



# Tenth Letter

the novel

KAYONA **EBONY** BROWN

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THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

# acclaim for Tenth Letter

“A BREATH OF FRESH AIR. THIS BOOK HAD ME TALKING TO MYSELF, SMILING, LAUGHING, AND CLOSE TO TEARS. GREAT READ! PAGE TURNIN’ AND POETIC.”

- M.T. POPE, AUTHOR: *BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE*

“THE COMPLEXITY OF THIS LOVE STORY IS A STEP ABOVE OTHERS READ THIS YEAR. THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IS PHENOMENAL AND THE REALNESS OF THE STORYLINE STRIKES HOME. THE METAPHORS USED HELP THE READER TOTALLY EXPERIENCE THE PAIN IN REALIZING THE SHORTCOMINGS OF INDIVIDUALS. BROWN IS A NEW VOICE IN RELATIONSHIP DRAMA AND THE POWER OF STARTING OVER. I ABSOLUTELY RECOMMEND THIS ONE!”

- DELTAREVIEWER, *REAL PAGE TURNERS*

“IT’S THE BEST BOOK THAT I’VE READ SO FAR THIS YEAR! I REALLY, REALLY LOVE THIS BOOK! THE WAY YOU CAN CONNECT WITH THE CHARACTERS, THE PARELLEL MEANINGS... I MEAN, IT JUST GETS YOU THINKING. AND IT’S A GOOD STORY ON TOP OF THAT.”

- TIFANY JONES, *SISTAH CONFESSIONS RADIO SHOW*

BROWN HAS PUBLISHED WHAT COULD BE THE BLUEPRINT TO UNDERSTANDING EXACTLY WHAT IT MEANS TO TAKE A RISK; NOT ONLY WITH LOVE, BUT WITH LIFE... PERIOD.”

- SIMONE BANKS, *SCHEME MAGAZINE*

**S**he looked at the digital clock on the nightstand as the last of three big red numbers turned into a seven. 8:27 a.m.

*I gotta get outta here.*

The *last* thing she needed to do was fall asleep.

Get comfortable.

She turned over slowly to see if he was asleep. His back was to her just as hers was to his seconds ago.

*I gotta get outta here.*

She covered her face with both of her hands and whispered, “I gotta get outta here.”

\* \* \*

April shouldn't be so hot. Especially at night. But DC rarely has a good spring: it's winter to summer with no in-between. And the city is infamous for its humidity during this time of year, too. Hoochie-mommas and girls who *normally* look like they just came from a rap video shoot aren't the only ones in cut-off, homemade halter-top shirts and mini-mini-skirts. Women with long hair have it tied up in ponytails; the ones with naturally short hair wear their weaves and extensions in pin-up styles; and those who prefer the short look hurry to make appointments to get fresh shape-ups, trims, and clippings before summer's real due date.

Guys are no different, wasting no time stripping from even short-sleeve shirts to expose those wife-beaters, which they seem to take pride in sporting. The color of choice is almost always white. Some go as far as breaking out the sandals this early in the year—the ones that look like the bottom half of a tennis-shoe... But then they defeat the whole purpose with socks.

89 degrees. 7:45 in the evening. Even at this hour, the windows of sedans and coupes are rolled down as far as they can go, and the cloth coverings of almost every cabriolet and ragtop are hidden somewhere in the back of the vehicles allowing the drivers to get an extra dose of that thick Chocolate City air.

Jaye sat watching this pre-summer scene from the roof of Black Girl Art Gallery where he'd been all day with his chin in his hands, and his head. . . somewhere in New Jersey. He took his time getting up from his seat on the rooftop of the gallery. He was comfortable up there. It was peaceful. He could sit up there forever, alone, and just watch the world beneath him. He'd be safer that way.

But he stood up anyway, stretched, and with a deep breath cleared his mind of the thoughts that filled it. This was supposed to be his big day—the grand opening weekend of Black Girl Art Gallery. *His* gallery. He was supposed to be happy. So he took off the sad mask and threw on the happy-to-meet-you face for the newspaper reporters, magazine journalists, and photographers. He had interviews to do, quotes to give, and pictures to take. Misery had no place at this party. Or at least it wasn't given an invitation.

Before he could get completely down the stairs and onto the gallery's main floor, he noticed that the place was covered with press who flooded the inside and front entrance trying to get pictures and quotations from the two young owners. He made his way over to Keyon who actually enjoyed entertaining them.

"I need to talk to you for'minute."

"Wait," Keyon told him, and continued his quotable speech: "You see, the art world *loves* to put people in a box. They want to applaud those who fit a stereotype. Well..." he said, "they gon' have to heckle us."

The people who heard him laughed. One female reporter's voice rose above the laughter, "Yeah right! Boo *you?*" as if she would fight the person who dared to heckle.

Keyon was Jaye's partner. Best friend. Almost twelve years ago, Jaye walked into his new living quarters for the first time at the Corcoran College of Art and Design in DC only to find a Boston native standing in the living room that almost looked just like him—a pair of crisp white Nikes, blue jeans, and a plain white t-shirt decorated his frame too. Even their hair was similar—cuts close, slightly faded and shaped up. His roommate stood just over six feet too, and had a similar lean build. He was a bit lighter in complexion though, and his eyes were naturally narrow and dark. They were both at the prestigious fine art institute to study the same thing—painting.

"I really need to talk to you for'minute," Jaye whispered again.

"One moment," Keyon said to the reporters. He turned to Jaye and asked, "What is it?"

Jaye sighed. "I'm sorry, but I'm not feelin' this."

"Feelin' what?"

"*This*, man," he said, referring to the atmosphere. "I'm not in the mood to deal with all these people right now."

Keyon sighed. "Look... This is the first night of the biggest weekend of your life. You can't let some..." He searched for the word: "*Stuff*," he said, "mess this up for you, man. Come on. Look at this."

