

KISS OF DESIRE

A Romance Novelette



AMY SPARKS

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PROLOGUE

JEANIE

My heart pounded loudly as I lurked in the supermarket's drug aisle, hoping that no one familiar would spy me and try to say, "Hi!" Several brands of the product I needed were on the shelf. It took me a half hour to choose the right pink box, and discreetly pay for it at the counter.

A million and one thoughts were running through my head. What was I going to do if the test confirmed my worst fears about my symptoms? What would I tell my mother and my pastor father? How would my friends look at me now? There was also Derrick. How would he react?

Especially with his recent change of attitude towards me.

Derrick and I have been going out for more than three years now. In the beginning, I thought we were a match made in heaven. Still, Derrick's recent behavior was miles away from being heavenly. He doesn't call as much as he used to. I never see him anymore, and the few times that I did see him, he was only interested in getting some action from me.

I was already considering leaving him by the end of the year, but now, if the test inside the pink box answers "Yes!" to my big question, we are more likely to be together for the rest of our lives.

"How can I help you miss?" the young man behind the counter asked with a bored expression. I knew he didn't recognize me for sure, because I had taken some necessary precautions.

Earlier this week, when I decided to do this, I knew there was no way I was shopping at my local store. So I cracked open my piggy bank and counted out enough bills for a bus trip. Two towns later, I found the SHANON Store.

"I would like to pay for this," my shyness dulled my voice a little bit, but it was what it was.

"Would that be all?"

"A bottle of water and this bar of chocolate," I pointed to the box in front of him and waited for him to ring it up.

"How do you want to pay?"

"Cash," I answered, handing him the amount displayed on his monitor. "Do you have a restroom?"

"Right at the back," he nodded and gave me the bag. "Take care, miss."

I don't know if it was the look in his eyes or how he said it, but his words brought tears to my eyes. It warmed a place in my stomach and reminded me that maybe, I would be fine. It wouldn't be that bad.

The bathroom wasn't all that. It was a single stall with both a bidet and toilet. I didn't think much of the sanitary conditions and dropped the shopping bag into the sink. I gulped down the water from the bottle and settled on the toilet seat with the instruction leaflet from the pink box. I scanned every word in every step of the process carefully, like woman who had no idea what she was doing.

"The outcome is not going to change by reading the instructions forever," I whispered and pulled out the plastic stick.

The whole process of peeing on the stick took less than five seconds. I didn't have a watch or phone with me. I had foolishly left it to me in case my parents

called. So I laid the stick on the bathroom floor and counted out the ten minutes the leaflet said to wait for.

"500, 501, 502..." the seconds went by with my eyes shut, praying to every deity willing to listen. I didn't want my life to end, didn't want to be derailed, and did not want this to be my reality.

"600," I sighed loudly. I washed up, and got up from the toilet seat. I avoided the stick of doom on the floor and walked to the sink where the rest of the water was. I finished the rest of it and bit into the chocolate bar. When ready, I returned to the floor and picked the stick up.

The two bold lines stared back at me, and it took my brain all of fifteen seconds to register my fate.

I was pregnant.

The rest of the day was a blur. I remember dropping the stick in the trash can and nibbling on the rest of my chocolate before exiting the bathroom stall. I avoided the counter and the cashier's inquisitive eyes as I made my way out of the store. Blinded by confusion, I didn't know where to stop and wait for the next bus. It took me another fifteen minutes to get a bus and an hour to get back home.

"Jeanie?" my mum called from the kitchen as I took the stairs to my room. We were only three living in the house, so she was just being rhetorical. I bet she didn't notice I was gone for the whole day. My parents and I have a toxic relationship, and I have learned to navigate negativity by staying out of their way.

My father owned a church and ran a religious community that was founded long before I was born, just a few years after he married my mother. My mother

worked at the local bank as a cashier, and together, they tried to offer me the best life they could. As a teen, I saw them as my greatest enemy. Now, after reading several books about toxic parents, I see they didn't know any better. In their minds, they felt they were doing the best, and they wanted the best.

As I turned down my duvet, I hoped their twisted form of love stayed latent in the light of my situation.

Speaking of which, I needed a plan.

First, tell Derrick, then decide whether we are keeping it. From there, we decide how we will tell our parents. If we decide to keep the baby, how am I going to care for the baby? I could barely get my hair done in the morning! If we decide otherwise, is Derrick's support enough?

How did I get here? Why did I let this happen to me? A baby would ruin my plans.

I tucked the duvet around me, letting it hug me, and cuddled up on my bed.

What now?

The first drop of many tears to follow spilled into my pillows.

Do I even want to have a baby with Derrick? What kind of father would he be? I definitely want a father better than mine.

I fucked up,

And I fucked up big time.

"You have to be kidding me right now," he screamed at my face. "Are you kidding me?"

"Can you lower your voice? Everyone is watching." I was too stunned to give a proper response. Undoubtedly, Derrick's reaction was one of the many possibilities I considered when I decided to break the news to him. However, some of me hoped there was still kindness to him, and that part was hurting from his outburst.

"I don't care if the whole world can hear me," Derrick continued. "I knew you never cared about me; you have always cared about the status my being with you brought you."

"You know that is not true!" I bit back, my disappointment slowly turning to anger. I had genuinely fallen in love with Derrick Bay from a distance back in junior year. Once he paid sufficient attention to me, it was head over heels at a moment's notice. I didn't know such vileness was hidden behind all the sweetness that drew me in initially. "I will not have you insult me!"

"And I won't sit here and listen to you plot my downfall." Derrick countered. "Do you think you can pull a stunt like this on me? Now? At the peak of my life?"

"It is not a stunt; I took a test," I whined. "And I didn't do this to myself. I also have a life planned; have you stopped thinking about how this affects me too?"

"See, Jeanie," Derrick started after a short while. "I don't know what you want from me, but whatever it is, I can't give it to you. I am not a party to this and don't want to be." He concluded and pushed the metal chair back. "And in case you were too caught up in your plot and didn't catch it, we are done."

My mouth was the only part of me that didn't freeze up; it remained agape as I watched Derrick leave the café. If I thought my world was upside down before, it wasn't. It was completely shattered.

I fucked up, big time.

"Can we get her to join us?" The silky voice flowed into my dreams, interrupting my drive through the desert.

"Not yet," a familiar voice replied. It was my father. Pops seldom had guests visit him at home. He preferred meeting with them at the small vicarage attached to the church. This was one of his few principles I loved- his home was his home while work stayed at work.

"Can we get you anything to drink? Perhaps some juice?"

"No, thank you. We want to state our business and leave."

I struggled to stay asleep, but eavesdropping kept dragging me back from being blissfully unconscious.

"As you well know," I heard a man say. I could also listen to the whole conversation now that I was awake. "We try to raise our children right. We provide for them in every area and hope they thrive worldwide." He continued.

"I have two children, boys. My youngest is in high school now. He is sixteen?"

"Seventeen," the silky voice added.

"At seventeen, I have his career charted. Once he's finished with high school, he is joining his brother at the prestigious University of Edinburgh to fulfill his dream of exploring space."

"You must be really proud," my mother said politely.

"We are." Silky voice, Space boy's mother answered.

"This is why this conversation is hard for us." Space boy's father continued.

"Especially with the amount of respect my family has for yours. You are one of the pillars of this community, doing your bit through your ministry." He sighed.

"A few days back, our son came home in a foul mood. I picked up on it the moment he entered the house, and after much pressing, I found out that he was upset by rumor circulating at his school." Space boy's mother picked up the conversation. "Of course, I think 'rumors are normal among teenagers' and told him to shake it off. His foul moods continued until I coaxed him to confide in me."

"Unfortunately," Space boy's father tented his forefingers, mimicking his wife's calm rational tone. "Your daughter is telling anyone who cares to hear that our son impregnated and asked her to abort it."

"What?!" my mother screamed.

I don't know which came off first, but I next saw myself standing by my room door, ready to bolt if things turned physical. Slowly, everything began to register in my mind.

Derrick's parents were here as Bay and Bay shipping company partners.

My parents knew I was pregnant!

I wanted to disappear. The consequences of my pregnancy were dawning faster than I imagined. Who would have thought Derrick would go even lower and spin lies about me? What did he stand to gain from all this?

"I am sorry, Mrs. Graze." Derrick's mother began. "I don't know why Jeanie would do this. She seems like a pleasant girl. We aren't here to fight her; we just want her to stop. It is okay if she makes a mistake and gets pregnant, she wouldn't be first or the last. What we wouldn't have is her dragging our precious Derrick into her mess."

"This whole matter is upsetting, to be honest." Derrick's father added. "We have decided as a family to have Derrick stay out of town until it blows over and this whole thing is cleared up."

"I am sorry that it has come to this," Mrs. Bay whispered.

"You shouldn't be," I heard my father grunt in response.

CHAPTER ONE

JEANIE

"Why are men great 'til they got to' be great?" I sang along with Lizzo as I pulled up into my driveway.

"I just took a DNA test; I am 100% sure that...." I just had one of the best days at work in a while and was excited to celebrate the good feeling.

My job as a reporter kept me prim and proper most of the time, so I was glad for any opportunity to let loose and enjoy the moment. I knew the importance of choosing happiness; darkness lurks and is willing to pounce at any time.

I got out of my car mid-song, heels in my right hand and bag in the left.

Typically, I am exhausted after work, so I just go home and crash, but as I clicked my door open and stepped into the perfect haven of my apartment, I felt pride.

When the day started, I didn't think it would end this way until my boss called me to his office to discuss an opportunity.

"I don't know if you are familiar with this story, Miss Graze," My boss had asked.

"I am not sure, sir,"

"Well, we generated an investigative report describing how precious artifacts from places like Spain, Rome, and Africa were being transferred to the United States Museum. I had Thomas forward the report to the State Department of Tourism a few weeks back. They were impressed." He had paused. "So impressed that they requested two of our best reporters to cover a week in the

State Department of Tourism life, or something like that - we are still working on the semantics."

"That is huge for us," I said. Our media house, though a good one, could use wider recognition. A report on how the state department is run would put us in the spotlight. "Congratulations, sir!"

"Congratulations back to you, Jeanie." He smiled. "You have had a good year, and you deserve this. I am pairing you with Thomas. Get together and decide how this will go. Give me your feedback by the end of the week,"

"Thank you so much, sir," I replied. This was an exciting career development for me – I was one step closer to owning my own media house. "Has Thomas been briefed?"

"Yes, he has. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Once I left his office, I could barely contain my excitement. I started out writing a small column for an even smaller magazine when I moved to New York and from there expected fully to slide down that slippery slope into obscurity.

Here I was, attached to the freaking State Department!

If only there was someone to share this excitement.

My heart sank to my stomach at the thought of how alone I was in this world.

It would have been more beautiful if I could pick up the phone and call my family to tell them how well I was doing. My mother had sworn to shave the high heels off all my sexy shoes if I stepped into their house. My father only looked at me with cold glacier eyes that conveyed complete contempt. I had taken for granted the kindness of my foster parents and lost my daughter's love.

It's going to be lonely at the top.

I had a few friends from work with whom I spent my weekends. Ever since the betrayal I experienced with Derrick, I haven't created space in my life to meet a new person.

You couldn't blame me for focusing on my career; my parents had deserted me.

As I changed out of my office clothes to slip into a sweat shirt, yoga pants and socks. I wondered if my parents or Derrick ever thought about me. Derrick may have come back years after his cowardly escape from his responsibility to see how much damage he had done. Did he try to fix it? How long did my foster parents look for me? Did they miss the money that I stole?

These questions have plagued me ever since I fled to New York, and several years later I was no closer to answering any of them. However I could vividly recall every minute from the point of departure, to my promotion today.

When the Bays left, I hid in my bathroom, hoping for a miracle that never came. Eventually I emerged to find my mother sitting on my bed and my father standing by the door.

"Jeanie Esther," my father had begun, addressing me by my full legal name.

