

JUST
BETWEEN
US

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WYNDY J. ADKINS

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*Dedicated To
Jacqueline “Jackie” Flourney
1964 - 2000*

“Friends become our chosen family.”
- Author Unknown

I am privileged to say I have close friends. I am sad to say I lost a best friend. Collectively, my friends are my inspiration for this book. Through joys and sorrows I’ve learned the value of true friendship. To my mother, Jackie Flourney, Tracie Warren, and Shannon Lee, thank you for being such good friends. I’m grateful you have allowed me to be a part of your lives and you have chosen to be a part of mine.

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Chapter 1 - The Awakening

Today is my tenth anniversary. Garrett is the man of my dreams and I am proud to be his wife. We haven't spent a lot of time together lately due to his new construction projects and my hectic flight schedules. Garrett owns a growing construction company and often works long hours. Although he owns one of the youngest construction companies, he has contracts with more than half the major building projects in Atlanta. He has maneuvered his way up to the higher echelons of business owners and investors, which has given him an advantage over the rest. His ambition was one reason why I fell in love with him.

We met when I was a sophomore in college. He had already graduated and was on his way to make his mark in the construction industry. Shortly after he began working for a major construction company in Atlanta, I quit college to help him pursue his dream. I didn't mind it too much because after falling in love with him all I wanted to do was be his wife. My best friend Mona was my main inspiration for going to college in the first place, but after meeting Garrett I found a new calling for my life. Garrett was very proud to finally start his own company and I was happy for him too of course, but I had no idea how much time it would take away from our marriage.

He is often away from home attending some out-of-town conference or meeting new contacts. When his business got off the ground good I applied to be a flight attendant just to keep me busy. At first I thought it may pose a problem for Garrett, but he seemed to love the idea and didn't seem to mind so much that I would be away from home almost as much as him. Our quality time has dwindled away drastically, but when we are together everything is so right. We may only have a few hours

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together—enough time to grab dinner or see a movie, but we haven't spent an entire evening together in a long time.

But today was going to be different. I wanted to come home and be with my man without any distractions. I wanted to make love to my man and show him how much I loved him. I was able to coax a co-worker to pick up the rest of my flights today; I wasn't due back until tomorrow. I drove directly to the grocery store from the airport. I wanted our evening to be special so I bought all his favorite foods. When I arrived home I noticed his car in the garage and assumed he was upstairs asleep. Often he would come home in the afternoon to take a nap.

I quietly began to prepare our anniversary dinner. I lit candles on the fireplace mantel, chilled a bottle of chardonnay, and put on some soft romantic music. I tiptoed around the house as to not wake him until I was completely ready. The salmon steaks, asparagus tips, and garlic potatoes were almost done, so I began to prepare the dining room table for our early candlelit dinner. I wanted everything to be perfect. When I came back into the kitchen I was surprised to find Garrett standing there wearing only his boxers.

“Hi, baby, happy anniversary,” I said as I embraced him.

“Ebony, you're back early.”

“Yes, sweetie, isn't it great? I wanted to surprise you. One of the new girls took over my flights today.”

“Garrett, are you coming back?” I heard a soft voice beckon him.

Surprised, I asked, “Who is that?”

“Garrett, your kitty needs some more lovin'.” The voice returned, this time it was closer.

“Ebony...I can explain.” Garrett stuttered.

Before he could finish, the voice appeared in a bodily form. Not just any body, but the body of his secretary. She walked into the kitchen wearing nothing but

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my silk bathrobe. *My* Victoria's Secret red silk robe that Garrett had given me for Valentine's Day along with matching slippers, body oils, and an unfamiliar perfume. I suspected his secretary had picked the gift out amongst the many other errands she would perform for him. Maybe that was why she felt so comfortable to wear it; it was obvious he didn't mind. I should have known a woman picked it out. Garrett has good taste, but when it comes down to shopping, he absolutely dreads the entire experience. I only wore it for so-called special occasions, and now this woman stood in my kitchen appearing very comfortable draped in my special occasion robe. Now what seemed special meant nothing to me compared to the dark truth of my husband's infidelity.

In an instant everything changed. What was important was no longer even a factor. The fact that I had toiled over selecting the perfect salmon steaks that would make our dinner just right no longer mattered. Nor the fact that I had tried to make every detail, no matter how small, perfect, which had led me to go back to the corner package store to exchange the bottle of Merlot for chardonnay. Not to mention the many co-workers who turned me down before I ran across a newcomer who was more than eager to make a few more bucks, and gladly took over my remaining flights. Nope, all of that which seemed so important, so necessary, meant absolutely nothing now. It was a foul smelling, stomach turning fart in the wind compared to what was *now* significant –the fate of my marriage.

Even the man who was the cause of my big-deal evening didn't feel our anniversary had much significance. Apparently, while I was focusing on nothing but our meaningful anniversary, he was focused on the pleasure the absence of my presence would bring.

Now what was important was my self-control. As much as I would have loved to start whooping this

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woman's ass for having the nerve to walk in my house and have sex with my husband, I knew I couldn't reduce myself to schoolgirl, ignorant behavior. Although I must admit it was taking every ounce of my being to reframe from whooping her ass. I wanted to run up on her, snatch my robe off that woman, and slap the hell out of her. But who was I fooling? She was really a minor detail at this point. The cause of my hurt really didn't have anything to do with her. The real issue at hand was the certainty of my man's disloyal, disrespectful, and hurtful actions. My man had become exactly what I thought he wasn't, a low-down snake in the grass. He sure did have me fooled. To think I had given him ten years. *Ten years.*

I did what most women would find ludicrous; I made my husband my #1 priority in my life. He was my primary concern from which all my actions, decisions, feelings, and love derived. My old-fashioned concept of what marriage should be was exactly that, old-fashioned. All this reality hit me in the face and saturated every tiny part of my being in a matter of seconds. I wanted to cry, but fought the feeling knowing it would only be a distraction. No, I was not gonna cry, I thought to myself. I'm going to muster up the strength I don't know I have, but must, somewhere deep inside since the Lord feels for some reason I can handle this hurt. Most importantly I'm not going to whoop this woman's ass; nope, *I'm* going to be a lady.

"Oh, Mrs. Sullivan!" Surprised by my presence, she covered her bare body with the robe.

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was so incredibly hurt. "Garrett how could you?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sullivan," she replied, as Garrett stood silent.

I closed my eyes and raised my hand as I responded. "Please don't say anything else to me. All I

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want you to do is take off my damn robe and get the hell out of my house!”

Garrett finally broke his silence and spoke. “Ebony, please let me explain.”

“I cannot believe you, Garrett. This is our home. I believed you loved me. Of all days you had to bring this into our home on our anniversary. You son of a bitch!”

“Ebony, please calm down. I’m sorry, this was a big mistake,” Garrett said in a small attempt to defend himself.

I began to recall the time my girlfriend Mona told me she saw him with a woman at an out-of-town café. The times I would question him coming home at all times of the night. He always insisted it was business. Now my eyes had been opened. I began to recall the times I would confront him with my suspicions, he would manipulate me into thinking I was being insecure. I started to believe that I was imagining things that were simply not true. Therefore, I would attempt to find interests to occupy my time while at the same time trying to do more things to make him happy.

I remembered the suspicious relationship he had with one of his co-workers. He and this lady had to spend evenings together because it wasn’t enough time in the day to finish all the work at the office. Of course, since she was the project manager at the construction site, he had to collaborate with her. So after he convinced me nothing was between them, I joined a creative baking course at the community college. As a result he was greeted every night with a new cake or pie. I managed to gain 10 pounds while he got laid. Then it was the old classmate we ran into at his high school reunion. I took yet another course, this time interior decorating. Once again he got a blowjob and I got new drapes. All these moments were returning to my memory as if they happened yesterday. All the pieces began to fit together like a puzzle.

After the taxi came to pick up Garrett’s secretary, I sat down at the kitchen table.

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My cigarette burned slowly while my eye's followed the cloud surrounding me. I wanted to float away at that very moment and go back ten years. I felt like a stranger in my own shoes. No one, I mean no one could have ever told me that I would be at this place in my life. The man I loved, the man I wanted to share my life with had sex with another woman in our bed on the day of *our* anniversary.

He was sitting in front of me moving his lips but I couldn't hear anything he said. All I wanted to do was close my eyes and hope all of this was a bad dream, a figment of my imagination. He taught me how to dismiss my suspicions so well that I still didn't want to believe he was unfaithful. But those well-conditioned days of believing his words over mine were over. It felt like when my cousin told me there wasn't a Santa Claus, it was the night before Christmas. I believed so much in that fantasy I made it real. It brought a sense of hope in something I wanted just like Garrett brought me a sense of hope that our marriage was fine and we would live happily ever after.