Jaye looked around. Everybody was talking about the great art they saw:

“These guys have basically begun a new movement in the art world. Their work is brilliant!” one person said.

“They’re more than just modern day neo-expressionists,” another person said. “They haven’t quite found a name for them yet—they’re style. I don’t know what to call ‘em, but they’re great!”

And not only were they talking, but they were taking pictures, jotting notes, trying to analyze and interpret the works... Keyon Braxten and JayMahr Cobain were the talk of the art world.

Jaye took Keyon’s advice; this was his big night and there was no time for misery.

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right, man. I can’t let this hinder me from enjoying my success.”

“That’s right,” Keyon said. “You gotta get it together. There’s gonna be tons of people in here this weekend. They’re here to see you,” he teased, trying to cheer his friend up.

Jaye tried to smile.

“Now come on. You got some reporters to talk to.” Keyon threw his arm around Jaye’s neck and guided him over to a swarm of media people.

Just like every other newspaper, journal, and magazine, *FACE Magazine*, a lifestyle, culture and entertainment publication, had sent their best writer to cover the opening of Black Girl.

“I fucking *bate* Georgetown,” she said to herself aloud as she circled the block for the fourth time realizing that she should’ve taken a cab.

She leaned over so she could get a better look out the passenger’s side window.

“Scuze me, are you coming out?” she asked a wealthy white guy sitting in a Lexus.

The guy nodded, and no sooner than he did, a woman with similar blue eyes and blond hair got in on the passenger’s side.

“Thank God,” the young journalist sighed. And luckily for her, the two-hour parking rule was almost set to expire. She had seen all those people inside the gallery when she drove by and immediately doubted that she’d be able to get what she wanted

if she had been limited to a time frame like that.

The guy moved and the journalist in her clean-for-the-summer-weather, champagne-colored coupe prepared to take his space. She threw her hand up thanking him as he drove off.

The place was quite large inside, so everybody had elbowroom, but that was about all they were allowed. She was immediately taken by some of the pieces, but she was reminded by the sound of cameras and rude writers to snap out of admiring the work and start working on her story. She had taken more than thirty pictures already, but all of them had been of the art; the rest were of the celebrities that were scattered about the place. No shots were taken of the owners; she hadn't any quotations either.

In the front, she saw two guys posing with the mayor of DC. She assumed that they were the men of the night. She snapped several good pictures of them.

She watched.

The guys were smiling, talking to the reporters, posing for pictures, and one of them was even signing autographs.

She watched.

After several photos were taken, the huge smile that covered the face of the darker complected guy disappeared as he separated himself from his friend and the politician. Most, actually all of the media people were still trying to talk to the mayor and the other owner; the one who had unknowingly revealed to the *FACE* journalist that his I-am-so-happy-to-be-here attitude was a fake made his way by several reporters and proceeded toward the front entrance.

She kept watching.

He went out, so she decided to follow him. When she got outside, she looked to the left, then to the right. Across the street. He was nowhere to be found.

"Damn," she said, thinking that she had lost him.

She wanted to go back, but the journalist inside of her wanted to find him. Investigate a little bit. She walked to the left, slowly. When she got to an intersection, an alley-looking spot, there he was—sitting on a milk crate with his chin on his fists. She hardly needed a full three seconds to examine him well



enough to describe him to the police if need be. He had smooth, dark brown skin. His frame was well structured; he was tall, she could tell that much. His eyes were dark and his brows were even darker, and they were thick but naturally neat. His eyelashes were long, which made him appear even more innocent than he would have otherwise. He had full, soft lips that were accentuated by a low trimmed mustache, chin hair, and just enough facial hair to make side burns, but hardly enough for a full beard. His hair on his head was kept in a curly bush about a half-inch high, but purposely uncombed because of the style.

He wore a canary yellow button-up shirt un-tucked, and blue jeans made for wearing with boots, which fell perfectly over his white sneakers. Other than his watch, he wore no jewelry.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not answering any questions right now,” he said, sensing her presence without having to look up.

This made her even more curious. She knew that she should’ve just left him alone and gone back inside the gallery, but again, the journalistic side of her took over.

“May I at least just ask you one thing?”

“You just did,” he responded.

He was sarcastic she noticed. She said, “That didn’t count.”

With frustration covering his face, he said, “My name is Jaye Cobain, I’m from East Orange, New Jersey. I...”

“Whoa... Wait,” she cut in. “I do need to know that stuff, but that’s not what I wanted to ask you.”

He said to her nicely, as he finally looked up to see who was bothering him, “I would really like to be alone right now. Just for a minute.”

She was the complexion of a roasted peanut. Blessed with a five-foot, seven-inch stature and thickness proportioned only in the right places. Her eyes: brown. Her hair: curly and brown and very short, especially now because of the heat. Lots of ethnic looking costume jewelry hung from her wrists, neck and ears, complimenting the outfit—a baby blue, knee length, summer skirt made of a thin fabric that caused it to cling nicely to her hips and hind parts, and a blouse that fitted likewise.

When he looked at her—even for just that short amount

of time—he noticed each and every one of those features, but had no problem convincing himself to care less. His mind was preoccupied with other things.

“Just give me ten minutes,” he said to her. “I’ll be back inside. Just... I need some time alone right now.”

“I see,” she said, feeling sympathetic and not understanding why, but really wanting to know what was bothering him.

She came close to meeting his demands and walking away. But she couldn’t. “I saw you inside and I noticed that ahh... You weren’t exactly *into* this like your friend. I just came out here because I was curious as to why,” she admitted. “That’s all.”

He didn’t say anything.

“But if you really don’t feel like talking about anything right now, I’ll have to respect that.”

Maybe there was a part of her that followed him because she was genuinely concerned for the stranger. But only part of that could be true; the other part, which was her main reason, had to do with her job and the story she had to get. Her boss was always talking about getting the first scoop, and she almost always obliged.

She only stood in front of him for a second, then she allowed the human side of her to take over and she began to walk away.

