okay!” Joshua came back and sat on Jacob’s side of the bed.

“What do you like to watch on television?” she asked Joshua, flipping through the stations.

“I usually watch CNN, or MSNBC,” he said.

“Oh,” Keisha said. She was surprised. What other eleven year-old kids liked to watch news stations by choice?

Keisha tuned to CNN and began to eat her breakfast. It was perfectly cooked. “Want some bacon?” she asked Joshua.

“No, ma’am. I ate earlier.”

“What time did you get up this morning?”

“Five a.m. I always get up at five for quiet time.”

Keisha couldn’t believe how focused Joshua was at such a young age.

“Miss Keisha, can I ask you a question?” Joshua asked.

“Sure!”

“Do you hate me because Jacob cheated on you with my mother?”

Keisha almost choked on her bacon. “Of course not! And he didn’t cheat on me, we weren’t married yet!” Keisha said.

“But Mama said you were engaged. She said she knew all about you!”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, that is in the past. We’re focusing on moving forward. Tomorrow we’ll take you to have the DNA test and then we’ll be able to determine what’s best for you.”

“But I can stay here, right? I love it here.”

Keisha didn’t know how to respond. “It’ll all work

out, I promise,” Keisha said.

Joshua sat cross-legged on the bed.

“Are y’all getting acquainted?” Jacob asked as he came into the room.

“Oh, yes, Keisha’s real nice,” Joshua said.

“Well, Joshua, why don’t we let Keisha relax a little? I can show you the rest of the house and maybe we can all go catch a movie later,” Jacob said.

“Now THAT sounds like a plan!” Joshua said.

As Jacob and Joshua left the room, Keisha’s phone began to ring. It was Frankie.

“Hey, sis! You never called me last night to let me know you made it home safely.”

“I made it home alright, but the last twelve hours have been something else!” Keisha said.

“Oh, you’re such a drama queen, Keisha!” Frankie laughed.

“Drama queen? So getting pulled over for speeding AND coming home to find out Jacob may have a son makes me a drama queen?” Keisha asked.

“WHAT?” Frankie yelled. “A son? When? With whom? I’m coming there!”

“No, don’t you dare. I have enough going on here. I’ll fill you in later, but just know that the son was conceived before we even got married,” Keisha said.

“How old is he?” Frankie asked.

“Eleven. His name is Joshua.”

“But you’ve been married for 10 years, so…”

Keisha cut Frankie off. “Yes, we were engaged when his son was conceived. But I knew Jacob couldn’t stay celibate while he waited until our wedding day. I was cool with that.”

“So you give yourself to him as a virgin on your wedding day, but he’s allowed to sleep around with whomever he chooses? That sounds kind of warped to me!”

“Frankie, please let me deal with my own life. You

deal with yours, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, Mama's been calling all morning asking if you and Jacob were still coming to see her today. She said she has something to tell Jacob?"

"We were supposed to go see her. But, now Joshua is here. Everything's crazy right now, so I probably won't be able to go until later this week."

"Okay, just call her and tell her, okay?"

"Yep. Love you, sis," Keisha said.

"Love you, too."

Keisha couldn't eat. She placed the tray on her nightstand and slid back underneath the covers.



"Somebody help my baby!" Sasha's mother screamed from the doorway. A handful of doctors and nurses rushed past Mason and ran into Sasha's room. One nurse escorted Sasha's parents out into the hallway.

"This is all YOUR FAULT, you know!" Sasha's mother said as she pointed right at Mason. Her face was red and her eyes were swollen from crying. She slid down to the floor with her back against the wall. Mason remained silent.

Mason's mind began to race with "what if's." What if he had just stuck it out this week instead of going to Jasmine's? What if he had taken the time to call Sasha earlier to make sure she was okay? But it was too late for that now. Less than 30 minutes later, the doctor re-emerged from Sasha's room.

"We did everything we could. I'm sorry for your loss." The doctor said nothing more; he simply hung his head and walked away.

Before Mason could console Sasha's mother, she leapt to her feet and began to shake him. She was screaming and wailing.

"Why MY baby, God?" she screamed. "Why not me?" Then she looked over at Mason. "This is YOUR fault! You shouldn't even be here! If you hadn't been layin' up with that tramp this never would have happened!"

Sasha's father tried to console his wife, but it was no use. She was delirious with grief. She collapsed to the floor again and hugged her knees with her arms. She was rocking back and forth as she sobbed.

Mason attempted to talk to her but she waved him away. Sasha's father walked over to Mason and spoke to him face to face.

"You should go. This time is for family."

Mason realized there was nothing else he could do for Sasha's family. As he walked to his car, a sense of grief began to fill his body. He had spent the past year arguing with Sasha over the seating charts for the wedding, the band and even the color of his corsage. But none of that mattered now, she was dead.

As Mason fastened his seat belt, he wondered where he should go. He didn't feel like going home, especially since Sasha wouldn't be there. He dialed his mother's number.

"Hey, Mase!" his mother said as she answered her phone. "Where have you been? I haven't heard from you all week! Have you been getting ready for the wedding? It's just a few weeks away, you know."

"Mama I'm gonna come visit you today. Would that be okay?"

"Of course that would be okay! I was supposed to go to bingo later, but I'll call Cherie right now and tell her to go without me. What a treat! What time will you be here?"

"I'm on my way now," Mason said.

As he drove the familiar road to his mother's house, Mason felt like a kid again. He had driven this road countless times, but he had never felt so defeated. The last

time he visited his mother, he was an almost-married man. Now he felt like a complete failure.

Mason parked his car next to her mother's red convertible and went inside. She was waiting at the door.

"Mason! You're so thin!" she said as she wrapped her arms around him. "I know for a fact you lawyers make plenty of money. Why aren't you eating?!"

"Mama, I'm fine. I'm just tired." He walked into the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table. His mother poured him a glass of sweet tea.

"Well, where's your fiancée? I know she must be SO excited!"

"Mama, I have something to tell you," Mason said as he patted the empty chair next to his. His mother saw the concern in his eyes and sat down before he told her to.

"What is it? Please don't tell me you've ruined another relationship because you couldn't keep your pants zipped."

"Sasha died this morning, Mama!" Mason said as he began to cry

His mother didn't react right away. She leaned back in her chair with her arms folded. She looked at Mason to see if he was joking. When she realized he was serious, tears began to fill her eyes.

"Oh, Mason I am so sorry! This is horrible! What happened?"

"She was in a car accident last night, on her way to the cake tasting."

"So you were with her? Did you get hurt?"

"I wasn't with her," Mason said in a lowered voice.

"You met her there?" Mason's mother asked, hoping he would say yes.

"No. I was out of town."

"So you sent your fiancée to the cake tasting for your WEDDING by herself? Mason I didn't raise you to be so selfish!"

"I had to get outta here, Mama. Sasha was driving me nuts! If I didn't get away for some breathing space, I probably would have called the wedding off."

"Hmph! Over my dead body!" Mason's mother said. "Do you know how much I paid for my dress? And do you know how good I look in it?" She was trying to make a joke to lighten the mood, but she was unsuccessful.

"Mason, I'm so sorry about Sasha. What can I do? Should we call her family?"

"There's nothing we can do, Mama. Her family hates me because they think it's my fault she died. And they've already told me I'm not welcome at her funeral."

"They can't keep you away from your fiancée's funeral, Mason. You can go if you want to!"

"Well, I don't want to. I just wanna go back to work and get back to normal."

"I think you need some time to grieve, Mason."

"I know what I need, Mama. I'll be okay," Mason said.

Mason's mother knew him well enough to know when to drop a subject. Once Mason's mind was made up, there was nothing anyone could do to change it. Even his mother.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"Not really. But do you have something hot to drink? The hospital was freezing!"

"I can make some coffee for you!" she said as she plugged the coffee pot into the wall. "I'll slice you up a couple of pieces of pound cake, too."

"Mama, I said I wasn't-" Mason started to protest the pound cake, but then he realized who he was talking to. His mother would feed a brick wall if it hung out in her kitchen long enough.

As Mason ate the cake and drank the coffee, his stomach began to settle. *The saying is true*, he thought. There's no place like home.

After Mason ate, he walked into the den and stretched out on the couch. His mother covered him with the afghan his grandmother gave him when he passed the bar. It was just as warm as he remembered.

As he lay on his mother's couch, Mason looked around the den. It was as though his mother had not changed a single thing in this room. Every school picture he had ever taken since the first grade was lined up on the wall. Even his prom pictures were proudly displayed.

His eyes stopped on a photo album that was tucked under the coffee table. As he looked through it, he was taken back to his high school days. Almost every page featured a photo of Jaz, and in every picture she was smiling. She was always so happy in high school.

Page after page, Mason was reminded of how happy he was when he was able to spend every day with Jaz. She made every situation better.

"What are you looking at that old book for?" Mason's mother asked as she stepped into the den.

"Just remembering the good times," Mason said.

"Looking at that ole' Jaz, huh? She's always had the hots for you, Mase!" she laughed. "Have you spoken to her since you moved here?"

"I just saw her last night," Mason said before thinking.

"Last night? How?" his mother asked. "Oh, Mase, please don't tell me that's where you ran off to!"

Mason lowered his head.

"Mason Joseph!!! I can't believe you ran down to Jasmine's when you were just a few weeks away from marrying Sasha! You are JUST like your father!"

Mason stood up. "I am NOTHING like my father, Mama. NOTHING. Pops ran out on us a long time ago, and I'll NEVER run out on my family. You can bet on that!"

Mason's mother was silent. "I sure hope you're telling the truth," she said as she sipped her coffee.

"Because Lord knows we don't need two of your father!"



The next day Jacob and Joshua woke up early in order to be the first people in line at the doctor's office. Jacob had already called ahead to let them know he would be bringing Joshua there for a DNA test.

Joshua and Jacob followed the nurse into the exam room. "So how does this work? Is it gonna hurt? Do I have to take off my clothes?" Joshua asked. He was noticeably afraid.

"Oh, it's no big deal. They'll take some blood from your arm, and they'll test it with mine to see if there is a match."

"Too bad we're not gonna be on T.V. like the shows Mama watches every day. You should see it, Jacob! When the guys find out they're not the father of the baby, they dance all across the stage! It's so funny!"

"It sounds funny!" Jacob said. Joshua laughed.

When the nurse returned, Joshua tensed up.

"Relax, son," Jacob said. "It's just gonna be a little pinch. No big deal."

Joshua held out his arm as instructed. His eyes were closed but Jacob knew Joshua could still see. Especially after Joshua flinched when the nurse opened the needle.

"Tell me when it's over!" Joshua said. "I mean, I'm a big boy; I'm not scared...okay maybe I'm a little scared. But..."

"Done!" the nurse said.

"Really?" Joshua said. "That was easy!"

The nurse placed the vials into a yellow envelope. "This usually takes 7-10 days, but Dr. Keith said he could probably have the results back to you tomorrow. He said you didn't mind paying the extra fee to use the *DNA Today* service."

“Not at all,” Jacob said. “So you’ll call us when the results are in?”

“Absolutely,” the nurse said. “Should I call your cell phone?”

“That would be perfect. Now I think it’s time for lunch. What do you feel like eating, Joshua?”

“Can we have sushi?”

Jacob didn’t like sushi, but he didn’t want to disappoint Joshua. “Sure! There’s a place right up the street.”

When they stepped inside the restaurant, Joshua lit up with excitement.

“They make sushi here? You mean, right in front of us? COOL! They have California rolls, right?” Joshua asked.

“Of course they do!”

Jacob and Joshua watched the sushi chef as he prepared their lunch. When their order was done, Joshua scarfed it down--- several pieces at a time.

“Whoa, slow down, son!” Jacob said. “You can have as much as you want.”

“Really?” Joshua said, his mouth still filled with sushi.

“Really. And you don’t have to rush, we have all afternoon.”

Joshua smiled and relaxed a little.

Once they left the sushi restaurant, they went back to Sarah’s house to pick up a few more of Joshua’s things. When they arrived, Sarah was sitting on the front porch with a young man who was drinking a forty-ounce bottle of beer. Jacob decided to wait in his car.

“Hey, Mama!” Joshua said as he walked to the front door.

“Hey, baby!” she said. She noticed the bandage on Joshua’s arm. “Dang, Jake, you couldn’t wait to get the test done, huh?”

## The Rhythm in Blue

“I don’t blame you, man! Sarah’s been around!” the young man with the beer said. Sarah smacked the young man on his arm.

“It’s not even like that,” Jacob said. “You know, my wife had to make sure everything was legit.”

“Yeah, I know. I understand,” Sarah said.

“See ya later, mama!” Joshua said as he passed Sarah.

“Bye, baby.” She kissed him on his cheek. Then she turned back to Jacob. “So when will you have the results? Doesn’t it take a few weeks?”

“Actually, I should have the results by tomorrow. I paid extra for some service called *DNA Today*.”

“Of *course* you did,” Sarah said under her breath, hoping Jacob didn’t hear her. But he did.

“So we’ll check in with you later tomorrow, okay? Take care of yourself, Sarah.”

“Always,” Sarah said as she took another drag from her cigarette.

As the boys drove away, Jacob noticed that Joshua kept looking back.

“What’s wrong, son?” Jacob asked Joshua.

“I just hate this neighborhood. If I stay here, I’m gonna die, just like everyone else.” Joshua turned and looked right at Jacob. “I really hope you’re my daddy.”

Jacob’s heart sank. Deep inside, he hoped the tests would reveal that he was Joshua’s father, too.



Jasmine’s cell phone rang, waking her out of a sound sleep.

“Mase! What’s up?” she said. Her voice was upbeat and chipper-- just what Mason needed.

“I’m just trying to maintain my sanity,” he said.

“How are you?”

“I’m good. I heard about Sasha. I’ve been so worried about you!” she said.

“It’s been really bad, Jaz. Her parents hate me. They think her death is my fault! How could it be my fault? I wasn’t even there.”

“Mase, you know they never liked you. This is nothing new. Maybe this is the perfect time for you to get outta there. Make a fresh start someplace else.”

“Someplace like where?” Mason said.

“Well, I DO have a spare room. You’re welcome to come here,” Jasmine said, smiling.

Mason immediately felt better. Jasmine always knew just what to say.

“I’ll call you in a few days once I figure out what I’m gonna do. Is J.R. still there?”

“No, *J.J.* is not still here. Come on, Mason, I swear sometimes you act like you’re not engaged.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Jasmine was immediately sorry.

“I’m NOT engaged anymore. My fiancée is dead, remember?”

four

Even though Jacob had a lot going on at home he still needed to be present at church as much as possible. On his first morning back after Joshua’s arrival, he noticed lots of strange looks from the people in the church office. Jacob told Joshua to go to the game room while he got some work done.

As he settled in at his desk, co-pastor Gregory knocked on his door.

“Hey, man!” Gregory said. “Got a minute?”

“Of course I do! Hey thank you so much for preaching yesterday. Things at home have been...well... interesting,” Jacob said.

“I know, I heard,” Gregory said.

“Oh, yeah? What did you hear?” Jacob asked.

“You want me to be honest?” Gregory asked.

Jacob gave him a look that let him know the answer without even having to say a word.

“Well, I heard you have a son. They said he’s like three years old? They said you met some lady a few years ago when you went down to Tampa for that Baptist convention.”

“That’s a lie, Gregory. You know that’s a lie,” Jacob said.

“Hey, I’m just telling you what I heard,” Gregory said.

“Well, the truth is, I MAY have a son. In fact, he’s with me today. But he’s NOT three years old, he’s 11. I met his mother before Keisha and I got married. So you can spread the *truth* now.”

“I didn’t believe it anyway, pastor. I know you’d never cheat on your wife. As fine as she is?” he said, laughing nervously.

“Hey, now! Watch yourself!” Jacob said laughing.

Gregory laughed. "You need me to preach again on Sunday? You know I have a whole stack of sermons ready to go!"

"Thank you, Greg, but I think I'll have my own message to share with the congregation this Sunday. But I appreciate you!"

"No problem," Gregory said. "I'll leave you to get some work done." Gregory turned back before he left the office. "What does your son look like? Maybe I'll say hello when I go down to the game room."

"He's wearing baggy jeans and a red shirt."

As Gregory walked down the hallway, Jacob decided to give Mason a call to check in to see how Sasha was doing.

"Hey, man!" Mason said as he answered the phone.

"Hey! I just wanted to reach out and tell you how sorry I am to hear about your fiancée's accident. Is she going to be okay?"

Mason's silence let Jacob know that something was wrong.

"She died early this morning," Mason said. "Her parents won't even speak to me, Jake. It's a mess."

"I know it is," Jacob said. "But look, you know you have us, right? If you want to come back here while you sort things out, you know you have a place to come. Don't feel like you have to deal with this by yourself."

"I know, man. Thank you. I'll call you in a few days once the funeral is over. I may take you up on your offer. I'll just need to be able to find a job when I get there."

"Well that's not a problem," Jacob said. "I have a job for you here at Elm Street. You know I've been trying to start up this youth center for a long time. Now that I have the money to open it, I just need a director."

Mason was too numb to be excited about the idea just yet, but he knew that when the time was right, Jacob's proposal would save his life.

## The Rhythm in Blue

"I'll definitely call you in a few days. Just pray for me okay?"

"No doubt!" Jacob said. "God bless you, man."

"God bless you, too," Mason said.



When Mason arrived back at his apartment, things seemed out of place. As he turned the key to open the door, he felt an immense sense of guilt over Sasha's death. He blamed himself for not being there for the cake tasting. If only he had been with her, maybe she would not have crashed. But he needed to figure out who her passenger was.

Mason looked around his apartment and noticed things were out of place. Sasha's suitcase was open on their bed, and her cell phone was on their dresser.

Mason's normal routine of pillow talk with Sasha was no longer a possibility, which is why he tossed and turned for most of the night. He missed her.

Before he knew it, the sun was beginning to rise.

The next morning, Mason sat on the edge of the bed he had shared with Sasha and wondered what his next step should be. It was obvious that he couldn't pay his last respects at her funeral, but he had to see her once last time before she was buried.

There was a knock at the front door, and Mason didn't feel like answering it. But, he had to, especially after he looked through the peephole and saw Mr. McCarthy standing there. Mason opened the door and Mr. McCarthy walked right in.

"We need to talk, young man," he said. "May I sit?"

"Of course you may," Mason said, sitting down on the loveseat opposite Sasha's grief-stricken father.

"I can't tell you how badly Sasha's mother is doing

right now. She's taking nerve pills just to be able to get through the day!

"I can only imagine," Mason said in a lowered voice.

"*Can* you? Have you ever lost a child, Mason? Have you ever sat at your daughter's deathbed and watched her take her last breath?" As he leaned down, his face was hot against Mason's. Mason could smell whiskey on his breath.

"Mr. McCarthy, with all due respect..." Mason started to say.

"My life has fallen apart, Mason. I lost my only child, and now her mother won't even speak to me as if it's MY fault she died!"

"Sir, I know you don't believe it, but I'm grieving too!" Mason pleaded.

"How can you say that? You've been in Blue for the past week, sleeping with another woman!"

"Now, hang on a second. I wasn't sleeping with anyone! I was just visiting!"

"Ohhhhh, yeah!" Sasha's father laughed. "I bet you were *just visiting*," he said. Then he suddenly began to cry.

"Please, sir, I don't know what else I can do!" Mason said. He was crying, too.

"You can't do anything. We're planning her memorial. She wanted to be cremated, so we're going to honor her wishes. Her mother is furious about that," he said.

"May I come to the service? When is it?" Mason asked.

"It's Wednesday. But you're not welcome there, Mason." He stood up and put on his hat. He extended his hand and opened it to reveal Sasha's engagement ring.

"I stopped by the jewelry store on my way here. Sasha was having her engagement ring sized because it kept slipping off her finger. But you bought it, so it's

## The Rhythm in Blue

yours." Sasha's father placed the ring in Mason's hand and closed his fingers around it. "She was a good girl, Mason," he said. He kept repeating "Good girl, good girl...good girl."

As Sasha's father drove away, Mason looked at the engagement ring in his hand. This shiny piece of gold once made him the happiest man on earth and now it was just a piece of metal. He found that fact profoundly sad.



When Mason arrived at his office on the Monday following Sasha's death, everyone seemed to be walking around on pins and needles. Even Suzie, who was usually the most talkative person at the firm, was silent. As Mason plugged in his computer and began to check his voicemail, his boss appeared at his office door.