"Did you hear our conversation with the Bays?" There was no denying the obvious, so I nodded "yes" in response.

"Which part of it is a lie?" my mother had asked. Her perfect curls sat on her head in the usual pristine manner of Chloe Graze.

"I... I..."

"You what?" my father asked, entering the room fully. "Did you tell people Derrick got you pregnant? Are you pregnant? Is it Derrick's?"

"Answer your father, child."

"I didn't tell people Derrick got me pregnant. I only told him." I answered what I thought was the least problematic question.

"Are you pregnant?" My father pointed his forefinger to the floorboards; straight to hell is where I was going.

"I don't know, but I took a test, and it came back positive."

"You don't know, but your test came back positive. That is brilliant. I haven't heard that one before." My father responded with a chilly smile. "Is this how you plan to ruin your life? If your goal is to amount to nothing, after all we have done for you, do you have to drag our reputation down with you? And let's not forget the innocent boy you are implicating!"

"I am not implicating him; he is the only one I have been with!" I had fought for the last tiny shred of dignity left to me.

"Or he is the only one you are willing to tell us about." My mother countered.

"And, of course, you will decide to name him the father, seeing the wealth that comes with the Bay's last name, right?"

"No!" hot tears ran down my face. My mother was choosing the words of strangers over mine, and she was wrong. "I didn't do anything!" I tried again with a broken voice. "I..."

"Save your tears, young lady," my father said. "Tomorrow, we will visit a doctor, and once he confirms you are pregnant, there are no two ways about it. I didn't raise you in my father's house, and you would not raise your bastard child in mine." He concluded his remarks by leaving the room.

"You are kicking me out!" I screamed after him; my ears had to be deceiving me. I had expected that my parents would have been angry at the news of me getting pregnant, but I didn't for once think they would kick me out. I have seen

my father house stray children in the vicarage under his church, but he was kicking me out?!

"Mum?"

"You did this to yourself, Jeanie. You only have yourself to blame," With that, she got up from the bed and followed in her husband's footsteps by leaving the room.

I remember crumpling in a heap on the floor and sobbing my heart out for I was a true motherless child. I was angry at Derrick, his stupid filthy rich parents that indulged their precious man-child and at myself for falling for a dickhead. But that anger did not compare to the heartbreak and rage the heartbreak and rage of having my parents turn their backs on me.

Whenever I thought of my hometown, the pain of being shamed and shunned resurfaced. Everyone turned their backs on me: friends, family, and even strangers. No one was willing to listen to me. No one believed me.

Well, except Katy and Moses.

The Pratts had looked at me, crying with nowhere to go, clutching my small duffle bag and asked if I needed a drink of water. They had given me water, food, shelter, and support: the things that one would expect from birth parents. Katy and Moses were, in a sense, my real parents, but I still did something terrible to them.

I will forever be grateful for the kindness they showed for the whole year I stayed with them. Katy never raised her voice at me, and Moses drove me everywhere. They both deserved rewards greater than I could ever give them. There was so much I wished I could do to thank them, but the shame of running away kept me from them, and slowly months became years, and it seemed too late to turn back.

My home assistant pinged quietly, steering me away from memory lane and onto a better path. I glanced at the wall clock to see if it was time for my evening walk. The walks kept my dark thoughts at bay; they helped me function optimally without dwelling on the past.

I got off of the couch I was lounging on and pulled on the joggers I got for Christmas from Rita, my assistant at work.

I was grateful for many things, and walks were one of them. It reminded me of the life I used to have and the long stretch of promising years in my future.

I have successfully made a life for myself with my work, humble but customized apartment, and a few friends. When I left home, I didn't know where I would end up, but I knew I would prove to my parents that I wasn't a failure. I was going to become bigger than the shame they tried to name with, and in the end, they would lie prostrate and plead with me to let them back into my life.

I didn't want them back in my life; I wanted them to know that they were wrong and that the key to success didn't lie in their palm.

Honestly, I would have completely blocked out my past but I couldn't ignore my daughter's existence. It didn't matter how many years have passed, almost a decade now. I have a daughter, and I would one day want her to know me. Even though I trusted the Pratts to look after her, I would have loved to raise her myself. Teach her to avoid men like Derrick and show her that love means more than a roof over her head and food on her table.

Sometime in the future, I could find a way to right all these wrongs. I could only hope it wasn't too late.

JASON

"You know that all the love you need and would ever need is right here," I said, wrapping my baby girl in my arms. "Every other person doesn't matter, Ava."

We were sitting on the lounge chair by the backyard pool of our dreamy flat. I loved the design of our home and the aura around it. It helped me raise my kids, Ava, and Bruce, in a proper healthy space.

It was difficult at first, raising two young children without the typical family dynamics. When Bruce's mother left him with me in the first month of his birth, I was so lost. I had no idea how I would raise an infant alone without the mother's care.

"But Wendy said, his mum said that my mum left, and she didn't love me," Ava sniffled.

Ava joined our little family a little later after Katy died. I loved my kids so much, and I would go all out for them. This included me having a chat with Wendy's mum about gossiping in her son's presence. I wouldn't stand for her ruining my daughter's outlook on life. I knew that living with just a dad and no mum was confusing enough.

"That is a hurtful thing to say, and I am so sorry that he didn't know better," I said, rubbing her forearm to comfort her. "Your mum isn't with us now, but I promise you she didn't leave because she didn't love you. She loved you so very much."

"Okay,"

"Are we good?" I asked, pulling some damp strands of hair away from her face. Ava nodded and snuggled up even closer.

The story around Ava's birth and how she came to join my family was tricky. I would have loved it if the community people kept their mouths shut until the

time was right, and she was old enough to understand everything. It wasn't like I knew all the details; what Katy had told me was what I knew.

I met the Pratts back at my old job as a health assistant. They had come in for a routine check-up at the doctor's, and I could feel the amount of love they shared just by observing them. Our relationship grew as the years rolled by, and the Pratts came in more often. Katy would bake a jar of cookies "just because" and bring them to me. After I adopted Bruce, she would come over and give me tips on taking care of a toddler.

Moses would invite me on his monthly fishing trips, most of which I declined, but he still invited me. When I had Bruce, they were there through the whole drama and were pivotal in my success in raising him.

I met Ava around this time as well. Katy had introduced her to me as the daughter of her distant cousin back in Australia. It was odd that such a young child was Katy's niece, but I didn't think much of it. Over time, Katy made Ava spend more time with Bruce encouraging the two toddlers to bond in any way possible.

Sadly, about two years after I met this wonderful couple, Moses fell terribly ill, eventually passing away from the sickness. His death broke Katy's spirit, and I knew she wouldn't last long. They were each other's world. There was no denying that. I made it a point, though, to spend as much time as possible with her. I would drop Bruce off with her during the weekends while I went work and invite her out when she felt up to it.

It was, therefore, not weird when she called me out on a date that fateful day. Katy had taken me to a flower shop out of town. We spent most of our time there admiring the shop's different blossoms. Katy then spoke about the meanings of different flowers and how best to arrange them. She had managed

the flower arrangements at her husband's funeral, and she told me she hoped someone put as much thought into hers as she did his.

"Enough about the flowers," she had said, leading us to one of the empty tables in the shop. "I have known you for all three years now, Jason. I see how you put your all into raising Bruce and even your willingness to help with little Ava." She began. "Mo and I decided that what I am about to tell you stays between us, but Mo isn't here anymore, and I won't be here forever."

"Kate?" I asked with a puzzled look. Due to the nature of my job, I have been around enough old people to know what a dying wish sounded like. "What are you planning?"

"I am not planning anything," She chuckled. "I just feel like passing this to you so I would be content when the time eventually comes for me to join my Mo."

"I don't remember how I described my relationship with Ava to you because the story is different for different people. But I am certain I haven't told anyone the truth." Katy continued. "Five years ago, Mo and I were coming back from one of his games. He was driving, and I was nodding off to a slow song on the radio. Suddenly, Mo hit the brakes and put the truck into 'park.' I was confused- long short, a young girl was dragging a duffle bag behind her on the lonely road." She paused with a short sigh. "Mo got out of the truck, and the girl turned out to be one of the teenagers in town. We asked her to join us in the truck for water-something to get her off the road that late at night."

"We got her off the road, took her home, and ensured she was comfortable. We were patient with her and waited until she was ready to tell us what was wrong. Apparently, her parents - I won't disclose their identity, kicked her out because they found out she was pregnant. We were devastated because knowing her parents were kind, we didn't expect them to throw her out for making a mistake."

"We offered her shelter for as long as she wanted. We promised to look after her through the pregnancy and help her chart her life after she delivered the baby. She took us up on our offer, and when the time came, she had Ava. Sadly, she didn't stay for too long after that."

"So Ava is not related to you?"

"No, she isn't- or rather not by blood. But she is as much as my daughter as her mother was and as much as a daughter from my uterus would have been." Katy replied. "I hope to the highest heavens that wherever she is, she is making headway. I hope she is killing it because I tell you, Jason, the only way to beat fate is to beat the odds and survive."

"You are right, Katy. Every day above ground is a blessing."

"You might be wondering why I am sharing this with you," Katy said after a short pause. "It is because I need you to help me," she signaled to one of the staff members and ordered a cup of tea.

"Would you like some spice tea as well?"

"No, I would take water instead," I answered. "Thank you."

"Death is so sudden." Katy began again. "Neither of us thought Mo would die at first. If something knocked you down, you got back up. But this time, he didn't. What is even sadder is that it could have been anybody. It could have been little Ava or me. Death is so sudden and part of life. And life is unfair." She continued. "I can't die if little Ava isn't well cared for; do you understand me, Jason?"

"I think I do," I answered sombrely.

"If anything happens to me and I cannot take care of her, I want you to decide how her future will go. You could enter her into the system or find her mother- I don't care about the specifics. All Mo and I ever wanted were for Ava to have

stability and love. We want her to grow up with all the right resources. I want her to be happy."

"I understand." I suddenly felt the weight of the responsibility that Katy was handing me, while at the same time realizing that it was a gift. Still, I knew I couldn't let Katy down, not after all she had done for me.

"When we get back home, I will show you some documents in Mo's safe; they should help you transition properly."

"I promise to do my best,"

"That is all I ask from you,"

Three months later, Katy died in her sleep.

Deciding what to do with Ava was easier than I thought. She was too young for a foster home, and since Katy didn't give me any names from her ancestry, I wasn't going on a wild goose chase of looking for her mother. If the birth mother wasn't looking back, there was no point chasing her with a child. The solution selected itself, and Ava moved in with me.

Ava and Bruce became the bane of my world, and I would not change this life for anything. They were practically joined at the hip with just a year between them. They were in the same grade and loved the same kinds of food, games, toys, and even clothes. Bruce took care of Ava like an older brother would, while Ava deferred to him most times. Their personalities also complemented each other. No one looking from the outside would easily tell that they were missing mothers or weren't siblings.

However, recently rumors about Ava's mum have been flying around town. Some people have seen her in town at her parents' house. And as much as I tried to shield my babies from the world, words traveled, and it wouldn't be long until

someone said something that would stick, something I wouldn't be able to explain away, like Wendy's jabs.

"Hey, Coco pops," I gently nudged Ava awake from the short nap she was already catching on my lap.

"Yes, Dada," she replied with a soft yawn.

"How about you continue your nap in your room? I would wake you in time for Iron Chef."

"Okay," she nodded and skipped off to her room. Bruce was already passed out in his room after a long day at his new hobby, baseball. I knew that soon, Ava will also pick up a baseball bat and decide she wants to play too.

They were that predictable, and I loved them for it.

I hoped deep down that nothing would upset the balance of our family.

Nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWO

JEANIE

I was in the kitchen stirring a sauce pot when the front doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anybody, and not many strangers came around the estate. My apartment was one of the private buildings in where everyone kept to themselves. I hadn't seen my neighbor in more than a month, and this didn't bother either of us.