He sighed. “I apologize,” he said.

She turned around and said, “Excuse me?”

“I need to work on my PR. I’m sorry. I’m not used to this.”

“That’s okay,” she said, keeping a nonchalant demeanor.

He reached to his left and grabbed another milk crate like the one he was sitting on and placed it in front of him—his way of inviting her to sit.

She took him up on his offer by simply walking back and sitting on the makeshift chair adjacent to him.

He reintroduced himself by simply saying, “Jaye.”

“Irony,” was all she said about the coincidence that: “My name is J. J. Llaureano. *FACE Magazine*.” She stuck her hand out for him to shake.

Jaye, still not smiling or looking sociable in any way, returned the shake and said, “Nice to meet you.”

“That was convincing,” she mumbled sarcastically, not joking at all.

He didn’t respond.

“So,” she said, “What’s bothering you so much that you had to take a timeout from probably the biggest night of your life?”

Jaye thought about it. He thought about the truth—why he was really sitting outside on a crate pouting when dozens of media folk and celebrities had come out to meet and congratulate him and his friend on their success. Then he realized who the woman sitting in front of him was—a journalist. One of *them*.

“I’m just...” he started. He looked up at her and she was listening attentively. “I’m just really stressed out about this whole... This whole thing,” he said. “I gotta keep sayin’ shit over and over and over and... I’m not a celebrity, y’know? And I never wanted to be one. I am a *visual* artist. I prefer to be seen and not heard. My art speaks for me.” He stopped for a moment and gathered his thoughts. “I just came out here to get myself together. I don’t wanna go back in there.”

The details of his elaborate excuse for being outside were true—but only partially. A smirk appeared on J’s face because she knew—she could look at him and tell—that his lack of love for limelight wasn’t holding that much weight. It was something more, something heavier. But she neglected to go “journalist” on him. She just said, “You better consider yourself lucky. We usually wait ‘til artists die to give ‘em this much recognition.”

He smiled.

“There it is,” she said, seeing him smile for the first time. “Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“It wasn’t.” He looked down, hating that he admitted that. “You are ruining my mad time. I’m supposed to be mad right now.”

“No. You’re *supposed to be* your ass in *there* enjoying yourself and talking to some other people like me.”

“I know, but I don’t feel like it.”

She nodded. She couldn’t make him go back inside if he

didn't want to.

"Okay," she said. "Well... You know what usually helps me clear my mind when I'm stressed out?"

"What?"

"I walk."

He looked at her—straight into her eyes.

"That's it," she said. She smiled.

Now Jaye was smiling. Again.

"Wanna go for a walk?"

8:27 a.m. She had to *leave*.

She looked at the digital clock on the nightstand as the last of three big red numbers turned into a seven.

*I gotta get outta here.*

The *last* thing she needed to do was fall asleep.

Get comfortable.

She turned over slowly to see if he was asleep. His back was to her just as hers was to his seconds ago.

*I gotta get outta here*, she thought.

She covered her face with both of her hands and whispered, "I gotta get outta here."

He heard the whisper. She had to get out of there. She was going to leave? She was going to get up and leave without even saying goodbye. Without even bothering to talk to him again. Without even ever seeing him again.

*Who is she? What is she?* He thought.

Thoughts about her went through his head; he didn't know what to think of this woman. Was she some type of harlot or something who was used to this—sleeping with guys and leaving? She could've been.

She could've been a completely innocent woman who just so happened to fall victim to his long sad face the night before. She could've been that too.

Or maybe she was neither. Maybe she was neither a slut nor a saint. Maybe she had just made a mistake too. Got caught up in the moment too.

So he said, "I'm sorry."

She lay on her back looking at the ceiling at the rotating

ceiling fan. A grimace was on her face after he said that. What was he apologizing for?

He said, "I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that. I apologize."

This was strange. The grimace remained. "Taken advantage of" was a new one. That was a line she had never heard before.

She remembered asking him as they crossed the intersection of 29th and M, "Why did you decide to move back to Jersey if you had things going for you here?" She inquired about his post-college life.

He sighed as he thought about it.

"My mother. And my little sister." He thought about her and smiled. "Meka." He shook his head as he thought about Meka, a nickname for TaMeka. "I don't know. I felt I needed to be there for her. And my mother still needed help with a lot of things. She was working two jobs. I needed to be there. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself had I gone off to New York to pursue a career in art. That's what I was supposed to do," he said. "But I don't regret moving back home. I was there for Meka. She needed that." He thought about what he had said and added, "I needed it too. She keeps me grounded."

They talked about music.

Talked about food.

About places they wanted to go. Why they wanted to go there.

Life.

They talked about everything but Black Girl. He didn't want to, and though she was supposed to, she didn't.

*Who is this guy?* She thought. He didn't seem like the type who would purposely take advantage of a person, especially a woman considering how he talked about his mother and sister. So for a moment she actually considered accepting his apology. But then again, he didn't seem like the type who would sleep with a woman after knowing her for less than a day either.

"You didn't take advantage of me," she said.

"What?"

"I said you didn't take advantage of me."

Silence smothered the room.

“Look, you don’t have any... diseases or anything like that or nothin’, do you?”

“No,” he said. “Do you?”

She shook her head implying that she didn’t. “No,” she replied. She sat up, avoiding eye contact with him. “I gotta go,” she said as she began to put her clothes on.

“Leaving? But where’re you goin’? It’s...” He looked around for a clock to prove that it was a bad time to be leaving. “It’s like 8:30 in the morn-”

“I know what time it is,” she snapped.

She didn’t mean to sound like she had an attitude. But then again, she really didn’t care; she just needed to leave.

“This was a mistake and I am *really* sorry.”

*Why does he keep saying that?*

So she wouldn’t seem cold, she said, “Me too. That’s why I have to leave.”

“So when do you plan to get your story?”

She’d forgotten about that. “I’ll worry about that,” she told him.