"Mason, I just want to extend my sincerest condolences. I know you must still be grieving! To lose a fiancée, in such a tragic way..." his voice trailed off.

"Thank you, Mr. Benjamin. I'm just doing what I can to keep my thoughts upbeat and positive."

"If you need to take some time off, I understand. Just let me know, okay?" Mr. Benjamin said.

"Definitely!" Mason said. He just wanted his boss to leave him alone. Mr. Benjamin stood in the doorway for a few seconds more, and then he walked away.

As soon as Mason's computer screen turned on, Sasha's smiling face appeared. His chest felt heavy, and he didn't realize just how sad he was until that very moment. He lowered his face in his palms and began to sob. Within seconds, someone's hands were on his shoulders. It was Suzie.

"Mase, I am SO SORRY about your fiancée. I mean, she was such a nice girl, you know? And y'all were gonna get married and have babies and probably buy this big house and make lots of money... I am just so SAD for you!" she said as she threw her arms around Mason. As soon as Mason felt Suzie's breasts against his back, he pulled away.

"Thank you, Suzie. I'm managing. What I really need is just some quiet time to get myself back on track." He removed Suzie's hands from his shoulders, hoping she would take the hint. She didn't. Instead, she walked around

to the front of Mason's desk and sat in the chair directly across from him.

"I remember when my grandfather died. I was only six, but I swear to 'ya, Mason, it's like it was yesterday. He used to pick me up in his big 'ole truck every day after school, and we'd drive around town picking up cans from the side of the road. Can you believe he actually let me keep some of that money? I thought I was rich!" She threw her head back with laughter.

"Suzie, I really appreciate you sharing with me. Really, I do. You're a real gem. I just need..."

Suzie cut him off again. "You're such a handsome guy... Mason," she leaned back and crossed her legs. "Do you think I'm pretty?" she asked, batting her eyelashes.

"Are you kidding me, Suzie?" Mason asked. He was starting to get upset. "My fiancée just died, and you're hitting on me?"

"Oh, come on Mason! Lighten up! You didn't even *like* your fiancée. All you did was talk about how she got on your nerves. I've always been your sounding board and now you wanna act like I'm nobody?" she was upset. "Well I promise you, I won't be bothering you ever again!" she stomped out of Mason's office and slammed the door behind her.

Mason was dumbfounded. He didn't know if he should alert his boss about what just happened or let it go. Just then, an announcement came from the overhead speaker.

MASON JOSEPH, PLEASE REPORT TO THE HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICE.

Mason wondered if Suzie had gotten to the Human Resources office that quickly. As he walked down the corridor to the HR office, various co-workers patted him on the arm, offering their condolences.

The HR director stood up as Mason came into the room.

“Hello, Mr. Joseph. First of all, I just want to offer my condolences for the loss of your fiancée. I also wanted you to know that you have an additional five days of bereavement that you can use if you choose to do so.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Mason said. “I’m fine. I just need some time to regroup.”

“Well, if you change your mind, just send me an email. No one else even has to know.”

As Mason walked back to his office, he passed Suzie’s desk. She looked up at him and winked. At that point, Mason decided to work from home for the next few days. He needed some time to work in peace and cope without distractions.



Keisha's cell phone rang as she was preparing lunch.

“Hello?” she said.

“Is this Keisha Anderson?” the voice said.

“Yes, it is. Who is this?”

“This is Ms. Kapp. I’m your mother’s nurse.”

Keisha’s stomach dropped.

“Keisha we need you to come and give a sample as soon as possible to see if you are a match to give bone marrow to your mother. For some reason, your sister is not a match.”

“Sure...” Keisha hesitated. She didn’t want to see her mother today if that meant she would have to reveal her secret to Jacob. “We’ll come later on,” Keisha said.

“Please come as soon as possible,” the nurse said.

Keisha had to figure out a way to tell Jacob before her mother had a chance to. But when?

Just then, her phone rang again. It was Jasmine.

## The Rhythm in Blue

“Hey girl!” Jasmine said.

“Hey...”

“What’s wrong with YOU?”

“Nothing...just a little tired.”

“Well I was calling to see if maybe you wanted to go grab lunch or something? Maybe we can go down to the new Mama’s Place downtown?”

“Is it like the original Mama Wilson’s?” Keisha asked.

“Mama Wilson’s granddaughter owns it, so probably not. But they say Mama Wilson cooks there sometimes.”

Keisha was not in the mood for lunch or conversation. But she promised herself she’d make more time for her friends and family, so she decided to go. Besides, maybe it would help to get her mind off her mother and Joshua.

“Sure, why not,” Keisha said.

“So let’s meet there around noon. That way, you’ll have plenty of time to get the girls from school. Besides, I heard they’re doing a lunchtime open mic with that guy Devin Devalle.”

*Why would I want to listen to someone running their mouth while I’m trying to eat?* Keisha thought.

“Okay, so I’ll see you there!” Keisha hung up and started getting ready for the day.



Mama’s Place was already packed when Keisha and Jasmine arrived. A young hostess greeted Keisha and Jasmine at the door and sat them at the only available table, which was right by the kitchen. As the kitchen doors began to swing open and closed, Keisha started to complain to the hostess. Jasmine tapped Keisha on the hand and she decided to keep her mouth shut.

“These chairs are hard on my bottom,” Keisha said.  
“Well, maybe if you had the natural padding like I do you wouldn’t be complaining,” Jasmine said, laughing.  
“I WISH I had your shape, Jasmine. Curvy is what’s in!”  
“You think so? All I know is this girdle cuts me in half every single day.”  
“Whatever you say, but it doesn’t look like you’re lacking in the date department. What with Mason being your houseguest and all.”  
Just then, the waitress appeared empty-handed.  
“May we have a menu?” Jasmine asked the hostess.  
“Menu? Honey we don’t use menu’s here. Mama Wilson will be out in a few to let you know what she feels like making.”  
Jasmine looked at Keisha, confused.  
“Mama Wilson’s here? Awesome!” Jasmine said.  
As promised, Mama Wilson was at Jasmine’s and Keisha’s table within minutes. She was a short, round woman with a full face with deep dimples. Her gray hair was swept up high on top of her head.  
“Hey, girls,” she said, wiping the sweat from her forehead with her apron.  
Keisha started ordering before Mama Wilson had a chance to finish her sentence.  
“I’m STARVING! I’d LOVE to have some pan seared salmon, some steamed asparagus, and...”  
“Girl, please!” Mama Wilson said as she put her hands on her round hips, leaned back and started laughing. Her laughter bounced around the restaurant and before long everyone was looking at Keisha and Jasmine.  
“What’s so funny?” Keisha asked. “I was placing my order!”  
“Well, first of all, *miss thang*, I don’t cook salmon in my kitchen. Shoot, I can’t even afford to buy salmon with the prices these days,” she said as she laughed again.

## The Rhythm in Blue

“But I’ll tell you what I *do* have. I just fried up some catfish nuggets and French fries. I may even have a couple of slices of pound cake from last night’s dinner. And some sweet tea lemonade. How’s that sound?”  
“Sounds great to me!” Jasmine said, licking her lips.  
“I’ll be back in a few,” Mama Wilson said as she walked away. She looked back at Keisha one last time and laughed again.  
“She’s getting a kick outta you, Keisha!” Jasmine said.  
“Yeah, she’s a real hoot!” Keisha said as she placed her napkin on her lap. “I’m not even thinking about her anyway. Have you heard from Mason?”  
“Yeah I spoke to him this morning. You know his fiancée died, right? He said when he got there she wasn’t wearing her wedding ring. Mason seems to think she was messing around with another man while they were engaged!”  
“Well to be honest, Mason shouldn’t be talking about other people messing around. Did he forget the fact that he stayed at your house?”  
“It’s not even like that, Keisha. Mason’s my homeboy, that’s all.”  
“You mean you’ve never even *thought* about being with him?”  
“Well of course I have!” Jasmine said laughing. “To be honest, I have loved Mason since the first grade. He IS fine! But I respect his engagement. Or at least I *did* respect it. I guess he’s not engaged anymore,” Jasmine said.  
“But I can’t imagine his fiancée having another man. That’s just messed up! I’ve never been with another man aside from Jacob, but even if I were single there’s no way I could bounce around from man to man like that!”  
“Hold up. You mean you’ve never, EVER been with another man besides Jacob? Are you kidding me?”

Jasmine giggled.

“I’m not kidding you, Jaz. When I met Jacob in college, I knew he was the man I would marry. I also knew I didn’t want to give my body away to anyone until my wedding night. It’s a promise I made to God on my sixteenth birthday.”

“So what about your wedding night? I mean, how did you...well.... *know what to do?*” Jasmine was intrigued.

“Well, Jacob had certainly had other partners, so he kind of led the way. I was lucky I guess,” she said confidently.

“Lucky? Sounds to me like HE was the lucky one,” Jasmine said. “And now? Ten years later? How is the sex?” Jasmine asked.

“Jaz! I am NOT going to talk about this with you! This is unladylike! Sex is not supposed to be the center of your marriage, anyway,” Keisha said.

“Keisha you are not some tramp on the street, so it’s okay to have sex with your husband- shoot, even to LIKE sex with your husband. No one is going to think any less of you if you turn up the heat in the bedroom.”

Mama Wilson returned with two tall glasses of sweet-tea lemonade.

“But it’s not proper to talk about sex. Even in our marriage ministries, sex is never mentioned. But enough about me and my love life, what’s the plan with Mason? Is he coming back to Blue?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure. He’s welcome to, but it’s up to him. I guess he can stay in my spare room. We can split the bills, mortgage, etc. It’ll be nice to have someone around to hang out with. But you know he doesn’t have a job here. I’m worried about that. He’s a lawyer, so I’m sure he can find something in no time,” Jasmine said.

“Wait, didn’t Jacob tell you?” Keisha asked.

“Tell me what?”

“The grant he just received to open a faith based community club for the church. It’s gonna be kind of like a community center, but it’ll have activities for adults too. Jacob’s looking for an Executive Director. He actually read about Mason’s work back in DC and he offered him the position! It pays six figures!”

“Give ME the job!” Jasmine said. “I could sure use THAT salary,” she said, laughing.

“Girl you are crazy! Besides, with Mason’s background in law, he’ll be able to review our community contracts, etc. It’ll be like killing two birds with one stone.”

Jasmine and Keisha chatted and enjoyed their catfish nuggets, just as people were beginning to fill the restaurant.

“Oh boy! We better finish up. I don’t like the looks of this crowd,” Keisha said, taking quick bites of her food.

Jasmine looked around. She didn’t see anyone who looked dangerous.

“What do you mean?” Jasmine asked. “What’s wrong with them?”

Keisha lowered her voice. “Look at their baggy jeans and their big shirts. Look at their chains! We might get shot!”

“Are you serious right now?” Jasmine was shocked. “You’re the first lady of a CHURCH, not first lady of the United States of America! You better climb down from your high horse before you get your feelings hurt.”

“You don’t know anything about me, Jaz. You think you do, but you don’t.”

“ALL I KNOW IS...” But Jasmine was interrupted by Mama Wilson’s hand on her shoulder.

“Now looky here. We ain’t gonna have no loud voices up in here. This is a place of business. If you wanna argue, you better go to the bar across the street.”

Jasmine and Keisha were silent. “Sorry, Mama

Wilson,” they said in unison.

Just then, a young man stepped up to the mic.

“Welcome to Lunch and Lyrics! I’m your host, Devin Devalle. The mic is OPEN, meaning that anyone can come up and share whatever is on their heart. I’ll start.”

Devin looked back and cued the band, and a smooth ballad began to play. His voice belted out the beginnings of what Keisha and Jasmine believed was a love song:

*When I first met you  
I didn't think that love was real  
but then you sat beside me  
and all that I could feel  
was the warmth of your heart  
the safety of your love  
I'm so glad you came and found me  
you're everything that I could ever dream...of*

“See?” Keisha said. “A bunch of secular love music. I told you! Let’s get outta here!”

Devin continued  
*My Lord, My life  
thank you for saving me  
My Lord, My life  
I opened my heart, and now I'm free...*

Keisha was stunned. She turned back to Jasmine.

“This is a Christian song? How can that be? It sounds so...so...”

“Good?” Jasmine said, laughing. “Christian music doesn’t have to be boring, Keisha. You need to get out more!”

Devin continued to serenade the audience, and then he asked if anyone else wanted to perform. A young woman raised her hand, and Devin welcomed her onstage.

“Hey, beautiful people!”

“Hey!” the audience responded.

## The Rhythm in Blue

She adjusted the microphone to accommodate her height, Jasmine and Keisha guessed she was at least 5 foot 11. She smoothed her long dreadlocks back with her hands and began.

“So, I’m new here, if you didn’t already know,” she said. “My name is Layla, but my stage name is Firecracker.”

The audience laughed.

“Why do they call you Firecracker?” Devin asked from his seat.

“Because my poems may cause spontaneous combustion!” Layla said as she laughed. “So anyway, this poem is new, so bear with me, okay?”

Layla turned to the band and whispered a few instructions. Within a few seconds, a mellow groove began to fill the room.

“I call this one: Deliciously Devin,”

The audience began to applaud.

*Your shoes are shined like brand new dimes  
Hair shimmering with coconut oil  
Your skin is satin, black like the night  
Your teeth, little seashells, are sweet and pure...*

“See what I mean about these places?” Keisha said. “It’s like they can’t get up on stage without making everything sexual.”

“Well, I don’t think her poem is sexual,” Jasmine said. “In fact, I like it!”

“You would.” Keisha said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jasmine asked.

“Lower your voice!” Keisha said.

“Whatever, Keisha. Jeez, sometimes you act like you’re a hundred years old,” Jasmine said under her breath.

Just as Keisha and Jasmine began to eat, Devin walked over to their table.

“I haven’t seen you beautiful ladies in here before,”

he said. "I'm Devin."

"I'm Jaz," Jasmine said, beaming. She liked the way he looked, the way he spoke and the way he sang. He was like a poetic, musical Morris Chestnut.

"Oh, and this is Keisha Anderson," she continued. "But don't even waste your time on her. She's a pastor's wife with two children and LOT'S of responsibilities. But me? I'm single with nooooo attachments," Jasmine said, batting her eyelashes. Keisha was blown away by Jasmine's ability to flirt with ease.

"Well, it's nice to meet you both!" Devin said. "Wait, Keisha you're a pastor's wife? Your last name is Anderson?"

"Yes, my married name is Anderson. I'm married to Pastor Jacob from Elm Street Baptist."

"Small world! Your husband used to visit when I was locked up. He came every Sunday for three years!"

"That sure *sounds* like my hubby," Keisha said. "He's always been active in the prison ministry."

"Well, I am thankful for him. He saved my life in there," Devin said. "Everyone in my family turned their back on me when I was locked up, but Jacob came every week, without fail. Please tell him hello for me. I'm planning to come and visit Elm Street real soon, that's a promise!"

"We'd love to see you!" Keisha said.

"Yes, we would," Jasmine said, winking. Just then, she noticed Layla watching her from her seat.

"What's *she* staring at?" Jasmine said.

"She probably thinks you want Devin too," Keisha answered.

"If I wanted him, I'd HAVE him," Jasmine said confidently.

Keisha shook her head in disbelief. "Don't you ever give it a rest?"

"Only when I'm sleeping, babygirl. Only when I'm

sleeping," Jasmine said as she finished her drink.



"May I speak to Jacob Anderson?" the voice asked. The caller ID said *Dr. Willis Johnson*.

"This is he, but can you give me a moment?" Jacob said. He got up to close the door of his office.

"Okay, go ahead,"

"We have the results of your DNA test on a Mr. Joshua Hiwassee. The results are 99.9% that you are NOT the father of Joshua."

Jacob didn't know whether to jump up and down or to cry. "Thank you," was all he managed to say. As he hung up the phone, millions of thoughts raced through his mind. Just then, Joshua knocked on Jacob's office door.

"Jacob?" he said, "can I come in?"

"Yes! Please come in!" Jacob stood up as Joshua walked in. "Can I have a couple of bucks to get something to eat? I'm starving!"

"Sure, but I wanna talk to you first. Sit down, please."

Joshua sat down on the leather chair by Jacob's bookshelf and began to run his finger over each book.

"What's up?" Joshua said, raising his eyebrows just like Jacob did when he was concerned about something.

"The DNA test results are back."

"And?"

"And, you're not my son," Jacob said.

Joshua's eyes welled up with tears. "I'm not? But...but I LOOK like you! I dress like you! I sound like you! Everybody says it!"

"I know, son. I know. Look, we'll sort everything out. I need to talk to your mom first."

Joshua sat silently as Jacob knelt down in front of him.

“Just because you’re not *legally* my son, don’t think I’m gonna walk out of your life now. We’re buddies, right?” Jacob asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. But now that you don’t *have* to take care of me, you’ll just walk out. Just please don’t make me go back to my mom’s. I’ll die there, Jacob. I’ll die!”

“We’ll work it all out, son, I promise. Let’s pack up and head home. Keisha’s probably wondering where we’ve been all day.”



As Jasmine stood up to put on her coat, she saw Layla coming in her direction. She decided to compliment Layla on her poem, hoping to avoid any sort of confrontation over Devin.

“I loved your poem, Layla. How long have you been performing?” Jasmine asked Layla.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve been performing for a little while. And actually, I just moved here from Boston a few months ago. I’m hoping to get a fellowship at Blue University.”

“That sounds cool! So you like Devin, huh?” Jasmine asked.

“I do...” Layla said, blushing. “Actually a lot! But it *looks* like you do as well.”

“Well he IS fine,” Jasmine said. “But he’s not my type. I don’t usually go for the artsy fartsy guys. Besides, I’m sort of seeing someone,” Jasmine lied. “But, *you* should make your move!”

“Oh, I’m not that kind of girl!” Layla said. “I’m very old-fashioned. I have to let the man make the first move.”

“If you wait around on a man, you’ll be waiting around forever!” Jasmine said as she laughed.

“Maybe you’re right...I’ll give it some thought,” Layla said.

“Give it MORE than some thought, Layla. Don’t be afraid!” Jasmine said. “By the way, my name is Jasmine. And this is Keisha,” Jasmine said as she pointed at Keisha.

“Nice to meet you, ladies,” Layla said. Her wide smile was warm and welcoming. “Maybe I’ll see you here next week?”

“Maybe!” Jasmine said.

Keisha and Jasmine gathered their purses and headed for the door.

“So I guess I’ll catch up with you later this week,” Keisha said.

“Yep! I’ll text you!” Jasmine said.

Keisha’s cell phone vibrated as she buckled her seat belt. It was her mother’s nursing home again.

“Mrs. Anderson?” the voice said. “Your mother really needs to see you. Today.”

“I’m working on it!” Keisha snapped. “My husband should be home from work by the time I get home, and then we’ll head over. I’ll call my sister and ask her to meet me there.”

“Your sister is already here, Mrs. Anderson. Please come as soon as you can.”

Keisha hung up and sped home. As she pulled up in the driveway, she dialed Jacob’s cell phone number.

“Hey, babe!” Jacob said.

“Hey! How was your day?”

“It was good. The doctor just called with the DNA test results. It said Joshua is not my son after all,” Jacob said.

“What a SHOCKER!” Keisha said sarcastically.

“I know. I probably should have known better. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. By the way, your mom’s been calling me all day asking when we’re coming to see her. I told her probably next weekend.”

Keisha knew she needed to talk to Jacob before her mother did.

“We actually need to go to see her today, Jacob. They need to test me to see if I’m a match for her bone marrow transplant,” Keisha said. “Are you coming home now? We need to talk.”

Jacob was concerned. “Talk about what? I’m on my way anyway, but is it something that can wait until I get home?”

“Of course it is!” she said. “I’ll see you when you get home.”

An hour later, Jacob pulled up in front of his home and Keisha was standing in the doorway. She had her keys and her purse in her hand.

“You ready?” she asked. “Mama is waiting for us.” “Who’s gonna stay with the kids?” Jacob asked.

“I called Tanisha to come and babysit. She’s already here,” Keisha said.

“Okay...well...Joshua go inside, we’ll be back in a couple of hours. I’ll bring you home when we get back, okay?”

“Don’t hurry,” Joshua said. “I’m in no rush to get home, that’s for sure,” Joshua walked into the house and closed the door behind him.