I took a slow deep drag from my cigarette and exhaled slowly making rings with the quickly fading smoke. The dull humming from the teakettle began to scream for attention, and I saw his lips moving again, this time accompanied by his body movements toward the stove. A few moments passed before he laid the cup of tea on the table before me. I couldn't help but think all of his movements had been rehearsed, they were so easy for him, but I sat paralyzed. I wanted to take him down—hit him, slap him, something, but my body was as stiff as stone as the reality of his infidelity soaked in. The steam from the cup swallowed the tea bag and I could smell the sweet aroma of jasmine and strawberry fill my nostrils. Tea seemed to always soothe my body and mind, but I seriously doubted its ability to soothe anything now.

“Baby, are you going to say anything?”

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My hypnotic state had subsided, and once again I allowed myself to hear his dull words.

“Please forgive me, baby,” he said in a deliberate, humble tone. “Ebony, she was just a trick from work,” he continued.

A trick? I thought. I guess he’s supposed to be a pimp now. A trick my ass, he’s the trick. He tricked me into thinking he was a loving, devoted husband. “So now you turning tricks, Garrett? Well did you get paid?”

He couldn’t do anything but give me his same ol’ emotionless blank expression. I was just happy he stopped talking.

“Look, I told you I didn’t want to get married, so this isn’t all my fault. You pressured me into this. I wasn’t ready to get married.”

“What do I look like, Garrett? Do you honestly believe you can turn this around on me?” I paused as if he would answer. He reverted back to his dumb look and closed mouth. “You’re right. Maybe I did pressure you into marriage, but I didn’t pressure you to go buy the damn ring did I? I didn’t force your ass to show up at the church and invite all your damn family and friends did I?! I didn’t open your mouth and make you confess your so-called love and promise of commitment at our ceremony. Now tell me this, what the hell was that Garrett?! How can you sit here and act as if you did nothing wrong?”

“Baby, I said I was sorry. I can’t take anything back. The deed has been done. Baby, please forgive me.”

He made it sound so simple. As if he had forgotten to bring home ice-cream from the grocery store. Now his act of infidelity was reduced to four little letters—deed. And on top of all that he had the nerve to accent it all by calling me *Baby*. “Garrett you can save that Baby crap for one of your tricks, as you put it. You are nothing but a liar. Our marriage is nothing but a big lie. How can you ask me

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to forgive you just like that? Today is our anniversary and you were upstairs fucking your secretary in our bed!”

“So that’s it, you want a divorce.”

The sinking feeling in my stomach returned. He tossed the word divorce up in the air like it was a coin. I guess it was on me to call heads or tails. Just an hour ago I was looking forward to a night with this man that sat across from me. It was so easy for him to fix his mouth to say the word *divorce* and *deed* while the thought of it made me feel like I was falling without control. I noticed the long ash collecting on the end of my cigarette and I took another drag before it burned out completely. Just because my marriage was wasting away didn’t mean my cigarette had to too. We both sat in silence while I pondered the idea of a divorce. Why should I give it a second thought? He’s been happy doing his thing for God knows how long while I’ve been busy trying not to see the truth. If I don’t make the decision now to make my life truly happy, I don’t believe I ever will. So I dropped the cigarette butt on the floor then stepped on it. “Yes, I do. I want a divorce. Don’t worry about moving I will find somewhere to go.”

He stood speechless and somewhat saddened in the kitchen as I walked to our bedroom and packed my belongings. I only packed the things I came with; I didn’t want any possession that reminded me of him or the lie we lived. I wanted him completely out of my life forever.

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Chapter 2 - Girls' Night Out

Six Months Later

Our divorce was final and I was happy. I finally did something for me. I stayed in a relationship for ten years and each day I did everything to make him happy and totally lost myself. On the outside I was thrilled, but inside I was all used up. My soul felt like an old prune; dried up and ready to throw away. Every part of me was dedicated to making my marriage work. I put my dreams on hold and helped him pursue his. Now I was left with a piece of a career and no one to come home to. My married friends at work no longer wanted to have lunch with me. Apparently I no longer met the title of married friend. It never dawned on me that as a result of losing my marriage I would lose friends as well. Every day became a struggle for me to just get out of bed. I realized that I never lived on my own. This was the first time in my life where I had to take care of myself. Since I was a child I had someone to take care of me and now that I am thirty-six I'm left without a choice. I couldn't continue my marriage to Garrett; however, I've never been so lonely in my entire life. I didn't regret the decision to leave, but I didn't have a clue how hard it was going to be.

One of my best friends, ShaLisa, helped me find an apartment that was convenient to the airport without the loud disturbing noise most people complain about when they live near one. It was in the city of College Park. One of her old beau's used to live in the same complex and she figured I would like it. It was affordable, but small. The four-room, tiny apartment was an adjustment from the five-bedroom, four-and-a-half bath home I shared with Garrett. It was cozy and did offer a few things I enjoyed. Like the hardwood floors and a big picture window. It was also close to a shopping district that was great scenery whenever

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I felt claustrophobic and needed to take a walk. I didn't realize how hard it was to cook for one person, so most of the time I would grab something to eat at one of the many fast food restaurants that lined the main road of the shopping area. When I first moved in I enjoyed every minute of my solitude. I could feel secure in knowing the toilet seat would always be down. I didn't have to worry about water being on the bathroom floor, Garrett always seemed to leave puddles of water after showering, and my peaceful serene sleep would not be disturbed by an occasional loud outbreak of hard snoring. But after all my perks of single living kicked in, I did find it hard to come home to an empty space. I was trying hard not to get depressed, but it was getting harder and harder.

Tonight my best friends joined forces to help me out of my emotional rut. ShaLisa and Mona persuaded me to join them on a night out with the girls. We planned to go to an all-nude male revue show then come back to my place and get drunk. Mona always looked forward to us all getting together no matter the atmosphere, and ShaLisa, well ShaLisa loves the company of men so a night out with a room filled with naked fine men suited her just fine. I wasn't the type to go out a lot but they thought it would do me some good. ShaLisa came by and picked me up then we headed to Mona's. We got to the club around ten o'clock and sat at a table close to the stage.

The large club was filled to capacity with women from all walks of life and all shapes and sizes. A simple scan of the room would give you an eye fill of women anxiously awaiting the finest men Atlanta had to offer. A few tables were decorated with paper tablecloths along with latex balloons looped around the back of the chairs. Some women were celebrating their birthday, some celebrated their last night of freedom before entering what one would hope to be wedding bliss while others just celebrated the simple fact of it being Friday. A few stood up from time to

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time getting the attention of the waitresses to turn their five, ten, or twenty dollar bills into singles.

Before long the house lights dimmed and the DJ introduced the first couple of dancers. One was conveniently placed on each of the four small stages that circled the room, giving everyone an opportunity to have a clear view. Each dancer seemed to have an exotic stage name like Mandingo or Mr. Loverman. They entered each stage fully draped in a provocative costume—from a motorcycle man dressed in all leather that looked as slick as oil to a costume resembling an African safari man. Although they were all uniquely fine in their own God given way one thing they all had in common were the hundreds of admiring women all hoping and praying they would have an opportunity to get a quick feel when placing their dollars in their leg bands.

“Aren’t you having fun, Ebony?” ShaLisa said as she waved her dollars in the air.

“It’s definitely not what I expected,” I replied as I took a drag from my cigarette.

“Girl, you know you need to quit smoking. I bet you smoke a pack a day,” Mona commented.

“Thanks to Garrett.”

“Ooh, yes baby, bring it over here. I got you,” ShaLisa hollered as she noticed one of the male dancers coming her way.

“Don’t blame your smoking on Garrett. You were smoking when you were with his sorry tail,” Mona continued.

“Well, I guess the answer is that I don’t want to quit. Thanks for being concerned Mona, I know you’re saying that because you love me, but this is not the time okay.”

“Okay, sweetie, as long as you understand my intention.”

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Mona was always the voice of reasoning. She was the most conservative out of the three of us. Mona had the type of beauty that you don't see every day—that naturally God given beauty that takes your eye a minute or two to appreciate. Her slanted brown eyes, and thin lips, adorned her honey-brown, oval shaped face. Mona never wore makeup, other than some lipstick from time to time. Her hair was always laid. She kept a precision short cut. Every time I saw her, she looked as if she had just left the salon. Mona was one sister you would never catch looking crazy at the grocery store.

She called herself letting her hair down tonight by wearing a pair of jeans with a button-down oxford blouse that had a crisp, white collar, and cuffs that were accented with a pair of engraved sterling silver cuff links, along with a pair of red ankle boots. It tickled me to watch her sit there snapping her fingers and moving her head from side to side completely off beat. *Erotic City* by Prince was coming from every speaker, but Mona was moving to the rhythm of a slow Whitney Houston tune.