He sighed and gently said, “Look. I think we should start over,” after noticing how curt she was being.

*What?!*

She definitely needed to get out. The crazy apology was one thing, but now he was talking about starting over?

*Start what over?*

He followed her with the sheet from his king sized bed wrapped around his waist. She was already down the steps and standing by the front door.

“Hi,” he said with a serious look on his face. “I’m Jaye Cobain.” He extended his hand for a shake. “And you are?”

“What are you doing?”

“And you are?” he asked again, ignoring her question.

She sighed, reluctant to give in. She was stubborn.

She looked at his hand and thought about whether she should give him hers. Still reluctant, she put her hand in his and said, “J. J. LaLaureano.”

There was an uncomfortable silence after her hesitant reintroduction.

“So what now?” she asked.

He sighed and said, “I don’t know. I mean... we got off to a rough start.”

She listened to him.

“And I apologize again for my part in that.” He looked at her. “But... I can’t... I wouldn’t even be able to live with myself if I allowed you to just walk out and... never talk to you again, or see you again. I’m just not that type of person.”

She wondered what type of person he really was. He was so confusing.

Jaye really wasn’t big on bad first impressions. People saw him as this handsome, intelligent, cordial, and respectable guy. And he was. But a bone had just been thrown into his neat little closet, and quite frankly, he wasn’t too pleased with that. So he did what any respectable man would do—he tried to clean it up.

After taking a few seconds to think about the situation, she said, “I yah... I feel what you’re sayin’.” She nodded her head. “Honestly, I would’ve just left and probably beaten myself up about this later, but ah... I see what you’re saying.”

He looked down at himself and became embarrassed after realizing his “attire.”

She fought off a smile, and then asked, “So what now?”

He shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know. I... I don’t know.”

That uncomfortable silence covered the room again.

“Friends?” he suggested.

“*Friends?*” she asked, like that was the first, or maybe second time she’d heard such an insulting word.

“You know—friends. Be friends. Like *Friends*,” he said.

“Friends.” It even sounded funny after saying it so much.

“So?”

“And this is totally platonic?”

“Platonic,” he confirmed, optimistically. “Yes.”

She thought about it. “Platonic,” she said again. That was another funny sounding, *new* word. “Platonic,” she repeated. It felt more uncomfortable the more she said it.

She knew what friends were and she knew what platonic meant. But what she didn’t understand was how or even why the two of them would incorporate either of those words into their lives with regard to each other.

So she told him, “Honestly? I really don’t think that a friendship between us would work out.”

“Why?”

“Because.” She sighed. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to do something like that after something like this.” She didn’t really know what to call it.

“Have you ever tried?”

She didn’t have to think about it, but she hesitated to answer as if she did.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Then how do you know it won’t work?” he asked.

“Because I know...”

“You scared?”

“Scared of what?”

“Scared that it might.”

She said, “I just know it won’t. Okay?”

She was irritated now, and uncomfortable.

“Can you open the door, please?”

He looked at her, almost trying to see if she was serious.

She was.

A part of him was upset. Another part disappointed—in himself. A third part: angry—with her. He was embarrassed. But with all those parts put together, he still couldn’t do anything about her decision. So he pulled the door open and let her walk out. He didn’t even look at her one last time.





Who is Jaye Cobain?”

“What?” was all J could say as she tried to buy herself some time to think of a lie to tell her friend who sat on the couch staring across the room awaiting an answer to her question.

J walked into her house that morning after her night out, dropped her keys into her open purse, then tossed the purse onto the couch as she made her way upstairs to the bathroom, stripping. She washed away the faint smell of *Contradiction*. He wore only enough that night to be smelled by a hug recipient. Calvin Klein was all over her.

J bought herself three, maybe even five seconds when she asked, “What?” to the question Ty asked.

“Right here in the paper,” Ty said, holding up the Arts section. “I’ve heard that name Jaye Cobain and... What’s the other one?” She searched the paper to find the name.

“Keyon Braxten,” J’s other friend, Kenya, answered. “They just opened up a gallery in Georgetown.” Kenya continued flipping through the pages of the latest *FACE Magazine* she’d picked up from J’s coffee table.

“You know them?” Ty asked her.

“Well we have the same publicist. I bought some art from them once, about a year ago.” She turned another page and said, “Real nice guys.”

“And cute too,” Ty added, handing Kenya the newspaper so she could see the picture.

J stood in the kitchen listening to the conversation, wanting to say something only so she wouldn’t look like she wasn’t saying anything. But she really wasn’t in the mood. Her friends were at her house in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of DC. The three of them had planned to hang out that Sunday because they rarely saw each other these days. Tylia Aldridge worked a few miles north of DC toward Baltimore and she’d just started a practice with another psychotherapist, so she almost never had time. And Kenya Shaw was a music business executive; she ran a burgeoning independent record company.

J was two years younger than Ty and a year older than Kenya, and the three had virtually been sisters for the past ten years or so. They were the only family J had in the area, so she valued her relationship with them.

But despite the fact that they were family and knew more about her than she probably knew of herself, last night was a secret. Normally, she wouldn’t care if they knew. Sometimes she would even tell them a story like this as if to brag about a conquest—‘cause that’s what guys were to her: conquests. But this time she didn’t feel like it. She didn’t feel proud. It felt more like a mistake. She might’ve even been embarrassed.

“J, didn’t you go to the opening last night?” Kenya asked.

J continued searching the refrigerator for something and acting as if she didn’t hear her.

“J,” she called again.

J stood up straight with a small apple juice bottle in her hand and said, “Huh?”

“I said didn’t you go to this gallery opening last night?”

“You interviewed them?” Ty asked.

J sipped her drink and thought fast. “Yeah, I went,” she said.

They waited for her to say more. Ty even asked, “And?”

J was actually nervous. She started tapping her hand on the counter in the kitchen. “And,” she said. “And it was nice.”