As Jacob and Keisha drove to the nursing home, Keisha was silent. She didn’t speak until they pulled up in front of the facility.

Keisha turned to Jacob. “Jake, you love me, right?”

“Of course I do! Why would you ask such a thing?” Jacob said.

“No matter what happens, just know that I love you. I don’t ever wanna do anything to hurt you.”

“Keisha, you’re scaring me! Is there something you need to tell me?”

Keisha couldn’t get up the nerve. Instead, she opened the car door. “Let’s just go inside. Whatever

happens, happens.”

Keisha walked quickly in front of Jacob through the sliding doors of the facility.

Frankie was already in their mother’s room when Keisha and Jacob arrived.

Lucille opened her eyes when she heard them walk in. “Please, girls, come to me. Sit with me,” she said.

“Where is Jacob?”

“I’m here,” Jacob said, stepping closer to her bed.

“I’m gonna miss you girls. *Even you, Keisha,*” she said, with tears in her eyes.

“What do you mean *even* Keisha?” Jacob said. He wondered why Lucille always seemed to be upset with Keisha.

“Oh, Jacob. I wish your wife was as perfect as you think she is. But, she’s not. She’s got a lot of secrets. And it’s time you know all about her past.”

“With all due respect, Lucille, I don’t like you talking about my wife in that way,” Jacob said.

“You’re supposed to protect her, I know this. But I want you to know something, something I’ve been hiding for the past twenty years. I don’t wanna die with this on my heart.”

Keisha’s mother sat up in her bed.

“You’re not gonna die, Mama!” Keisha said.

“You don’t know that, Keisha. But you have to tell him now. Tell him what happened twenty years ago. Tell him about the baby.”

“What baby?” Jacob and Frankie said in unison.

Keisha looked away. “There was no baby!” Keisha screamed.

“Yes there was! Tell him! Tell him about the baby you had when you were in the ninth grade!”

Keisha turned to face her mother. “Mama why are you doing this, after all this time? YOU were the one who made me promise not to tell anyone! And now you’re trying

to ruin my life! Why would you do this to me? Why now?" she was crying hysterically.

Lucille struggled to sit up on the edge of her bed. "Because you have not been honest with your husband. When he married you, he thought he was marrying a virgin. But you weren't a virgin! And when you had the twins, Jacob thought they were your first born, but they weren't. You and I both know that. It's time to end the lies. I'm gonna die soon and I can't die in peace if this is still on my heart."

Frankie was confused. "What do you mean, Mama? Keisha only has the twins. She doesn't have any other children. I think you're a little delirious," she said. "Here, have some water."

"I don't want any WATER!" Lucille screamed, throwing the glass across the room. "Keisha, tell them NOW! Tell them about the baby you had when you were fourteen. Tell your husband about how you had to be sent away for nine months so you wouldn't shame the family. Tell him about how, when he met you, you were used goods—certainly not worthy of being called *First Lady*."

Jacob was stunned.

"WHAT? This can't be true! You said you were a virgin on our wedding night! You even acted like..." Jacob turned to face Lucille. "Where is the child now? Was it a boy? A girl? What happened?" Jacob wanted to know everything.

"The child is just fine," Keisha's mother said. In fact, she's twenty now, living not too far from here."

"In Blue?" Frankie asked. "She's my age. Do I know her? Did we go to school together?"

"Oh, yes," their mother said. "You know her very, very well."

Keisha turned to Jacob. "I didn't want you to find out this way, Jake," she said. "I was going to tell you eventually, but now was not the right time. I cannot believe

## The Rhythm in Blue

Mama is doing this to me, especially now."

"Well thanks to her, you have to tell me what happened. We can deal with anything, Keish, you already know that. Now I'm gonna ask you again: where is the child you had when you were fourteen?"

"She's standing right next to you!" Keisha's mother screamed, pointing right at Frankie. The next sound they heard was Keisha hitting the floor.

The Rhythm in Blue

five

*Fall, 1990*  
*Blue, Virginia*

What do you MEAN you're pregnant?" Keisha's mother fumed.

"Mama I don't know how it happened," she said. "Okay, wait... I KNOW how it happened, but it only happened one time."

"You are NOT going to embarrass our family Keisha. ABSOLUTELY NOT! I am making arrangements for you to have that baby someplace else and then you can come back. This is such a scandal!" her mother said. "What will the church say?" She slammed Keisha's bedroom door when she left.

Keisha's father appeared at her door an hour later.

"Ladybug," he said, "I'm gonna make this right. I know you didn't do it on purpose. Everybody makes mistakes. Maybe your mother and I can raise the baby. I've always wanted another child, but God never blessed us with another one. Maybe this is His way of blessing us now. What do you think?"

Keisha's mother cut in on the conversation.

"That is NOT going to happen. Why would WE pay for her mistakes? That bastard child will NOT live under my roof!" she said.

"That child is our grandchild. OUR

GRANDCHILD. How can you turn your back on family?" he asked her.

"Don't you flip this back on me. I'm DONE raising kids. I need my life back. You PROMISED me that when Keisha started high school I could stop doing this 'mother' thing and start living again. There is NO WAY I'm gonna start all over just because she doesn't know how to keep her legs closed!"

The next day Keisha boarded a plane to a group home in Mississippi, where she lived for the remainder of her pregnancy.

Once Frankie was born, Keisha returned to Blue. Frankie arrived a few days later and Keisha's parents pretended they had just adopted a baby.

No one ever knew their secret. Until now.



Mason called his landlord as soon as he returned home from work. He wanted his landlord to know he would be leaving in a few days, even though his lease stated he had to give a 30-day notice.

"Hey, man, I know you've been through hell, so I'm not gonna sweat you about giving me a notice. Just make sure you leave the apartment the way you found it when you moved in, okay?"

"Definitely. I'm trying to leave by the end of the week," Mason said.

"That soon, huh? Well, I don't blame you one bit. I'd probably want to leave, too. But will you still be a lawyer if you move back to your hometown? I mean, don't you have to go to school all over again?"

"No, actually I was waived in to practice in D.C. I took the bar in Virginia," Mason said.

"Well good luck to you, man!" Mason's landlord said. "Drop me a line and let me know how you're doing

## The Rhythm in Blue

from time to time."

"Will do, sir!" Mason said.

As he began to pack his things, he realized how happy he was to be a minimalist. Aside from his bed and his kitchen table, everything he owned would fit in his Volvo. He took the photos of Sasha off the wall and wrapped them in newspaper. He didn't know if he'd hang them again once he unpacked at his new place, but he didn't know what else to do with them.

A knock at his back door startled him.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Suzie. From work."

Mason opened the door to find Suzie standing there holding a bottle of wine.

"What are you doing here?" Mason fumed.

"I came to bring you a bottle of wine as a way to say...well...I'm sorry for everything that happened earlier. You know how much I hate rejection!"

Mason was silent.

"Well, aren't you gonna let me in?"

"No. And I'd appreciate it if you'd leave now. I thought I was clear earlier today!"

"Oh, come on, Mase. I could make you forget all about Sasha," she said.

Mason didn't move from in front of his doorway.

"Well, I guess I'll split then. Hey, are you coming back on Monday?"

"Nope."

"Tuesday?"

"Nope."

"So then when are you coming back?"

"Never. I'm leaving for Blue first thing in the morning."

"Blue? You're going back home? Are you kidding me, Mase?"

"Suzie, this is none of your business. Please leave."

“Whatever, Mase. I know you’ll be back,” Suzie turned on her heels and walked down the hallway to the elevator. Her heels clicked with each step she took. Mason slammed his door.



When Keisha came to, Jacob and Frankie were standing over her. She was lying on a hospital gurney.

“What...what happened?” Keisha asked. Suddenly she realized her head was pounding.

“You fainted,” Frankie said. “Like some old damsel in distress!”

“No, I mean before that. *Why* did I faint?” Keisha asked.

“Because your mother told us all about your secret. Well, it’s not really a secret anymore, I guess,” Jacob said.

Keisha turned her head to look at her mother.

“Mama, why would you do this? Why are you trying to ruin my life?”

“I’m not trying to ruin your life, Keisha. I’m trying to save MINE!”

“What are you talking about?” Keisha asked.

“Frankie has been hounding me to allow her to be my bone marrow donor, but my doctor said that in order for the procedure to work, it has to be from my child. You’re the only one who can help me!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you needed my help? How long have you known this, Frankie?” Keisha asked.

“For about a month now,” Frankie said. “Every time I’d go for the blood work, they’d have an excuse as to why I couldn’t be screened. Now I know why.” Her eyes welled with tears.

“Frankie you know I’d never want to hurt you. You’re the closest person to me. I didn’t want you to find out this way!” Keisha said.

“So when DID you want me to find out? In a year?”

Ten years? Never?” Frankie snapped.

“I was going to tell you!” Keisha said. Then she looked at Jacob. “I wanted to tell you! I just wanted to marry you so badly that I thought this would keep you from wanting to be with me.”

“So you lied to me to get your own way? That is the most selfish thing I have ever heard, Keisha. Who *are* you?”

Frankie began to sob. “I don’t even know who I am. Who is my REAL father? Do I have any half-siblings? I just don’t know anymore!”

“Your *real* father was only fourteen when you were born, and he never even knew I was pregnant,” Keisha said.

“What was his name?” Frankie asked.

“That doesn’t matter now. He’s long gone,” Keisha said.

Frankie didn’t know what to do. She was in shock over everything that had just been revealed.

“You’re going to leave me, aren’t you?” Keisha said to Jacob. “I’ve made so many mistakes!”

“Why would I leave you? This happened long before I married you. And this,” he said taking Frankie’s hand, “is not hardly a mistake.”

“Are you mad at me, Frank?” Keisha asked.

“Of course not, it’s not your fault,” Frankie said. “So this means you can help mama then. You can give her your bone marrow?”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help. She’s my mother, after all.”

Lucille Mrs. Jennison pushed the call button and within a few minutes, the nurse appeared at the door.

“Can I help you, Mrs. Jennison?” the nurse asked.

“My daughter would like to be tested to see if she is a match for me,” Lucille said. Suddenly she looked healthy again. Keisha wondered if she was acting sicker than she actually was.

“Definitely! Let me get the kit and I’ll be right back,” the nurse said.

“Is this gonna hurt?” Keisha asked.

“No, silly!” Jacob said. “They just have to take one vial of blood.”

“How do you know?” Keisha asked.

“Because I was tested a few years ago at one of our *Be the Match* events at church. I’m in the database in case I am a match for someone.”

As the nurse drew Keisha’s blood, Lucille sat on the edge of the bed.

“Thank you, Keisha,” she said. “I know you’re angry with me, but I thank you for getting tested. I hope you’re a match for me.”

“I hope I am, too, Mama,” Keisha tried to pretend not to be angry, but inside she was fuming.

The nurse placed a bandage over Keisha’s arm.

“The preliminary results will be back in about fifteen minutes. But then we’ll need to send it out for further testing.”

“Sounds good,” Keisha said and turned back to Jacob. “Babe, we really should be heading back home now. I promised Tanisha we’d be back before she put the kids to bed.”

“Okay,” Jacob said. “Frankie, are you okay?”

“Not really,” Frankie said. “But I’ll be okay eventually.”

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Keisha said, kissing Frankie on her cheek. “Bye, Mama.”

“Bye, baby,” Lucille said.

As Keisha and Jacob walked down the hall, Jacob reached out and took Keisha’s hand.

“You’re an amazing man,” Keisha said.

“I know,” Jacob said. This morning, when he had asked God to give him strength, he didn’t know he’d be tested in this way.



Jasmine was excited that Mason was returning to Blue, but she didn’t want to get her hopes up just yet about the possibility of being with him. His fiancée hadn’t even been dead for a week, yet Jasmine’s connection to Mason seemed stronger than ever.

She changed the sheets on the guest bed and dusted the nightstand and dresser. Mason had left in such a hurry that his t-shirt and sweatpants were still hanging on the chair.

Jasmine promised herself that she would let whatever was supposed to happen, happen. She didn’t want to rush into anything with Mason, but she wanted to make sure he knew she was there for him. She decided to call him. His phone went to voicemail.

“Mase, this is Jaz. I just wanted you to know how excited I am that you’re coming back to Blue. I mean, I know it’s not D.C., but it is your home, after all. Anyway, I’ll see you when you get here. I changed the sheets on your...I mean the *guest* bed. Peace.”



As Keisha and Jacob were driving home, Keisha’s cell phone rang. It was her mother’s nursing home. Keisha pressed the button to answer via speakerphone.

“Hello?” Keisha said.

“Mrs. Anderson?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, this is she.”

“Mrs. Anderson, I just wanted you to know the preliminary results are back, and you are a match for your mother. But with your current condition, you won’t be able to donate right away.”

“What current condition?” Keisha and Jacob said in unison.

“Your pregnancy,” the nurse said. “That’s probably why you fainted.”

Jacob almost ran off the road. “You’re pregnant?” Jacob screamed.

“Yeah...I guess I am...” Keisha said. “Nurse, thank you for letting us know. I’ll be in touch tomorrow to see what our next step will be with my mother.”

Jacob was beaming. “You’re pregnant, Keish! What a blessing!”

Keisha was happy, but confused. She was told after the twins were born that she would be unable to conceive another child.

Jacob smiled for the rest of the way home.

When they walked into their house, Joshua was standing by the front door with his duffel bag.

“So I have to go home now?” Joshua asked.

“Not tonight!” Jacob said. “Put your bag back in the guest room!”

“Today, tomorrow, what does it matter?” Joshua said. “I don’t wanna go home. I told you I’ll die if I have to live there.”

“Why do you keep saying you’ll die?”

“You’ve seen the neighborhood. No one makes it out of there in one piece. You either get locked up or buried. Or strung out like my mama.”

“Listen, Joshua, that doesn’t have to be your story,” Jacob said.

“It WILL be. Just wait and see.” Joshua said. He lowered his head as he walked back into the guest room.

“The girls are already sleeping, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson,” Tanisha said. “Joshua has been a little wound up all evening, but now I know why. He doesn’t want to go home.”

“We’ll take it from here, Tanisha,” Keisha said, handing her a twenty-dollar bill.

Jacob walked upstairs to check on the twins and

found them sleeping soundly in the same bed. He picked Mikayla up and put her in her own bed.

“So what’s the plan for Joshua?” Keisha asked as they prepared for bed.

“I’m taking him home tomorrow. He’s not my son, Keisha. I don’t have to take care of a kid that’s not mine!”

“You’re right about that, Jake. You don’t HAVE to do anything. But it’s only right to at least make sure he’s going to be okay. Why don’t you call Sarah tonight? That way you can give her a head’s up that we’ll be bringing him home tomorrow,” Keisha said.

“WE?” Jacob asked, surprised. “You’ll go with me?”

“Of course I will! I just dropped the biggest bomb on you and you didn’t throw me to the curb! So the least I can do is support you through this.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Jacob said. “Get some sleep...MAMA,” he said, laughing.

“Funny!” Keisha said sarcastically.

As Jacob walked back into the family room, he dialed Sarah’s number. When she answered he could hear what sounded like a party going on in the background.

“Sarah?” Jacob asked.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Jacob. Listen, we need to talk. I got the DNA test results back today and...”

“And I already know,” Sarah said.

“You already know what?” Jacob asked.

“Joshua’s not yours, right? It figures. This means his real father is the man who managed the restaurant where you met me. Jeez!”

“You were sleeping with him, too?”

“Jake, remember you and I were only together for about four weeks. I worked there for much longer than that. Anyway, you can bring Josh home tomorrow. My friends should be gone by then.”

“Is this the life you want for your son?” Jacob asked. He was immediately sorry.

“WHAT? Joshua has a GOOD life. He has his own room, three meals a day, and nice clothes to wear. I’ve been sick for most of his life, so I’m doing the best I can! Don’t you dare judge me!”

“You’re not sick, Sarah. You’re an addict. And I’m not judging you, I just...”

“Just bring him home tomorrow. I’m done talking to you!” Sarah said.

Sarah hung up before Jacob could say anything else.

“So what did she say?” Joshua asked. Jacob didn’t hear him come into the family room.

“I’m gonna bring you home tomorrow, son. Get some sleep.”

## The Rhythm in Blue



The next morning Mason drove to his office and delivered his notice to the human resources department. His boss walked in and tried to convince him to stay, but Mason’s mind was already made up. He cleaned out his desk and said good-bye to his co-workers.

The drive to Jasmine’s was reminiscent of the trip he had taken just two weeks prior. So much had changed in so little time. As he passed each mile marker, he said a prayer asking God to direct him over the next few weeks.

He rolled down the interstate with ease, relying on the fresh air and smooth jazz to get him back to Blue.

When he pulled into Jasmine’s driveway, she opened the front door and began to wave. Mason had forgotten how beautiful Jasmine was, or maybe he hadn’t noticed because the last time he was there he was an almost-married man. But now everything was different.

“Put your stuff in the guest room and come get something to eat!” Jasmine said.

When Mason returned to Jasmine’s dining room, he was welcomed with a spread of his favorite meal: porterhouse steak, baked potatoes and salad. Mason’s stomach growled as he sat down.

“Thank you for cooking, Jaz,” Mason said with a mouth full of food.

“You know I love to cook for you!” Jaz said. She made a small plate for herself.

“Aren’t you gonna eat more than that?” Mason asked.

“Nope!” Jasmine said. “I’m trying slim down a little.”

“You look fine to me!” Mason said. He meant it. Mason had always liked Jasmine’s curves, and she certainly knew how to show them off.

“So when do you start your new gig?” Jasmine asked, changing the subject.

“I’m not sure. Everything is happening so quickly, I haven’t even had the chance to get all the details from Jacob. I’m gonna call him later to let him know I’m back in town.” He took another bite of steak and closed his eyes. It was so good.

“Well you know you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you’d like. I have plenty of room,” Jasmine said.

“Thanks! I’ll probably be outta your hair in a week or so.”

“That’s fine!” Jasmine said. “Now, eat up! I also made cheesecake for dessert.”

Mason ate to his heart’s content. He loved being back in Jasmine’s home again. It just felt right.



As Jacob, Keisha and Joshua pulled into Sarah’s driveway, their tires rolled over something that sounded like glass. Jacob put his car into park and got out to see what it was.

“What was that?” Keisha asked.

“A glass bottle, of course,” Jacob said. “Now I’m probably going to need a new tire.”

“Hey, baby boy!” Sarah yelled from the front porch. Joshua half-heartedly raised one hand.

“Hi, mom,” Joshua managed to say.

“Come in!” she said. “This must be the world-famous Keisha! Well, I’ve heard so much about you!” Sarah said. Jacob and Keisha followed her into her house. Sarah pushed a pile of dirty clothes from the sofa onto the floor to make room for them to sit.

“Oh, we’re not staying,” Keisha said. “We just wanted to drop off your son.”

“MY son, huh?” Sarah said. “Yeah, I guess he is. It’s

a shame that you couldn’t just TRUST me, Jacob. Why’d you have to have a DNA test anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be a *man of God*?”

“Sarah, I AM a man of God, but I’m no fool. Why would I take on raising a child who isn’t mine?”

“Whatever you say, Jake,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “Joshua, go to your room.”

“Yes, Mama,” Joshua said.

“You know, you really should try to quit smoking. At least in the house, anyway,” Keisha said.

“And you know, you really should try to mind your business. Just because you’re a pastor’s wife, doesn’t mean you can go around telling people what they should and should not do!” Sarah said as she blew a puff of smoke right in Keisha’s face.

Jacob stepped in between Sarah and Keisha. “Sarah, all we’re trying to say is that you should try to get yourself together, if for no one else but Joshua.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Sarah said. Just then a young man came into the room from Sarah’s bedroom. “I’ll be back, Ma,” he said.

“Is he your son, too?” Keisha asked.

“Hell no!” Sarah laughed. He’s my *special friend*,” she said, laughing again. “Look, I appreciate the good reverend doctor and his beautiful wife paying me a visit and taking care of my son over the past week. But he’s home now. I’m feeling better than I ever have and he’s gonna be just fine.”

Jacob looked over at Joshua, who was sitting on the floor in front of the television.

“Please call me if you need anything, Josh,” Jacob said. Joshua didn’t respond.

Jacob and Keisha walked to the front door and looked back at Joshua one last time. He never looked up.

Jacob and Keisha drove home in silence. They were happy about Keisha’s pregnancy, but leaving Joshua at

Sarah's made them feel as though they were abandoning him.