ShaLisa on the other hand was the hot mama of our trio. ShaLisa was still as wild as she was back in our college days. She had a style that was completely her own. The best way I could describe her is hoochie mama meets clothes designer. Her dark-chocolate brown skin was as smooth as a baby's. Unlike Mona, you would never catch ShaLisa without a face full of makeup. She could very easily be the poster child for hair weaves. If you didn't know better, you would think she was born with a track in her head. Glued, sewn, braided or just held in with bobby pins, ShaLisa had been there done that. But I must admit she wore it all well. ShaLisa was very trendy and always stood out in a crowd. If you didn't hear her loud boisterous laugh, you would definitely notice her dress-to-impress fashionable style. One thing I can say is she doesn't have any self-esteem issues. She knows she looks good and her

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attitude says it all. Most men seemed to be intimidated with her level of confidence and sexy style, which didn't bother her one bit.

Tonight she was going for a party girl look. Her hair looked wavy, like when you take down your hair after it's been braided for a couple of days. She sported a short designer denim dress with knee-length heeled boots, complimenting her long slim legs.

"Oh, lawrd did yawl see what he was packing? I could definitely ride that tonight, okay," ShaLisa said giving us a high 5.

"You are crazy," I said.

The nude revue was coming to an end and the dancers were making their way through the congested crowd of women. I was finishing up on my tequila sunrise and putting out another cigarette butt when I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned around to find a very nicely dressed handsome man standing behind me. He was tall, fine, and smelled as good as he looked. The subtle scent of his cologne seemed to put me in a slight trance. His complexion was a perfect cocoa brown. If butter came in flavors I would be tempted to say he was a butter brown. Smooth and slick. His moustache was neatly trimmed just the way I like them. He was not only good-looking, but also very well groomed; all the way down to his designer suit, and square-toed, expensive looking shoes. There was no doubt this brotha' was fine as wine and worth my time.

"Excuse me, but I had to come speak before you left. I noticed you when you came in, and well, I've been wanting to come up to you all night." His voice was deep and sultry. Some might call it a bedroom voice. I was a sucker for men with bedroom voices. The type of tone that makes you feel safe, but above all lets you know he is all man.

ShaLisa and Mona gave the *You Go Girl* look.

"My name is Jackson how are you?"

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I was at a lost of words but knew I had to answer. “I’m doing good. I’m Ebony.”

“Very nice meeting you, Ebony.”

Did this wonderful specimen of a man know how sexy he was? He stood his fine ass in front of me as if everyone looked as good as he did. However, considering I’m in Atlanta, the Mecca of many things, one being the *undercover brother*, I had to ask the question. “Don’t take this the wrong way Jackson, but I wouldn’t expect for a man to be here, considering it’s an all-*male* revue.”

He laughed then replied, “True, but I’m the manager of these guys. I let them have all the fun. I’m here to basically help with security and make sure things run smoothly.”

ShaLisa raised one eyebrow and rolled her eyes. Mona turned and faced the opposite direction to give us a little privacy.

“Oh, I see.”

“Well, I have to get back to work, but here is my card I hope that we can talk sometime. It was very nice meeting you, Ebony.”

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” he replied as he walked his fine self back toward the bar.

“Ain’t that something. I spent sixty dollars getting my hair done, one hundred on this to-die-for outfit, not to mention the hundred and fifty I dished out on these boots, and you get the fine guy,” ShaLisa said as she folded her arms.

“ShaLisa don’t be like that,” Mona interjected.

“You are just hating, girlfriend,” I said with a smirk on my face.

“You damn right I’m hating. That brotha’ was fine as hell and good lookin’, whew,” ShaLisa said as she laughed.

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“You can have him if you want,” I offered. I could clearly recognize how fine the brotha’ was, but when it came down to it I didn’t feel ready for a man in my life.

“What!” Mona and ShaLisa replied simultaneously.

“He is good looking and all, but I’m not ready to get into another relationship,” I said as I lit up another cigarette.

“You have got to be kidding. That is exactly what you need,” Mona demanded.

“I know that’s right girl, I think I need it too,” ShaLisa said as she continued to stare at Jackson standing at the bar.

“I’m for real, Mona, I’m not ready. Garrett burned me bad. I can’t imagine trusting another man so soon.”

“You don’t think you are jumping the gun just a little? He may want to just date and hang out, what’s so wrong with that? You are a grown woman, you can do that you know,” Mona suggested.

“I’m too old for that. Have you forgotten I turned thirty-six last month? I’m not about to go back to the days of casual dating so I rather not date at all if it’s like that,” I replied.

“I would be more than happy to jump on that for you girl, look how tall he is. Shit, I could climb that tonight,” ShaLisa moaned.

“Ebony, I’m just saying don’t shoot the brotha’ down so quick. You never know what could happen,” Mona expressed.

“Maybe I will call him, I don’t know.”

“Girl, did you smell his cologne? I think he was wearing that new fragrance, Lucky You. Damn, I would love to get *lucky* with that,” ShaLisa continued.

“You need to calm yourself down before you mess up and get wet over there,” Mona added.

“Too late.” ShaLisa laughed.

* * *

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We came back to my apartment and did as planned, got drunk. We reminisced over our college days and our relationships. Mona was approaching fifteen years of marriage without any children. She and her husband, Edwin, owned a car dealership and were doing pretty well for themselves. The only thing Mona wanted was a child. In the beginning they were having problems conceiving. They tried everything from ovulation tests to making love in all sorts of awkward positions to ensure things would flow in the right direction. After they mastered the art of conceiving, Mona suffered two miscarriages. That was tough. ShaLisa and I tried our best to help her get over her loss. That was a year ago, but now that she and Edwin were about to celebrate fifteen years of marital bliss, Mona had reconsidered going at it again. Edwin wanted to have a family just as much as Mona, but he had accepted the fact that it might not come to past.

ShaLisa, on the other hand, was content with being single and didn't have any desires to get serious. Mona and I tried to convince her to settle down, but she wasn't trying to hear that. She was happy playing the field and saw nothing wrong with it. She enjoyed the thrill of the hunt, and after that was over, she was on to the next victim. I felt sorry for the guys. They all came in with wide eyes and high expectations, only to discover they were just the flavor of the month. Some took longer to get the point, but after their phone calls went unreturned for a while, they got the picture.

ShaLisa's last serious relationship ended three years ago, after only six months of exclusivity, when she found out he was bisexual. He was deeply undercover, and truly a man's man in every sense of the word. She discovered him with one of his closest *'friends'* when she returned home early from one of our *girls only* weekends. ShaLisa has the same attitude when it comes to her career. She has

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had more jobs than I can count, but is presently a manager of a clothing boutique for women.

We had drank too much tequila, but continued to talk and giggle as we laid on my living room floor.

“Mona have you ever had a threesome?” ShaLisa questioned.

“Heavens no!”

“You can tell us. We know you and Edwin must get freaky. You’ve been married too long,” ShaLisa continued.

We laughed.

“No, we don’t get freaky. We make love. My baby isn’t like that,” Mona confessed.

“Okay, Ebony learned her lesson. She wasn’t freaky enough for Garrett and you see what happened,” ShaLisa said with an intoxicated slur.

“What!” I said.

“I don’t mean to be cruel, but that had to be it, Ebony. Face it, we all have the same thing, my stuff isn’t any better than yours, but if I’m freaky with your man he will be back for more.”

“You are so nasty,” Mona added.

“It’s true,” ShaLisa continued.

“Well I guess you should know, ShaLisa. Maybe if you would have invested in some freak action yourself, Lorenzo would not have *backed it up* to his so-called friend,” I snapped.

“What a minute!” ShaLisa shouted.

“Okay ladies, we have all had too much to drink. We can’t do this to each other. We are all we got. We love each other and have been through too much together to start slinging mud at one another. We have had our bad experiences, but it’s just between us, and it’s no need to start calling each other out,” Mona interjected.

“Whatever, you didn’t have to go there, Ebony. You know I didn’t know that joker was like that. I gave him the

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best six months of my life. How was I supposed to know when I was looking at a fine brotha' he was looking too?" ShaLisa shouted.

We sat silent for a moment then we all started laughing. We laughed so hard tears came rolling down our faces.

"Okay, okay...we are even. Mona was right, I should not have said that. Forgive me, Ebony," ShaLisa asked as she held back her laughter.

Between my giggles I responded, "You are forgiven. Shoot, you may be right. Maybe instead of taking all those damn courses I should have just bought some handcuffs and a blindfold."

We began to laugh again.

"Girl, don't forget the thong and thigh-high boots!" Mona added.

"I told you she had some freak in her, Ebony," ShaLisa laughed.

We continued on until we all passed out. Although I was reluctant to go out, I was so glad I took them up on their suggestion. The night ended up being exactly what I needed to get out of my slump.

* * *

It was five o'clock in the morning and I was preparing to leave for the airport. I'd been a flight attendant for a couple of years, but was ready to make a career change. I worked about ten trips a week and four of them were usually overnight. Since I was gaining more seniority I was able to have more control over my flight schedules. I was tired, but was still happy I joined my friends last night at the club. I tiptoed around their sleeping bodies as I moved my luggage to the door.