Ty looked at Kenya who noticed too, but neither knew what they noticed. Now they were confused.

“The hell is wrong with you?” Kenya asked J.

She sighed. She grabbed up her apple juice from the counter and walked toward the living room where her friends sat.

“Nothing,” she lied.

“Jesenia,” Ty said, noticing the lie. She called J by her full first name. Nobody ever called her by that name except her mother.

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Ty concluded, “So it is something.”

“Look, it’s nothing. Seriously,” J assured. “What ya’ll tryin’ to eat?”

Neither answered and neither planned to answer until J told them what was wrong. So they all sat there in silence. J, now relaxed on the couch pretending to care about what might be on TV, flipped through cable channels. Ty finished reading the article about Jaye and Keyon. And Kenya continued looking through the magazine.

Sick of the silence, J sighed and then blurted, “Something happened.”

They let her finish.

“I was gonna tell you. Later,” she said. “It was an accident.”

“What was an accident?” Ty asked.

J furrowed her brow, thinking about how she was going to put this. She didn’t want it to sound like what it really was, but there really wasn’t any other way to package it. It was what it was.

“I was with him last night,” she admitted, uncomfortably.

Ty asked, “With who?”

J thought about him: one second, she remembered watching him leave the gallery; the next second, she remembered finding him on a milk crate; the third second she was sitting in front of him; the fourth, they were strolling along the streets of Georgetown. And by the time ten seconds had gone by, she still hadn’t figured out how exactly, from the sidewalk that night, she ended up in his bed that morning.

“Jaye,” she answered. “I was with him last night.”

Ty looked confused.

Kenya was shocked. She even had trouble exhaling. She scratched her head and asked, “Ahh... Jaye *Cobain*?”

J nodded. “And it’s crazy... You know one-night stands ain’t my thing.”

“They aren’t?” Kenya asked, joking—a little bit.

J shot her what was supposed to be a scornful glare, but she couldn’t help but crack a smile at the joke herself. She thought about the situation for a moment as the smile slid from her face. She said, “I don’t regret it though.” She looked at the floor and not at her friends.

“Should I even ask why?” Kenya said, thinking that J would say something about the goodness of the experience with the chocolate Adonis.

“Well...” J thought and answered honestly, “I noticed that he looked miserable. Upset about something. I wanted to cheer him up.”

Kenya said, “Yeah, I bet you cheered him up aw’right.”

Finally, the laughter had come into their conversation. They joked about the situation now, even though J didn’t mean the comment in the way that Kenya thought.

“So what are you now? Like the superwoman of sex or something?” Kenya asked, still laughing. “Do you, like, fly around and make sure the sexual needs of every man are met? You’re like the sex defender of the world.”

J said, haughtily, “Aye, I do what I can.”

“You should advertise,” Kenya said. Then she started

talking like an infomercial: “If you’ve been injured in a car accident, are experiencing the effects of a bad divorce, or have problems getting it up, call ‘1 800 J’ for professional sexual healin’.”

“Hey, that’s an idea,” J said, only partially joking.

They all laughed. Then they sighed concurrently.

“But seriously,” J said. “Something was bothering him. I never found out what it was, but we talked for a while—off the record. Haven’t even written my damn story yet.”

Was it his innocence? His soft-spokenness? His benevolence?

“So you talked to him. Are you gonna talk to him again?” Ty asked. She knew the answer to her question; she just wanted to see if her friend would perhaps surprise her this time.

Though J didn’t go around having one-night stands all the time, she had had similar encounters before—once or twice in college and another time when she was about 23. Truthfully, they weren’t her style. A bit too risky. But even though one-night affairs weren’t very prevalent in her life, she still lived by an unwritten one-night stand rule: she could never intend to be any more to the person than just a one-time hit. So she never spoke to the guys after that night. It just wasn’t right.

“Mmm...” J hummed. “Last night wasn’t supposed to be what it was. But it was,” she said. “I’ve never slept with somebody and then tried to make something of it. What happened last night...” She paused to think. “What happened last night should remain just that—a thing of the past. It is what it is—a one-night stand—and it should be treated as such.”

“Says who?”

Kenya and Ty didn’t quite understand what J had meant when she said that last night wasn’t supposed to be what it was, and they weren’t familiar with this apparent “Rules of a One-Night Stand” book from which J continuously quoted. Neither Kenya nor Ty had had one before, but they were quite sure that there were not actually specific rules that applied to this game. Who said something couldn’t be made out of what was supposed to be nothing?

J said, “That’s just the way it is.”

“That’s just the way it is,” Kenya repeated, almost disappointed about her friend’s whole basis for not talking to the guy again. Knowing J though... she wasn’t surprised.

\* \* \*

Monday morning.

Jaye left the house headed for the gallery. He had planned to get there at ten, but it took him a little longer than usual to get out of bed and dressed this morning. Long weekend. His cell went off as soon as he locked the door. The display showed a picture of Meka, so he immediately answered the phone before it had the chance to ring any longer.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” he asked, not bothering to greet her.

“See, I’m not feeling well and you’re being mean,” she said.

He felt badly about attacking her. “Wha’sup with you?”

“Monthly stuff,” she told him. “Hey, did you get the pictures?”

He smiled. “I got the pictures. I can’t believe Ma let you cut your hair,” he said.

Meka had gone from a typical 16-year-old hairdo—shoulder length, which she usually wore in a ponytail—to a shorter cut, worn down and bent on the ends from the previous night’s wrap. She was chocolate like her brother and had the same dark eyes, same nose and full lips. She pretty much looked like a girl version of him, except she had her mother’s short height.

He still couldn’t believe how grown up his baby sister looked.

“Jaye, she’s the one that cut it for me. She told me you was gon’ be trippin’.”

Jaye just continued walking. He didn’t say anything else about it, but he couldn’t believe how “adult” she was starting to look.

Meka said, “You know I can’t wait to get down there and away from her.”

Jaye smiled thinking about their mother.