## The Rhythm in Blue



The next morning, Jacob arrived at his church office before anyone else. He did his normal morning routine: praying and working out in the church gym. As he settled at his desk, he felt the presence of someone standing in his doorway. It was Mason.

"Hey, bro!" Jacob said, standing up to give Mason a hug. "I'm so glad you made it back safely. Did Jasmine let you get a good night's sleep?" he said, laughing.

"Jaz is the perfect hostess," Mason said, sitting down. "She cooked a meal that was fit for a king! And then I slept for like ten hours!"

"*Sure*, you slept for ten hours," Jacob said with a wink.

"Aw, man, it ain't even like that with me and Jaz. She's just a good friend."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm just messin' with you. Let's get down to business. We'll get you started on your paperwork. Then we'll go over and check out the site for the center."

"Sounds good!" Mason said.

After Mason finished his paperwork, he walked with Jacob to the north side of the church campus. The site for the community center was formerly used as a fellowship hall before the new church was built a few years ago.

"I'm gonna warn you," Jacob said. "This place has been closed up for more than two years."

As Jacob and Mason walked inside, they were greeted with cobwebs hanging down from every doorway. Mason swatted the cobwebs away, hoping there were no spiders nearby.

"This is where the game room will be," Jacob said,

pointing to a large empty space. "And this will be the audio-visual room," he said, pointing to a smaller space to the left of where they were standing.

"So what about a performance space?" Mason asked.

"Right this way," Jacob said. Mason followed him to the back of the building. There was a mini-amphitheater, complete with seating and a stage.

"This is hot!" Mason said. It was exactly how he had envisioned it.

"Now, I know we'll only be able to do performances during the warmer months, but I still think it's an awesome space!" Jacob said.

"It is!" Mason agreed. "Can you imagine what we can do once we have everything in place?"

"With your brains and my beauty, there's nothing we can't do!" Jacob joked. On the outside, he looked happy, but he couldn't get his mind off Joshua.



As the months passed, Keisha's stomach began to grow. She was glowing with excitement each time her pregnancy hit another milestone.

As she and Jacob prepared for their first ultrasound, the nurse asked them if they wanted to know the sex of the baby.

"Of course!" they said in unison.

The nurse pointed out the baby's head, arms, legs and fingers. Then she pointed out another part of the baby that let them know they would be having a boy. Jacob leapt to his feet.

"A boy!!!" Jacob yelled. He gave the nurse a high-five and kissed Keisha. "A boy!" he yelled over and over again.

As Keisha got dressed, Jacob rambled on and on about possible names for the baby and what color to paint the nursery. Keisha couldn't remember Jacob being this excited when she had the twins. But then she realized this was not going to be just an "ordinary" delivery; she was carrying Jacob's first son.

As Keisha's due-date grew near, her mother's health began to decline. Jacob drove her to see her mother every other day, but each time she visited, her mother looked more and more weak.

One Saturday morning, Frankie called Keisha and asked her to come to their mother's facility right away.

When Keisha walked in, Frankie's eyes widened. "Wow, girl! Are you carrying one baby or five?" Keisha said, laughing.

"Don't joke on me!" Keisha said, as she lowered herself into the nearest chair. "How's Mama today?"

"Sleepy," Lucille said.

"You're awake, Mama?" Keisha asked.

"Of course I am," their mother said. "I'm not dead yet."

"You're not going to die, Mama!" Frankie said. Stop saying that!"

"Well, all I know is that they still don't have a donor for me. The doctor said it could be a few months...or even weeks."

"They're still looking, Mama!" Keisha said.

"Besides, they said I can donate once the baby's born."

"That may be too late," Lucille said.

Keisha and Frankie were silent.

"Can you hand me my purse?" Lucille asked.

Frankie handed the purse to her, and Lucille reached inside and pulled out two large manila envelopes. She handed one envelope to Keisha and one to Frankie.

"Don't look inside until you get home. Keisha, wait until you're with Jacob, okay?"

“Yes, ma’am,” Keisha said.  
“Now, go and let me get some rest. I’m so, so tired,” their mother said.  
Keisha and Frankie kissed their mother on her cheek and headed for the door.



“Oh, how I love a man who is good with his hands!” Jasmine said as she walked up the sidewalk to the community center.  
“Hey, girl!” Mason said. He put the hammer down and gave Jasmine a hug.  
“It’s really coming along, huh?” she asked.  
“Yeah! Opening day is four weeks away!” Mason said. “I still have so much to do, though.”  
“Like what? Anything I can help with?”  
Mason rubbed his chin as he thought. “Maybe you can help me pick out the paint for each room? And maybe something for the windows?”  
“I’d love to! What’s your budget?” Jasmine asked.  
“Ha! That’s a good one!” Mason said. “I don’t have a budget. Just don’t go crazy!”  
“I’ll see what I can come up with,” Jasmine said.  
Just then, Mason and Jasmine saw a woman walking toward them.  
“Is Pastor Anderson around?” she asked.  
“No, ma’am,” Mason said. “He’ll be back later, maybe around 3.”  
“Okay. Well can you tell him Sarah stopped by?”  
“Sure thing!” Mason said.  
As the woman walked away, Jasmine leaned over to Mason. “I think that’s the girl that tried to pin that boy on Jacob. Her name was Sarah, too.”  
“You think so? Well the way Jacob described Sarah,

I expected her to look like a crackhead. He said she was really thin and didn’t look well. That girl looks BETTER than well,” he said, chuckling.

“Oh, yeah?” Jasmine said, slapping him playfully on the arm. “Don’t make me get crazy on church property.”  
“Oh girl, please. You couldn’t get crazy even if you tried.”

“Yes I can get crazy!” Jasmine said. “You just haven’t been a witness to it yet.”

“Anyway, what are you doin’ this weekend?”  
Mason asked, changing the subject.

“I’m supposed to be going away with J.J., but I don’t know. Why, what are YOU doing?”

“Finishing up here, then maybe taking a drive to see my mom.”

“You never talk about your mom. Is there a reason?” Jasmine asked.

“No, not really. Mom and I were close until my dad died. Then she decided she would rather travel the world than to spend time with her son. It’s all good, though. I’m grown now.”

Jasmine could tell Mason was hurting.

“Yeah, my mom is the exact same way,” she said, lying.

“Well if you end up being around this weekend, why don’t you come and hang out with me here? I sure could use your help.”

“I’ll let you know!” Jasmine said, trying not to sound too excited. She didn’t want Mason to know how much she wanted to spend time with him.

“Isn’t Keisha ready to have her baby? How many months is she now, like 119?” Mason asked, laughing.

“She’s due in a couple of weeks but I think she’s gonna have him early. But who knows?” she said.

Mason’s cell phone began to ring. It was Jacob.

“Hey, man!” Mason said. “You just had a visitor.”

Some girl named Sarah. And man, she was HOT!” Mason said. Jasmine slapped him on the arm again, this time even harder.

“Are you sure her name was Sarah? What did she look like?”

“Petite with long curly brown hair. She had freckles on her nose and green eyes. She kind of looked like Vanessa Williams.”

“That was Joshua’s mom, Sarah. I wondered what happened to her. The last time I stopped by there, her house looked like it had been abandoned. Did she leave a number?”

“Nope. Maybe she went over to your office, I don’t know,” Mason said.

“Okay. Well thanks! How’s the center coming along?” Jacob asked.

“It’s almost ready, man, and I can’t wait!” Mason said.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Jacob said. “I’ll be back later on, Keisha just called and asked me to meet her at the house. She said her mother gave her an envelope for us to open together.”

“Oh, lord,” Mason said.

“Yeah, I know,” Jacob said. “I’ll see you later on.”



“You ready?” Keisha asked as she placed the envelope on their kitchen table. Frankie was holding her envelope in her hands.

“I guess,” Jacob said. He didn’t know if he should be afraid or excited.

“Okay! One, two...” Keisha and Frankie opened their envelopes at the same time.

“Well? What’s in it?” Jacob asked.

Frankie dumped the contents of her envelope out on the kitchen table. Keisha did the same. Each envelope contained a hand-written letter, a stock market print out and a key.

“What does the letter say?” Jacob asked. Keisha read hers first.

Keisha began to read, silently. “She said she’s going to die soon and she didn’t want to be a burden.”

“She’s been dying for ten years,” Jacob said. “What does the stock print out say?”

Frankie swallowed hard. “If I’m reading this right, it says we have stocks that are valued at over half a million dollars!” She picked up Keisha’s printout too. “So are yours! How could Mama have this much money without us knowing about it? And why would she sit in a nursing home for ten months when she could have paid to stay at a nicer place? I don’t get it!”

“I have no idea!” Keisha said. She was shocked.

“What’s the key for?” Jacob asked.

“Well, the letter says the key is to a house she owns down by the beach. I didn’t even know she owned a house!” Keisha said. “Did you, Frankie?”

Frankie was silent.

“Well, *did* you?” Keisha asked again.

“Keish, you know how Mama’s always saying crazy stuff. I never listened to her!”

“So she said she had a house? What else did she say?”

“She said she was famous. She said she’s a household name!” Frankie said laughing.

“Well, we all know that’s not true,” Keisha said. She continued to read the letter. “She also says she has a storage area in the basement of her house. She said she stored all of her paintings there? What paintings?”

“I have no idea, Keish,” Frankie said. “Mama couldn’t even draw a stick figure when we were growing

up!”

Keisha and Frankie laughed.

“Well, let’s go down and check out the house! I wanna see it! And let’s stop at the bank first and see how we can cash in our stocks!”

“Okay, whatever you say,” Keisha said. When she tried to stand up, she felt pain in her lower back.

“Whoa!” Keisha said. “That hurts!”

“I bet you’re in labor, Keish!” Jacob said, rushing to her side.

“No, just a little pain, that’s all. Wanna go with us down to the bank? And to see Mama’s house?” Keisha said. She suddenly had a burst of energy.

“To be honest, I don’t think any of it is real. I wouldn’t even waste my time! You should probably just stay here and rest.”

“Jacob! My mama wouldn’t send us on a wild goose chase for something for no reason!” Keisha said.

“Whatever you say, babe,” Jacob said as he kissed her on the lips. “Just be careful!”

“I’ll call you if I go into labor!” Keisha said, laughing.

Keisha squeezed into the Frankie’s passenger seat and attempted to buckle her seatbelt. Frankie laughed as Keisha struggled.

“Dang, girl! You’re huge!” Frankie said as she helped Keisha fasten her seatbelt.

“Tell me something I don’t already know!” Keisha said, laughing. As they drove to the bank, Keisha held onto the door handle. Frankie’s driving always made Keisha nervous.

As they walked through the sliding doors at the bank, Keisha noticed a painting on the wall.

“That is beautiful!” Keisha said. The painting was of a field of irises, but the colors were predominately different shades of blue.

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“Yeah, it’s nice. Come on!” Frankie said. They walked into the bank and asked for the stock manager. As they sat down at his desk, they placed the printouts in front of him.

“What does this mean?” Keisha asked.

“It means your mother made some smart investments over the years in your names.”

“So we’re *rich*?” Frankie asked.

“Not quite, but you’ll be able to retire well, that’s for sure. Your mother made sure of that!” the manager said.

Keisha looked at Frankie. “And all this time I thought Mama was out to get me because of what I did when I was 14. When the truth is, she was setting us up to have a good life. That just blows me away!”

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” the manager asked.

“No, we’re good for now,” Frankie said.

Keisha and Frankie walked to Frankie’s car and headed to the house they never knew about before now.

As they drove up the gravel driveway, Keisha’s eyes filled with tears.

“This yard looks just like the painting at the bank.”

“I didn’t even notice it.” Frankie said.

As Frankie fumbled with the key, Keisha looked out at the beautiful landscape of her mother’s yard.

“She never even had a garden when we were growing up. She said she hated getting her hands dirty.”

“Well, people change, Keish,” Frankie said as she leaned her shoulder against the door. “The door is stuck!” Frankie said.

“I can’t help you,” Keisha said, rubbing her belly.

After a few pushes, the door finally opened.

The house was immaculate, with paintings hanging on every available inch of wall space. The house looked like an art gallery.

Keisha walked up to the painting to get a closer

look. It was of a field of irises, in bold shades of purple and blue. "K. Frank" was written on the bottom.

"Wonder who K. Frank is?" Keisha asked. But Frankie was too busy looking around to answer her.

"Mama said there would be another envelope here for us, this must be it," Frankie said, holding up a smaller white envelope.

"FRANKIE AND KEISHA" was written on it.

"What is it?" Keisha asked.

"Well one paper looks like an inventory sheet. And another paper is the deed to the house."

"Inventory of what?"

"These paintings. Wonder who gave them to her? And I wonder why they're all of different types of flowers?"

"Well we can ask her next time we go to visit. She's not dead, you know."

"I know!" Keisha said.

"Wait a second!" Frankie said as she continued to read the paper. "I think mama painted these!"

"Really?"

"Yes. On this sheet it says 'paintings by K.Frank, a.k.a. Lucille Jennison,'" Frankie said. "And the value of each painting is..."

"Is what??"

"\$5,000!"

"But there must be hundreds of paintings here!"

Keisha screamed.

"I know!"

"What do we do now? She really thinks she's gonna die!"

"Well, she's not. She's just giving up, and we can't let that happen!"

"That's right!" Keisha said. "Oooo. Wait a second."

"What? What is it?" Frankie asked.

"I think my water just broke!" Keisha said as water

began to pool around her feet.

## six

As Jacob pulled into his assigned parking space at Elm Street, he noticed a car pulling in at the same time. The woman got out and started walking toward him. It was Sarah.

“Sarah!” Jacob said. “You look AMAZING! What happened?”

“90 days in rehab,” she said. “I got my appetite back, stopped smoking that stuff and started focusing on being the best mother I can be.”

“Wow!” Jacob said. He was stunned. “Where did Joshua go during this time?”

“The facility allowed me to bring him with me. He was in a separate area, of course. But they took him back and forth to school. It was a Godsend. And your church provided the money needed for my care.” She reached out and touched Jacob’s hand.

“I just wanted to come and thank you for everything you did to help my son. It was unfair the way I threw him off on you, but I swear to you, Jacob, that person was not me. Drugs almost took everything away from me!” Sarah said.

“I know they did,” Jacob said. “How is Joshua?”

“Joshua is just fine. He’s playing basketball and he just made the honor roll AGAIN at school!”

“That is awesome.” Jacob said. “So what have you been up to? Are you working anywhere?”

“Well, no. Actually, that’s why I’m here. I saw the ad in the paper for a secretary’s position here at Elm Street. I wanted to apply.”

“Oh, Sarah. I don’t know about that,” Jacob said. “With our history and everything we’ve been through...”

“Oh come on, Jake. I’m a whole new person! I have references and I also have the experience you’re looking

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for. Can you give me a chance? Please?”

Jacob thought about it. “Well you’ll have to go through the same process as everyone else,” he said.

“Of course!” Sarah said. “Thank you, Jake! I won’t let you down!”

Mason and Jasmine walked up just as Sarah was hugging Jacob.

“Hey PASTOR,” Jasmine said. “Is your WIFE in labor yet?”

“Hey Jaz, it’s not what it looks like. This is Sarah, she’s an old friend of mine.” Jacob turned to Mason. “And Mason, Sarah is gonna apply for the secretary’s position.”

“Great!” Mason said, smiling from ear to ear. “When does she start?”

“She has to APPLY first!” Jasmine said, standing with her arms folded.

“So, here’s my resume and my references. When are the interviews?” Sarah said.

“On Friday.”

“Let me know what time I need to be here!” Sarah said.

“Will do!” Mason said.

As Sarah drove away, Jasmine looked at Mason and Jacob. “You know, you’re all the same.”

“Whatever you say, Jaz!” Mason said. He watched Sarah drive away.



“Slow down!” Keisha screamed as Frankie drove over eighty miles per hour on the way to the hospital.

“Hush! We gotta get there! And don’t get any of your...um...fluid on my seats!”

“Are you kidding me, Frankie?”

Frankie sped up to the emergency room entrance motioned for help. Two nurses came and put Keisha into a wheelchair.

“Did you call Jacob?”

“As soon as we left the house. He said he’d meet us here”

As the nurses wheeled Keisha into the hospital, Jacob sped up behind Keisha’s car.

“Can someone park my car? My wife is in labor!” Jacob dropped the keys on the front seat of his car and ran into the hospital.

Jacob Anderson, Jr. was born a few hours later.



On Friday morning, seven young women were waiting in the lobby of Jacob’s office, including Sarah.

One by one the women came in and boasted about their experience with typing, organizing and filing. Mason and Jacob were pleased, but not blown away. Every interviewee seemed to blend into the next.

But when Sarah walked in, she beamed with confidence.

“So what makes you qualified to do this job, Sarah?” Jacob asked.

“Look, I’m gonna keep it real with you. I need this

job. I really feel like God has given me a second chance and I can’t blow it this time. Helping people in my community is what I feel I was created to do.”

“But what makes you qualified for THIS job?” Jacob asked.

“I can file, type, organize, take calls, make coffee and even pick up your dry cleaning. And even though I’ll be just a secretary, I have ideas on ways you can reach people in Blue who have been out of your reach for many years.”

“Go on,” Jacob said.

She handed out a copy of her resume.

“On paper, I look good,” she continued. “Heck, IN PERSON I look even better.” she said, laughing. Mason nodded in agreement.

“You can check my references today, and then I can start on Monday. Sound good?”

“Now, hold on Sarah. There are procedures we have to follow.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know,” Sarah said. “Just give me thirty days to prove myself to you. Can you do that?”

“Yes!” Mason said.

“We’ll give it a shot,” Jacob said. “As long as your references check out.”

“Oh, they will,” Sarah said. “In fact, one of them you know very well!” she said. As Jacob read the list, he saw his name at the very top. He smiled.



“He’s perfect!” Frankie said as she held Jacob, Jr. for the first time.

“I think so, too,” Keisha said. He looked a lot like Jacob, same brown skin, same dark, thick and curly hair.

“Mama said she wants to see him as soon as

possible. I thought maybe I'd go get her later so she can come here? Would that be okay?"

"Of course you can!" Keisha said. "Besides, I want to talk to someone about the bone marrow donation for her. Maybe I'll ask my doctor."

"Ask your doctor what?" Keisha's doctor asked.

"Oh, Dr. Cann, I didn't even see you come in!"

"No worries!" Dr. Cann said. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling great. I was just wondering how soon I could become a bone marrow donor for my Mom? I'm the only match so far."

"I don't see why we couldn't do it while you're here if it's a stem cell transplant. That's not too complicated."

"Whatever I need to do, let's just do it as soon as we can!"

"I'll get started on it right away," the nurse said.

Later that evening, Frankie returned with Lucille.

"Mama! You came!" Keisha said. She was amazed to see her mother looking so healthy.

"Of course I did! Do you think I'd miss seeing my first grandson?"

"Of course not," Keisha said. "Did you see him yet? He's in the nursery."

"Well why on earth isn't he in here with you? In my day we didn't have the luxury of carting our kids off to some strange nurse, we had to take care of them from the moment they were born!" Lucille said.

"Well, a lot has changed since the 1800's," Frankie said, giggling.

"I'll have you know I was born in 1950, thank you very much!" Lucille said.

"I'm just messin' with you, Mama, jeez," Frankie said. "Doesn't mama look great, Keish?"

"She sure does!" Keisha said.

"My doctor put me in a clinical trial, and from the

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looks of my first few blood draws, my cancer is in remission!"

"Mama, that is wonderful!" Keisha said. "All good news today, huh?"

"Indeed," Mrs. Jennison said. "When are you going home?"

"Probably tomorrow. They said they wanted to observe Jacob, Jr. for one more day before he can go home. I told them I was not going home until he did!"

"I don't blame you!" Frankie said.

"Frankie, thank you for looking after the girls. I know they're a handful!" Keisha said.

"They sure are!" Frankie said. "But it's good practice for me for when I decide to..."

"Decide to what?" Lucille asked.

"Get a dog!" Frankie said, laughing.

"Where's Jacob?" Lucille asked.

"He had to stop at church to pick something up. He should be back any minute now."

"Well, I'm gonna bring Mama back home now," Frankie said.

"Okay," Keisha said. "Oh, Mom, you know you're not gonna get out of telling us the full story of the paintings, right? And the tons of cash you had stashed all these years?"

