

SOME SECRETS ARE BETTER LEFT UNSAID.

THE RHYTHM IN BLUE

A NOVEL

CRYSTAL SENTER-BROWN

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Second edition

Gabby Girl Media

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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 she 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.

“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.

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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

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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.

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