"Coming," I called out of habit.

Whoever is outside the door wouldn't hear my response from the kitchen anyway. As soon as I got to the door, I peeked out of the peephole, and there was no one there. Then the bell rang again. I pulled open the door to find a little girl of not more than eight on my front porch.

Her black curls were held together in two cute buns, which complimented her brown skin and large blue eyes. She had on a tight denim shorts and a loose tank top.

"Good afternoon, miss," she chirped.

"Good afternoon. How can I help you?" I asked, stepping out of the doorway to join her on the porch.

"My name is Leslie. I live down the lane."

"Hi, Leslie. How can I help you?" I asked again, suddenly remembering that I hadn't turned down the sauce's heat.

"I am in the girls' scout at school, and we were asked to collect stars from our neighbors."

“What stars?” I didn’t want to sound impatient, but my sauce was going to over-reduce if I didn’t get to it soon.

“Well, it goes into our star jars, and the most stars get a reward,” Leslie replied with pride. I guessed she had won the reward a few times and was reminiscing about the good old days.

“Okay, Leslie. What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to fill out this pamphlet and add your signature.”

“Is that all?” I took the sheet and pen she offered and began to fill in the blank spaces. “Where are your parents? Shouldn’t they be helping you with this?” The question came out of my mouth before I could think much of it.

“It is just my dad, and he is at work,” Leslie answered. “I have his permission, but he says I should not go outside our avenue.”

“That is good advice, Leslie.”

“Thank you, miss.” She gave me a sweet look.

On second thought, my curiosity struck a nerve. What does my daughter say when she is asked about me?

“Here, I am done.” I handed the sheet back to her. “Wait one moment,” I added and dashed back into the house. I had had some leftover brownies that I had baked earlier that week. I wrapped a couple in a paper towel and packed them in one of my recyclable Tupperware containers.

When I got back out, Leslie was tucking the sheet into her backpack. “Here you go, Leslie.” I gave her the plate. “I hope you get enough stars to fill your jar.”

“Thanks, ma’am,” and then she left the porch. Once she reached the sidewalk she waved and screamed: “What’s your name?”

“Jeanie,” I answered with a chuckle. “My name is Jeanie,”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Jeanie,”

“Take care, Leslie.

The wet grass of the park grazed my ankles as I crossed the field to my favorite spot in the estate park. I chose to buy my apartment here on this estate for many reasons, but one was that it was situated in a forest. When I could finally afford to move out of my apartment in the suburbs, I searched a serene place that allowed me to enjoy the youth I had missed.

I had coincidentally fallen in love with night walks and meditation around that time, so when my agent gave me a tour of the estate, I was sold.

With this park within walking distance, I had no excuse to skip my daily strolls. Thankfully, the lone seat that I favored at the park was empty, and I plunked down into it. I needed peace and quiet.

After a while of sitting and just existing, I made the effort to get up and complete the rest of my walk. I was gathering myself when a dramatic scene unfolded before me a short distance away. A young lady was scolding her daughter. I wondered what she was correcting her for. She was probably right to stop the child from having her way, but I knew from experience that mothers weren't always right. Mothers could be caring and vicious at the same time. They could turn on you with the same breath they used to profess to be your mum.

It then dawned on me that all of my random thoughts circled around my parents or my daughter. I try to keep these thoughts at bay, because they are more intense than I can handle. When I think about my daughter, I don't even know

her name; I miss what could have been. Over the years, I have met several single mothers whose relationship with their daughters made me wonder if I would have succeeded in raising her alone. I ask myself if I should have taken her with me that afternoon. It would have been difficult, I wasn't deluded, but maybe I could have made it work somehow.

I should have removed her from the same community that turned its back on me and shielded her from any awful tale about where she came from. There were many things I wish I could redo with regards to my pregnancy, starting with choosing to tell Derrick. In hindsight, I should have told my parents first and allowed them to handle the situation. They would have thrown me out, but at least they would have heard the truth from me. Derrick and his parents wouldn't have made me out to be the villain, and I wouldn't have felt so ashamed.

Hindsight is a luxury anyways. I would have turned out even worse if I had done things differently- who knew? Is there a way to right the wrong?

I could go look for my daughter and tell her the truth. She should be ten now, barely old enough to understand, but she would still. I have been absent all her life, and it would definitely take some effort and time to get her to accept me. That is, if she didn't belong to another parent now.

It has been ten years, and I didn't think the Pratts could hold on to her for that long. They would have probably sent her to a relative or back into the system. It was the kind of thing Katy would do "for balance." In the one year I stayed with her, she planned out my entire future- college, husband, and happiness. So I was certain my child's life was going according to her plans. Katy was a good woman; if I could also track them down, I would give them my heart in gratitude.

I didn't particularly appreciate how my evening stroll turned out. It was supposed to help me feel better; I felt worse. I was obsessing. I felt like shit.

And the only thing that could comfort me was some alcohol-encouraged sleep on my soft and squishy bed.

I needed my bed.

I stood at the counter of the moderately sized motel and waited for the front desk guy to hand me my keycard. The man didn't look anything like a local. He had long golden locks, and tattoos on his lower arm. The people of this town were the most conservative people I knew. If you lived in town, it meant you didn't have tattoos or piercings or a teen pregnancy spawned by a son from a prominent family in town.

"Here you go, ma'am," he turned towards me, and I caught his name on his name tag: Tobe.

"Thank you, Tobe,"

"It is not To-be. It is Tobe,"

"Tobe?" I tried again.

"You will get it eventually."

"What does it mean?"

"My father is Nigerian; Igbo-Tobe is a short form of Tobechukwu. It means we need to start praising God."

"That is a strong name. It is a mouth full, though," I chuckled. Africans had a way with names that was fascinating. And interestingly, all their names had a meaning and were well thought out. Jeanie seems to pale in the light of a name like Tobechukwu. "See you around, Tobe." I was careful to replicate the stress in the pronunciation.

"Of course, ma'am, enjoy your stay."

I pulled my Louis Vuitton suit case with me towards the elevator. This motel was everything their website said, and I hoped they wouldn't disappoint me in

the long run. My room, 322, was on the second floor, and before I knew it, the elevator dinged open.

I had decided about a month ago, when the thoughts about my past didn't wane, that I would come back here. At the very least, look for my Katy and Moses. If the universe willed it, I could reunite with my daughter and maybe see if the years have given my parents' a fresh perspective. I was counting on my absence to have fixed everyone's notion of me. I wanted to find my child and explain everything to her. Maybe she would be willing to go with me, and we could finally have that mother-daughter relationship.

A part of me feared that my presence would upset her life balance, but although it would hurt to have her turn her back on me, I would try to respect her choice. She would at least hear the truth and know that I was ready to make amends.

With a grateful sigh, I turned on the lights in my room. I loved the color palette of the hotel decor. It was a mixture of beige and solid chocolate. There were also a few browns and whites- I loved it already. There was a living space with two couches, a TV station, and a bookshelf.

I proceeded to explore a cute kitchen area. A neatly made queen bed sat on a dark brown wooden frame at the farther end of the room. The pillows looked like clouds, and I was tempted to kick my boots off and sink into them.

"Delayed gratification, baby," I whispered and pulled the adjoining door to enter the bathroom. There was an oval bathtub in the center, a shower stall closer to the walls, and a high vanity. Overall, the room was a good one, and I was glad because I paid good money for it, and money wasn't easy to come by.

My boss had been hesitant to grant me a three-month leave from work, especially with the task I was working on with Thomas. Still, I had promised to work remotely since the actual footwork was done. I would miss going into that

monstrous building and sitting in my large plush chair, pulling strings to create beauty. But I had to do what I had to do.

I hung up my suits and skirts and arranged my high heels in the closet. I then unpacked my tape recorder and laptop and set up my hotel suite office. But mostly, I wanted to look professional and successful in the eyes of my family.

The plan was simple, find Katy and Moses, locate my daughter, and avoid every other person. As much as I would like to believe, it would not hurt to listen to the rumors about Derrick and I. I would rather not experience it. I didn't want any of the people who remained in this town to have an opinion about me- I didn't want to be the topic of their gossip.

So while finding my daughter is the main goal, staying out every other person's way is up there on my list of Things To Do.

Add to that a soak in the tub and a long nap.

It has been three days since I flew into town, and so far, Tobe is the only other human I see. When the cleaning crew comes in the morning, I make sure to leave before them and go for a run. Tobe recommended a delivery service to get me groceries and other stuff I was missing so I wouldn't have to go to the mall. My stay at this luxury hotel has been peachy so far. After my run in the early mornings, I make breakfast, catch the morning news at eight and settle down to work at nine. Once I wrap up my job for the day, I either pick a book to read from one of the shelves in the lobby, or catch a show on TV.

It would have been a perfect vacation if I didn't have such a monumental potentially traumatizing task to fulfill on this trip.

It was time, though, to start my search. I didn't know where to begin, but I was hoping to pose as a news reporter and pose questions to some of the locals. So I dressed in a boring blouse, a silk skirt, and a pair of white sneakers to give me that hungry-for-a-story look. I braided my hair down into a crown and wore non-prescription clear spectacles. I clicked a plastic name tag on my blouse and carried a small bag, made by a fake designer.

I gave myself one final look in the mirror, and I hoped to God that I had been able to conceal my identity.

"You look different," Tobe commented as soon as I entered the reception. "Is there a role-play party happening somewhere? Wait, it is a Tuesday, and only a few parties are happening here. What are you up to, Jeanie?"

"I am going undercover, Tobechukwu,"

"To-be-chu-ku, not whatever it is you just said. And I think you should start with Tobe."

"What can I say? I am ambitious."

"I see," he responded with a short laugh. "Have fun with whatever you are doing today,"

"Thank you."

The ride I ordered was already idling in the driveway, so I didn't waste any more time getting to the local farmer's market to interview the locals. It was my plan to pursue the fake story of 'Indigenous Food Production in a Close-Knit Community.'

When I arrived at my destination. I avoided the familiar stalls and approached the newer vendors. The first person I spoke to owned a fish stall. He told me how cold weather and sudden heat waves were affecting the anglers on the sea. He complained about climate change. I then moved quickly to another stall, beginning my real mission.

“Before now, I presume things were better at the fruit farms,” I asked the kind woman who offered me a seat and an organic apple.

“Well, as the years progress, fruit farms get worse. There is no improvement, and we strive to get by.”

“That’s sad to hear. How do you meet demand, then? Local farms such as yours, such as Pratt’s Pride used to represent about 50% of the local production of some common fruits.”

“Pratt’s Pride?” She shrugged.” It’s been almost a decade since that place closed down. Other smaller farms tried to survive too, but couldn’t.”

“Really? Tell me more about the demise of Pratt’s Pride.”

“Well, I don’t know much. I opened my stall towards the end of Pride’s business. I knew Katy, though; she was the warmest soul in town; God rest her soul.”

“She’s dead?” I tried to keep the shock out of my voice.

“Yes, she died shortly after her husband did. There was no way either one could have existed without the other. They were so in love.”

“That is really sad,” I said after a pause. “You mentioned smaller farms. Why didn’t they thrive?”

“There is a whole bunch of reasons.” I tuned out her explanation, which was lengthy and somewhat repetitive, detailing every reason a fruit stand could close, buying myself time to process this new information.

If the Pratts were dead, then I just hit a dead end.

Finally, the woman finished listing all the fruit companies in her area and what year they closed, and I thanked her for her time. I even bought a bag of mixed nuts from her “just because.” Katy was a “just because” person, and I wanted to take after her.

There was nothing else for me to do, but go back to the motel. It didn’t take too long for my phone to ping a notification that my cab had arrived.

As I was exiting the market, almost outside, my eyes caught the side profile of a familiar face. My breath hitched in my throat, and I waited for her to turn around so I could tell myself I was wrong. Slowly, the woman turned, and I wasn’t.