"Yeah, I know," Lucille said. "Once you're back home with Jacob Jr., we'll have dinner and I'll explain."



Sarah arrived thirty minutes early for her first day at Elm Street Baptist. She sat in the parking lot and drank a latte as she waited for the rest of the staff to arrive.

When Mason pulled up, Sarah jumped out of her car and stood up, smoothing her skirt around her hips.

"Good morning, Mr. Joseph," she said, smiling.

“Well, good morning to you as well! Ready to get started?” Mason asked.

“I’ve never been more ready!” Sarah said.

Mason pointed out where Sarah could find the mail room, copier room, bathrooms and gym. He also showed her where her desk would be, and where to hang her coat. But as she unbuttoned her coat and hung it on the hook, Mason took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong, Mr. Joseph?” she asked.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Mason said. “It’s just...well...that dress is a little snug.”

“Really? I didn’t notice,” Sarah said as she smiled.

“Maybe you could pick up a few dresses that don’t accentuate your curves as much? I mean, this is a church after all.”

“I understand,” Sarah said.

She was in a wrap dress that clung to her body like a second skin, leaving little to the imagination. Mason was immediately distracted when she bent over in front of him to help with the sorting of the guest list.

“So where is the center? The grand opening is right around the corner!” Sarah said.

“Right this way,” Mason said.

Sarah followed Mason down the corridor to the back door and into the courtyard. She could see the center in the distance, and she could already tell it was beautiful.

“WOW, Mason!” she said. “This place is nice!”

“I did a lot of the work, but some of the men of the church helped too. But it has everything we’ll need to keep the kids in our community safe.”

“Well, I’m proud of you! This is wonderful, Mase!”

Mason’s cell phone began to vibrate. It was Jasmine.

“Hey, Mase!”

“Hey, Jaz!”

“You wanna do lunch later?”

“And there’s so much room in here too, Mase!” Sarah said in the background.

“Wait, who is THAT?” Jasmine asked.

“Sarah. She started today,” Mason said.

“Oh, you mean that crack-head Sarah? Y’all better make sure you nail down all the valuables,” Jasmine said, laughing.

Mason walked away from Sarah and began to speak in a lower tone. “Jaz, that is not nice. She’s cleaned up her life now, and she doesn’t need people harping on who she *used* to be.”

“Are you sweet on her, Mason? Because if you are, maybe I should just take somebody else to lunch. Maybe even J.J.” Jasmine said.

“Do you hear yourself, Jaz? You sound like a different person right now. You and I are *not* a couple, so you have no reason to be jealous. Now, if you wanna go to lunch, I can meet you down at Mama Wilson’s at one,” Mason was irritated.

“Okay, okay. Jeez. Stop being so sensitive! I’ll meet you there,” Jasmine said before she hung up.



As Jasmine got out of her car at the restaurant, she felt like someone was watching her. She put her keys in her purse and then held her purse close to her body as she made her way to the back entrance of the restaurant.

As she walked, she heard footsteps behind her. It was a young man who looked to be in his late teens or early twenties.

“Good afternoon, young man,” Jasmine said. “Are you going to eat at Mama Wilson’s too?”

“Nope,” he said.

His demeanor suddenly changed, and this made Jasmine concerned. She sped up her pace.

“Oh, so now you’re scared, huh? Just because I’m not driving a nice car like you?” the man said.

“What are you talking about?” Jasmine was afraid.

“Give me your purse!” the young man said, just as he pulled out a gun and aimed it right at Jasmine.

“You’re not getting my Coach bag! Do you know how much I paid for this? You’re gonna have to kill me first!”

The young man looked confused. “Are you serious? You’re willing to die for a purse?”

“Dang skippy! This purse cost more than you probably make in a week. I don’t have any money anyway.”

“I’ll shoot you, lady. Don’t play games with me!”

“That gun’s probably not even loaded. Get outta here with that nonsense,” Jasmine pushed past him and opened the gate to the restaurant. “And you’re lucky I didn’t call the cops!”

As Jasmine closed the gate, the young man was still standing there holding his gun.

“Punk!” she yelled as she closed the gate behind her.

“You may want to know, you have a young thug who thinks he’s a stick-up man in your parking lot!” Jasmine said to the hostess as she stepped into the restaurant.

“A stick-up man? Where?” The hostess asked as she ran past Jasmine and opened the back door.

“In the parking lot!” Jasmine said. “He’s young, too. And he has a gun! It’s probably not loaded though,” Jasmine said as she took off her jacket.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” the hostess asked.

“I’m fine. But please don’t call me ma’am. I’m not much older than you!”

“But I’m twenty-one,” the hostess said.

“And I’m twenty-five!” Jasmine lied. The hostess

didn’t bother to argue with her. “But looking back now, I probably should have given him my purse. He could have killed me!”

Just then, Mason walked in.

“Did you just say you almost got robbed? Where?” Mason asked.

“In the parking lot! Some young’n who wanted my purse!”

“How did you get away? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine! I’m just starving. Let’s eat,” Jasmine said.

The waitress brought over a steaming basket of cornbread and two glasses of lemonade. Jasmine took a giant bite and closed her eyes, savoring the goodness of it all.

“THIS is what I needed,” she said.

“Yeah, it is good!” Mason said. “Not as good as yours, though.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to agree with you on that one, Mase.” Jasmine said as she took another bite. “So how is your little girlfriend? What’s her name again? Shug? Shorty?”

“You know her name, Jaz. It’s Sarah. And she’s not my girlfriend.”

“Whatever, man. Look, like you said, I’m not dating you anyway, so why am I trippin’?”

“You’re not dating me because you CHOOSE not to date me.”

“When did I make that choice, Mase? When?” Jasmine asked.

Just then, someone walked up behind Jasmine and tapped her on the shoulder. It was Devin.

“Hey, Jaz!” Devin said. “Long time no see!” Devin leaned in and kissed Jasmine on her cheek.

“I know! How have you been?” Jasmine asked.

“I’ve been awesome! Making moves, making

music, enjoying life!”

“I’ve been awesome, too!” Mason said in a high pitched voice. He was looking right at Devin.

Jasmine looked at Mason and then back at Devin. “Devin this is my *friend*, Mason. Mason, this is Devin! He’s a wonderful singer and poet.”

“Oh yeah? I’ve never heard of him,” Mason said dryly.

“Mason!” Jasmine said through her teeth.

“No worries, man,” Devin said. “You will soon!”

“Well it was good to see you!” Jasmine said.

“You as well! I hope I’ll be seeing you soon! Y’all should come back this weekend for my performance! I’m gonna have a full band and Layla is gonna be here to rock the mic, too! And Mama Wilson’s letting everyone in for five bucks!”

“Wow, five bucks? You must REALLY be famous,” Mason said sarcastically.

“Thank you for the invite, Devin,” Jasmine said as she kicked Mason under the table. “We’ll definitely try to stop by.”

“See you then!” Devin said with a wink. Mason and Jasmine watched him walk away.

“What was THAT about?” Jasmine fumed.

“What?” Mason said as he took another bite of food.

“And you talk about ME being jealous?”

“I’m not hardly jealous of some wannabe rapper.” Mason said.

“See what I mean? Devin is very talented! You’ll see this weekend when we come to his show.”

“You mean when YOU come to his show. I ain’t coming.”

“Really?” Jasmine asked.

“Really,” Mason said. “I’m not into watching my girl sweating another man.”

“*Your* girl? I’m your girl?” Jasmine asked as a smile began to spread across her cheeks.

Mason leaned across the table and took Jasmine’s hands in his. “You’ve always been my lady. Even when I was on the verge of marrying Sasha, I’ve always known you were meant for me.”

“So you were gonna just marry Sasha and spend your life with someone else? Even when you felt in your heart it was wrong?”

“Baby, I was in too deep to get out. Her parents had already paid so much money! Everything was booked, her dress was purchased. I had to go through with it!” Mason said.

“Why are you JUST saying this now? After all this time?”

“I don’t know. But what really matters is that I’m saying it now, right?” Mason asked.

Jasmine blushed. “You’re right.”

“So can we stop all of this jealous bickering and dating other people, and focus on each other? Aren’t you ready to settle down? We’re almost 40!”

“Hold up!” Jasmine said. “I’m not even 25 yet,” she said laughing.

“Sure...” Mason said. “Whatever you say.”

Jasmine leaned in and kissed Mason lightly on the lips. His lips felt just as amazing as they did in her dreams.



“So what gives, Mama?” Keisha asked her mother as they waited for Jacob to prepare breakfast. Jacob Jr. was sleeping soundly in his swing.

“What do you mean?” Lucille asked.

“Come on, Mama, you know what I mean! How could you live a double life all these years?”

“A double life?” Lucille said as she laughed. “You make it sound like I’m some secret special agent. I didn’t hide anything from you and your sister. I just didn’t reveal everything to you. I’m a grown woman and I don’t have anything to prove!” Lucille turned her attention to Jacob Jr. and then continued.

“And as for that old house, your FATHER bought it for me right after Frankie was born. It was part of the reason I didn’t run away from the stress of raising another child. I’d go to my house every other weekend for a few days, just to clear my head. That’s when I began to paint.”

“But what about the stocks? You’re THAT rich?” Keisha asked.

“Not hardly! I made some smart investments in my lifetime. But I also found a great market for my paintings. For some reason, everyone loves flowers. So that’s what I painted exclusively,” Lucille said.

“Is that your painting hanging down at Blue National Bank?” Keisha asked.

“Yep! It sure is. They paid me quite a bit for that painting. And others!”

“I just can’t believe you were able to hide this from us all these years,” Keisha said.

“Let’s get one thing straight, ladies. I’m the mom, which means I don’t have to hide anything from either one of you. Everything I did was in full view, y’all just weren’t paying attention!”

“I guess she told you!” Frankie said, laughing.

“I’m talking to *both* of you!” she said with her hands on her hips.

“Looks like Mama’s back!” Keisha said.

“Yep, she is!” Frankie said. “But while we’re planning the youth center opening, we need to plan an exhibit for your paintings.”

“Girl, please. I already told you, people in Blue are too broke to pay attention. They’d rather buy one of those

run of the mill prints at the local dollar store than spend money on an original,” Lucille said.

“I just feel like I have so many questions for you, Mama. Like, when did you start painting? And how did you sell your paintings without daddy knowing?” Keisha asked.

“Your father knew about my paintings. He encouraged me to paint because he understood that painting was my outlet. If I didn’t have my art, I probably wouldn’t have been able to stay in his home all that time. Painting saved my life!”

“And what about the man who came to see you that time when I was visiting? The Puerto Rican gentleman with the candy?” Keisha asked.

“Ah, Dalmacio. He is wonderful! He’s just an old friend. He actually used to paint with me quite a bit,” Lucille said as she smiled.

“Ooo, Mama!” Frankie said. “That’s not a *friend* smile. That’s a *lover* smile!”

“Oh hush, child!” Lucille said. “I’m a grown woman! Your father died years ago, and I think it’s okay for me to have a little fun from time to time.”

“Exactly!” Jacob said as he came into the kitchen. “Leave your mama alone, Keish!”

“Thanks, son!” Lucille said. “Now let me fix you a plate.”

“I can do it, Mom” Keisha said.

“Yeah, so you can make it like you make your own plates? No, thank you. Your husband eats like a man, not like a bird!”

Lucille took the plate from Keisha and began to pile it high with bacon, eggs and waffles. Jacob’s mouth watered as he watched her.

“Yeah, you should listen to your mother, Keish,” Jacob said. Keisha rolled her eyes.

As Jacob, Keisha, Frankie and Lucille sat at the table, Jacob’s cell phone rang. It was Sarah.

“Hey, Jake! I know you’re probably just sitting down to breakfast, but I wondered if you could stop by later and have a chat with Joshua? He’s been acting out in school and I’m scared they may try to kick him out!”

“Yeah...” Jacob said as all eyes were on him. “I can come by...”

“Awesome! I’ll be here all day,” Sarah said before hanging up.

“Who was that?” Lucille asked.

“Just one of my employees,” Jacob said. “She’s having some trouble with her son and she needs me to come by to have a chat with him.”

“Well, isn’t that nice of you!” Lucille said. “Keisha, you’re so lucky to be married to such a wonderful man. He’s always on call, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m lucky alright. And yes, he’s always on call.” Keisha said. “*For certain people,*” she said under her breath.

“Come on, Keisha, don’t start that today,” Jacob said. “You know Sarah needs help right now. I thought we agreed to move forward instead of constantly looking back?”

Keisha turned her back to Jacob and began to fold a basket of laundry. Lucille picked up on the tension in the room. “Is everything okay?” she asked. She had lived long enough to know when a relationship was in trouble.

“Everything is fine, mom,” Jacob said. “Your daughter has some issues she needs to work out.”

“I have some issues?” Keisha said as she stood up and walked over to Jacob. “Let’s back up for a second. Less than a year ago I come home to find some strange kid sleeping in our guestroom. A kid you think MAY be yours! A kid who may have been conceived while we were engaged! You expect me to be okay with that?”

“Are we gonna go *there*, Keisha?” Jacob said as he stood up, too. “Because didn’t we also discover a couple of

skeletons in YOUR closet? Actually, one GIANT skeleton?” he said as he looked right at Frankie.

“Oh, so now I’m a *giant*?” Frankie said, laughing. “I only had ONE pancake!” She was trying to calm the tension in the room.

“This is no time for jokes, Frankie,” Keisha said. “And having a baby at fourteen was in my past, Jake- long before I even met you!” Keisha shot back.

“And so was Sarah! That was a long time ago, Keisha. Yes, I messed up. You said you forgave me! Forgiving means you don’t mention it again.”

Keisha was silent. Jacob had a point. She didn’t want to keep bringing Joshua up, but it was hard. Especially since Sarah seemed to call every day for something. She wished Jacob had never agreed to serve as Joshua’s mentor. She continued, “Well, all I know is that I don’t want Sarah calling you whenever she wants to. I accepted the fact that she works for you, but I don’t have to loan my husband out whenever she hits a bump in the road with her son.”

“You’re right, babe,” Jacob said. He stood up and wrapped his arms around Keisha’s waist. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I get my church duties and my husbandly duties mixed up. I need to draw the line if helping her makes you upset. I’ll tell her when I go over there later that she can’t make this a habit.”

“You promise?” Keisha asked.

“I promise,” Jacob said as he kissed her.

“Awww!” Frankie said. “Black love is so beautiful!”

“You mean black and yellow love,” Lucille said, referring to Keisha and Jacob’s contrasting complexions. Frankie laughed.

“You’re just as fair as I am, Frankie,” Keisha said.

“Whatever you say, light-bright,” Frankie said, laughing hysterically. They spent the rest of the morning

eating and catching up.



Joshua was awakened by the smell of smoke in the air. He ran down the hall to find his mother Sarah asleep on the couch with a cigarette in her hand.

“MAMA!” Joshua yelled. “You’re gonna burn the house down!” The cigarette had already burned a hole in the sofa cushion.

“What?” Sarah said sleepily. “What are you talkin’ about, Joshua?” Then she looked down and saw the hole in the cushion. She immediately jumped up.

“Oh Joshua, I’m so sorry!” she said as she ran into the bathroom with the cushions. She turned on the shower to smother the smoldering cushion.

“Mama, you said you quit smoking!” Joshua said.

“I said I’d try! Josh you know I’m having a hard time! I don’t need you on my back, too!”

Joshua lowered his head. “But you promised!” he said in an almost whisper.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Sarah said as she put her arms around Joshua’s shoulders. “I’m so stressed out with this new job. I just want everything to be perfect!”

“It will be, Mama! You just gotta relax! Please don’t start smoking again.” Joshua pleaded.

Sarah crumpled the pack of cigarettes and threw it in the trash.

“Done!” she said. Joshua didn’t know about the spare pack she always kept in her dresser drawer.

“Thanks, Mama!” Joshua said.

“Go back to bed, baby,” Sarah said. As she watched Joshua walk back down the hall to his bedroom, her eyes filled with tears. He had been through so much in the past year.

Since sleeping was out of the question after the

almost-fire, Sarah turned on her laptop. The only other possible father was Sarah’s previous boss, Dexter Simpson from the restaurant where she worked during that summer twelve years ago.

She typed his name in the search bar and within seconds over 10,000 web pages appeared. Sarah was overwhelmed by the number of results, but she began the task of sifting through each site to see if her Dexter was listed.

Almost two hours later, Sarah stumbled upon Dexter’s SmilePage website. She held her breath as she clicked the link.

There he was.

Dexter’s profile was filled with photos from his trips abroad. The profile said Dexter was single with no children and still living in Seattle. It also said he was a record producer for several music labels, and that he had won several music awards for his work.

Sarah clicked on every photo on Dexter’s page and was shocked to find that he still looked the same as he did twelve years ago. Even his smile was still the same: wide and wonderful. She clicked on every picture on his page to get a closer look. After an hour of perusing, she had gotten through more than one hundred photos.

When she noticed the message button on his page, she froze. Should she message him? Or should she leave well enough alone? Before she knew it, she was frantically typing a message to Dexter on his page.

HI DEXTER. I’M NOT SURE IF YOU  
REMEMBER ME. I WORKED WITH YOU IN  
SEATTLE A LONG TIME AGO. I NEED TO  
TALK TO YOU. CAN YOU CALL ME AT  
555.889.0982?- I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT  
YOUR SON. HE’S 11. PLEASE CALL!- SARAH  
HIWASSEE

She pressed *send* and closed her laptop before she

could change her mind.



As she spent yet another night alone, Layla wondered why on earth she decided to move all the way to Blue from Boston. Sure, Boston was cold and snowy, but at least when she lived there she had friends to hang out with on the weekend.

Then her thoughts drifted to Devin, who always seemed to be on her mind lately. He seemed to be everything she had ever wanted in a man: he loved God, he was smart and he knew how to command a stage when he was performing. The only thing that held Layla back was the time he spent in jail.

As she sat on her couch watching yet another boring television show, her cell phone vibrated with a text message. It was from Devin.

I HAVE A SHOW TONIGHT IN RICHMOND.  
WANNA ROLL?

Layla's stomach filled with butterflies as she typed YES, I'D LOVE TO. As soon as she pressed SEND she started second-guessing herself. But it was too late because Devin responded and said he would be over to pick her up in two hours.

Layla began to pull every dress she owned out of her closet to find the perfect outfit for the evening. She wanted to be sexy, but not *too* sexy. And she wanted to show a little skin, but not too much. She decided on her purple baby doll dress with her black stilettos. She said a silent prayer, hoping her feet would allow her to stand on four-inch heels all night.

When Devin arrived, he presented her with a dozen yellow roses and a box of chocolates.

"Is this a date?" Layla asked.

"That depends. Do you want it to be?" Devin responded.

Devin was a perfect gentleman from the moment he picked Layla up. He opened the door for her, helped her fasten her seatbelt, and he even stopped to ask for directions when he got lost on the way to the venue.

They drove past several abandoned buildings and when they pulled up in front of the club, Devin looked at Layla and noticed a frightened look on her face.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Of course! I'm from the hood, you know."

"Well, it shouldn't be too bad inside," Devin said. He got out and opened Layla's door.

When they stepped inside, the club was empty aside from the DJ and the bartender.

"Is there a poetry showcase tonight?" Devin asked the bartender.

"Nope, it was cancelled after last night's shooting."

"SHOOTING?" Layla said. "We gotta get outta here!" Layla said as she headed for the door.

"We drove over an hour to get here. We should at least have a drink or two. Maybe dance a little?"

Layla stood with her arms folded. "Are you serious?"

Devin smiled.

"Aw man, you got me again with that smile!" Layla said.

Layla and Devin ordered their drinks and sat down at one of the many available tables. Layla took a sip from her drink and closed her eyes. "This is so good! What is it?"

"I don't know, the bartender said it was a house special," Devin said as he took another sip. It tasted like a mixture of pineapple juice and apple juice. "It doesn't have alcohol in it, does it?" Devin asked.

"Nope," Layla said.

"Good," Devin said as he took another sip.

Little by little, the club began to fill with patrons, and Devin and Layla sat at their table and people-watched. "These people would make some great poems," Devin said. "Like them for instance," Devin said as he pointed to a woman sitting with an older man at the bar. Her dress was so short she had to keep pulling it down as she crossed and un-crossed her legs. Her date kept leaning in as she talked to him. They were at least thirty years apart in age. "I could probably write a whole story about them," Devin said.