“Did she ever nag you like she does me?” she asked.

“I was good,” Jaye said.

“I’m good!” Meka proclaimed. “I got all A’s and two B’s on my report card this time. *And* my drama club gave me an award for best actress.”

“Are you serious?!” Jaye asked, excited. “You didn’t tell me that. That is so good! I’m so proud of you, Meek.”

“Yeah, well, your mother told me that I need to focus more on bringin’ those B’s up instead of playin’ around on the stage. This is my career we’re talkin’ about.”

Jaye smiled at Meka’s comment. “She doesn’t mean any harm.”

“Yeah right.”

Walking the same streets he had a couple nights ago with J brought back memories. Good memories and bad memories. But he was on the phone with his baby sister, so he ignored the fact that he was starting to feel like turning around and going back home.

“I can’t wait for you to come visit either,” he told her. “I want you to see the gallery in person.”

“I bet it’s nice,” Meka said. “The walls aren’t white, are they?”

He smiled and said, “Gray.”

“Yeah, you never liked plain white walls.”

“Nope,” he confirmed. “Only white canvases.”

Meka sighed and said, “So... How are *you* doing?”

“I’m cool,” he said, now standing outside of the gallery. He had answered quickly, almost missing her real question. He thought about what she really meant and he realized that the question wasn’t as surface-level as he thought. He began to understand the tone of her question. He understood what she was asking him. He then said, “I’m... I’m get’n by, Meek.”

Though Meka couldn’t see him, she saw right through him. She only asked how he was doing just to hear what he would say. She knew the answer to her question just by how he acted—his tone. She knew he wasn’t “cool.” And she simply settled for the answer, “Get’n by.”



Kayona Ebony Brown

She said, “Okay, Jaye.”

He stood there listening to the silence over the phone, hating the fact that it was interrupted by the sound of buses and cars and walkers-by.

She said, “Look, that’s my other line...”

“I thought you were sick.”

“I never said that.” She laughed and said, “Bye Jaye.”

“Bye TaMeka.”

Jaye walked in and greeted his potential customers and window shoppers as he made his way to the back to his office. This was his first real “workday.”

“Good morning Mr. Cobain. You have...”

“Hold up. Wait,” he said. “I told you that you can call me Jaye. Mr. Cobain is my grandfather,” he said to his gallery manager.

Linda was a 34-year-old with seven years of motherhood experience and fifteen years of office management expertise. She was new to art, but she had already proven to Jaye and Keyon that she was able and willing to be more than just a helping-hand in Black Girl. Every minute they were there that hectic opening weekend she was there with them.

She smiled and said, “I’m sorry. *Jaye*. You have two messages. Your publicist called. Ebony Brown is coming Thursday. And Meka called. She said to call her back...”

“I just talked to her,” he informed. He smiled at the thought of Meka.

“Hi. May I help you?” Linda asked, looking past Jaye at whom she thought was an approaching patron.

He hadn’t noticed that someone was approaching the desk from behind him. He looked back just as J said, “No. I’ve found what I was looking for,” referring to him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, continuing his walk toward his office. “You need to get somethin’ for your little magazine?”

She followed him.

“No.” She waited until they got behind the door to say the rest. “I don’t need anything for the magazine. Thank you.”

He didn’t say anything to her. He wanted to look like he

was busy, so he stood up behind his desk and began fumbling through some papers. He didn't really want to look at her. He was embarrassed because he felt he had played himself by asking her to be friends. He realized how stupid it must've sounded.

She noticed that he had cut the cute little bush she remembered from the other night; now he was nearly bald.

"Short hair is a good look for you."

"So why are you here again?" he asked.

She just stood looking at him, waiting for him to look up from the desk. After a few seconds of silence, he looked at her to see what was taking her so long to answer, or leave.

"Can we talk?"

He looked at her as if he were expecting a punch line.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Well I... I want to apologize to you," she said. "For the way I acted the other day."

He looked down at the desk again as if a response might've been there on one of those papers. He thought about it.

"Apology accepted."

"Look, I wanna give this thing a try," she said. "If you still do."

He looked at her trying to see if he could detect an ulterior motive in her eyes; he tried to decipher the reason for her visit. He couldn't tell whether it carried the same weight in sincerity as his proposition or whether she had changed her mind for some other reason.

He thought about it as he looked back down at the desk.

"That's okay." He looked back up at her: "Shit happens," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm a big boy. I can live with that." He had grown to accept his mistake. "We ain't gotta be cool."

She had come to the gallery not expecting to really make a long-term friend, but to simply be able to say to herself—and Kenya—that she had tried. She was willing to try it.

"I know we don't have to be," she said. "But come on, it's worth a try. Can we give it a try?"

He didn't know what to think of her visit, but he didn't want to be a part of whatever her reason was for changing her mind.

“No thank you.”

She was sure he would still be that nice, guilty guy from the other day who would do anything to erase the thought of something like this out of his mind. Apparently, she was wrong.

“So what are you saying?”

He said, “I'm saying... that I'm not interested in a friendship—in anything—with you. Anymore.”

His comment had insulted her and he could see the excuse-the-hell-outta-me look on her face, so he said: “Look, you were right—a friendship between us would never work.” He waited for her to respond. She didn't, so he added, “Why even waste our time?”

She knew he was right. But she never had a guy propose friendship though. What was friendship like? Where would it go? She was so curious to know. But she wasn't going to find out now.

“Look... I have a lot of work to do here.” His way of telling her to leave. He was finished talking about a friendship that was never going to happen. It was time to move on.

**K**enya's Memorial Day cookout had officially begun two hours ago and already the place was nearing crowded. Guests occupied the chairs—drinking, talking, and eating. Caterers worked the grills, preparing food for the people that were there and the ones expected to come, and the bartenders were already mixing up drinks that consisted of hard liquor and tropical fruits even though it was just after 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

“Jaye. Keyon,” Kenya said as she made her way over to them. Her long, thick, dark brown hair flowed like the girls' in the commercials, and her milk chocolate complexion was flawless. She wore a summer dress that showed off just enough of her fairly fit frame, and the heels on her sandals boosted her to 5'6”.