It was my mother. Her hair looked thinner with gray highlights. Her forehead spotted a few wrinkles, and she walked with a slight hunch. The years haven’t been that kind to her, or maybe she aged this poorly because she felt guilty about me.

I kept staring at her, spellbound and unmoving, until her eyes caught mine. I pulled off my glasses and maintained eye contact for a few seconds. From where I stood, I could see that she recognized me. That recognition quickly turned to contempt, and my heart broke once again. She saw me, knew it was me, but she wasn’t sorry.

The same darkness and hatred that made her and my father throw me out several years ago still festered in their souls; maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was unrealistic to think that you could fix the past.

CHAPTER THREE

JEANIE

Another full day passed before I was mentally ready to resume my search. When I got back from the market, I was beyond devastated. If my own mother could remain hostile for more than ten years, what should I expect from other community members? It was nerve-racking to think that no one had any empathy for me. Derrick was the villain, but somehow, I was the only one suffering the consequences.

I couldn't sulk forever, so I decided to chit-chat with Tobe when he came in for his shift at the front desk. I already asked to be informed once he arrived. My mind tried to focus on the cooking show on the TV, but I was nervous about my stay. If it wasn't cowardice, I would pack my bags and leave town. When the universe wills it, I will meet my daughter without all this emotional pain holding me back.

About an hour into my 'TV time, the intercom sitting on the TV shelf rang twice, and I rushed to answer it. It was Tobe asking if it was okay to come up. I agreed- privacy was my best friend at this point. Shortly after, I let him in.

"Hello, Jeanie," he greeted me merrily. "How was your day? I love how you have made our suite your own- the flowers are a good touch."

"Thank you, Tobe," I responded. "Please have a seat. What can I offer you?"

"Technically, I am not supposed to take anything from our residents," he said as he settled into one of the sofas. "But you pronounce my name better than my European cousins, so you are technically family."

“Indeed,” I chuckled. Tobe had a way with words and an aura that dispelled any tension. Maybe that was what made him so great at his job.

“If you have some cookies and warm milk, I would take that as lunch.”

“Isn’t warm milk like a sedative?” I said as I left to get him the snacks.

“Leave the details to me,” he answered with a mischievous smile.

“I don’t want to take too much of your time- I would hate to get you into trouble,” I balanced a plate and a glass to take to the coffee table.

“You are trouble, aren’t you, Jeanie?”

“I try not to be,” I smiled.

“What do you need from me then?” Tobe asked.

“The other day, I was at the farmers’ market, and one of the fruit stall owners was telling me about Pratt’s Pride and the decline of their business.”

“Oh, sad stuff,” Tobe shook his head and removed several cookies. He was in luck, as that was the last box I owned. “The Pratts were a big part of our community, and with no one to carry on after them, the farm died with them.”

“It is sad, but this is more common than we would like to admit. There are a lot of corporations back in New York that suffered the same fate.” I chipped in.

“Well, it is what it is.”

“Hypothetically, if I found someone to invest in the farm and hypothetically, if they agreed to put a local in charge, how do you think the people here will take it?”

“Hypothetically?” Tobe raised his right brow like he was onto me. “Well, I don’t care much for the town folks here. I mean, I am a walking oddity. However, if this hypothetical investor maintained the same values Katy and

Moses embodied in their services, it would be a great honor. I think they would have loved that very much.” He paused to catch his breath. “I don’t know any businessman who would want to invest in a business that has been cold for more than five years.” He shrugged and gulped down the rest of the milk in the glass.

“You never can tell,” I said and waited for the moment to pass before moving to the next part of my questioning. “Who would I speak to? In the slim chance that my hypothesis works ...”

“The Pratts didn’t have any children that we know of. I think their attorneys handled their estate, so they would probably be in the best position to deal with that.”

“That’s a shame.”

“It is,” Tobe concluded and got out of his seat. “I should get back. I hope, hypothetically, you can figure it out.”

“Thanks, Tobe,” I replied, smiling, and watched the young lad leave the room. He was at the door when he turned suddenly with wide eyes. “Are you okay?”

“I just remembered. There is this man Katy used to babysit for, and towards the end, they got really close. He might have some information.”

“Really, where can I find him?” I couldn’t hide the excitement in my voice.

“Think his house is on Kent Avenue. His name is Jason,”

“Jason,” I repeated.

“Good luck, Jeanie.” With that, Tobe finally left the room.

I was super pleased that I had finally made a little progress. It was already late in the afternoon. Else, I would have gone looking for him. If this Jason worked, he should be at work now, and an evening visit seemed like a bad idea. First

thing in the morning, I was going to look for Jason, the next rung in my search ladder.

JASON

“Bruce!” I yelled for my pigheaded son from the kitchen where I was packing his and his sister’s lunch. “If you don’t get down here this moment, I will make you spend 45 extra minutes in the library!” I hated yelling at my kids. I read somewhere that kids who are yelled at eventually become loud adults, and I hated loud people.

“Dada,” Ava called. She was sitting on the kitchen island with her bowl of cereal. “Can I have more nuts?”

“Of course, my darling,” I scooped a spoonful of mixed nuts and added it to her bowl. “Is that enough?” she nodded with a smile.

“Dada, yelling is bad,” Bruce grumbled, finally coming down the stairs.

“So is stealing extra minutes of your morning to read comic books. Good morning.” I countered. I swear to God, Bruce had the attitude of a teenager and he was not even in his preteens.

“Good morning, Dada. Hey Ava,”

“Hey, Bruce,”

“Want some cereal?” I asked him.

“Yes, without Ava’s nuts, please. Don’t mix it up again.”

“That happened one time,” I grumbled.

A few years back, Ava began to favor nuts, and she would ask to put them in about anything. On this fateful day, I had added nuts to the kids’ food bowl, thinking nothing of Bruce’s allergies, and we ended up spending a day in the ER. The doctor had told him to always remind me of his allergies if he didn’t want the shots that made him cry. To date, Bruce called nuts Ava’s nuts’ and asked that I didn’t give them to him.

“Special people eat nuts,” Ava added.

“Eating nuts doesn’t make you special, Ava,” Bruce answered, sitting down to eat his breakfast. “Everyone else eats nuts.”

“It does too!” Ava protested. “Dada says it does!”

“Not everyone gets sick from eating nuts; that is special.”

“Not as special as eating nuts.”

I was going to cut them short, but they were saved by a knock on the door. I leave them to it to answer the door.

“Good morning, I am looking for Jason,” said the young woman standing on my doorstep.

For a moment, my brain froze, and I couldn’t form words. The woman’s blue eyes shone brightly and spoke of depths I was willing to dive into. She had luscious short black hair that framed her round face. Her facial features sat on the said face with godlike precision- straight nose, full lips, and chiseled eyebrows; and have I mentioned the deepest blue eyes I have ever seen. I was too entranced by her face to register the softness that characterized the rest of her mid-height physique. Only God knows how long I stared, but as soon as I caught myself, I cleared my throat and said, “Good morning, ma’am.”

“Yeah, good morning,” she greeted again. “Are you Jason? A neighbor said this was his house.”

“Yes, I am Jason. How can I help you this morning?”

“I was told you are the one to speak to if I needed to know more about Katy and Moses Pratt.”

“It depends on who is asking,” I replied, giving her a pointed look.

“My name is Jeanie, I am from New York, but Katy and Moses were sort of my family.”

“The Pratts didn’t have any family,” I responded with hackles raised. In all the years since Katy’s death, no single person had come around to look for her.

“Yeah, I know that.” Jeanie nodded. “They fostered me some years back for a short while,” she looked helluva’ nervous, and deep down, even though I didn’t want to acknowledge it, I knew she was the young child Katy told me about.

I just knew it in my guts, but I could be wrong.

“That’s good to know, but I don’t know you, and to be fair, I didn’t discuss family with Katy while she was here. I am sorry I can’t help you.”

“But I was told Katy told you everything- you were like a son to her!” Jeanie’s voice rose a pitch with frustration, but I could care less. If she was who I think she was, then she had no place here.

“I am sorry....” I began to say when Ava and Bruce ran through the door with their backpacks and lunchboxes.

“You are taking too long, Dada; the bus will be here soon,” Ava said, looking up at me with her blue eyes.

Blue eyes similar to Jeanie’s,

“Who is this?” Bruce asked.

“She was just asking for directions.”

“Hi, young man,” Jeanie greeted. “And you too, young lady.”

“Hi,” Bruce gave a short wave.

“Hello,” Ava said and turned to me. “Can I have my hair in that style?” she asked in a poor attempt to whisper, pointing at Jeanie.

“How about we discuss that when you get back from school,” I answered, and thankfully, the bus pulled up in front of the house. “Have a nice day, my darlings. I love you both.” I said, squatting to their height. “And it doesn’t matter if you eat nuts or not. You are both the most special people in the world.” I then kissed their forehead and sent them into the bus.

“Ma’am? Jeanie?” she was staring at the kids leave with a longing look. “I am sorry, I can’t help you.” I stood in front of her, blocking her view.

“But you can!” she cried and turned to face me.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“That is my daughter, and you can’t keep her from me.” She answered.

“Can I not?”

“I didn’t come here to make trouble. I need another chance,”

“Sometimes, we only get one shot, and once you miss it, there is no going back,” I answered. “You didn’t want to be here anyways.”

“What?!” Those bright eyes darkened with pain, but I couldn’t see past the threat that her presence posed to the balance of my family.

“Just leave. We don’t want you here,” I finished and entered the house. She could stay on that porch for the rest of the day, but my mind was made up. Jeanie had no place in my daughter’s life and that was final.

No second chances!

JEANIE

“I am only here out of respect for Katy and Moses, so please make this quick. I am at work.” Jason said as he took a seat on the bench. His tone was tinged with a hint of contempt.

After he slammed his door in my face, I returned to my lodgings with no game plan. I was numb, I knew there was no way I could lay claims to my daughter if Jason wasn’t willing to permit it. If I decided to go the legal route, we could remain in court for years, increasing the chance of my child hating me. I also didn’t know if Pratt had legally binding agreement when it came to custody.

There was no better obvious choice than to appeal to Jason and get him on my side. So I got more information from unsuspecting Tobe under the guise of obtaining Pratt Pride from Jason. He told me Jason worked at the hospital and I could catch him there all day if I didn’t manage to meet him at his house.

“I,” I didn’t know how to begin. “What’s her name?”

“You didn’t even look back to find that out, at least,” Jason rolled his eyes with indignation. It was obvious that he hated me and my choices. “How unfeeling can you be?”

“It is not even like that,” I countered. “You can’t judge me off what you’ve heard? You weren’t here. You didn’t live my life, so please don’t judge my decisions.”

“Right, Miss Jeanie. I am afraid that would not cut it, though. Nothing changes the fact that you left; you dumped your newborn on strangers and left. Oh, and that don’t get me started on how you ran away because you couldn’t take responsibility for your mistakes.”

“I will not have you speak to me like that, Jason.” My anger was roaring; the man was pushing it. “How was I to take responsibility when I was the victim. I was a child, and Derrick turned the whole community against me when he couldn’t deal with the consequences of our relationship.”

“Derrick?”

“My daughter’s father is Derrick Bay,” I answered. “I was in my penultimate while he was in his senior year. We were only together for that year- it wasn’t a pleasant relationship, but I was with Derrick Bay. I couldn’t complain. The sex was bland and riddled with guilt because it was against what my mum had taught me. I found out I was pregnant when I thought I would leave the boy.”

My mouth ran with the story. “I didn’t know what to do, so I told my boyfriend, who, instead of supporting me, accused me of ruining his life. He informed his parents- I am not sure if he told them the truth and they decided to make me the villain, or he did that all by himself. Before I could figure my life out, my parents threw me out because I wasn’t going to smear their ministry with my loose self.”

“I am sorry, that’s awful,” Jason started, but I didn’t let him finish.