"What time is it?" Mona groaned in a deep, early morning tone.

"It's almost five thirty," I whispered.

"Girl, I don't see how you do it."

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“I’m fine. I left my spare key on the counter so you guys take your time and lock up when you leave,” I whispered.

“Okay, no problem. When are you going to be back?” Mona questioned.

“I have a few trips scheduled today so I should be back early tomorrow morning.”

“Call me when you get back and please be safe.”

“You know I will. Thank you for such a nice time. I’ll see you guys later,” I whispered again as I closed the door.

The ride to the airport was traffic free, something you learn to appreciate living in Atlanta. It made my commute so much better and stress free. I was juggling between my cup of coffee and my early morning cigarette as I approached Hartsfield International Airport when I heard my cell phone ringing. It was early, so I assumed it must have been Mona or ShaLisa.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Ebony, this is Jackson.” He sounded just as good on the phone, if not better than he did the night before.

“Good morning.”

“I know it’s early, but I was still up and hoped you would be an early riser.”

I might have been tired and even a little hung over, but I knew I hadn’t given him my number at the club. “How did you get my number, Jackson?”

“I checked the guest registry. I called your home first, but your friend told me you were on your way to work and gave me your cell number. You don’t mind do you?”

“I guess not.”

“Ebony, I know you are surprised. I just wanted you to know that I was serious. I don’t usually come off so strong, but I would love to get to know you better. Don’t

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worry, I'm not a stalker and I don't call every woman that signs the registry, but I thought I would take a stab at it."

"Okay, well as you know I'm headed to work so this isn't a good time for me, but I will call you when I return."

"Promise." The words promise said in his sultry, seductive tone were like music to my ears.

I laughed. "Sure, I promise. Thanks for the call."

I was already hesitant about calling him, but now I was curious. He was coming on too strong for me, but I had to admit he peaked my interest.

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Chapter 3 - Dusting off my Dating Shoes

I returned from a four-day consecutive flight schedule and was looking forward to a few days off to rest. I enjoy the luxury of traveling with my job, but I have to admit it can be exhausting at times. I decided to take advantage of my spare time and spend the day watching old movies. After opening my blinds to allow a little of the outside in, I nested down on the couch. I lay curled up with a light throw, lit a cigarette, and started to watch Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde starring Spencer Tracy. I absolutely adore watching old black and white movies and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was one of my favorites second to *It's A Wonderful Life*. I lay there anticipating Dr. Jekyll's evil transformation, as if I hadn't seen it a hundred times before, when the phone rang, interrupting my date with Spencer.

"Hey, girl what's up?" ShaLisa asked.

"Nothing much, just watching a movie," I answered.

ShaLisa continued, paying no attention to my answer. "I met this hot guy at the gas station yesterday and we are supposed to go out tonight. What do you think I should wear?"

I pressed pause so that I wouldn't miss any of the scenes that were already affixed to memory. "Are you standing in your closet now?"

"You know I am," ShaLisa replied in a matter of fact tone.

"What about your black dress you wore to the movie premier we attended a few weeks ago?"

Mona and Edwin always seemed to get tickets to most of the elite happenings in town, usually given to them by an appreciative customer who was satisfied with their purchase of a BMW from their dealership. One of their grateful customers happened to be a prominent Atlanta businessman accredited with owning many downtown

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properties along with his high-priced charitable events. Quiet as it was kept, he was responsible for unknowingly sponsoring many of our girls' night outings. The movie premiere happened to be one of them. I recalled ShaLisa wearing a black dress that had a subtle elegant look and flattered her petite frame.

"Hmm, that would be nice. I was looking good. We are going to a nice restaurant plus I could show off my legs."

"You are too much ShaLisa."

"What happened with the guy from the other night? Did you call him?" ShaLisa questioned.

"Matter of fact he's been calling me. Mona gave him my cell number and he left a few messages while I was working."

"At least you know the brotha' isn't playing with you. You need to hook up with him. Damn, he was good looking and fine, whew," ShaLisa moaned.

"I thought about calling him today, but I don't know. You know I'm rusty at this whole dating thing."

"What are you talking about? He's already made his move so you know he's interested. All you need to do is return his call. That brotha' was too fine to sleep on, you know I wouldn't," ShaLisa continued.

"I'm not like you, ShaLisa you know me, I like to take it slow."

"I didn't say go to bed with him I just said call him. Instead of lying around the house doing nothing you could be out doing something. You have hardly gotten out the house. I know it must be hard being newly divorced and all but damn, you still have blood running through your veins."

"All right, ShaLisa I'll call him but if he ends up being a jerk it's on you."

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“Shit, he could get on this if he wants.” ShaLisa laughed. “Just kidding, girl. Well, let me get off this phone so I can get ready. Good luck.”

If I did get with Jackson this would be my first date since my divorce and I was reluctant to go. It was hard dealing with all my feelings and adjusting to single life. I hadn't dated anyone other than Garrett in the past thirteen years. After over analyzing the entire scenario, I decided to follow ShaLisa's advice and call Jackson. He was at home and was happy that I returned his call, reminding me of my promise. We planned to go shoot pool and have dinner. He suggested that I dress casually so that we could relax and have fun. I sat on the couch awhile after ending my call with Jackson, debating whether I should call him back and cancel our date. After thirty minutes or so I decided to get up and continue as planned.

* * *

Jackson arrived in perfect timing. He looked as handsome as I had remembered. I thought to myself, he is just as fine in a pair of jeans and button down as he was in that million-dollar suit he sported at the nude revue. His physically fit form made his clothes look like paint on an already well-designed canvas. A few of his buttons were left undone, revealing the upper part of his chest, showing off his sexy, curly body hair. Could he get any more sexy? After we exchanged our equally casual and congenial greetings, we started on our way. I was impressed to find him driving a new convertible sports car. It was an antique white color and appeared freshly waxed.

Jackson was very down-to-earth, which made me feel as if I'd known him for years. His jovial conversation kept my attention and I was thankful that I followed ShaLisa's advice.

“I'm glad you called me today. I was just at home bored and doing nothing,” Jackson revealed.

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“I’m glad too. I have a few days off so I was relaxing at home myself.”

“Really, what is your profession?”

“I’m a flight attendant.”

His sudden change in facial expression clearly had eureka written all over it. “Ahh, no wonder you were up so early the other day.” Jackson paused for a moment. “About the other day, Ebony I apologize again for invading, but I wasn’t sure if you were going to call me or not.”

My uncertainty must have been just as obvious to him. “I must admit I did have second thoughts.”

“I thought you might. Believe it or not, some women have problems seeing someone who is in the exotic dancing field no matter how remote.”

“Your job had nothing to do with it for me. I just finalized my divorce and I’m still adjusting to the single life.” Jackson made me feel so comfortable it felt natural for me to tell him about the circumstances that led to my sudden relationship status.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. I know that must have been difficult for you, but I have to admit I’m happy I met you.”

His eureka expression quickly faded and was replaced with a look of concern. Either he was truly an easy read or he had his own Jekyll and Hyde issues going on. “I don’t want to get into the details, it’s water under the bridge now. Like I said, I’m just working on getting used to being solo again,” I confessed.

“No problem. You don’t have to worry about me bringing it up, but if you need an ear I’m here for you.”

I smiled and was happy he was being sensitive to my feelings. “Where are we going, I thought the billiard was the other way?”

“You’ll see,” Jackson replied with a smirk on his face.

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September by the fine elements of Earth, Wind, and Fire began to play on the radio and Jackson immediately turned it up. It became quite clear he was a big fan. Jackson began to sing along loud and proud and from time to time would point toward me for me to pick up the lyrics where he left off. I normally didn't subject anyone to my ill singing, but Jackson didn't seem to care, all he wanted to do was have fun. His high level of comfort was very contagious, which made me relieve myself of some inhibitions. Before I knew it I began to sing as if I put the fire in Earth, Wind and Fire. Soon, instead of turning the song into a duet, we began to sing in unison trying desperately to hit all the high notes. There was no way for me to tell at first that Jackson would be so much fun and at ease, but it definitely was a pleasant surprise. We drove for a while continuing to enjoy our conversation accompanied by our brief fantasy concert moments. He made me laugh and seemed to be a pretty intelligent guy. Like Mona said, he may just be *exactly* what I need.

We began to reach a conservative suburban side of town and the homes became larger and farther apart. It was not far from Garrett's house, and I prayed Jackson wouldn't pull up in his community. I didn't remember billiards in this area. He entered Madison Park, a subdivision that was known for luxury homes, and I became somewhat puzzled. Jackson pulled into a long, brick driveway, which led us to a large beautiful home. The lawn was a light forest green and the landscaping was immaculate. He parked and walked around to open my door.