"What would it be about?" Layla asked. She was intrigued.

"She ran away from home when she was sixteen because she wanted to be a dancer in New York. She met him at the bus station and he offered to give her a ride to New York, free of charge. But when they arrived in New York, he wouldn't let her out of his car until she kissed him. Then she realized she was trapped with this old creep until she was able to make a quick getaway."

"Wow!" Layla said. "You got all of that just from looking at them?"

"Yep," Devin said. "I guess I'm cursed with an active imagination!"

"I guess so!" Layla said. "Did you write a lot when you were...um...in jail?"

"I wrote every single day. That's the only way I could keep my sanity!"

"How did you end up in jail anyway? Selling drugs?" Layla said.

"Looking at me, you'd probably assume that, huh? But no, that's not what happened. Actually, I was involved in a real estate scheme. I was trying to make a few extra dollars by buying houses and re-selling them for a profit. But I didn't know the lender we were dealing with was actually a fraud. I ended up being involved in over fifty fake real estate transactions."

## The Rhythm in Blue

"So you ended up taking the fall for someone else?"

"Pretty much. The lender had this powerhouse attorney, and of course they ended up with probation. I had to serve two years."

"I bet you were angry!" Layla said. "I know I would be!"

"Yeah I guess most people would be upset, huh? But the reality is, I *did* commit a crime. I actually knew it was a scheme, so I shouldn't have participated in it. But all I could think about was all the money I'd make. God showed me!"

Layla was amazed at how positive Devin was able to be, even after he had to take the fall for someone else.

When the DJ began to play a house music set, Layla sprung to her feet. "Come on!" she yelled as she grabbed Devin's hands.

"I don't dance!" Devin said. He hadn't danced since prom night and even then he didn't dance very well. He had hardly mastered the art of the two-step.

Layla and Devin were the only people on the dance floor, and it was just as well, since the disco ball seemed to be spinning just for them. As the lights swirled around the room, so did Layla's hips, as she effortlessly matched each beat of the music.

As the lights hit Layla she danced even harder. She didn't seem to care about messing up her hair or her make-up. The music led the way.

Devin tried to keep up with her but he couldn't. It was obvious Layla was born to dance. The techno-house beat thumped on and on and Layla danced as though nothing else mattered in the world. Devin expected Layla to push him away when he slid up behind her, but she didn't. Instead she leaned her back against his chest and they rode the addictive rhythm for the rest of the night.



The church boardroom was filled to capacity, just as it was every staff meeting day. Jacob always held meetings to prepare his staff for the month, as well as to hear updates from the various ministries. But before he could begin his agenda, Deaconess Smith stood up.

Deaconess Smith was a stout woman who never missed her weekly appointment at the hair salon. Her fingernails were more than two inches long, and every time Jacob looked at them, he shuddered. He preferred women keep their nails neat and short.

“Okay, Pastor. It’s been almost a year and we have yet to see what’s happening with your *club*. What gives?” Deaconess Smith asked as she stood with her hands on her hips.

“Give him a chance to explain,” Pastor Gregory said, coming to Jacob’s defense. But it was no use. Deaconess Smith had had it out for Jacob since he turned her down for the secretary’s position a few years back.

“Well, Sandra, if you’d give me a moment, I’ll give all of you an update on where we are with the project.” Jacob straightened his tie and opened his binder.

“To be honest, I’m tired of looking at these four walls. All we do is come to church on Sundays, share a meal, and go home. I don’t think we’re doing enough in the community.”

“Sure we are!” Deaconess Smith said. “Why, just last week I brought a bag of clothes down to the mission.”

Jacob turned to Deaconess Smith. “That’s just what I’m talking about. We’re involved in passive ministry. We think by making a food basket or bagging up a few bags of old clothes we wouldn’t be caught dead in, that we’re doing God’s work. But in reality? We’re not. We’re doing things for show, and we’re not making a real difference in our community at all.”

“Get to your point, Pastor. I’d like to be home in

## The Rhythm in Blue

time for dinner!” one of the deacons said as the group began to laugh.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you: Club One Seven.” Jacob pulled the drop cloth from the painting and stepped back. The artist rendition of Club One Seven was stunning; and it even included a future addition.

“I think it’s brilliant,” Sarah said as she stepped into the room. “What a wonderful way to reference the book of John! The Bible says we are to gather together and fellowship, and that’s just what we are going to do!”

“Who invited her?” one of the staff members said. Sarah took a seat in the back of the room and began to take notes on her tablet.

“So I hope I can count on each and every one of you to help us get the word out about the opening. Everyone is welcome! We want everyone within our congregation to bring a non-member. If we plan this right, we’ll have well over a thousand people here on opening day! Can I count on you?” Jacob asked.

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement.



It was well after 4 a.m. when Layla opened her eyes and realized the club was closing. She had allowed the music to take her away, just as it had so many times in the past. For some reason she felt free in this space, wrapped in Devin’s arms. When he was in the room, no one else mattered.

Her body was soaked with sweat, but she felt too good to care. Dancing gave her a euphoric rush like nothing else.

As the DJ began to pack up, Devin watched Layla gather her things. “It’s hot in here!” she said as she fanned herself with a club flyer to cool off.

“You wanna go get some breakfast?” Devin asked.

“Breakfast, huh?” Layla asked as she raised her eyebrows. She had certainly heard that line before. But instead of declining his offer, she agreed to go. “Breakfast sounds good to me!”

Devin opened the door for Layla when they got back to his car. She thought he was being a gentleman, but in reality he was avoiding having to explain why the door handle didn’t work unless it was lifted a certain way.

As Layla climbed into the passenger seat, her dress lifted. Devin laid his jacket over her knees.

“You are such a gentleman! Most guys would have wanted to see everything I have to offer,” she said as they fastened their seatbelts.

“Well, I know you have more to offer than a nice pair of legs,” Devin said. Layla smiled.

As they headed down the highway, they passed one waffle restaurant after another. Layla was confused.

“I thought we were going to get breakfast?” she asked. “Are you kidnapping me?” she joked.

“I’d never kidnap you on the first date!” Devin joked. “And we are going to breakfast. At *my* house,” Devin calmly replied.

“Oh, wait a second. I never agreed to go to your house!”

“Come on, Layla. I’m not a serial killer. I just want to make a nice breakfast for you in my own space.”

Layla was silent as she thought about Devin’s proposition.

“Okay I’ll go back to your place under one condition. I have to text my friend with your address when we get there. This way, if I turn up missing, she’ll know where to find me.”

“Deal,” Devin said. “But turning up missing is not always a bad thing, Lay.” He turned to Layla and smiled widely. Layla blushed.

As Devin opened the door to his apartment, Layla

could hear someone fighting in the apartment next door.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” she asked as they stepped into Devin’s apartment.

“No need to, they’re always fighting,” he said as he laughed. Layla followed him into the living room. Or what *he* called the living room.

The space was definitely *lived in*, but there wasn’t much to it. He had a small loveseat and a few milk crates scattered around the room for additional seating. His television was a 13-inch, black and white model that had aluminum foil on the antennae.

“Where’d you get this TV?” Layla asked as she smiled.

“Oh, you got jokes now? Not everyone has a fifty-inch flat screen at home, you know.”

“I don’t have a flat screen either,” she said. “But I DO have a color TV. And I don’t need aluminum foil to get the stations I want to watch,” Layla said as she laughed. “You need to upgrade ASAP!”

“I don’t need the extra bill. Besides, I don’t watch much television anyway,” he said. “Just the news and sometimes I’ll watch *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*.”

“I LOVE *Family Guy*!” Layla said.

“See? Yet ANOTHER thing we have in common. Now why don’t you make yourself comfortable and I’ll get breakfast started?”

“Sounds good!” Layla said. She took off her shoes and sat on the loveseat, using a milk crate with a pillow on top of it as a make-shift ottoman. Within a few minutes, Devin reappeared with a cup of tea.

Layla looked around the room and noticed that aside from it being very bare, it was also void of any personal items. She didn’t notice any family pictures or family albums.

“Why don’t you have any family photos on the wall?” she asked Devin.

“I used to. But when I got locked up, they disowned me. In fact, my father told me I was better off dead.”

“Seriously? How long ago was that?”

“A couple of years. No big deal now, though,” Devin said as he shrugged his shoulders. I’m good with having my heavenly Father on my side. At least He’s never turned his back on me.”

“What about your mom?”

“She calls from time to time. In fact, she comes by every now and then, but never with my dad. I don’t even think he knows she comes to see me.”

Layla decided to cool the conversation so that he could focus on cooking. She walked over to the tiny TV set and looked for the power button. Once she figured out how to turn it on, she turned the knobs to find a channel.

She sat back down and put her coat under her head, and before long she drifted off to sleep.

She was awakened by Devin tapping her shoulder to let her know breakfast was ready.

Devin slid a tray table over to Layla and placed her plate on top of it. On the plate was a delicious array of French toast, bacon and eggs.

“Who taught you how to cook?” she asked as she took a bite of the French toast.

“My mama!” he said. “Is it good?”

“Yes!” Layla said. She tried not to eat too quickly but it was the best breakfast she had ever had.

“What are you watching?” Devin asked her as he looked over at the television.

“I wasn’t watching anything!” she said. “The TV was watching me!”

“Well, I’d rather watch you, too,” Devin said as he smiled widely again.

They ate in silence, with only the sound of the television buzzing in the background.

## seven

When the name DEXTER SIMPSON appeared on Sarah’s caller ID, her stomach filled with butterflies. It took a lot to send the message to him, but she had no idea what she’d say if he actually called.

“Hello?” she said as she answered the phone.

“Is this Sarah?” he asked. His voice was deep and raspy.

“Yes, is this Dexter? Look, I’m sorry for messaging you like that out of the blue, but...”

Dexter stopped her mid-sentence. “Look, you mentioned a son? There’s no way your son is mine, Sarah. I’ve been sterile my entire life. My doctor said I could never be a father. So you’re gonna have to keep looking for the real father of your child.”

Sarah didn’t know what to say. She had only been with Dexter and Jacob that summer. From the tone in Dexter’s voice, she knew he was serious.

“Good luck!” he said.

“Thanks, look... I’m...” Sarah started, but was cut off by the sound of a dial tone.

She sat at her desk and wondered what was going on. Jacob had a DNA test that proved he was not the father. Was it possible that the test was wrong?

Just then, Jacob and Mason walked into her office.

“Wow, Sarah you look like you’ve just seen a ghost!” Mason said, laughing.

“I feel like I have!” she said. “That was the guy I thought was the father of Joshua. He said he’s sterile! He said there’s no way he could be the father!”

“Well, he’s not my son either. The DNA test proved it,” Jacob said.

“That reminds me, what was the name of the company you used to do the DNA test? It wasn’t DNA Today was it?” Mason asked.

“Actually, it was. Why?” Jacob asked.

“There’s a big scandal around them right now!” Mason said. “In fact, I just saw something on the news the other day! Sarah, type their name into the search bar of your computer.”

Sarah did, and once the results appeared, she gasped. “Oh my goodness! Mason’s right! Look at all these lawsuits!”

“What’s it saying?” Jacob asked.

“It looks like they were taking people’s money and not actually doing the test. They were charging people a few hundred dollars to get the tests back within twenty-four hours, and all they were doing was generating bogus results.”

“No way!” Jacob yelled.

“So we need to have it done all over again? I can’t put Joshua through that again!” Sarah said.

“We have to. We need to know if he is my son. He deserves to know who his real father is!” Jacob said. “I’ll set it up tomorrow. I won’t even go to my own doctor, since he’s the one who sent the blood to DNA Today in the first place. We’ll go to the same lab the city uses.”

Sarah sat with her face in her hands. “I can’t believe this is happening. I knew for sure that Dexter was the father!”

Jacob was surprised, too. But a part of him wanted Joshua to be his son.



“So when are we gonna have an exhibit for you, Mama?” Frankie asked as they worked on cataloging her mother’s paintings.

“An exhibit? Girl, this ain’t New York City. Nobody buys original artwork in Blue! All of my paintings sold around the world, no one EVER bought one in Blue aside from the banks.”

“Well that was before,” Frankie said, “and this is now. Let me handle it all, okay? I can make it the biggest exhibit Blue’s ever seen!”

“Whatever you say, babygirl,” Lucille said. “I’m glad you have faith in me. Especially after everything that’s happened recently.”

Frankie stopped sorting and looked at her mother. “Everything like what?”

“You finding out Keisha is your real mother. I never thought you’d ever have to know. I wanted to take that secret to my grave.”

Frankie stood up and walked over to her mother. She put her hands over her mother’s hands and knelt down to look at her face to face.

“Keisha may have carried me, but *YOU* are my mother. Nothing’s changed.” Frankie had tears in her eyes.

“But I was thinking about myself first. All I cared about was getting better! I didn’t care about who I hurt in the process.” Lucille started to cry.

“That may be true, but people do crazy things when we’re afraid. I can’t say that I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing!”

“Really?” Lucille asked.

“Really. Let’s not mention it again, okay Mama?”

“Okay,” Lucille said.

Frankie walked back over to the stack of paintings and continued her inventory. Her mother rested better than ever, especially now that Frankie had finally forgiven her.



As Joshua, Jacob and Sarah stood at the reception

area of the lab, Jacob felt as though all eyes were on him. There were at least forty people in the waiting area.

“Aren’t you that Pastor from the billboard?” the receptionist asked as she turned her head to one side to get a better look at him.

“Yes, I am,” Jacob replied.

“So what are you doing HERE? Because she sure don’t look like your wife!” the receptionist said. Then she turned to her co-worker and nudged her with her arm. “We got a scandal up in here!”

“Maybe you should just mind your business!” Sarah said as she stepped up to the window. She was in no mood for drama this morning.

“Oh snap! I think homegirl may be trying to start something! Girl, you don’t want none of this,” she said as she stood up. “I’m working on two hours’ sleep and if you push me I may have to mop the floor with your skinny tail.”

Sarah realized the woman was serious. Instead of arguing with her, Sarah found an empty seat and sat down.

“Can you believe they actually hire people like her to work here?” Sarah mumbled to Jacob.

“Just ignore her. We’ll get in and out in no time if we just keep cool.”

“You okay, baby?” Sarah asked Joshua. She noticed how quiet he had been since they arrived at the lab.

“Everything’s fine. I just don’t want to get my hopes up, that’s all,” Joshua said.

“That’s understandable,” Sarah said. Once they were called, they were in and out in less than ten minutes.

“When can we expect the results?” Jacob asked.

“Well, we’re overwhelmed right now since we’ve picked up all of the DNA Today mishaps. So I’d say a week at the most. We’ll call you, okay?” the nurse said.

“Sounds good,” Jacob said. He motioned for Joshua and Sarah to follow him.

“Jacob can we get something to eat? I’m starving!” Sarah asked as they walked to the car. Jacob looked at his watch before responding. He had plans with Keisha later that afternoon, but figured an hour or so wouldn’t throw him that far behind.

Joshua sat on one side of the booth and Sarah sat next to Jacob. Jacob wished she hadn’t, especially with all the gossip that seemed to be floating around at church lately. But he didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, so he ordered a pizza and a pitcher of soda.

“Jacob thank you for everything you’ve done for us over the past year. It’s been hell for me and Joshua, and if you hadn’t been there, I don’t know what we would have done!” She placed her hand over Jacobs, but he pulled it away. He didn’t want her (or anyone else for that matter) to get the wrong idea.

“Look, Sarah, I’m glad I’ve been able to help, too. But you’ve gotta understand, I have a wife and children. I also have a new baby. I can’t get mixed up with anything that would threaten to mess up everything I’ve worked so hard to build.”

“I understand, Jacob,” Sarah said. “I just wanted to thank you.”

As they ate, Jacob noticed people looking at them as they walked by. Some were even whispering to one another.

“Let’s hurry and finish our meal so I can drop you off at home. Keisha’s probably waiting for me,” Jacob said.

Sarah lowered her head. “She’s so lucky,” she said.

“What did you just say?” Jacob asked.

“Nothing. I’m done. Let’s go,” Sarah said.

“But, Mama, I’m not done yet!” Joshua said. He was still eating.

“Just wrap it up and take it with you. It’s obvious that Jacob is ready to get rid of us.”

Jacob ignored her as he motioned for the waiter to

come with the check. As they rode back to Sarah's house, nothing more was said.



Law was not at the center of Mason's heart anymore. Since he wrote the proposal for the community center, he felt himself being pulled towards helping young people. Now that Elm Street created a position for him doing what he loved, law was secondary.

As he sat in Jasmine's living room, his thoughts drifted to the future. Evidently, Jasmine was thinking about the future as well.

"So I was thinking, Mase. Since I'm officially your girlfriend now, maybe we can let people know?"

"People like *who*?" Mason said, looking up from his budget sheet.

"People like your co-workers at church. Well, actually, ONE co-worker."

"Who?"

"Don't play games with me, Mase. You know who!"

"Sarah? Aw, come on, Jaz. Sarah is not interested in me!"

"You don't think so, huh? Well, I'm a woman, and I know how we act when we see something or someone we want. She wants you."

"So what do you suggest? Matching t-shirts? Your name tattooed across my face?"

"Stop being facetious!" Jasmine said.

"Looks like somebody's been using their word-a-day calendar," Mason said, laughing.

"Ha-ha," Jasmine said. "Maybe I *am* being silly." She walked over to Mason and sat on his lap. "It's just that, well, you're just so FINE!"

"Don't try to butter me up now," Mason said. "But yes, I'll let everyone know I'm off the market. Happy?"

"Very!" Jasmine said as she jumped up and walked into the kitchen.

Mason didn't want to jump into another engagement but being with Jasmine just felt *right*. She anticipated his every need, understood where he was coming from and their chemistry was through the roof most days. But, he had to respect Sasha's family. It had only been a year since her death and Mason didn't want Sasha's family thinking he never really loved Sasha. While he had loved Sasha, he never loved her like he loved Jasmine. Nothing would ever change that.



When Layla woke up on Devin's sofa, she didn't know where she was at first. The room was quiet, and she didn't recognize any of the furniture in the room until she saw the teeny-tiny black and white television. Then she realized she was still at Devin's house.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Devin said as he handed her a cup of coffee. "Well actually, I should say good afternoon since it's after two."

"Seriously? I've never slept past noon before!" Layla said as she took a sip of her coffee. "Mmm this is so good! How did you know I like my coffee black?"

"I assumed you like your coffee like you like your men...dark with a little sweetness?" Devin joked.

"Well, you were right about that!" she said as she took another sip. Devin sat on the loveseat next to her and put his arm around her.

"Thank you for spending the night," Devin said as he stroked the side of her face with his hand.

"Thank you for letting me," Layla said, blushing. "And thank you for not taking advantage of me," she said as she giggled a little. "How long have you been awake?"

"Since five. I always go for a run when I first wake up; then I write for a couple of hours."

"Every day?"

"Yep. I have for years," Jacob said.

"I wish I had your discipline. I don't think I've gone for a run since...well...never," Layla laughed. "I couldn't imagine trying to get *all of this* around a track anyway," she said as she ran her hands over her stomach.

"I think *all of that* is beautiful. I'd be happy to walk with you if you ever want me to. I love taking walks, especially when the view is as fine as you are. Just say the

word!"

"Maybe I'll take you up on that offer," Layla said. She hadn't thought much about exercise before but something told her Devin was about to change all of that.

Layla stood up and stretched. "That loveseat is a killer on my back!" she said.

"Yeah, it is. I've slept on it many times," Devin said. "Especially after performances when I can barely make it through the door!"

"I have nights like those sometimes," Layla said. "I should go. I have a sorority meeting at five."

"I didn't know you were in a sorority. Which one?"

"Gamma Gamma Gamma," Layla said. "I pledged in college. Now I'm in the alumnae chapter."

"You're a Triple G? That's hot! Those girls always throw down at the yearly step show!"

"Well, I'll probably be steppin' this year with them," Layla said.

"And I'll be in the audience!" Devin said. He reached out and held Layla's hand. "I'm glad you stayed. I thought you'd be ready to break out once you were done with breakfast."

"I usually do," Layla said. "It must have been your 50-inch TV that kept me here. Either that or the four-piece milk crate living room set you have in here," she said as she laughed.

"Oh, you got jokes? Okay, just remember that when I come to your house for dinner."

"So you're inviting yourself to my house now?" Layla said. "Who said I even know how to cook?"