“No, you wanted to know why I left my child in the hands of strangers, and you are going to hear it.” I drew in a large breath. “Katy and Moses found me, cared

for my child and me before and after my pregnancy, but I couldn't leech on them forever. I knew I couldn't stay here. I couldn't raise my child here amid these vile people. So I left," I paused again. This was the first time I was admitting my reality out loud. It felt liberating.

"I left Jason. I left. I hoped Katy would send my child to a kind home away from here so she could grow up in a saner environment. I didn't leave because I was running away from my responsibility. I left because I was running from the responsibility of being the villain when I was the victim in reality."

"You were right; I shouldn't have judged you harshly. I acted based on the half-truths of the gossip mills." Jason tried again. This time I let him speak. "I am sorry. I am sorry that you had to experience that."

"It wasn't your fault. If there was anyone I blamed, it was Derrick Bay."

"Is this the same Derrick of the Bay Constructions, their last son?"

"The one and only," I answered.

"Well, he didn't turn as good as someone should with that kind of bright future; he has been to prison at least three times in the last decade. His parents spoiled him." Jason continued. "I don't think you would want someone like that as a father."

"Well," I shrugged. "I don't blame him anymore, though. I blame my parents for everything- they listened to the Bays that night and decided on the spot that they didn't want to be associated with me."

"No one should ever experience that kind of heartbreak," Jason added.

"Yeah,"

"I have to get back now," Jason said after a brief silence. He stood up. "We should talk more soon; where can I find you?" he asked.

“I am at Hubris Hub,” I answered. “Thank you, Jason,” I got up and pulled my jacket closer. I needed a comfortable warm bath. Telling my story out loud was draining but freeing. It felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. “I hope we talk soon,”

Jason nodded and left. He crossed the yard towards the hospital building before turning around.

“Hey, Jeanie,” he called out with a warm smile. “Her name is Ava. Ava Butler.”

Ava.

Ava sounded the perfect name; I couldn't have come up with something better.

“Thank you,” I screamed after him like a crazy woman.

Ava Butler.

CHAPTER FOUR

JEANIE

“Ava! Get the door!” I heard Jason scream from inside the house. My belly erupted in a riot of butterflies. Two days after my meeting with Jason at the hospital, he came looking for me at the motel, and we spoke some more. Jason had introduced me to some of the hot spots in town; we watched a movie together; caught a game at the new volleyball stadium, and did a few other fun things.

It felt nice to relate freely with someone who knew my past and wasn't judging me. The man who was raising my daughter was my first ever genuine friendship since high school. Jason listened to my rants about my struggles and put up with boring conversations about my job.

Even if he couldn't process half of the gist, he encouraged me to let go of the hurt my parents caused me. I told him that could come eventually. I opened my world to him unrestrained, but I could see the skepticism in his eyes when we brushed on personal topics. It is like he is afraid I was going to suddenly get up and leave or that I wasn't being honest. I guessed this was why it took so long for him to agree to this.

I had tried to invite myself over to his home for a while now, but he always had an excuse at hand, and I didn't push it. I didn't want to force any part of this reunion process.

“Hi, miss,” Ava pulled the door open and greeted me with a smile. “I know you,”

“Yes, you do,” I replied with a shaky smile. I wanted to scoop her in my arms and scream ‘I am your mother’ into her ears, but I knew that would be the stupidest thing I could do. “Can I come in?” I asked instead.

“Let me ask my dad,” she closed the door and ran back into the house. “The miss with my next hairstyle is outside the door. Should I let her in?” I heard her ask faintly. She was so cute.

“Hi, Jeanie,” Jason came to get the door a few moments later. The butterflies in my belly did another little dance that confused me. Wasn’t I nervous because I was meeting Ava?

“Hi, Jason,”

“Come on in,”

“Thank you,” I replied and entered the house. The interior was colorful in contrast to the plain porch and front yard. There was an art wall directly opposite the front door. I saw several kids’ paintings hung next to more professional canvases. The navy-blue couches in the living room that faced a game console instead of a TV space, was going to be my favorite example of his good taste, until I saw the beautiful chandelier hanging from the center beam of the ceiling. “You have a lovely home,” I said.

“Thank you. Please have a seat.”

“Here, I brought wine.” I handed him a cask of wine I’d picked up to go with the meal. We had agreed to make this a dinner date as the kids would have settled down from the day’s stress.

“You shouldn’t have. You are technically family, thank you.” Jason said and left the room.

Not long after, Ava entered the room, followed by Bruce. I presumed Jason had sent them so I could feel Ava out. During our conversations, Jason told me

important things about Ava. Her grades in school, her favorite tiara, and her struggles with others – just little bits here and there.

“Bruce, right?” I asked the little man who had taken his place on the plush carpet.

“You know my name,” he answered.

“Your dad told me.”

“Did he tell you mine? I am Ava.” Ava jumped in my face. She was wearing a paper tiara

“Ava,” I smiled back at her. “Yes, he did.”

“Then you are not a stranger. Dada says not to talk to strangers. What’s your name?” Bruce said.

“Jeanie, and he is right. We usually cannot trust strangers, but there are a few good ones.” I answered. “Strangers eventually become friends if we give them time.” The kids looked so confused at my words- I sucked at parenting already.

“Don’t talk to strangers, okay?” They nodded and went back to their games.

“You were at our house two weeks ago!” Bruce screamed suddenly. “I knew you looked familiar.” He continued. “It didn’t look like Dada wanted you here, though,”

“That’s true,” Ava murmured in agreement.

“We had grown-ups’ disagreement, but we’ve sorted it out now.”

“Is it like when Ava sneaks nuts into my room?”

I was confused; I didn’t know what that was about, so I nodded.

“Dinner is ready, guys. I made pasta.” Thankfully, Jason came into the room and announced. “go and wash your hands Bruce; Ava, get a hair tie, We don’t want sauce all over that tiara, do we?”

“No, dada,” Ava answered and skipped merrily after Bruce out of the living room.

“You have done a good job with them,” I said after a while. “It doesn’t get better than this. Katy would be proud.”

“She would have been proud of you, too,” Jason said with a brisk nod and motioned for me to follow him.

“You think?” my brows rose in surprise.

“I know. She didn’t resent you; they loved you even in your absence.” His words brought warmth to my heart. I could finally begin the journey of forgiving myself for hurting them.

Maybe one day, Jason could soon forgive me and let down his walls. I wanted, needed him to do that fast, but I also knew I couldn’t let myself be impatient. I didn’t want to rush him into letting me back into Ava’s life; that could blow back in my face. I really wish he forgave me soon.

JASON

“Can Jeanie come to our recital at school?” Bruce asked me. Two pairs of eyes stared at me, waiting for my answer. My instinct was to say ‘no,’ but it would break my kids’ hearts. I have heard and read about kids talking to someone, but

seeing how Bruce and Ava made space for Jeanie in their lives was fascinating. It was like she had been a part of our family from the beginning.

“We would have to ask her?” I suggested, shifting the heartbreaking task to Jeanie. I knew she would turn down the invite. She was still uncomfortable in public places, even with her time in town. I knew she would rather not give the wagging tongues of the local gossips the chance to ruin her life a second time.”

“Can we go and ask her now?” Ava asked.

“How?”

“You will take us to her,” Bruce answered. The kids have been to the motel twice, but for a short time. The first time, we picked Jeanie up for a movie, and the other time, we went for a walk in the park.

“I am exhausted. I had a long day, and driving across town this evening is out of the question.” I replied.

“But Dada,” Ava began.

“Look, I am not taking you anywhere tonight except your bed,” I affirmed.

“This recital is still months away, and Jeanie might not be in town then.”

“That’s why we need to tell her now,” Bruce murmured.

“Not tonight. Get back to your books.” I said. “You’d better study for that spelling test Bruce. It would be best if you ace it. And you, Ava, go study your school books.”

“Yes, Dada,” they both grumbled and left me.

I returned to the game I had been playing at the living room console but couldn’t focus. The thought of the kids loving Jeanie this much this fast was scary. Jeanie had a track record of running from situations, and I wasn’t ruling

out the possibility of her doing it again. If, when, she eventually leaves and isn't part of our lives anymore, I would be left to pick the pieces.

She held all the power in this situation, and I didn't like not being in control. Ava speaks about her at least three times a day; Jeanie was constantly referred to in Ava's most random conversations. She could tell me about her schoolwork and then remember what Jeanie said. She would then latch on to that for several minutes. I could understand that this might be the result of a mother-and-daughter bond, but it is surprising how Bruce welcomed the woman into his life, too. Bruce was often a closed-off kid choosing to have just Ava as his friend in school for a long time until he became more familiar with his classmates. Bruce didn't usually become friends with anyone in the short space of a month.

But he did with Jeanie.

So did I,

I could mask my real fear with concerns for the kids, but the truth is that I would also be as heartbroken if Jeanie left us. I was finally letting her into my world, which was enough to cause me to be afraid. She was slowly becoming a big part of my life.

I always looked forward to our next meeting and relished our long conversations when together. Jeanie was good company, so it made it easy to talk to her. I haven't had someone to speak to about myself since Katy passed.

I remember telling her about my decision to leave my job someday as it was beginning to affect the amount of time, I could spend with my kids. She listened with utmost interest. The next day, Jeanie called with job options that I could fit in. It was one of the best gifts I had received in a long time.

As much as Jeanie listened to me, I tried to listen more. Obviously, we had been missing companions for a long time, and it was easy to lean on each other. It

would have been easy to fall in love with Jeanie if the large elephant in the room wasn't snoring in a corner.

There was no way I was keeping her in our lives for as long as she wanted to stay without her requesting a birth mother-and-daughter relationship. Ava was her daughter, and I might try to fight it legally, but I couldn't keep them apart forever. Ava was still a baby in my eyes, and the truth would break her little heart. It would hurt to know that the bullies at her school were right about her mother abandoning her. They would also be right about her being loose in a way; all the things I told her about her mother. The dynamics of Jeanie and Ava's relationship would change from 'dada's friend' to 'absent mother.' I wasn't sure I knew how I would deal with that when the time came.

I dread the rift the eventuality would bring. At that moment, I missed Katy so much. Katy always had the answers; she always knew the right thing to do. I wished I could tell her the responsibility she gave me was becoming tougher. Katy would have smiled widely and said, "You are smarter than you give yourself credit for. You would figure it out. Don't you think, Mo?" Moses would have nodded in agreement. Later over a can of beer, he would tell me how he would have approached the situation.

They had been more than parents to me. I missed them so much.

"Enemy contact," the gaming AI said, jolting me out of my thoughts. I looked back at my screen to find my character shot dead. I suddenly had no interest in continuing the game, so I clicked it off and sunk deeper into the couch.

There was no better escape from reality than sleep, especially in odd places.

And so, I allowed sleep to come to me.

CHAPTER FIVE

JASON

Days rolled into weeks, and weeks into months. It has been two months since Jeanie entered our lives, so far, so good. She was kind and patient and helped with the kids when I let her; she brought feminine luster to our lives, and we loved every second of it.

Over the last few weeks, we settled into a routine. I would bring coffee by every morning on my way to work, and on my way back, I would pick her up for dinner at the house. She would offer to make said dinner, and I would refuse. After dinner, we would hang out on the porch or in the living room with the kids. When the kids left for bed or study time, we would talk about anything that came to mind. Later in the night, I would return her to her motel.

It was a pleasant routine that I was getting used to.

Today, however, Jeanie turned down dinner. She had said she needed to work some extra hours as the leave she was granted expired. Her boss had previously agreed to extend her leave on the condition that Jeanie creates a mind-blowing story around her vacation. I could understand how that translated to more tasks for Jeanie, especially since she didn't like to be associated with this town.

Her parents, the Grazes, were still here and some of her high school friends were still in town as well. I could only imagine how difficult it was to know she could meet any of these people that were so casual about their cruelty to her. I had been trying to get her to detach from all the negative emotions she was holding on to, but I also knew that it was easier said than done.