"Do you know someone here?"

"I guess you could say that," he said as he laughed.

We walked up the wide staircase to the door, and he took out his keys to open it. When we walked in I was surprised to see the marble floors and large staircase that led to the upstairs area. The interior was just as

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breathtaking as the landscaping. It was easy to assume whoever lived here had very good taste.

“Would you like a tour?” Jackson offered.

“Is this your house, Jackson?” I questioned.

Jackson proudly answered, “Yes, yes it is.”

“Wow, I’m impressed. Your home is beautiful. My ex-husband and I lived in Chestnut Lake, which is not too far from here, but I have to say our home was nothing like this.”

“I’ve been to Chestnut Lake, they have beautiful homes. Most people are shocked to see my home, but I’m glad to see you don’t have that deer in the headlights look.”

I laughed. “I have to tell you, I wouldn’t have expected a manager of male dancers to live in a home such as this one.”

“Believe me you’re not the first to tell me that, but I’m also a financial consultant. As a result I learned how to invest my money and was eventually able to quit my day job, and with the exception of the house, I live quite modestly. Don’t get me wrong I’m not cheap, but I’m not a compulsive spender either.”

I began to grow somewhat suspicious of Jackson’s intentions and asked, “So I guess pool is not on the agenda after all.”

“Yes it is. I have a game room downstairs with a pool table so don’t try to chicken out on me now. Look, let’s get out of the foyer and go shoot some pool. I’m curious to see what type of skills you’re working with.”

“Okay. I sure would hate whipping your butt in your own home, but if I must then I must,” I joked.

Jackson and I had a great time. We played about five rounds of pool and he lost, as predicted. We got to know each other really well and before we knew it, it was going on eight o’clock in the evening. Jackson decided to cook dinner instead of going out, and I was happy with that. He admitted spaghetti was the only thing he knew how

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to make so we decided on spaghetti. Although his home was stunning, he was a very unpretentious person. We sat on the floor in his den, ate dinner, and talked some more. Our conversation consisted of current events along with the basic first-date type of talk. I figured we had played it safe long enough and it was time to get down to the nitty gritty.

“So, have you ever been married?” I asked.

“No. Not yet. I came close a few years ago, but things didn’t work out so we parted as friends. I want to settle down, but I guess when the time is right I will.”

“That was smart, but that doesn’t surprise me. You appear to be a very intelligent man.”

“Thank you. You know, Ebony I’ve really enjoyed spending the day with you. I sincerely hope this is the beginning of more days we can spend together. I know you are just out of a divorce so I’ll lay off, but I have to be honest with you it’s been a long time since I’ve met a woman as intelligent, witty, and beautiful as you.”

It felt so good to hear a man say those things to me and I loved every word he was saying. “Thank you. I’ve enjoyed my day with you also, Jackson.”

“Do me a favor okay?”

Here it comes, I thought, the request for a massage or some type of touching activity, which could easily lead to a one-night stand. “Well it depends on the favor,” I admitted.

“Come with me to church tomorrow. Afterwards we can go have brunch and if you want I will take you back home. I know you only have a few days off so I won’t tie you up all day,” Jackson asked with excitement in his eyes.

I was surprised to put it lightly, but also relieved. It had been a while since I’d been to church, and I did enjoy his company so I answered, “Okay. That sounds lovely.”

“Great. Let me get you home so you will have time to rest, service begins at 8:15.”

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“Sure,” I agreed.

Like the drive to his home the drive back was just as enjoyable. It turns out he had been attending the same church since he was a child. I was impressed with his charismatic manner and down-home ethics. Jackson in turn appeared happy that his suggestion didn't turn me off. It was as if I passed the first test and he was eager to get me to the second phase. When he walked me to the door we kissed softly and he hugged me close. His cologne invited me into his embrace even closer than I intended. Jackson's warm body made me feel safe, but in a strange way it also made me feel like home. How could this man that was still practically a stranger make me feel like this? I was on cloud nine. Although I made a point to tell ShaLisa I would not be sleeping with this man I just met, I had to admit to myself the longer he held me it was becoming more and more likely. Surely he wouldn't leave me like this.

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Chapter 4 - Let the Church Say, Amen

I had a wonderful time with Jackson at church today. Like yesterday, he was a perfect gentleman. Even though I was unquestionably tempted to sleep with him last night, I was glad Jackson didn't make any moves to me. It would have definitely taken away from our church date.

I was embarrassed when I pulled out my bible and the receipt was still inside. His bible looked as if he carried it everywhere he went. Nevertheless, I was so happy I agreed to attend service with him. The sermon was exactly what I needed. It seemed as if the pastor was talking directly to me. He spoke of making changes in your life and stepping out on faith. All the words seemed to be especially selected for my ears to hear.

The pastor's messages gave me some assurance that I did the right thing and that now I needed to keep the faith and continue to march on. A few moments during the sermon, tears filled my eyes and I began to cry. My attempts to hold back my tears failed, but Jackson gently held my hand to comfort me. Afterwards, he didn't ask me anything. He made me feel comfortable without saying a word and it made me feel even better. I felt bad that it had been so long since I attended church, but I knew that it was time for me to build my spirit again. The love and divine presence in the church was overwhelming. From the elders to the younger members, everyone in the church seemed to know Jackson. He extended an open invitation for me to join him anytime and I planned to take him up on it.

He took me to a bistro, Babbettes, located in midtown Atlanta, which serves brunch by reservation on Sunday. The food was delicious and the service was excellent. We sat and talked for a couple of hours before he drove me back home. He shared with me that going to church always made him feel good. The members were like family to him and had been close to him ever since his

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mother died a few years ago. Jackson spoke very highly of his mother's spiritual influence on his life. Apparently, she was a well-respected member of the church whose presence was deeply felt. It was clear Jackson missed her just as much, but he didn't come across as being sad, instead he spoke with pride and gratitude.

I took pleasure in Jackson's openness, but I must confess, at times during his conversation I admired his sexy appeal and anticipated our next embrace. I briefly fantasized him sweeping off the table with one stroke of his arm and leaning over to kiss me. My fantasy was interrupted when I thought maybe I was enjoying Jackson so much because he reminded me of something I once had in my marriage.

* * *

After Jackson dropped me off, I slouched down on my couch and slowly smoked two cigarettes in a row. I wasn't sure how Jackson would react to my habit of smoking, therefore I decided to keep it from him. Most men cannot stand being in the company of a woman who smokes unless they smoke. I wanted to get to know Jackson first before I exposed my bad habits.

The longer I sat, the more I thought about how lonely it was for me to live alone. It wasn't long after I began my pity party when I heard a knock at the door.

I was glad to see Mona had come to visit.

Mona walked in looking tired from a long day at church. "Hey, girl. I was in the neighborhood and decided to drop in. Were you busy?"

"Not at all. I was in the middle of a one-person pity party but it can wait," I confided as I lit yet another cigarette.

She leaned against the wall then removed one of her shoes. Once removed, a look of relief covered her face. She spread her toes apart paying close attention to the thin nylon material of her stockings. Mona began to massage

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her foot while letting out a sigh. “Oh, Ebony. I wish there was something I could do for you, sweetie. I know it must be hard.”

“Well, so do I. You know I never thought my marriage would not work out. I did everything to make it work. Yet, just before you came I was thinking maybe I should have given him another chance. I mean, I just left. I’m sure I’m not the first woman that caught her husband cheating,” I confessed as I began to cry. Mona quickly ended her foot massage, put down her shoe and purse, and began to hug me. “Thank you, but all the hugs in the world can’t take away the hurt I feel.”

“Sweetie, I don’t know what it feels like for you to be in this position. I think we all look back and say what if, but I believe in my heart that you know you made the right choice. You and I both know you had suspicions. You deserve to be happy and he wasn’t making you happy in the way you deserve. It’s time for you to take care of Ebony instead of taking care of Garrett,” Mona spoke in a calming tone.

We released from our embrace and sat on the couch. I continued to cry as I spoke. “Mona, I’ve never lived on my own. I barely know how to balance a checkbook. I always thought of myself as being an independent woman, but I never realized how much I *did* depend on him. I can deal with adjusting to living in this cramped apartment, but his income accommodated for all the little things I love to do. Now I have to budget every penny and pray I can make it another month. I have to tell myself to get out of bed, to take a shower, to dress, to go to work, to buy groceries and then go to a job and pretend to be miss congeniality. This shit is hard.”

Mona opened her purse and handed me a few tissues. “Ebony, I had no idea how bad things were for you. You seem to be taking things well on the outside, but I didn’t know how you were really feeling. Why didn’t you

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tell me you needed some help? You know Edwin and I would be more than happy to help you out, financially or otherwise,” Mona offered.