"I didn't say you had to cook. Maybe we can order in. Or maybe we can have cereal."

"Whatever you say, Devin. But for the record, I would never make you eat cereal in my home. I would cook for you if you ever came over. Trust me."

Devin smiled. "I bet you can burn in the kitchen,

too!” he said.

Layla smoothed her hands over her ample hips.

“Well, I had to get these from somewhere!” she said as she leaned over and grabbed her jacket.

“Why do you do that?” Devin asked.

“Do what?”

“Always call attention to your weight? Are you uncomfortable with it?”

“No!” Layla said as she felt her cheeks begin to burn. Devin caught her off-guard with his question. “It’s just that I know you’re already thinking it, so why not just go ahead and get it out into the open?”

“Thinking *what*?” Devin asked.

“That I could stand to lose twenty pounds or so. That I’m taller than most people. That I have a serious Boston accent. All of that.”

“Well, let me fill you in on a secret, Layla,” Devin said as he stood up and wrapped his arms around her waist. “When I look at you I see a beautiful woman with some amazing curves. I see a woman who can look at me eye to eye even when she’s NOT wearing her stilettos. And I see a woman whose accent turns me on like nobody’s business!”

“Are you serious?” Layla asked. “For real?”

“For real,” Devin said. “You need to stop thinking people are noticing your weight before they notice you. You’re a beautiful woman, Layla! I love each and every part of you.”

Layla didn’t know what to say. “I’m flattered,” she said. “That’s really sweet.”

“It’s the truth. I’m glad God brought you into my life. You’re a blessing to be around.”

Layla leaned in and kissed Devin on his cheek.

“Thank you. You made my entire week.”

“Call me later if you want to come by for dinner,” Layla said.

“It’s a date!” Devin said. Layla turned to the door

and opened it. Devin watched her as she walked down the hall to the elevator. When she looked back and caught him watching her, he didn’t look away. She smiled.



Keisha was washing dishes when Jacob came home. He slid up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her on the neck.

“Good evening, Mrs. Anderson.” Jacob said.

“Well, good evening to you, Mr. Anderson,” Keisha said as she turned to face Jacob. “How was your day? How did it go at the lab with Sarah and Joshua?”

“It went as well as could be expected, I guess,” Jacob said. “Sarah has a few issues she needs to deal with. Some things are beyond my scope of expertise!” he said laughing

“Well, we both know Sarah’s been through a lot. I’m just glad you can be there for her. People need to spend more time helping others, you know? Like it used to be back in the day, before cell phones. Before the internet.”

“I hear you. Remember when we first moved in here, Keisha? When our neighbors actually used to speak to us when we’d come home. I remember when they’d actually *have a conversation* with me. They would check in on me to see how I was doing.”

“I remember, baby. Now grab that towel and help me dry these dishes,” Keisha said as Jacob continued.

“I feel like our church is operating in the same way, Keish. People aren’t reaching out to one another anymore. Just yesterday, I was walking down the church hallway and saw several people walk past each other, and all they did was raise their chin up and say, *What’s up?*” Jacob said as he dried each dish and placed it in the cabinet.

“Why don’t you preach about it on Sunday? Is there a scripture in the Bible you could reference to drive your point home more?” Keisha asked.

“Are you serious? There are tons of scriptures that point to the need to connect with each other. The first one that comes to mind is in Acts. I think it’s chapter four, around verse 36. It’s about a dude named Barnabas. Remember him?”

“From Bible study a long time ago. But I don’t remember his story,” Keisha said.

“When Jacob, Jr. was born, I was gonna ask if we could name him Barnabas, since it means *Son of Encouragement*, but I thought better of it.”

“You know better than that!” Keisha laughed. She took Jacob’s hand and led him into the living room to sit on the sofa. “So what was his story?”

“Well, there’s no short way to tell it, but I’ll try.” Jacob said as he rested his head on the back of the sofa.

“Basically, Barnabas went head to head with Paul because he wanted to bring his cousin John Mark along on their missionary trip. Barnabas chose encouragement over joining Paul on the trip.”

“How did Barnabas encourage John Mark?” Keisha asked.

“Well, it wasn’t the way we encourage each other these days, that’s for sure. He didn’t send him an email or give him a copy of a sermon.”

“Oh, come on. I have only handed out ONE copy of your sermon. And that was a long time ago! Besides, she REALLY needed to hear it!”

“*One* time, Keisha?” Jacob said as he turned his head to one side and looked right at Keisha.

“Okay, okay. Maybe five or six times. But they needed to hear the message!” she said.

Jacob laughed. “I know, baby. Anyway, Barnabas didn’t do any of that. Barnabas was willing to give John Mark another chance, after everyone else had given up on him. Barnabas didn’t practice passive encouragement; he showed up in person and encouraged John Mark along the

way. This is why I think our community center is going to be so life changing for so many of the residents in Blue!”

“I’m excited, Jacob!”

“This is also a chance for us to give people the benefit of a doubt when they’ve messed up in the past. Even people like Sarah. If Joshua ends up being my son, I’ll be the best father to him that I can be. But if he’s not, I’m still going to be there for them because I feel that is what God wants me to do.”

Keisha sat up on the couch and looked at Jacob. “What do you mean *be there for them*? You have your *own* family!”

“Helping them won’t take away from you or the children, Keisha. I promise. We’ll have the results back in a few days, and we’ll move on from there. We have to stop pushing people away because of ONE mistake they may have made in the past! Everybody makes mistakes and everybody deserves the chance to make it right again.”

“You’re really serious about this, huh?”

“I am! Look at me, Keish. I’m a pastor, but I’ve done my dirt in the past. If God can use me, imagine what He can do with the rest of our congregation?”

“I love you, Jacob Anderson,” Keisha said as she kissed him on the lips. “I’m so lucky to have you.”

“No, I’m the lucky one, Keish. You’re the best thing that could have ever happened to me.”



Mason tossed and turned the night before the opening of Club One Seven. He even had a dream that all of the chairs were stolen, and that no one showed up for the opening. He finally got up out of bed at 4 a.m. and walked into his living room.

*What if no one shows up?* he thought. He knew he had everything planned just right, but in the back of his

mind he wondered if he had missed anything. He decided to text Jasmine to see if she was awake. She was.

"I can't text this early in the morning," she texted to Mason. A few seconds later, his cell phone rang.

"Hey, babe!" Mason said. "Did I wake you with my text message?"

"Nope! I've been up since three. I was watching a scary movie last night before I fell asleep and I swear I keep hearing something in my kitchen!"

"Girl, you are crazy!" Mason said.

"What are you doing awake at this hour anyway? The opening isn't until 11. Are you nervous?" Jasmine asked.

"No!" Mason lied. "Okay, maybe a little. I'm just worried no one will show, that's all. That's normal, right?"

"Of course it is!" Jasmine said. "You want some company?"

Mason hesitated. "No, get some rest. You're coming to the opening, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it!" Jasmine said. "Goodnight, baby...or better yet, good morning," she said laughing.

"Good night, see you in a little while," Mason said as he hung up. He looked around his apartment and suddenly felt very alone. He didn't miss his family very often, but this was one time he wanted to be able to have some of his mother's fried chicken, or have a cognac with his dad.

His mind began to fill with all the mistakes he made over the past year, especially when it came to Sasha. He was still blaming himself for her death, even though it was later proven that Sasha was not on her way to the cake tasting after all. There were still so many unanswered questions. Mason even sold Sasha's engagement ring because looking at it every day made him sad.

Mason was happy he could talk to Jaz, and he was grateful to have found a home again in Blue. (Even though

he swore he'd never return after he finished law school.)

It was time to spend some time with God before starting his day. Especially a day as important as this one.

Mason had been attending church at Elm Street every Sunday for the past year, but he still didn't feel comfortable enough to pray out loud. But one of Jacob's sermons taught him there was no "proper" way to pray.

Mason knelt down in front of his sofa and began to talk to God as though He were right in front of him. Mason never used big words or structured prayer, he simply opened his mouth and spoke from his heart.

After having prayed, he immediately felt better; the butterflies in his stomach disappeared and the anxiety he was having over the opening of Club One Seven also began to subside. He finally began to feel sleepy, so he walked back to bed and was asleep soon after he pulled the comforter over him.



"Is this Pastor Anderson?" the voice said on the other end of the line.

"It is. Who's calling?" Jacob asked.

"This is the lab. We have your DNA test results. It says here that you *are* the father of Joshua Hiwassee."

"Are you sure?"

"We ran the test using three samples. You're definitely his father. Good luck!"

Jacob hung up and rested his face in his palms. "Who was that, babe?" Keisha asked.

"It was the lab."

"And?" Keisha asked.

"Joshua *is* my son."

"Are you sure?" Keisha said. She didn't know what to think.

"They said they ran three tests. He's mine, Keish.

Are you okay with that?"

"I'm fine with him being your son, Jake. But I'm *not* fine with the thought of Sarah being back in your life full-time. We need to come up with some boundaries for her. You know how she can be at times."

"No need to worry, baby," Jacob said. "I'll have Mason to draw up an agreement on what will be expected from her from now on. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," Keisha said.

## The Rhythm in Blue



When Sarah received the call from the lab a few minutes after Jacob, she wanted to jump up and down. Finally, some closure for the most stressful situation she had ever been in.

"Joshua! Come in here! I have some good news for you!"

"Yes, Mama?" Joshua said. It was obvious that he had been sleeping.

"Sit down, baby," Sarah said. Joshua walked around to the other side of Sarah's bed and sat down.

"Jacob *is* your father. That was the lab! Isn't that wonderful!"

"So I can go back and live with him now? I'll pack my stuff!"

"Wait a second!" Sarah yelled. "No one said anything about you going back to live with him. He has a family, Josh. The only reason you were there before was because I was too sick to care for you. Now I'm better."

"But we still live here in this dump. I hate it here, Mama. I really do!"

"Well, this is home for now. We'll be moving soon, don't you worry."

Joshua lowered his head and looked at his feet.

"Don't look so sad. This is a celebration! Jacob is going to be the best dad ever!"

Joshua stood up and looked at Sarah. "Whatever you say, Mama. Whatever you say." Joshua walked out of the room before Sarah could say anything else.

Sarah understood why Joshua hated living on Chesney Road. They had roaches, the neighbors were noisy and Joshua had to go to a school that could barely afford to educate the children properly. Chesney Road was Sarah's only choice years ago when Joshua was born. But not now.

Sarah's income at Elm Street was more than enough to find a better and safer place for her and Joshua to live. And now that she knew Jacob was definitely Joshua's father, anything was possible.



Layla couldn't believe she had actually agreed to allow Devin to come for dinner. Everything seemed to be moving so quickly. But enough about that, she needed to focus on getting her apartment (and herself) ready.

She stood in her living room and looked around at all the boxes she still had to unpack. She had been in Blue for more than six months now, but her apartment looked like she had just moved in. She shoved most of the boxes into her hall closet and quickly swept the floor.

By the time 6 p.m. rolled around, she was ready for Devin. She kept their dinner menu simple: shrimp and pasta with spinach salad and garlic bread. She even baked a batch of oatmeal cookies for dessert.

As Layla set the dining room table, she remembered setting the same table as a child when her great-grandmother made dinner. When her great-grandmother died, the table was passed on to Layla's grandmother, then to Layla's mother, and finally to Layla. Even though Layla was single at the time, she insisted on taking the table with her to Blue. It was massive and took up most of the space in her dining room, but she didn't care. That table was a piece of history. Every relative for four generations had, at some point, had a meal around that very table.

Layla set two places at one end of the table and stepped back to take one last look. It had been ages since she had invited anyone over for dinner, but she was ready to break out of her shell and welcome new people into her life. It was time.

## The Rhythm in Blue

As she stood in her kitchen enjoying a glass of wine, her doorbell rang.

"Girl you got the whole neighborhood smelling good!" Devin said as he stepped inside her apartment. He revealed a bouquet of roses and gave it to her along with a kiss on the cheek. "What did you cook?" he asked.

"Patience, my friend. Patience," Layla said. She was

anxious to get the evening started, but she couldn't ignore the butterflies in her stomach. Devin made her heart turn flips anytime he was in the room.

"You want some wine?" Layla asked, holding up the wine bottle to show Devin the label. "It's from Anita Vineyards."

"No, thank you," Devin said. "But I'd love some juice if you have some."

"You don't drink, huh?" she asked.

"Not anymore. I left that life behind me a long time ago."

Layla looked at her glass of wine. "It's only one glass of wine, Devin."

"Maybe to you," he said as he shifted his weight to one leg and crossed his arms. "But for me, one drink can lead to four or five. I've been sober for two years. I don't wanna mess that up. Ya dig?"

"I dig," Layla said, taking another sip of wine. "Are you okay with *me* having a drink?"

"I'm fine with it!" Devin said laughing. "Besides, this is your home, babygirl."

"Well, why don't you take a seat right here, then," she said as she pulled out a chair for him to sit down.

"This table is different," Devin said as he ran his fingers along the etchings. Various symbols had been etched into the wood including elephants, stars and diamonds. The top of the table was a converted wooden door.

"It was my great grandmother's," she said as she served Devin a plate of shrimp and pasta. "My great-grandfather was a woodworker; he could make anything using his hands!"

"I love it. So unique!" Devin said. "But this food has my attention now! Mmmm! It looks and smells so good!"

"Thanks! I hope it tastes good, too!" Layla said as she sat down with her own plate. "You want me to turn on some music?"

"Actually, I thought maybe we could write during dinner. I have an idea for a dual poem, and I'd love your help with it."

"Really? Me?" Layla was shocked. "I'm honored!"

"Don't be honored yet," Devin laughed. "It may end up being wack," he said.

"Not if you're writing it," Layla said as she took a bite of her pasta. She could look at Devin all day and night if she were given the chance.

Devin pulled two notebooks and pens out of his bag placed them on the table. "This is your notebook," he said as he pushed it over to Layla's side of the table. "I want you to write about what love is."

"What do you mean? Love is complicated!" Layla said.

"How many times a day do you say the word love? I bet it's a lot. We *love* a book we're reading. We *love* the cake we had at the party. We even *love* a song on the radio. But what about true love? What makes your soul sing? And what would your perfect mate look like? Sound like? Taste like?"

"Devin!" Layla said. She was blushing.

"You know what I mean," he said as he laughed. "I wanna write a poem from both sides of the fence, one from a man and one from a woman. Because, believe it or not, we both want something different."

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"You're right about that!" Layla said. "Sometimes I feel like men and women are from different planets!"

"That's because we are!" Devin said. "But it's up to us to find out what the other wants. And it can start with a poem, a song, a painting, anything that will spark the discussion."

"I love it!" Layla said.

"So get to writing!" Devin said as he smiled. He was already writing.



"So it's gone? Just like that?" Frankie asked her mother's doctor. He looked at her mother's chart one last time.

"It sure looks like it," the doctor said. "I've never seen this happen before, it's so strange!"

"It's not strange, it's GOD!" Mrs. Jennison said.

"Oh, here you go with the religious talk again. Mrs. Jennison, you don't know how tired I am of hearing people give credit to some pie in the sky when sometimes diseases can just go away on their own," the doctor said.

Lucille stood up. "Now you look here. I had cancer. Now I don't. How do you explain that? My God took it from me and now I'm cancer free! I have my life back! I'm not gonna waste a single moment of it now. I'm gonna paint and teach and see the world!"

"Whoa, slow down, Mama," Keisha said. "You're not a young woman anymore. You're almost 70!"

"And? Since when does living come with an age requirement? If you wanna sit around here and waste your life, you go right ahead. But I'm not." Mrs. Jennison turned back to the doctor. "So, am I released to go home for good now? Can I finally get out of that dump they're passing off as a nursing home?"

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re a free woman!” the doctor said. “I’ll send over the paperwork right now.”

As Mrs. Jennison put on her coat, Keisha helped her button it up. “So, you’re going home right? To your house?”

“You think I wanna live with you? Girl please!”

“It’s not like that, Mama. I was just making sure you’d be okay on your own,” Keisha said.

“Will you stop pushing me into my grave? Of course I’ll be okay. Frankie’s been helping me sort my paintings, and Dalmacio is coming tomorrow to move some out to the garage.”

“Yeah, I *bet* he is!” Frankie said as she laughed.

“You are so fresh!” Mrs. Jennison said. “But you get it from me!” she said laughing.

When Keisha, Frankie and Mrs. Jennison arrived at the nursing home, the nurses smiled as they walked by.

“Mrs. Jennison, we just got your paperwork from your doctor. Looks like you’re going home today!”

“And not a moment too soon!” Mrs. Jennison said.

“I just came to get my photos; you can give the rest of my things to my roommate.”

“Are you sure, Mrs. Jennison? You have some pretty expensive clothes!”

“I’m sure. And they’re just clothes. I can get more. I have a whole life ahead of me, and I’m refusing to focus on the small stuff.”

“I hear you!” the nurse said.

As Keisha and Frankie took the photos down from their mother’s bulletin board, Keisha noticed a photo she had never seen before. It was of her mother and father standing in front of a painting in a gallery.

“When was this taken, Mama?” Keisha asked.

“Just before I got pregnant with you. Your daddy entered one of my paintings in the Blue County art contest and it won! He was so proud of me!”

## The Rhythm in Blue

Keisha studied the photo and noticed how young her parents looked. And happy. She traced the edges of the photo with her fingertips and realized how many sacrifices her mother made for her and Frankie.

“Let’s get outta here!” Mrs. Jennison said. She was ready to go.

Keisha, Frankie and Mrs. Jennison walked down the corridor one last time. It had been an eventful year, but they wouldn’t have had it any other way.



As Sarah sat at the table in the court's mediation room, she nervously twirled her hair around her fingers. When Jacob and Keisha entered, she stood up, not knowing what else to do.

"Relax, Sarah. Take a seat!" Keisha said. Sarah sat down. Mason entered the room and sat on the other side of Jacob. He placed the folder he was carrying on the table.

"What are *you* doing here, Mason?" Sarah asked.

"I'm Jacob's attorney. I'm the one that drew up the contract you're going to review and hopefully sign today."

"Contract? What contract?"

"Remember the agreement we spoke about the other night, Sarah? Our agreement on how much I would pay to support Joshua, visitation, etc.?"

"Oh, yeah! Mason made it sound like it was serious," Sarah said.

"That's because it *is* serious. I was thinking maybe you should have your attorney look it over before you sign?" Mason said.

"Attorney? I don't need an attorney. We're all friends here, right? I just want what's best for Joshua."

"Okay. Well, let's get started then. Basically this agreement says Jacob will pay \$500 per month to you directly to support Joshua. He will also have visitation every other weekend at his home. If necessary, Joshua can be placed on Jacob's health insurance; otherwise, Jacob will pay half of your premium."

"Sounds good! Where do I sign?" Sarah said.

"That's not all," Keisha said.

"You also agree not to call Jacob for every little thing that happens with Joshua. Jacob has a wife and a family, Sarah, and you have to respect that," Mason said.

"I do respect his wife and family!" Sarah said.

"Well, you have to respect them even more," Mason continued. "You can't expect Jacob to fill the role of a husband for you, Sarah."

"Nobody said he was my husband! Jeez, y'all are really making this a big deal, huh?" Sarah snapped.

"Do you agree?" Mason asked.

"Yes," Sarah said in a lowered voice.

"Could you speak up?" Mason asked.

"YES!" Sarah said. She leaned over and signed the paper.

"I'll give a copy to you and one to Jacob. Hopefully we won't have to meet about this again," Mason said as he stood up.

"Hopefully," Sarah said. She looked at Keisha and then rolled her eyes.

"See? That's what I'm talking about! She just rolled her eyes at me!" Keisha yelled.

"Eye-rolling was not in the contract, Keisha. Sorry," she said as she stood up. "So does the weekend visitation start this weekend? Hopefully so, because I have plans."

Jacob was silent.

"Well?" Sarah asked, folding her arms.

"I guess so," Jacob said.

"Perfect. He'll be ready at 5 o'clock tomorrow. You can get him from home."

"No, *you* can bring him to us," Keisha said. "Jacob won't be coming to your home anymore, Sarah."

"Ridiculous!" Sarah said. "Whatever, guys. I'm good with bringing him to your house." Sarah grabbed her purse and started to walk out. "Mason, thank you for making this easy for me."

"It's my job to make things easy!" Mason said.

"Are you coming to the opening of the community center?" Keisha asked.