The elevator door dinged open, and I let myself out. I was at Jeanie's motel with a plate of chicken curry we had for dinner. I found her room and gave the door a soft tap. It took her six seconds to get to the door- yes, I counted.

"Jason?" she asked in surprise.

"Jeanie?" I answered with glee. "Is that you? I was looking for an old lady with a beautiful face and shoulder-length hair. Her favorite show is the Final Table."

"Hmmm, I think I know who you are looking for." Jeanie answered, playing along. "Is she friends with a certain hospital assistant?"

"So we are friends,"

"You don't think we are? Come on in, stranger," she lets me into her room. It wasn't my first time here, but like the first time, I was entranced by how much Jeanie had made a public apartment into her own.

"This stranger is bearing gifts," I announced.

"I see," Jeanie took the bowl from me and took it to the kitchen. She returned with two cans of soda and joined me in the living room.

"What were you doing?"

"Watching TV,"

"I thought you had to work?" I asked with a gasp.

"I did," she chuckled. "Don't be silly. I finished earlier than I thought I would." I nodded.

"The kids missed you," I said after a while. "I missed you,"

"I promise not to miss dinner tomorrow," she responded. "How did your day go?"

I proceeded to tell her how I spent my day as I sipped from the can of soda. Jeanie was at least my best friend at this point- she ticked all the boxes I didn't know I had and she had a way of creating intimacy, without being my lover.

“It's a bit of a sore point, but I tried to give my voice to the cause of single parenthood back in New York,” she mentioned after hearing about a single mother I met at the clinic. “It is deeper than we see. We were made for sharing the raising of a child, and when we can't share this burden, it becomes a problem.”

“I completely agree with you. When Margret left without explanation, I considered giving Bruce away. I would have killed the boy out of ignorance if I didn't have Katy.” I blurted out without thought.

“Margret?” Jeanie questioned.

“Yeah,” I answered with a sigh. “Bruce's mother, Margret,”

“This is the first time you are bringing her up, “she pointed out.

“I don't speak of her at all,” I answered.

“I am sorry to have brushed on it then,” Jeanie apologized.

“Nah, it is fine.” I picked the cans off the table and took them to the kitchen to escape Jeanie's soulful stare. This woman had a way of chipping away at my wall of defenses. I didn't even tell Katy about Margret, so tell me why I was considering how best to begin my story?

“Fuck,” I cursed as I returned to the living room.

“I met Margret at my college's job fair,” I began after a moment, sliding down from the sofa to sit on the carpet.

“You don't have to, Jason. It is fine.” Jeanie tried to stop me.

“I want to. I have to.” I replied. “She was one of the speakers, and I thought she was the most beautiful girl at the fair. I remember what she looked like that day, like sunshine. I knew I had to talk to her, so I waited till the fair was done before initiating the conversation” I took a deep breath before continuing.

“We fitted together like hands and gloves, like white on rice. The whole relationship lasted all of college and after college. That was when the problems started. In the outside world, we couldn’t survive. We fought all the time about everything. It added to my frustration and pressure of getting a job to support our unit.”

“I cringed now remembering the baseless fights and shouting sprees that Margaret and I had in our small basement apartment in California. “It was in the middle of our chaos that we found out she was pregnant. From the day we knew, Margret told me explicitly that she wasn’t going to keep the baby- that she wasn’t ready for motherhood, and I understood. I couldn’t force her to be what she didn’t want to be, plus there was no way we could raise a child in our shitty apartment. So we went to the doctor and had a safe abortion.” I choked back emotions I had not felt in a long time as vivid images of those times flashed back through my mind.

“Jason, we don’t have to do this. You don’t have to explain,” Jeanie whispered, scurrying across the carpet to comfort me.

“It is fine,” I continued. “After the abortion, all seemed good. I got my first job at a local clinic while Margret decided she wanted a diploma in Historical Sciences; she joined a class at the community college. We were good. We moved out of our apartment to a bigger and more conducive place. A few years passed, and I applied for a junior position at my job now. Margret wasn’t a fan of moving cross country for a job, especially with how well we were doing back in Cali. She thought the next thing for us was a wedding. I thought it was

advancing our careers.” I leaned over to pinch my forehead. Unshed tears were giving me a headache,

“The fights started again. I got the job, moved here, and kept shuffling from Cali and here. Soon Margret was done with her diploma and joined me here. Long short, she got pregnant again. Mid-pregnancy, Margret got a job offer back in California and took it.”

“Did that make you mad?” Jeanie asked.

“Of course not. I have done the same with my job here. I had no issues with her taking the offer. My problem with the arrangement was that Margret spent the rest of her pregnancy in Cali. I didn’t see her or my child until after the baby was born, and they were both fit to travel. All my efforts to go to Cali were futile- she didn’t want me there, and she kept me away.” I shook my head and paused.

“The day she showed up at my old house, she came with a large box and a stroller. Bruce was in that stroller. She had said something like ‘he is more of a chore than I thought. Here, he is yours now. Then she left.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that” he repeated. “Stunned and stared at the baby for a few weird minutes before taking him in. I was lost. I didn’t know his name or if he was the right baby. Sometimes, I wish it was a bad dream, and that Margret will waltz in that door screaming ‘gotcha.’”

“I have heard wild tales, but this is a stretch,” Jeanie said. “I can understand why you judged me harshly in the beginning now.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “That’s in the past. We are friends now,”

“That we are,” she replied with a smile. “Come here,” and then she pulled me towards her for a hug.

I didn't know what it was; the warmth of Jeanie's arms, maybe it was finally getting the comfort my soul desired all these years, or maybe it had to do with the recent feelings I refused to acknowledge, but as soon as her arms were around me, the world felt better. Her fingers roamed over my shoulders for a fleeting moment, offering a tentative soft caress.

"Sorry," she murmured as she tried to detangle herself, but I wasn't ready to let my bundle of comfort go, so I pulled her closer. Face to face, we remained in each other's arms, releasing the tension in our bodies, letting the other bear some of the burdens.

Jeanie's eyes rose to meet mine, and her forehead was pressed against mine. I acted without thinking about anything but her. She sighed softly as my full lips captured her wet lips in one sweet second. The wet heat of her threatened to melt me into pudding. Jeanie's lips brushed softly over mine and I savored all of the new feelings blossoming in my groin, my belly.

Her lips tickled mine, and I returned the favor with fervor and teased her upper lip with my tongue. Her hips wriggled and her hands wandered all over my body. I pinched her nipple, and it was like a switch was flipped, releasing all of her pent-up animal libido.

Jeanie picked up the tempo, sucking, tugging, and biting. My tongue explored the soft inner layer of her lower lip, drawing a moan from her. The sound excited me to my very core, and I wasted no time deepening the kiss. My mouth crushed against hers, and my rod was firm and hard.

It was the headiest kiss I have had in a long time. I reluctantly pulled back from her to meet her hooded eyes, which seemed almost glazed over with lust.

"That was..." I whispered.

"We shouldn't have," she whispered back.

“I am tired of doing what I should do. Don’t you think we need to start living for ourselves? And right now, I want to wrap you in my arms and keep kissing you for the rest of the night,”

“I want that too,” Jeanie replied shyly. “I just don’t want to complicate us,”

“Let’s uncomplicate it then,” I said and got into a straighter position. “We have defined ourselves as friends, and you are technically my baby’s mama.”

“And you, my baby's father?” Jeanie added with a chuckle. I nodded with a smile.

“What we already have is precious to me.” I began. “I don’t think I have enjoyed anybody’s company as much as I do yours in a long time. The last time I felt this keenly for any woman was with Margret.”

“Ouch,”

“No, no, I am not comparing you with her. Trust me, Jeanie, you are fifteen, and she is a basic three. Look at how far you have come. Look at what you are doing. It didn’t matter that a decade had passed. You came back to find redemption.”

“Thank you, that means a lot.” She answered, sweeping some of her loose hair behind her ear.

“I want to make a promise to you right here and now.” I adjusted into a more comfortable pose. “When you are ready, you can tell Ava the truth, and I will support your decision.”

“You are not going to fight me?” Jeanie asked, brows raised.

“No,” I answered. “You are not the enemy. I don’t kiss my enemies and like it as much as I did the one we just shared.”

Jeanie laughed shortly, and I could see the wheels turning in her head. The evening was a lot to process, even for me. I had dumped the story of Margret on her, then drenched her in my feelings for her- which I swore I would not dive into just yet, then gave her my permission to tell Ava the truth. It was a lot to process, and both of us were overwhelmed, practically drowning in too much information, but I guessed that was the price of being honest and open.”

“It is getting late,” I stated after a while. I needed to recalibrate in my own space. “I should get going.”

“Right,”

“We don’t want Bruce leading his sister here now, do we?” I got off the floor and pulled her with me. “Thank you for the evening. Thank you, Jeanie.”

“Thank you, too,” she responded, and her arms came around me. “For everything,”

“See you later?” I asked, pulling out of the hug. She nodded and got the door for me.

As I crossed the threshold into the hallway, I realized that we had crossed something else, which could be just as exciting as it was terrible.

We will see how that goes.

JEANIE

I turned in my bed for the umpteenth time, but I still wasn't comfortable. I was laying in a sea of pillows and smooth sheets, but my sleep, if I could call it that, felt off.

I could understand that I had had a crazy evening. It shouldn't cost me my precious sleep, especially because I had some pieces to review for work in the morning. If my mind wasn't clear by dawn, I was going to have a shit day.

"Fuck," I murmured and turned my back again. My eyes flew open, and I glanced at the bedside clock. It was two in the freaking morning, meaning I had been seeking sleep for close to three hours. I sighed loudly and closed said eyes again.

After Jason left, I ignored the rest of my plans for the evening and watched the cooking show late into the night until my eyelids began to droop. I quickly went to bed, and now still couldn't sleep.

Could it be because you are ignoring your feelings?

I doubt it.

I wasn't ignoring anything; there was nothing left to process. Jason was also a victim of the terrible partners' streak, we kissed out to comfort each other, and he gave me the leave with Ava. What more did I need to process?

There could not be more. There couldn't be more to how my stomach flipped whenever I was near him or how all I thought about was him, right? My stomach flipped because I was nervous. I thought of him because he was my daughter's father, and that's all there was to it. It had nothing to do with how my flesh shivered at his touch or how I melted into a simp when I was around him.

Since when did you lie to yourself?

It wasn't like I wanted to deceive myself; I couldn't let all these things mean more to me. I came to town to reunite with my daughter and not to fall in love.

“What the fuck?!” my eyes flew open again. I threw the comforter off me and entered my bathroom to pee. I wasn't in love with Jason. How would that be? We were friends at most right?”

Do you kiss your friends and dream about it?

“Shut up!” I shouted at myself in the mirror. My inner voice was a fucking nag and was especially annoying now. “And I wasn't dreaming about it. I didn't even sleep.” I sighed. I was tired and torn.

On the one hand, I wanted to ignore my feelings until they disappeared, and on the other hand, I was tired of fighting. I felt like I finally deserved a good thing that wasn't a reaction to my past, something pure, like love. Maybe the Universe was finally giving me a break.

I needed to let go.

I washed my hands and went back to my bed. My eyes caught my phone on one end of the bed, and before I could process my next thought, I was dialing Jason. I put the call on speakerphone and lay back down with my eyes shut. If he didn't answer on the first ring, I would ignore everything my sleep-deprived brain cooked up.

“Jeanie?” his dreamy voice answered from the other end of the call. Lucky him, he got some sleep.

“Hi. I am sorry for disturbing your sleep. I know this is crazy. I am not in an emergency, don't panic. I couldn't sleep, and my mind had been playing tricks on me and whatnot, and I thought maybe I should call you. I didn't think you would answer. Why did you answer? Never mind. It is just that....” I rambled off.

“Hey, hey, slow down.” He stopped me before I bit my tongue off. “It is fine. What’s up.”