Jaye took her hand and said, “Kenya, it's nice to see you again.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Keyon agreed as he gave her a hug and kiss too. “When are you coming to the gallery to spend some more money?”

She smiled and said, "I'll be there, believe me." She saw Ty and signaled for her to come over. "I made plans to go this Thursday, but I gotta go outta town."

Keyon watched Kenya's friend as she made her way over to them with a smile decorating her delightful face.

"This is Ty," Kenya said, placing her hand on Ty's shoulder as soon as she approached. "One of my best friends. Ty this is..."

"Keyon," he said taking Ty's hand. He was immediately taken. He noticed Ty's naked ring finger. He also noticed that she had a gorgeous golden complexion almost the color of honey. He noticed that she wasn't thin, but couldn't be considered heavyset either; her height was average too. He noticed her naturally curly black hair, which she wore pinned to the back, and her beautiful baby-like adorable face that seemed to stand out because of the hairstyle. She wore little make-up. Not much jewelry. And all the right colors to make her glow. Breathtaking.

She shook his hand and said, "Nice to meet you," while still smiling.

"The guys from the newspaper," Kenya reminded.

"Oh yeah!" Ty remembered. "The artists. Okay."

"I'm Jaye," he said, shaking her hand. "Nice to meet you."

She examined Jaye since she already knew something about him. He was beautiful. That was the only word that could come to her mind to describe him. It had nothing to do with his physical appearance, though physically he was attractive; she was going by his energy and aura. She got a very good vibe from him. Both of the guys.

Kenya said, "There's tons of food in the back—burgers, seafood... Help yourself," she said to them. "I gotta make my rounds."

"Okay," Jaye said, smiling.

Kenya walked off and when he looked back at Keyon, he was indulged in conversation with Ty already.

He went to the back where most of the guests were—dancing to the music as the DJ mixed it up, eating and drinking, and conversing with others whom they had just met or hadn't

seen since mayba last year's cookout. He decided to take Kenya's advice and get a plate, but before he made it over to where the food was, he saw *her* across the yard talking to a guy. The guy was awkwardly tall and lean like a basketball player, but not one Jaye recognized. And he looked older than her. At least ten years older than her.

He walked over to the buffet with his mind already made up. He glanced over at J and the guy who were just feet away from the food; she had her back turned so she didn't notice him. He still couldn't believe her. How self-centered could the woman be? She wasn't interested in anything when he asked, but he was supposed to jump at her offer, which he didn't trust. He didn't understand where this sudden change of heart had come from. But he didn't think too much about it. He really didn't care. And he wouldn't have been surprised if she was only coming back for that story. That's how condescending he assumed she was.

He got a burger, some potato salad, macaroni and cheese, and a soda. He sat at a table where there were already four women sitting, eating, and saying, "That is my *song*" to almost every record the DJ played. The only thing he noticed was the vacant seat; he didn't realize the company he'd be keeping.

As he concentrated on his plate, the conversation between the four women ceased. All eyes were on Jaye. They watched for a moment as he slowly and lazily scooped up some macaroni.

After looking up and noticing that his presence was probably an intrusion on what was probably "girl-talk" amongst the four of them, he spoke:

"Ahh... Hi."

"Hi," one of the women said.

She sat facing him on the opposite side of the table. He immediately assumed that she was the most outspoken of the four. But this was probably only because she spoke first.

"What made you wanna join in on our boring little conversation? Especially with all of these celebrities floatin' around here."

"Ahh... Actually, I just wanted a place to eat. I wasn't tryin' to join in your conversa-"

“It’s okay,” she said, smiling.

He forced a smile.

“I’m Simone,” she said reaching over to get his hand. She immediately reminded him of Queen Latifah. Same face and everything; a hairstyle similar to one Queen would have, and she was sharply dressed. Because he thought Queen was pretty, he thought the same about this girl.

He said, “I’m Jaye Cobain,” and took her hand.

They held hands while exchanging “Nice to meet you” and smiles.

“I’m Heather,” the lady to Simone’s right said. She practically took Jaye’s hand from Simone’s.

“Hi Heather.”

Heather had short hair, a tall frame, a light brown skin tone, and was thin—model thin.

“You wouldn’t happen to be Jay*Mabr* Cobain, the artist, would you?” the lady sitting beside him on the right asked. This lady was obviously older than the others; she looked to be about 40. She too had short hair and light brown skin, but this woman was noticeably short in stature.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s me.”

“Wow. It is a *pleasure* to meet you,” Heather said, more excited now by the guy who was not only incredibly good-looking, but was an incredibly good-looking celebrity of sorts. “I’ve been dying to come to your gallery to see what all the talk is about.”

“I’ve been,” said the woman to his left. She hadn’t said anything the entire time he was there. She was an Asian woman. Chinese-American, actually; she didn’t have an accent.

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I purchased a print called ‘Sunday Morning.’ I have it in my office at work. It’s the only piece I have up.”

Somewhat of a blush struck his face because “Sunday Morning” was one of his pieces.

“Thank you,” he said.

He took another bite of his burger and proceeded to indulge in conversation with the four ladies.

Across the yard, J continued counting to five in her head,

then smiling and nodding. This was now her routine as she stood listening to this guy who wouldn't stop talking. Well, she wasn't actually listening, that's why she had developed this whole "count to five, then nod" routine.

"That's why I usually drive one of my trucks instead of a car. I just got this complex about being low to the ground when I'm riding for a long time."

She sighed and said, "Look, Todd..."

"My name is Sean," he said.

She frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said, almost upset.

"Wow. I thought your name was Todd. You look like a Todd. Are sure your name ain't Todd?"

He didn't find that funny.