"Am I invited?" Sarah said.

“Of course you are! You’re family now!” Jacob said as he put his arm around Sarah.

“Then I’ll be there!” Sarah said.



Layla and Devin wrote all night. Even when Layla assumed Devin would attempt to make his way to her bedroom, he didn’t. Instead, he came up with another writing prompt and they wrote another poem.

“Do you do this every night, Devin?” Layla asked as she wrote.

“Do what? Write? I’m trying to make it a habit. Do you have any good habits, Layla?” Devin asked.

“Sometimes I go to the gym,” she said as she looked at Devin. He tilted his head to one side and looked at her. “I mean, sometimes I drive past the gym,” Layla continued.

“You don’t have to pretend to be someone you’re not, Layla. I like every part of you. Your hips, your thighs, your stomach...your lips...” he said as he leaned closer to her.

“Devin, that’s really sweet...I like your lips, too...” she said as she leaned in to greet them.

When Devin’s lips touched her’s, it just felt right. No need to rush. Layla wanted to stay in this moment forever.

When Devin finally pulled back, Layla leaned in even more. She wanted more, she wanted every part of him, but he was a real gentleman. Instead of leading the way to her bedroom, he went into the kitchen and put on his coat.

“I’ve never met a guy like you, Devin,” Layla said as she leaned back on her sofa. She was amazed.

“I’ve never met a woman like you either, Layla.

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That’s my word. That’s why I don’t wanna rush into anything. I wanna get to know you...all of you...before we do anything we might regret.”

*Oh trust me, I won’t regret any of it,* Layla thought.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said instead. “We’ll have to get together soon.”

“That’s a definite. After spending the past two days with you, I can’t imagine spending tomorrow without seeing you.”

Layla was blushing again. She stood up to walk him to the door.

Devin glanced back into the living room at Layla’s 52-inch flat screen television.

“Nice TV,” he said as he winked.



Mason hurried from the courthouse back home to get dressed for Club One Seven’s grand opening. He wanted to look professional but also approachable since many of the community leaders would be there.

He stood in front of his hallway mirror and spoke to his reflection. *You can do this. People will come. You’re prepared.* Mason always gave himself pep talks before a big event. It was something he learned from his father many years ago.

Once Mason decided on a shirt and tie, he headed for the door. He didn’t want to be late.

The parking lot was already full when Mason arrived. News trucks were lined up in the adjacent parking lot as the newscasters prepared for their live shots.

Mason stepped into Club One Seven and was amazed at how much the space had changed since he first saw it one year ago. Much of the work was done by Sarah, but some of the young people had also helped. It looked brand new and ready to serve Blue’s community.

As Mason scanned the room for people he needed to connect with at some point in the evening, he noticed Sarah standing by the refreshments. He walked over to say hello.

“Sarah, I’m glad you’re okay with how everything went today.” Mason said. “I really tried to be fair to both you and Jacob.”

“I realize that, Mason. Sometimes I get kind of emotional. But you already knew that!” she smiled. “I just want my boy to have what he needs. I’m just glad Keisha is so cool with everything-- especially after the way I acted.”

“I know,” Mason said. “But, what’s done is done. I’m proud of how y’all are handling everything,” Mason said as he spotted Jacob walking through the crowd. “Well, the star of the show is here, I guess we can get started.”

“Packed house!” Jacob said. He was smiling from ear to ear.

“Yep! I’m shocked!” Mason said.

“I’m not,” Jacob said. “You did an amazing job putting it all together. I know for a fact that everything happens for a reason. If you hadn’t come back to Blue to visit a year ago...” Jacob’s voice lowered as he realized what he was saying. “Oh, Mase. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know you didn’t, man. But you’re right. I came back here for a reason. Maybe there was even a message in Sasha’s death, I don’t know. All that matters is, Club One Seven is open for business!”

“Well it sounds like you’re ready to speak!” Jacob said.

“I thought you were leading the celebration?” Mason asked.

“Oh, no. Not me- you are. You can do it, man! Just pretend you’re arguing some high-level case in D.C.”

Mason laughed. “Whatever, man!”

Mason walked up to the podium and turned on the microphone. A high-pitched squeal rang out across the

room. Everyone covered their ears.

“Sorry about that, everyone!” Mason said. “I guess I don’t need to ask if I can have your attention, huh?” he said, laughing. “First off, I want to say thank you for supporting our dream to make Club One Seven a reality. When we came up with the concept a year ago, we never realized how much would change in each of our lives. We learned early on that Club One Seven wouldn’t just be a gathering place for young people, it would also be a place of encouragement. Now that we’re open, I expect to see big things come out of this building. Children and teens will be able to come and learn to dance, sing, act, write- you name it! At this time I would like to ask my main man, Pastor Jacob Anderson and his lovely wife Keisha to join me at the podium for our ribbon cutting.”

Jacob and Keisha stepped up to the stage and stood alongside Mason.

“Can I ask one more person to join us at the podium? She’s my best friend and she’s also my soul mate. Jasmine Garrett, will you join me?”

Jasmine made her way to the front of the room. She was blushing.

“Now, Jasmine’s been insistent on keeping our relationship a secret for quite some time. In fact, just the other day, she told me it was okay to let everyone know we’re together. So I’m saying it here and now: Jasmine is my girl. I’m off the market!”

There were a few groans from some of the ladies in the audience before the applause began.

“Enough about the lovebirds. Let’s cut the ribbon and get this party started!” Joshua yelled from the crowd.

“Okay, son! Okay!” Jacob said as he, Mason, Keisha and Jasmine held the scissors and cut the ribbon.

“We’re officially open for business!” Mason said into the microphone. The crowd rushed to see the rest of the space.

“So that’s it, huh?” Jacob said. “All this planning for a few minutes of fame?”

“I just didn’t want you to preach,” Mason joked.

“Ha-Ha, very funny,” Jacob said. He turned to Jasmine. “So you finally got him, huh?”

“Oh, I’ve always had him. He just didn’t realize it until now,” Jasmine said.

“So what’s the next step? Wedding bells?” Keisha asked.

“We’re not trying to rush into anything,” Jasmine said. Mason smiled as he put his hand in his pocket and felt the engagement ring box. He had planned to propose today, in front of everyone. But something stopped him. Something told him to wait a little longer. Maybe a month, maybe a year.

Who knew?

**One year later...**

The Rhythm in Blue

“Mama your paintings are perfect in this space!” Frankie said as she straightened the final painting on the wall. As she looked at her watch, she realized the exhibit would be opening in less than one hour.

Frankie noticed her mother nervously positioning and re-positioning each painting. “Something seems off,” her mother said.

“Nothing is off!” Frankie said. “We should go freshen up before the people begin to arrive.”

“Oh, girl, you act like there’s gonna be a million people here. I told you nobody cares about art these days. All you young folks care about is logging onto your cell phones and talking to your friends on those old internets.”

Frankie laughed. “You’ll see! Now come on before we run out of time!”

Frankie led her mother to the restroom to allow her to freshen up her make-up and smooth some of the stray gray hairs that were forming a halo around her head. “You need a dye job, Mama,” Frankie said as she brushed her mother’s hair. Mrs. Jennison just rolled her eyes.

In less than an hour, the gallery was filled with people from surrounding cities. Some were art critics, while others were artists. They had all come with one goal: to purchase a K. Frank original.

Frankie stepped up to the podium and officially started the evening. She introduced her mother and a few of the featured paintings.

“And we have a special surprise,” Frankie said. Just then, Devin stepped from behind the curtain.

“Who on earth is he?” Mrs. Jennison said.

“This is Devin. He’s gonna sing a couple of his songs for you, Mama!”

“Oh, I don’t wanna hear none of that boogie woogie

## The Rhythm in Blue

music, Frankie,” Mrs. Jennison said.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Jennison. I know a few gospel songs,” Devin said.

“I bet you don’t know *Praise Him in Advance*,” Lucille said sharply.

“I bet I do!” Devin said. He plugged his mp3 player into the sound system and within a few seconds the music began to play.

“Mama Jennison, this is for you,” he said before singing right to her.

When the song ended, Frankie’s mother was blushing. “Oh that young man can SANG!” she said as she fanned herself.

“I told you! And he said he’d come here and sing every weekend if you’ll let him.”

“Really?” Mrs. Jennison asked.

“Really.” Devin said. I’ll take a few more requests later, so start thinking about what you’d like me to sing!”

Frankie’s mother smiled.

Just then, Keisha and Jacob walked in.

“Well, it’s about time!” Frankie said. “Late as usual!”

“Don’t start with me, Frank. The babysitter was late and Jacob Jr. did NOT wanna go to sleep. I’m lucky I made it at all!”

“Well, all that matters is that you’re here,” Mrs. Jennison said. She hugged Jacob and Keisha.

“This is amazing, Mama Jennison!” Jacob said as he looked around. More than one hundred paintings were hanging on the walls, and upwards of two hundred people filled the room. As Jacob looked at each painting, he noticed the words SOLD written on most of them.

“What’s the price range?” Jacob asked.

“Frankie priced them way out of reach for most of these folks,” Mrs. Jennison said.

“I priced them where they should be,” Frankie said.

“They start at \$5,000.”

“See what I mean? Way out of reach,” Mrs. Jennison said.

“Well if they’re out of reach, then why are they all sold?” Frankie asked.

Mrs. Jennison looked at Frankie and tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’ve sold almost all of your paintings. See the little red stickers? That means they’re sold. I can’t wait to see how much you’ve earned!” Frankie said.

“Who woulda thought I could make so much doing what I love?” Mrs. Jennison said. She put her hands on her hips and smiled. “My girls,” she said as she put her arms around Keisha and Frankie. “What would I do without you?”



“So, how was the exhibit opening?” Layla asked as she made room for Devin on her sofa.

“It was amazing! There were so many people there!”

“I bet it was great,” Layla said. “I was gonna come but I’ve been waiting on a call all day.”

“A call from whom?” Devin asked.

“When I first arrived here from Boston, I applied for a writing fellowship at Blue University. On their website they said they would be calling the winning applicants today.

“Well?” Devin asked.

Layla was silent for a moment.

“THEY CHOSE ME!” she said as she jumped up and down.

“Are you serious? Layla that’s awesome! What did you have to submit with your application?”

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“My bio, a few references and 25 poems. In fact, one of the poems I submitted was the one we wrote together.” Layla said as she smiled at Devin.

“I am so happy for you! So when do you start?”

“They said I need to be on campus by January 15th, and classes start on January 20th. I’ll be teaching three poetry classes each week. AND I get free housing!”

“You deserve it, Layla. You’re the best poet I know, and I know you’ll be a wonderful teacher, too!”

“And Blue U is only a few minutes from your house, so you can come and visit anytime!” Layla said.

“I would love that,” Devin said. He wrapped his arms around her and they leaned back on the sofa.

Layla couldn’t remember ever feeling this happy. In less than a year she had the dream job and a man who made her feel like she was the most beautiful woman on earth.



“So today is the big day!” Joshua said as he helped Sarah load the boxes onto the moving truck.

“Finally!” Sarah said. “It’s been a long time coming, huh?”

“Yes! I’ve been waiting for years to finally move away from this dump!” Joshua said.

“Well, why don’t you use some of that energy to grab more boxes from inside!” Sarah said.

She watched Joshua as he walked back into the house. He deserved better than Chesney Road, and now she was finally able to give it to him.

Sarah’s phone rang. It was Jacob.

“Hey! Just calling to see if y’all need any help,” Jacob said.

“Nope, we’re good! Josh is grabbing the last box now.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything. I’ll be at

church this evening and I know you said your new place is just up the road.”

“I think we’ll be fine,” Sarah said. Just then, Joshua reappeared at the front door.

“Is that Dad?” Joshua asked. “If it is, can you ask him if he’ll take me to shoot some hoops tomorrow? Basketball practice starts next week!”

“I heard what he said,” Jacob said. “Tell him I’ll come by and pick him up tomorrow after I get off. Call me if you need me.”

Sarah closed her phone and put it into her pocket.

“You ready?” she asked Joshua.

“Yes!” Joshua said.

“Well, hop in!” Sarah said as she opened the passenger door of the moving truck. Joshua climbed in.

As they began to drive away, Joshua looked back at their old house. He remembered how much he hated coming home from school, and how much he had prayed for a new place to live.

“Thank you,” Joshua said silently.

“What did you say, babe?” Sarah asked.

“I was thanking God for answering my prayers,” Joshua said.

“He answered mine, too,” Sarah said.



Jasmine had grown to love Friday nights with Mason. For so many years she spent every Friday night at the club or hanging out with her girlfriends, but once she and Mason made it official he told her Friday nights were his.

When she had her house built a few years ago, the only request she gave the contractor was to have a round tub. She had to have a place to retreat to after a long day. Tonight she was most thankful for the round tub as well as

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the sandalwood candles she burned every time she took a nice, soaking bath.

Jasmine filled the bathtub to the rim, sliding in until the water was up to her chin. The bubbles tickled her nose and she smiled. *This is heaven*, she thought. She didn’t even care about getting her hair wet, especially since Mason told her tonight would be an “inside” kind of night.

As she lay in the tub, she felt as though she were floating on air. She opened her eyes just long enough to find her glass of wine and then she closed them again. She wanted nothing but the silence, the warmth of the tub and the scent of the candles. The only thing that would top off this moment would be if Mason appeared at the door.

Jasmine had almost fallen asleep when her doorbell rang. She grabbed her robe and wrapped it around her. As she walked to the front door, she left a pathway of her wet footprints behind her.

*Why did he show up early?* She thought as she opened the door.

But instead of finding Mason at the door, she found a delivery man holding a bouquet of flowers. She thanked him and stepped back into the foyer, closing the door behind her. The card attached had only five words, but nothing more was needed:

*To my only,*

*Love, Mase.*

She brought the flowers to her nose and inhaled their sweet, sweet scent. She began to walk back to the bathtub but felt someone behind her. She was startled until she smelled his cologne. It was Mason.

“You look beautiful,” he said as he stepped back to look at her. Even though her hair was wild and she was wearing her frumpy old bathrobe, she was beautiful.

“Are you kidding me, Mason?” she said, laughing.  
“Seriously, you do!” Mason said. “And you know, I’ve been thinking. We probably should get something for you to wear so people know I’m taken. Something like a t-shirt. Remember you said that a few months ago?”

“I was just joking, Mason. T-shirts are corny!” she said.

She turned to the hallway mirror and began to swoop her hair into a ponytail.

“What about rings?” Mason asked.

Half-listening, Jasmine said “What ring?” She was becoming annoyed with Mason’s strange behavior. When she looked over her shoulder in the mirror, Mason wasn’t there.

“Where’d you go?” she said as she turned around. Mason was kneeling in front of her with a ring box in his hand.

“Isn’t this a lot better than a t-shirt?” Mason said as he opened the box to reveal an engagement ring.

“Yes!” Jasmine said as her eyes began to fill with tears. “Way better!” She threw her arms around Mason and kissed him wildly.

“Does that mean you’ll marry me?” Mason asked.

“Of course I’ll marry you!” Jasmine said as Mason slid the ring onto her finger. “What took you so long to ask?”

Jasmine stood with her left hand extended as she admired her ring.

“Are you sure you don’t want a t-shirt instead? Or perhaps matching tattoos?” Mason asked.

Jasmine leaned into Mason. “This is perfect,” she said. “Now let me go get my three-ring binder so we can start planning!”

Mason was silent as he looked at her.

“I’m kidding! We can keep it small and simple. As long as I have you, I don’t care who else is there!”

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Mason was relieved.

As they lay on the sofa, Mason thought about how much he had been through in the past two years. When he graduated from law school, he swore he’d never return to Blue.

Now, he couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.

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### Discussion Questions

#### Chapter 1

1. Do you think Mason made the right decision when he went to spend a few days with Jasmine to escape the stress of his engagement? Or should he have “stuck it out” until his wedding day?
2. Do you believe men and women can have a platonic friendship like Mason and Jaz tried to have?
3. Do you think Mason had a right to be jealous about J.J.?
4. Do you think Mason left his boxers in Jaz’s bathroom on purpose?
5. Jasmine obviously likes to “cater” to the man in her life (cooking, etc.) Are you like Jasmine? Or do you like to be catered *to*?

#### Chapter 2

6. How would you react if a child showed up on your doorstep claiming to be your own? Or your partner’s?
7. Have you ever had a “whirlwind” (short-lived but very intense) relationship like Jacob and Sarah had twelve years ago?

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#### Chapter 3

8. Do you think Mrs. Jennison should have kept Keisha’s secret? Why or why not?
9. Do you have a sister? If so, are you close like Keisha and Frankie?

#### Chapter 4

10. Do you think Mason returned to work too soon?
11. What did you think about Suzie? Was she out of line?

#### Chapter 5

12. Do you think Keisha’s parents were wrong to send her away when she became pregnant?
13. Jacob follows the same routine every morning. Do you have a routine to get your day off to a good start (prayer, exercise, etc.?) What happens when you miss a day?

#### Chapter 6

14. What do you think about Jacob giving Sarah a job at Elm Street? Have you ever worked with an ex?
15. When the house music set came on, Layla couldn’t wait to dance. What type of music always calls you to the dance floor?

16. Do you think Layla should have gone back to Devin's home after only knowing him for a short time? Have you ever "followed your heart" and gone against what you know to be the *right thing to do*?

### **Chapter 7**

17. In Chapter 7, Jacob talks about the importance of encouragement. Have you ever been encouraged? Have you ever offered encouragement to someone else?
18. Layla dated Devin even after she found out about his time in prison. Would you ever date a person who had been incarcerated? Have you ever dated someone with a "past"?
19. Do you think Sarah secretly wants to be back with Jacob? Does she respect Keisha?

### **"One year later":**

20. Do you think Sarah's move to a better neighborhood will provide a better future for Joshua?
21. Do you think Mason should have waited a little longer before asking Jasmine to marry him?

### **General questions:**

22. Which character is your favorite? Why?
23. Which character is most like you?

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24. Which character's behavior did you find most frustrating?
25. Which character reminded you of one of your friends or family members?
26. Where do you see the characters in ten years?
27. Where do you see Blue in five years?

Find more discussion questions at  
[www.therhythminblue.com](http://www.therhythminblue.com)

**Book club menu ideas:**

**Consider serving one of the following meals at your  
“The Rhythm in Blue” book club discussion.**

***Big Mama’s Fish and chips*** (the meal shared by Keisha and Jasmine when they visited Big Mama’s for the first time)

Catfish nuggets  
French fries  
Salad  
Sweet tea

***Jasmine’s “breakfast for dinner”***

French toast  
Bacon/ turkey bacon  
Fresh fruit  
OJ/ mimosa

***Elm Street Baptist Church Sunday dinner*** (the meal enjoyed by Mason during his first visit to Elm Street Baptist)

Spiral ham  
Baked mac and cheese  
Green beans  
Cornbread  
Red punch

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***Jasmine and Mason’s picnic***

Chilled bottle of wine  
Assorted cheese/ fruit  
Crackers

***Layla and Devin’s first dinner together***

Shrimp scampi  
Pasta  
Garlic bread  
Spinach salad  
Oatmeal cookies

### About the author



Crystal Senter Brown has been featured in *Redbook Magazine*, *Vibe Magazine*, *Proverbs 31 Magazine* and *Essence Magazine* and has been a performance poet for most of her life. Born in Morristown, TN to a bass-playing Baptist preacher and a painter, Crystal was

introduced to poetry at the age of six.

She was awarded the 2010 Harold Grinspoon Award for her children's book *Gabby Saturday* and has been awarded several Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Fellowship awards for her work in the arts community.

She has released two books: *Doubledutch* and *Gabby Saturday*. She has also released three music cds: *Bees are admired*, *Easybreezybeautifulcoloredgirl* and *Mojo*. Her song "Large and Lovely" was nominated for several music awards including the Billboard Music Song Award, Peacedriven Song Award, ASCAP Music Plus Award and the Urban Music Award.

Her writing has appeared in *Lioness Magazine*, *Proverbs 31 Magazine*, *The Women's Times*, *African American Point of View*, *The Valley Advocate*, *Local Buzz*, *Vibe Magazine*, *The Republican* and in the anthology *His Rib*.

### The Rhythm in Blue

When she's not writing, performing or saving the world, she can be found in New England with her husband Corey, son Adonte and a potato chip-eating dog named Serena Marie.

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