“Nothing much. I can’t sleep.” I drew in a large breath and began. “I have been thinking,”

“What about?”

“Us. That is if there is an ‘us.’”

“Let me hear it.” He was so encouraging.

“I mean, it could all be in my head, and I might be messing a good thing up but here goes nothing.” I started. “When I left New York almost five months ago, I had only one thing on my mind: getting Ava. Then I met you, Jason.”

I didn’t know where the speech came from, but I was on a roll. “First, you challenged me, and I knew I had to prove to you that I deserved Ava’s love. Every action, every word, all I did had that undertone. I wanted your approval. Saying that out loud made me realize that I wasn’t just seeking your approval for Ava’s sake. I think I wanted you to see me.”

I paused to reassess my words. “I wanted to be worthy, for Ava, but then for you. I can’t say this was when my desire to please you turned into something more, but I know deep down in my bones that there is more between us than I would like to admit. Being with you makes me so happy, and I don’t want to stop. Jason?” It would suck like a dick if he dozed off while I was rambling.

“I am here, Jeanie,” he answered.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess I am trying to say that I have feelings for you, Jason. My sleep-deprived brain calls it ‘love,’ but I know it is early days. Plus, what if you don’t feel the same, and I just shot myself in the face. I messed up, didn’t I?”

“You are rambling again,” Jason interrupted. “Are you done, babe?”

Babe? That is a good thing, right?

“I guess.”

“I would like to begin by saying you are the best. The way you approach situations is one of the many reasons I want to keep you at my side forever.” Jason stated. “I understand your fear, and it only makes you better than me. I have wanted to tell you how much I cared about you for a while, but I was afraid. I was afraid you would leave me, not feel the same or even spite me. You don’t just make me happy, Jeanie. You excite me. You’ve awakened parts of me that I had left cold in my heart. You are one of the Universe’s gifts to me this year, and I can’t help how I feel about you.”

He paused for a short while, searching for the right way to say it.

“I am just going to put this out here,” he continued. “I love you, Jeanie.”

My breath caught in my throat at his declaration. “You don’t know how long I have wanted to say that,” Jason said. “I fell in love with you so fast it gave me whiplash. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Jason.”

“That’s good,” he answered. “I would need you to say that to my face in the morning, so I can respond properly with a kiss.”

“You aren’t getting a kiss that easy,” I joked, finally feeling relief.

“What if I say please?”

“Still wouldn’t do,”

“What if I tell you that I love you more than life? Would that do?”

“That is all I need, your love.”

EPILOGUE

“Dearly beloved,” the minister began. “We are gathered here this lovely afternoon to witness the coming together of two lovers,”

I smiled at my husband-to-be with a heart full of gratitude. His thumb rubbed over the palm of my right hand, gently letting me know he was there with me. It was still surreal that we were here, getting married. Our story would for sure make a good romance movie. The tender story would tell of the coming together of two pigheaded lost souls at opposite ends of single parenthood.

Jason had had a child dumped on him and an absent baby mama that just happened to be me. I was his baby mama. It had hurt so bad to have endure all those years without support and structure to try and raise our kids in a conventional home.

However, neither of us would change a bit of our story- the pain made us who we were. Our past formed a great part of the new and the beautiful future ahead of us. The future promised bliss, balance, and unending peace. I had the best husband anyone could wish for in the world, two beautiful children that loved me twice as much as I do them, and total contentment.

I remembered the day we finally told the kids, more Ava than Bruce, about their parentage. Jason and I had fought over the timeline, but I didn't want to wait anymore, especially since they knew I was more than a friend now. Jason thought it didn't make sense to force two realities on them so close together, while I thought ripping the band-aid off once and for all made the most sense. Eventually, when the back and forth ended, Jason broke the news at one of our weekly dinners.

“Like a new mum?” Ava had asked innocently.

“No baby, I am your mum.” I tried to explain. “I carried you in my body and gave birth to you, but I had to leave. I couldn’t care for you as a mum should at the time, so I left to become a proper mum.”

“Are you a proper mum now?” Bruce had asked.

“I like to think I am,”

“Are you my mum too?” the little boy had asked after a moment.

“As long as you want me to be, I love you just as much as I love Ava. You both mean the world to me.”

“The tooth fairy was right,” Ava said suddenly. “She said my mum was coming back for me.”

“Really?” Jason’s face mirrored mine in surprise.

“Yes,” Ava responded. “Welcome mum.”

Since the first time she called me mum, I have felt nothing but peace in my soul every time she said the word.

Now, my daughter and son were standing beside me, and their dad was holding baskets of flowers. They were the most important of our wedding guests, with only Tobe, a few of Jason’s work friends, and my secretary present. I had sent an invite to my parents, but they didn’t as much as acknowledge the receipt, but I didn’t care one bit. I was done holding on to relationships that were dead. The hate I felt was now replaced with the love Jason and I shared.

“The celebration of love is beautiful, almost like a privilege to witness. Love is the greatest of God’s gifts to humans, and when we find someone to share that gift with, it is the best thing.” The minister continued, “Jason, Jeanie, it is now time to make a declaration for your love.”

“We would like to do the Game of Thrones vow,” Jason announced with a chuckle.

“Alrighty, go on.”

“Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger. I am hers/his, and she/he is mine. From this day until the end of the days.” We recited together excitedly.

“That was a good one.” The minister commented, and the guest laughed. “As God, the seven gods, and the people here present to bear witness, you have both promised to be together forever. This makes you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride,” he declared. I giggled, watching Jason rub his cheeks mischievously.

“Come here, babe,” he said and pulled me closer. I closed my eyes in anticipation of his warm lips touching my glossy ones.

I saw sparks as soon as Jason’s lips touched mine. We kissed for a moment, but it carried our shared emotions. I felt content, at peace, accepted, and joyful.

And most of all, I felt the love.

THE END.

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Book 1 Teaser...

Chapter One

Groggy with sleep, Lily peered at the screen of her alarm. It was 6:48am. As if shocked with an electric impulse, she jumped out of bed to run a bath. Even

though it was barely seven in the morning she knew she was late for work already, and she didn't like it. Mr Marshall, her boss would twist that pretty mouth of his and tell her he was disappointed in her without uttering a word. It was a super power that only he possessed.

It wasn't the first time she was going to be late this week. In fact but for the exception of Monday, she'd been late throughout the week and it was due to her sleepless nights going over manuscripts. She knew it was her cue to ask for her well deserved sabbatical.

Writing had always been a place of solace for her, it was her little bubble where she could make up stories about knights in shining armor coming to rescue their distressed damsels but over the years she'd learnt life was red not white. A battleground filled with struggle and not always peace. That didn't dissipate her love for writing though, she still wrote bits and pieces of stories on paper waiting to be shredded.

As if it were yesterday, she remembered when she first got the job with her publication company. Fresh out from NYU with a literary degree, she'd carried her manuscript to every publisher she knew begging for her book to be given a chance. People had laughed at her and called her book a mere Cinderella story, something to be read to put the kids to sleep. At the time she was squatting with Linda and Brenda, her two best friends from college who never failed to encourage her. When it seemed like all hope was lost, Duncan waltzed in. Just like from one of the pages from her novel, he offered her a job and supported her till she was able to get an apartment of her own and pay the mortgage on it.

Too bad their story refused to have a happily ever after because Duncan's surname happened to be Marshall who was her gay boss and who would give her that ugly look as she discreetly tried to sneak into the office late.

She really hated the face he made. One day she was going to knock his lips off his face.

She tucked her unruly hair into a tight chignon and applied a slight dab of brown powder across her face completing the look with a navy blue suit and nice flats.

There was no use rushing her dressing if she was already late.

Turning left on Isle street about twenty minutes from her workplace, she received a call from her friend, Brenda.

"Hi, Lily. I see you're up so early today. Trying to escape the wrath of Babyface?"

Babyface was the clique's nickname for Duncan. It came to be as a result of Duncan's inability to have proper beards. He was in his late thirties but his face still resembled that of a teenager that had not hit puberty. He sometimes used a fake mustache to cover up for it.

"Come on." Lily grumbled. "You know I'm definitely late for work already."

"Hahaha." Brenda laughed. "Serves you right for snoozing your alarm severally. I lived with you for many years and I know you did just that."

"You're right. So how're you doing anyways?" Lily asked.

"Fine. How's work?"

"Stressful as always. I'm not a morning person, I wish I could get an afternoon shift."

She was at a traffic light now, and she looked across, seeing children walk by as the light turned red.

"How's Anderson?" Lily asked. "Are you guys still on the honeymoon?"

"Of course. We're in the Maldives right now but we should be back in a week. He got me this really beautiful jewelry piece that... "

Lily rolled her eyes, knowing well that she wasn't ready for the gist but she listened halfheartedly, praying Brenda would notice her disinterest and stop talking at some point. But she didn't.

The traffic light turned yellow, and the passers-by began racing to the other side of the road. "Yeah that's so nice." She said, putting the right 'oohs' and 'aahs' where necessary.

"Yes yes. Oh there's more..."

She banged her head against her wheel in frustration and mistakenly honked, scaring the passers-by in the front.

"Are you alright?" Brenda quickly inquired, her Mother Hen attributes pushing through her voice. Brenda could be a sweetheart when she wasn't animated about any new piece of gossip.

"There's more!" Lily faked a gasp, ignoring Brenda's earlier inquiry about her health. "Tell me, I'm so interested."

"No need to get smart with me, young lady," Brenda bristled. "I know your hand is hovering over the red button itching to cut this call at the slightest notice."

"You know me too well," Lily conceded. "But, what's happening? You've got me hooked now."

"Claire's getting married... in three weeks." Brenda shouted, filled with joy.

"Claire? I thought they didn't plan on getting married soon." Lily asked, surprised.

"Yeah I thought so too, but it turned out they were planning to elope and do a quick one in Vegas. God forbid that such happens in my vicinity. What's a wedding without white lace gowns and a tower of cake and ribbons?"

"Umm. It's a union between two people that have promised to love each other forever?" Lily volunteered.

"Well, and that too." Brenda agreed.

The light switched to green, and cars zoomed off beside hers. She eased the car down the street and continued with the call.

"Have you gotten an invitation?" Brenda asked.

"I would check my mail, surely I've got one and thank you for watching out for Claire. It means a lot to me."

"Anytime, she's my sister too. We would talk later. Okay? Drive safely."

"Haha. Sure, I will. Bye." The call ended.

Claire was the last of the four friends to join the clique. Linda, Brenda and Lily already had a solid history in college, attending fraternity parties together, getting drunk and sweeping through boyfriends like fine wine. She was formerly Lily's colleague at work before quitting and establishing her own magazine firm. It was a small company that provided details on celebrities scandals and love stories. The rest of them always teased her for being a celebrity tattletale.

Linda was the most notorious one, popularly known for the daunting dares she took on back in college. It therefore came as a surprise when she finally settled down and relocated to California with her husband and her daughter.

Brenda was more of a protective figure, looking after anyone that was sick and making sure everyone had eaten. She was currently on her honeymoon with Anderson, her childhood sweetheart.

And then there was Lily Everton, beautiful self made Lily. She was once in a serious relationship but their relationship didn't last, especially because he seemed to have a more animalistic form of love which she hated. Then there was another guy that came along but seemed to only love her for her body, which was an issue she'd battled with right from her heydays in college considering her physique. But no, she didn't want that. And since she'd refused to lower her standards, she was starting to give up on love and focus more on her career. Luckily, she had a job that she loved to keep her busy, enough to keep her from reflecting on her loneliness.

It wasn't often that one had a career that was both fun and paid the bills.

Arriving at work three minutes late, she didn't miss the twist of Duncan's lips from the glass office where he was seated.

His lips seemed to be saying, 'you could've done better than this Lily. Do you know what you could've achieved in those three minutes?'