I tried to get myself together. I didn't want Mona to see me like this. “I'm sorry, Mona you caught me at a bad time. I don't want to appear to be an overgrown crybaby. I don't want to depend on my friends to pay my bills. Don't get me wrong I love you and Edwin with all my heart. It means the world to me that you both are here for me, but it hurts when you want to do it for yourself but can't. I want to do it for myself.” My tears began to subside and I took a deep breath. “Whew, Mona I didn't mean to dump all this on you.”

Mona waved her hand in the air as if to say *girl please*. “Don't be ridiculous, we are friends. I love you. You can come to me with anything and it will remain between us. You have confided in me so let me confide in you. I have a therapist that I go to every once in a while when things become overwhelming for me. If you want, I will give you her card and you could go talk to her. Maybe you need someone that is totally objective to confide in, she really is great.”

I was completely shocked by Mona's confession. She was always so strong. So leveled. I've never seen her rattled or not in control. “You go to a therapist!”

Mona poked her eyes out and gave me the *you didn't know look*. “Shoot yeah, girl it's stressful running a business with your husband. Don't get me wrong, for the most part it's great, but I have my moments as well. We go to work together and then I come home and he is still there. Sometimes I look in the TV Guide hoping to find a football game or something scheduled just for him to get out of my space for a few hours.” Mona laughed.

“You were always proactive.” I laughed.

Mona glanced at the coffee table and saw my bible. “Ebony, why are you so dressed up? I noticed it when I

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came, but now that I see the bible I can't help but assume you went to church," Mona questioned in a tone that suggested if she hadn't witnessed it for herself she wouldn't believe it. She'd tried to get me to go to church with her and Edwin, but I always had an excuse. Eventually she stopped asking.

"Yes I did." I smiled, remembering the wonderful time I had with Jackson.

"Why didn't you tell me? You could have gone to church with Edwin and I today," Mona asked with a tone of pride. She was happy I went to church even if it wasn't with her and Edwin.

"Actually, it was sort of a date," I said with a smirk.

"Okay, I'm lost, fill me in," Mona requested as she sat back and made herself comfortable.

"You remember Jackson right?"

Mona immediately sat back up. "Girl you are kidding me."

Her reaction summoned that I give more information. "To make a long story short, I went to his house yesterday and he invited me to church and brunch today. It was great. He is great. To be honest Mona he seems to good to be true. Jackson is an incredible gentleman and conversationalist. In the short time I have spent with him he has made me feel like a million dollars."

A wide smile of approval covered Mona's face. "Wow, I'm happy for you girl. Maybe the best is yet to come. She paused then whispered, "Tell me, does he have the typical bachelor pad?"

"Oh, my God. His home is beautiful. He lives in Madison Park and his home is exquisite. When I walked in it took everything in me to keep my mouth from dropping to the floor." I laughed.

"At least you know the brotha' has taste," Mona continued.

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“Yes he does, but I don’t want him to think I’m a divorced gold digger. I’m going to play it cool and just see what happens. To be honest that’s all I can do because I don’t know if I’m ready for anything serious.” I didn’t want to be with only Jackson because being with him reminded me of the days when I was happily married.

“I can understand that and I’m sure he could appreciate that as well. Ebony, I seriously doubt he will think of you as a gold digger, it’s not like you are not used to anything. Shoot, Chestnut Lake isn’t exactly the projects; it’s only one step from being Madison Park itself.”

“I know, but look at this apartment. If you sneeze too hard you’ll be outside.” I laughed.

“Girl, you are worried about all the wrong things. Believe me if you and Jackson are meant to be together it will happen. The more time you spend together he will get to know the wonderful person you are and will be a fool to let you slip out of his hands.”

“Mona, I just got divorced and you are trying to get me married off again,” I said as I lit another cigarette.

“I’m just saying just be yourself and whatever happens will happen. Just don’t play it too cool or you may get left out in the cold.”

“You sound like ShaLisa now.”

“Speaking of ShaLisa, she is having a little get together at her place next weekend. She called and told me this morning. She called you but you were not here.” Mona sat up and began to squeeze that one foot back into her uncomfortable shoe.

“Well, I may be working, but if not I may stop by I don’t know.”

“All right, well I need to be getting out of here, I was supposed to be meeting Edwin at his parents’ house, but you were on my way.”

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I hugged her tightly. “Thank you so much, Mona. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Don’t mention it, sweetie. Ebony, remember what I said, if I can help you I will be happy to. No need in you sitting over here stressing yourself out. You know I have it to give, it’s not like I can take it with me when I’m dead and gone.” Mona paused and picked up her purse checking for her keys. “I need to go to the little girls’ room real quick and then I’m outta here.”

“You know the way.”

Mona’s visit was exactly what I had needed. She provided me with support and peace. It was hard to suck up my pride and confide in someone, but it was exactly what I needed to do. Shortly after she left I found the card to the therapist and a blank check she left on the bathroom counter. It felt so good to have friends like ShaLisa and Mona; words could never express my gratitude for their friendship.

Chapter 5 - Here Kitty, Kitty

It was the end of another long five-day flight schedule and I was awaiting my flight back home at the Newark Airport. We had a flight delay so I rolled my carry-on luggage around with me as I searched for a smoking area. I finally gave up on my endless search and decided to go outside. I sat on one of the cement dividers and discreetly lit a cigarette. I desperately took a few drags in hopes no one would tap me on the shoulder to announce it was a non-smoking area. The airport was busy with business travelers, most of who were dressed in their power suits, dragging their laptops on wheels, with a newspaper, usually *The Wallstreet Journal* tucked under their arms. I figured they wouldn't mind much if I smoked, I'm sure they just wanted to get back home to their families.

"Excuse me," a man said.

Damn, I was caught, I thought to myself. "Oh, I'm sorry, I'll put it out right now," I reluctantly replied.

He laughed then said, "No, I'm sneaking in a smoke myself. I noticed you when you came out and I had to speak to you. My name is Calvin and you?"

I smiled in relief and replied, "Hi, I'm Ebony." It was at that moment I noticed how nicely dressed he was and his stylish well-polished shoes.

"Do you mind if I join you, Ebony?"

"No, suit yourself." I was tired and wanted to be by myself, but the brotha' was fine.

"So I see we are both slaves to the airport."

"I'm not particularly fond of the term slave being used so casually, but yes I'm a flight attendant. What do you do?"

"I'm a flight engineer."

"I hear that job is pretty stressful," I replied in my meager attempt to make small talk before taking another drag.

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“Yes, but it pays the bills. I’m actually off now, but I’m waiting for my ride. I let my baby brother borrow my car while I was working.”

I glanced at my watch and noticed I had fifteen minutes before I had to be onboard.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you, Ebony, but I would love to be able to get to know you better. I can give you my card and when you have time we can go do something.”

“I am really busy, I’m not sure if I will have time to go out.”

“I understand, believe me, but in case you do I would love to go out with you.”

“Actually I don’t live here, I live in Atlanta.”

“Traveling is not a problem for me.”

“Okay, Calvin sure. I have to leave, but when I get a chance I’ll call you.”

“I’m looking forward to your call, Ms. Ebony. Thank you and have a safe trip.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

After assuring all luggage was secure, and the passengers were seated with their seat belts on, I sat in the forward cabin preparing for departure. I loved working first-class because after the passenger’s had a couple of drinks and ate, they were pretty relaxed for the ride. I glanced up and saw one of my ex-friend slash co-workers heading in my direction. Since my divorce, she hadn’t had much to say to me. I thought about playing a little joke on her and telling her I was married again. I wouldn’t be surprised if she would have wanted to pick up our so-called friendship where we left off. We used to talk, and have fun when we had flights together, but now she barely said two words and they were usually hi and bye. Now I’ve come to realize she was one of those two-faced heffa’s my mother warned me about.

“Ebony, are you working first class?” she asked.

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I wanted to be ignorant and say duh, but I held back and responded, “Why yes I am, so that would mean you are working coach.”

“Ahh, well do me a favor, next time you decide to change cabinets with me please let me know.”

“And next time you become my boss please let me know,” I snapped.

“No need to be ugly. I was only asking a question,” she responded in a dull tone.

“I believe you are the one being ugly, but I’m not going to go there at this time besides there are more married people in coach anyway,” I whispered.

She and her attitude simply walked back into the coach department.

I checked on the passengers again to ensure they were doing fine and had everything they needed then I began preparing their meals. ShaLisa’s party was tomorrow and I still wasn’t sure if I would be going. I hadn’t been in the partying mood lately. After paying all my bills I barely had enough left over to buy a bottle of champagne. ShaLisa loves champagne and usually expected me to bring her a bottle. My pride would not allow me to call her and tell her I couldn’t afford it. Mona asked me if I was going to invite Jackson, but I told her probably not. So far Jackson was great, but I didn’t want to start spending too much time together.