She ignored his negative vibes and switched quickly to her Gmail on her laptop. She spotted a 'You are cordially invited to...' and confirmed what she'd been expecting. The invitation was sent to her mail.

A slow exhale escaped her lips as she remembered her own love life. The single Pringle amongst the four. The dark horse amongst the white stallions.

Sometimes, when she was drunk and the alcohol had her feeling sleepy and low on defense, she allowed herself to miss the butterflies that came with a loving touch and the countless calls that kept her feeling like a queen. Those outings

that once left her breathless and yearning for more. The gifts and surprises. The kisses and most importantly, the tumble in the sheets.

Glasses were filled up and clinked severally, the red wine seemed to be overflowing. The three-men group was out today, invited by one of their own, to celebrate something they knew nothing about yet. They were all busy during the week, either with one business project or on a trip.

"Yo Ryan, what have you been up to this week?" Matthew asked, placing his wine glass on the table.

"Yeah, my schedule was really tight this week. I was at a waterfall a few days ago trying to capture the beauty of the ecosystem there." Ryan answered.

"Oh cool, tell me, have you gotten any sponsorship yet? Anything from the Wayne brothers?" Camden chipped in.

"Nah not yet, they seem to be recruiting but I don't think they've checked my application yet."

"Shit! Let's hope they do so. They would be the one missing out on a talent if they don't."

"So, Camden, you phoned yesterday? What's up, why are we drinking?" Ryan asked.

Camden rose up from his seat with his glass of wine. "Gentlemen, we are here today to celebrate..." He paused a little for dramatic effect. "I'm getting married in three weeks," he shouted.

"Dudeee!" screamed the other guys.

"Congrats Man, you've gotta get the cradle ready then." Matthew said with a laugh, hugging the groom-to-be after they made a toast.

"You better forget those crushes you've had bro, you're gonna get hitched," Ryan added.

"Thanks a lot guys, I would really love your support." Camden said.

"Sure, we got you, right guys?" Ryan asked.

His question was supported with a loud "yess" from the seemingly drunk Matthew, but it was only red wine.

"Personally, I can't wait to destroy your cake," he added.

"So, how are you preparing? Have you chosen a venue already?" Ryan, always the planner, asked.

"Yes I've," he replied. "I would have sent you an email, but I preferred to make it an open announcement. I will send the mail to you tonight."

"So who is it? Claire or Jane?" Matthew asked, being the naughtiest in the group.

"Shut up man, you know I never dated Jane. Of course it's Claire."

"Oh wow, that's nice," Ryan said as he poured himself a glassful of red wine.

"Have you gotten the ring yet? A Diamond or a Ruby?"

"It's a diamond ring. Spent a fortune on it. It's worth about fifty grand."

"That's a lot!" Ryan exclaimed.

At this time, their glasses were empty but there were still a couple of beers in the cooler, and Matthew had reached in to get one.

"You always wanted to do your honeymoon in Africa, are you still going with that option?" He asked, a bottle of beer already in his hands.

"I'm not sure of Claire's take on that choice. Let's get the wedding done first."

"Cool cool."

"So Ryan, got any dates yet? " Matthew asked.

"Uhh, nah, not yet." Ryan replied, his tone sad.

"Cheer up man, you will get someone, you will," he patted him on his back.

Ryan Paige, the socially awkward of the three men, was in his mid-thirties and the youngest of all three. He was a passionate photographer, adventurous at it also, and had been to more places than anyone. He had met so many people- Indians, Australians, Portuguese and yet he couldn't boast of having anyone that appealed to his heart. Sometimes, he wondered if he traveled so many times because of his love for the aesthetic pictures he took at these places or because he was searching for something.

Someone to share his heart with.

Chapter 2

God! I hate weddings," Lily moaned as she tried to squeeze herself into her four inch suede heels. It had been a long time since she attended a party, so wearing six inches was out of the question, she would meet herself on the floor if she tried it. Her stomach fat was a little bit excess and she had to make use of a corset to push it in.

At thirty-one years of age, Lily tried not to dwell on the fact that her entire relationship life was non-existent. The only thing she could boast of was an amazing career and a cat that loved her but these days, she wasn't even sure of her cat's love again. It was becoming quite spiteful and it scratched her more than it played with her.

Why have a cat that refused to play with her?

Her writing career was putting food on the table and also managed to pay for some traveling expenses and vacation treats. She loved the fact that she was now working in the same position that was used to taunt her many years ago during her job hunt.

Choosing manuscripts to be published. It gave her the chance to bring to life many mind blowing novels.

She was positive that mean Mr. Babyface intentionally placed her there. He thought he'd given her the worst job in the office but it turned out to be a source of joy for her.

In a few months, she would be thirty-one which was the age she thought she would be settled with her millionaire husband and two kids, checking through

social media and appreciating her fan's comments on her bestseller book. Instead, she was in a publishing company that served lunch that tastes like weed. She could swear she'd seen the cook smuggling some into the food before.

Life really had a way of throwing curve balls and changing one's direction. Was she having second thoughts about her life?

No.

She loved it just the way it was. She could go for an all nighter at the club without the need to tell anyone about her whereabouts. She didn't have kids in diapers staining her expensive Arabian rug with poop or whatnot.

Earlier, Linda had called to complain that her daughter 'cleaned' her personal computer with detergent and bleaching agent. Now, the computer has refused to boot.

No, Lily concluded. She could do without all that stress in her life.

Dragged from her trail of thoughts by a phone call, Lily hurriedly grabbed her purse and put her phone on speaker.

"Lilyyyy!" Linda's voice boomed through the speaker. "You dumb cow, when are you planning on dragging your ass here? We're taking pictures already."

Lily didn't bother to hide her eye roll even though Linda couldn't see it. She was so sure the wedding had barely started, it was so typical of Linda to exaggerate things.

"Make sure you come with your eyelash curler, another voice- Brenda sounded through the phone. "I forgot to bring mine and my lashes are going haywire."

Just Lily's luck, the whole squad was around. The whole married squad was here to remind her of her unmarried state and childless life. Not that they would be doing it intentionally but they would be saying it in the various pitiful stares they threw her way, the way they would stop cuddling with their husbands once she got there.

She really wished they didn't do it because of her. She'd tried many times to tell them she wasn't bothered and she loved her life the way it was but they refused to listen and kept on arranging several blind dates for her.

"Good of you to finally join us," Linda said as Lily walked through the doors of Claire's family house.

Claire was the star of today's show, the second to the last single lady of the clique. But all that would change today once she said 'I do' at the altar. Lily felt really sorry for her, abandoning all that freedom to be shackled to the bondage of marriage but that wasn't wedding material so she shut up instead and plastered a smile on.

"Did you bring the curler Brenda asked you for?" Linda queried.

"I thought you said that you were taking pictures already," Lily said, her eyes throwing accusing glances at Linda. "Why are we still in the family house?"

"It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding so we told the guys to use the hall while the ladies stay here." Linda explained. "This gown is better than it looked on the phone, where did you get it?"

"Ordered it. Where's Claire by the way? I need to bribe her to throw her flowers to a friend of mine. She believes in all these false marriage practices."

"Oh please," Linda scoffed. "That's just baseless superstition. I think Claire's avoiding you. She's still very sorry about not including you in her bridesmaid train. Don't tell her you heard this from me but she's in the garden behind the orange tree. The make-up artist is putting finishing touches to her face."

"Thanks a lot, I'll go see her." Lily said.

"Hello there. How's it going? Any wedding jitters yet?" Lily greeted.

Claire's contour was being adjusted so she doesn't glance up but gave a thumbs up sign and continued staying still. After a while she stood up and stretched.

"There's no going back now, not that I want to." Claire answered. "I'm really sorry about the bridesmaid situation. I couldn't say no to my sister. I wanted to..."

"Look," Lily interjected. "It's not that serious. Ok? If I was in your shoes, I would've looked out for my sister also. I guess it turned out well, I hadn't even bought the cloth yet."

"Is there anything I can do to be of help here?"

"We're done here already. No need to bother yourself."

The splendour of the wedding hall was nothing Lily could've conjured even in her wildest imaginations. To her left, a giant eight tier cake stood with a caricature of the bride and groom on it. The ceilings of the hall was a paneled wood painted glossy black with a plethora of blush peonies.

Lily was half expecting all the peonies to land on her head anytime soon.

The staircase for the groom and bride only, was covered in a deep-burgundy carpet runner instead of the usual red carpet. The long curving flight of stairs was covered in petals of red roses. The hall itself was a mix of Victorian and contemporary without coming off as ugly.

It was indeed a romantic vision and it was stirring feelings Lily had once buried deep within her.

Best to get away from all this and check out the appetisers on display.

Lily made her way up the flight of stairs reserved for the special guests. That was where several tables filled with so many mouth watering dishes were kept. And the key to eating to your fill and still managing to look cool in a wedding was eating early. At that time, everyone was still trying to make connections and barely any attention was paid to the food.

She spotted the array of appetisers on the tables. Chicken skewers, crab cakes, stuffed mushrooms, shrimp cocktail. Dang! It was just to her taste. Now, all that

she needed was to find a way to chase the two women talking animatedly to each other near the table. They only needed to shift a little bit to the front and they would be providing a perfect cover for her gauche activities.

Carefully, she made her way to the table focused on the escargot that seemed to beckon on only her name which was why she didn't notice the perfect gentleman in her path until she crashed into him.

Her nose on his hard, solid chest.

Shit!

Strong wiry hands kept her stable. Her science teacher would have loved his hands, it would've been useful in teaching the various veins he kept trying to drum into their heads.

"Are you okay?" A male's voice interrupted her.

Right! She was still entangled in another guy's arms. Sniffing his cologne and fantasising about his wiry arms.

If only she didn't have to look up and relieve this embarrassing moment. His shoes were rather entertaining with their pointy ends and shining outlook and she would rather spend eternity looking at them than looking at the guy whose butt she almost landed on the floor.

"Are you alright?" The guy repeated.

Typical of the universe to refuse to listen to her earnest pleas.

Awkwardly, she lifted up her eyes to face the pointy shoe guy. "I'm fine, thank you."

There was a beat of silence as the both of them made a show of checking themselves out. Mr Pointy was impeccably dressed in a brown tuxedo and wire rimmed glasses.

Nerdy and well dressed. A nice match.

He was probably a kindergarten teacher who flossed twice daily and had pajamas for every day of the week.

His brown tuxedo made his brown eyes pop and look more like honey. With all the tuxedos flying, she would bet twenty dollars he was French.

"I'm not French."

"What?"

"I'm British actually," Mr pointy shoes laughed. "I guess you owe me twenty dollars then."

She blushed furiously and lowered her eyes, she really must've lost her marbles if she was going around voicing her inner thoughts.

"Not to worry, I won't charge you," he continued. "Who're you here for? The bride or the groom?"

"The bride. I'm a friend of the bride," she replied.

"Ohh."

This was the problem Lily had with nerds. They never quite knew what to say and Lily wasn't exactly eloquent either so now the universe had two blubbering fools on its hands.

"My name's Ryan," Mr Pointy shoes said.

Right! His name was Ryan, not pointy shoes.

"I'm Lily, Lily Everton," she volunteered, suddenly remembering her sole reason for climbing up the stairs. A quick glance to the left confirmed her fears, the crab and snail sauce was gone and it was all Ryan's fault.

Regretting the words even before they came out of her mouth, she raised her pointy nose which was now bruised by the way. "I'm fine. If you're done interrogating me, can I take my leave?"

It really wasn't her fault. A well cooked crab was hard to come by and Ryan just made her lose her chance to have one.

"I didn- didn't. I wasn't tryin..." Ryan stuttered.

The bewildered look on Ryan's face followed her throughout the wedding and if she was being honest with herself, it followed to the dry steamed sheets in her room.

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Amy writes fast-paced short clean and wholesome romance novels from her home in Canada. Amy lives with her husband and two sons. When she is not writing, she's reading, enjoying life and seeking out new adventures.

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