* * *

The weather was nice and clear so we arrived right on time at Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta. I went by a fast food restaurant and picked up a little something to eat then headed home. Upon my arrival I noticed a bouquet of balloons and a card on my doorknob. The card read:

All my thoughts are consumed of you. I would have left flowers but I wasn't sure when you would be back
☺

Just Between Us

I hope to see you soon, x o x o

Jackson

I was overjoyed by his thoughtful sentiment. His very kind gesture made me smile and was very nice to come home to. I sat on the couch and read the card again. *All my thoughts are consumed of you.* He definitely wasn't alone. I had to admit it was hard not to think of him too. He was different and it felt good, real good; on the beach in 80 degree weather with a clear sky kind of good. Like when you step into sand and you feel the grains go between your toes. It might feel strange at first but you can't help but want to feel it again. I just hoped I wouldn't sink this time around. If Jackson was trying to impress me, his tactics were definitely working.

I rolled my bags into the bedroom and called him. I told him I loved the card and he asked if he could come over. It was late in the evening and I was tired; however, I agreed.

He arrived much sooner than I had expected. When I heard the knock at the door I knew it was him. I hurriedly sprayed some Lysol and hid my cigarettes before opening the door.

"Hi, come on in."

"Before I come in I have to ask you a question," Jackson said in a low, sexy tone.

"No, this isn't a booty call," I joked.

"Seriously, do you like animals?"

I was shocked by his question. "Yes, I like animals."

"Good," Jackson replied as he walked in with a small carrying case.

"What is that?"

"If you don't like it I will take it home with me. I was at the pet shop the other day and thought I would buy you a kitten."

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Surprised, I asked, “A kitten. What made you do that?”

“Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I thought you might get bored at home by yourself at times and since you don’t want me here with you I thought I would get you a companion in my place,” he joked.

“Oh, well umm, that was very thoughtful of you.”

“Besides, the salesman told me they help lower blood pressure and stress so I thought after coming home from those long trips you could have someone here to greet you.”

Jackson placed the carrying case on the floor and opened the small door. The kitten was tiny, with orange, gray, and white fur, and full of energy. I wasn’t too crazy about cats, but it was pretty, and I could use some company. If Jackson kept this up I was gonna have to give him some.

“Jackson, thank you. You are so thoughtful,” I said as I reached out to hug him.

“Is it a boy or girl?”

“It’s a girl. I wouldn’t bring another man in here.”

“Do you think she will be okay when I’m gone?”

“Heck yeah, cats are very independent, and as long as she has food and a litter box she will be just fine.”

“Did the salesman tell you that too?”

“He did mention it,” Jackson laughed.

We sat on the living room floor and played with my new housemate. Jackson brought some wine and we enjoyed it as we conversed. The more time I spent with Jackson the more I liked him. It was so easy for us to relax and be ourselves. As much as I wanted to believe he was damn near flawless I couldn’t help but wonder what was going to be wrong.

“Jackson, are you like this with everyone?” I asked.

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“I don’t know, I guess, I’m just being me. I must admit you have captivated my attention. I cannot remember the last woman that had such an affect on me.”

“Really?” It was hard for me to determine if he was running his best game on me or what.

“Really. Ebony, in the brief time I’ve known you, you have made me feel like I’m on cloud nine and I don’t want to get off,” he whispered before taking a sip of wine.

“What exactly are we trying to do here. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy spending time with you, but are we dating casually or are we pursuing a relationship?” I asked.

“To be very honest I want to pursue a relationship with you, but I respect the fact that you want to take it slow. I guess you have noticed it’s hard for me to take it slow, but I will if that is what you need.”

“Yes, I do need to take it slow. I just got divorced and....”

Interrupting, Jackson replied, “You don’t have to justify or explain anything to me unless you want to. If you are not ready I understand.”

I took a deep sigh before responding, “Jackson, when I am with you I feel like someone is going to pinch me and you will turn out being a dream.”

Jackson leaned down and softly kissed me. “Now do you believe it’s real?” he whispered.

“That was nothing like a pinch,” I joked.

He kissed me again, this time it was much longer. He was passionate and gentle and I was loving every minute. “I don’t want to leave, but I know you are tired. I’m glad you like the kitten. I have a show tomorrow night, but it should end early so if you want to hook up call me,” Jackson said softly.

“You don’t have to leave,” I replied in the sexiest tone I could conjure up.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

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Jackson and I slept in each other's arms all night. It was the best rest I had gotten since moving into the apartment. Although we kissed and held each other, he didn't make any attempts to make love to me. Once again he was a perfect gentleman. In the morning he awakened me with eggs, bacon, and orange juice.

"This is good. I thought the only thing you could cook was spaghetti."

"Well my culinary skills are okay when it comes to breakfast too, it's just that I seldom have the chance to cook breakfast for anyone," Jackson said as he sipped on a cup of coffee.

I continued to enjoy my breakfast as he walked into the bathroom.

"Ebony, do you need anything before I get into the shower?"

"No, I'm fine."

I heard the sound of water pounding against the bathtub followed by the racking sound of the shower curtain. A part of me wanted to get in with him, but I withheld my desire and continued eating. After I finished, I put on my robe and looked for my new kitty, she was making herself at home and getting some rest of her own on the couch. When I returned to the bedroom I caught a glimpse of Jackson stepping out of the shower. His body was glistening with water drops. He stood and dried his fine body then walked into the room completely nude. It was at that moment I wanted to jump on the bed and tell him to come and get it. To put it shortly, he was blessed and I thanked God for his parents. Jackson was not shy at all when it came to showing his body, an attribute that I was sure derived from being involved in adult entertainment.

"What do you have planned today?" he asked as he looked for his shirt.

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I wasn't going to mention ShaLisa's get together to him, but after having such a wonderful evening with him I figured why not. "Actually I'm going to a friend's home for a little get together she is having. Would you like to join me?"

Jackson replied with a smile on his face, "You know I would love to join you."

"What time is your show?"

"It's at 8 o'clock, but don't worry about that. What time do you want me to pick you up?"

"It starts at 9 o'clock but we don't have to be there when it starts. You know CP time and all. I'm guessing 10 o'clock would be fine. She lives only ten minutes from here," I responded.

"Cool. I'll be here at 10 o'clock. I can start things off and make sure everything is running smooth and then I can leave," Jackson answered as he finished dressing. "What have you decided to name your kitten?"

"That's a good question. I don't know. Do you have any suggestions?"

"What about Jackson?" he joked.

"Very funny." I laughed.

"Okay, seriously what about, Honey?"

"Honey?" I replied.

"Yeah, she has a honey color to her, matter of fact, so do you."

"I do, huh?"

Jackson walked close to me and held my hands in his. "You taste like honey too." He leaned down and kissed me. "You are so beautiful, Ebony. I could spend the whole day looking into those big brown eyes of yours."

"You better be careful what you ask for."

"I don't have to be careful, but if I get it I'll be the happiest man in the world. Whoever let you go was a fool, but I'm not mad at all. I want to be the one that makes the

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sun shine for you, and believe me I'll do whatever it takes to make all your days happy.”

I looked up into his eyes and could see the sincerity in his daze. “Why don't we get back into bed and we can look into each other's eyes,” I suggested in a provocative tone.

Jackson released my hands from his and responded, “I would love to, but I have to go work out. I try to work out at least an hour a day, but on the day of a show I make it two. I can't have those guys showing me up too much.”

“I see, making sure you are looking fine to all those women,” I said with a smirk on my face.

“As long as I look fine to you that is all that matters. Would you like to join me?”

I held my stomach in and replied, “I don't do the gym thing very well. Everyone there is in a thong and look like they never eat fried chicken with macaroni and cheese. All I do is walk around the neighborhood and occasionally dust off my Tae Bo tapes when I feel the urge to really bust a sweat.”

“I work out at home. I have most of the latest equipment so you don't have any excuses.”

“I don't want to leave Honey home by herself,” I said as I tried to think of another excuse in case that one wasn't good enough.

“Come on, it will be fun to work out together. Let's make a deal. Afterwards I won't ask you to stay, if you want to come back home to Honey or do whatever.”

“Was that a deal?”

Jackson stood even closer to me and held my face in his hands. “Yes, you know I would love to spend the entire day with you, but I'm trying to work on this space thing with you,” he said with a sexy smile on his face.

“Okay, it's a deal. You know you are making it hard for me to say no. Let me get dressed and we can go.”

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Chapter 6 - The Party

After my work out with Mr. Wonderful I came home and played with Honey. She found her way into my closet and had a good time playing with my hosiery, which reminded me that I needed to cat-proof my apartment. It wasn't long before I was asleep on the couch. A few hours had passed and before I knew it, it was time for me to get ready for ShaLisa's party. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do about the champagne dilemma; however, I figured things would work out. It was hard for me to decide what to wear. Jackson had me feeling a little frisky so I chose to show some skin. I decided on my one-piece black pants suit with the back out and black pumps.

Jackson arrived precisely on time. He was looking absolutely fantastic in his champagne colored suit and Italian shoes. When he walked in he immediately gave me a hug and kiss as if he hadn't seen me for days. He whispered in my ear, "Ebony, you look more beautiful every time I see you."

"You don't look to shabby yourself."

"Are you ready to go or do you need some time?"

"Yes, let me get my purse and feed Honey then we can leave."

"I stopped and picked up a couple of bottles of champagne. I wasn't sure what to buy, but I know you can never go wrong with champagne."

I stood silent for a moment then responded, "Jackson, you read my mind. You have no idea how perfect a choice that was."

I snuck into the bathroom to sneak in one last smoke before leaving. I went so far as to place a towel in front of the opening of the door and blew the smoke out the window. Of course I sprayed nearly an entire bottle of Lysol before opening the door. I was just hoping the Lysol wouldn't cover up my perfume.

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We arrived at ShaLisa's party and everyone was mingling and having a good time. It turned out the crowd was more than I had expected. While Jackson placed the champagne in the kitchen I went looking for ShaLisa. I found her out on the patio surrounded by a few of her gentleman friends.

"Hey, girl," I said interrupting her flirting session.

She opened her arms and gave me one of her Hollywood hugs. "Hey, sweetie. I was afraid you weren't going to make it."

"Mona and Edwin are downstairs playing spades. You know Edwin loves himself some cards."

"Oh, okay. I'll have to go down and speak. We brought you some champagne it's in the kitchen."

"We? Who is we? I thought you were coming alone," ShaLisa snapped.

"Jackson and I."

"Jackson?" ShaLisa questioned.

"You know the guy I met at the male revue. Here he comes," I replied as Jackson made his way through the crowd with two glasses of champagne.

ShaLisa rolled her eyes then gave a phony smile before responding, "I see you took me up on my suggestion. Damn, that brotha' is too fine for himself. You sure you can handle it girl?" ShaLisa continued as Jackson came closer, "Ooh, lawrd have mercy."

"Do I need to get the water hose for you? You act like you're not getting any. By the looks of the crowd you invited every man you've been dating."

ShaLisa stood silent as Jackson approached us and handed me one of the glasses.

"Here you go, baby," Jackson said in his sexy tone.

ShaLisa stepped in closer to Jackson and began to bat her long eyelashes as she looked him up and down like he was on display. "Hi, I'm ShaLisa. I was with Ebony

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when you both met,” she said as she tapped him slowly on the chest.

Jackson reached for my hand then responded, “Oh really, I didn’t notice anyone but her at the table. I’m Jackson, very nice to meet you.” He extended his hand out to hers and made it perfectly clear he understood her flirtations, but wasn’t interested.

ShaLisa slowly shook his hand and in a small attempt to save face she answered, “Ah, well it was packed in the club. I am so happy that you are getting her out. She’s been down in the dumps ever since her divorce and all.”

I could have slapped the painted makeup off her face, but instead I interjected, “Look, ShaLisa...”

Jackson quickly interrupted, “I’m sure it is hard to deal with a divorce. I’m just happy that I can be here for her. We all have been down in the dumps at one point or another so there isn’t any need to harp on that. Don’t you agree?”

ShaLisa cut her eyes, “Yes, you are right. Ebony, he sure is a gentleman isn’t he?”

I looked up at Jackson and smiled, “Definitely. I’m very lucky.”

Jackson leaned down and kissed me on the forehead.

ShaLisa stood back, “Okay, well I need to get back to my guests. Make yourselves at home and have fun. I’ll hook up with you two a little later.” She strutted off looking like a wounded puppy.

“What’s up with your friend?” Jackson questioned.

I took a deep sigh and shook my head, “ShaLisa is just ShaLisa. She’s been that way since I met her, but remarkably enough we became really close in college. ShaLisa is a character, but when it comes down to it she is a good person.”

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“With friends like that you don’t need enemies. You know the saying.”

“Yes, I know.”

We had a great time laughing and getting to know each other better. Jackson and I mingled and danced. ShaLisa put in some old school music and everyone started off doing the electric slide. Then *Fly Girl* came on and Jackson and I started cutting up. He busted out with the robot and I joined him. Before I knew it Mona and Edwin were dancing beside us. Edwin was doing his old man dance while Mona let her hair down a little and started doing the bump. We were all laughing and having a ball reliving our own old school memories.

I looked over toward ShaLisa and caught a glimpse of her hoochie-mama moves. After a while things slowed down and my favorite song by Prince began to play, *If I Was Your Girlfriend*. Jackson held me close and it felt good. I closed my eyes and it was like we were the only ones in the room. *Love Me in a Special Way* by DeBarge played after Prince and Jackson held me even closer. He leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Ebony, you are going to make me fall in love with you.”

His words made my heart stutter. Although I wanted to be loved the way I deserved, I was afraid of getting hurt again. In the beginning Garrett made me feel this way, but Jackson was too good to be true. He was damn near flawless. I knew it had to be something to him, but I just hadn’t figured it out yet. It would be great if he was truly as perfect as he seemed, but no one is that good, at least not by my experience. The music was still sounding good however the dance area became less and less crowded. Jackson and Edwin started a conversation about business so I thought it would be a good time for me and Mona to have some girl talk.

We walked outside and sat on one of the patio chairs.

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“Whew, girl I haven’t danced like that in years. At the moment my brain thought it was a good idea, but now my body seems to be thinking otherwise,” Mona said then laughed.

“I know that’s right. Jackson never gets out of energy,” I sighed.

Mona raised her eyebrows and gave me one of her sly looking smirks, “Really. That must mean all is well in the love department.”

“If you are talking about sex, I don’t know yet.”

“I know you’ve only been dating for a couple of weeks, but I just assumed you might have gotten together.”

“Mona, I can’t quite figure this guy out. He is excellent. I can’t say anything bad about him. To be honest wit’cha I just knew he was going to be trying to get some, but he has only kissed me. I told him I wanted to take things slow so I guess that is why he hasn’t made any moves. He spent the night with me last night and didn’t try a thing. Nothing.”

“Well, that’s good right?” Mona questioned.

“Yes, it’s great. Don’t get me wrong I’m loving it, but he seems too good.”

“You just can’t believe it. I understand how you feel. Shoot you thought Garrett was the best thing since sliced bread, but you can’t let your disappointment in him keep you from a genuinely good man. Edwin, bless his heart, has been the same since the first day we met. He was wonderful then and he’s wonderful now. We both have our moments, but I wouldn’t trade my baby in for nothing.”

“I know Mona, it’s just hard. Garrett hurt me really bad and although it’s been a while, it still makes me feel like I have to guard myself more now than ever before.”

“Take it slow and if he’s the one he will be there. Trust me,” Mona paused, looking as if something just caught her attention. “Girl, I haven’t seen you light a

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cancer stick since you've been here. Have you finally taken my advice and kicked that ugly habit?"

I took a deep sigh, "Not exactly. Believe me I'm thinking about smoking at this very moment. I wasn't sure how Jackson would take it so I have resulted in sneaking in a smoke whenever I can when he is around, but it's not too many times he lets me out of his sight."

"Ebony, that is ridiculous. You are so worried about him hiding things from you and you are doing the same thing. If you are not going to quit you need to be honest with him and tell him. All he can say is *I don't like smoke*. It's not like you've never heard that before. Maybe he will be able to persuade you to stop, Lord knows I can't."

"You're right. I shouldn't hide anything from him. We do need to build whatever this is on honesty. I thought about telling him, but I wasn't sure if I should even bother. As long as they make Lysol and breath mints I can manage."

"Okay, you do what you want, but the only way someone is going to be completely honest with you is if you be honest too. At least you will have peace about it and know that you did the right thing."

ShaLisa stumbled out onto the patio and joined us.

"I think I've had a little too much champagne," ShaLisa groaned.

Mona and I looked at one another and didn't say a word.

"Are you girls having a good time? I know I am. All I need now is some seltzer to take away my headache."

"You always get a headache when you drink champagne. I don't even know why you continue drinking it," Mona said in a disgusted tone.

Edwin walked out with two jackets in hand, "Cupcake, are you ready?"

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“Yes, sweetheart,” Mona said in a loving tone. “ShaLisa, I had a great time. Are you going to be okay?” Mona asked.

ShaLisa lay back against the chair and placed one hand over her face, “Yes, sweetie I’ll be fine. Thanks so much for coming I enjoyed you both as usual.”

Jackson walked up and I felt a guilty feeling. I knew I had to tell him about my smoking.

“Baby, you feel like leaving or did you want to stay?” he asked.

I sat there looking at him for a moment before responding, “I’m ready.”

“Nice meeting you, ShaLisa,” Jackson said while holding me close.

ShaLisa barely opened her eyes, “Yeah, nice meeting you too. Thanks so much for coming, Ebony, you know I love you girl.”

“Yes, ShaLisa I know. Good night.”