"I'm joking with you," she lied. She really had forgotten his name. "Lighten up. Look, I have your number. I'm gonna call you."

He smiled.

"Look, I got some people I need to talk to. I'll call you."

"Okay," he said. "I'll talk to you later, J."

She sighed and walked away. She then looked over at the table where those four women were. And there *he* was—laughing and talking to them. *What could he have to talk about with them?* He seemed like one of those types of guys, she thought—the type that has women falling all over him. Little did they know. *Stupid ass bitches.*

"I'm Lisa Tsung," the Chinese woman said, shaking his hand. "CEO of L. Tsung Entertainment. We're an artist management company."

"Pretty successful, huh?"

"Very," she said. "We represent four multi-platinum bands, three rappers, and countless singers."

"Mm," he hummed, impressed by what he'd heard.

"Which is why you *must* give me a *personal* tour of your gallery someday," she said, handing him a business card with her personal phone number on the back. "I have a few walls that are in desperate need of redecorating. And what better way to



decorate than with the work of America's premier artist."

"I wouldn't say all that," Jaye replied, modestly.

"I would," the older one said. "I've been dying to get to DC so I can visit."

"You should," he said. "My partner and I would love to have your business."

"Your partner," Heather said. "Is he *half* as fine as you are?"

Jaye blushed. "I don't... I don't know..."

"Are you single?" Simone asked. "I mean I'm just asking."

"Ahh... Yeah. I am."

"You mean to tell me that with all this success you've been having lately," Heather said, "and as *fine* as you are... You haven't been snatched up yet?"

Blushing more, he said, "Can't... say that I have."

"That's too bad," Lisa said with a phony look of pity mixed with seduction on her face. "What are you doing later?"

J went over to the bar area and got another bottle of Smirnoff Ice. She drank it straight from the bottle as she reluctantly glanced over at the table where Jaye sat with the women—all of who seemed to be taken by every word that left his mouth.

*Bastard.*

She couldn't believe what he had done. She had gone to his gallery—used her lunch break too—just to extend her hand in friendship. She went out of her way just to apologize to him for being impetuous with her decision to avoid trying to make things more than a one-night thing, and this bastard rejects her. She wasn't used to rejection. And she didn't like it.

"Hey girl. Wha'sup?"

J looked to her left as Salon walked closer expecting an answer to his question. Salon was J's friend from the magazine—the photo editor. He began his internship the same time she did, and both had been employees ever since they finished undergrad.

Salon epitomized a stereotypical homosexual male—exaggerated femininity: walked with somewhat of a switch, used heavy hand motions when he talked, he loved fashion and was

an expert on what a woman should do with her hair.

“Not a damn thing,” J answered once Salon was closer. “Finally got away from that motor mouth ass guy. He talks *too* damn much.”

Salon laughed. “Girl, I saw you over there talkin’ to him and I wanted to bail you out, but... I didn’t know. I mean he *was* fine as hell.”

“As *hell*,” J agreed. “But I can’t be fuckin’ a brotha who can’t shut the hell up. I don’t wanna hear that shit.”

Salon laughed harder.

J sipped her drink and shook her head, disgusted with the whole situation as she kept her eyes on the women at the table with Jaye.

Out of nowhere, he said, “Oh, I meant to tell you—you are lookin’ *fierce* this evenin’, Ms. Girl.”

J chuckled at the compliment.

“Yes,” he said looking her up and down. “And you are workin’ those shoes, honey.”

“Thank you, Salon.”

She sipped her drink again and inadvertently glanced back at the table. For a few seconds, Salon watched with her.

“Who is that?” he asked. “Your latest prey?”

She shook her head. “No.” She paused for a moment, then said, “*Hell* no.”

She hadn’t told Salon the story of her and Jaye and she hadn’t planned to. Yeah, Salon was close enough to her for her to call him a friend, but she didn’t tell him all of her personal business like she did, say, Kenya and Ty. Salon wasn’t on that level and never would be. Not too many people were.

“He’s... He’s just somebody I know. Nobody special.”

“Mm,” he hummed, pressing his lips together, giving J a “yeah right” look. “Sweetie, we don’t give somebody that’s nobody special *that* much stare.”

“Seriously, he’s nobody.”

“Okay. I have to admit, though—he is definitely eye candy.”

J wasn’t about to deny that.

“Here’s a little FYI,” Salon whispered. “You see that

skinny one with that *old* Toni Braxton cut?”

J looked over and spotted her immediately.

“Her name’s Heather,” he continued. “If I was you and he was just somebody *I* knew... I’d advise him to stay away from her. Ms. Thing is *hot*. She’s burnin’ brothers, okay. And she’ll fuck anything with a pulse, you hear me?”

J simply nodded her head implying that she followed him.

“Better go save your friend ‘fore Ms. Heather gets her claws in him,” he said.

J chortled.

Salon smiled and said, “I gotta go get myself somethin’ to eat, honey. I am *starved*. I’ll talk to you later, girl.”

“See ya,” J said as Salon switched off toward the food.

Salon didn’t know it, but he had given her an idea.

She looked back over at Jaye talking to hot Heather and the gang. The women were all over him. He wasn’t even all that, she thought. And for a moment she hoped things would go for Heather like they had for her the night of the gallery opening. But that could be too good for him; he might wrap it up this time.

“So,” Heather asked. “Do you rent or own?”

Jaye said, “Own. Why?”

“Do you have any kids?” Lisa asked.

“No.”

“Want any?” she asked.

“Of course. One day.”

“You are just too much,” Heather said. “Well I’m looking forward to my trip back to DC to visit you. The gallery, I mean.”

He smiled. The women were a trip.

“Jaye... Where’ve you been?”

He looked up only to see J standing beside him. Smiling. He was so confused.

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” she said, pretending to pick something off of his shirt. She snatched a seat from the table behind her, put it beside him and sat down.

“What?” he said.

All of the women were confused too.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” J said. “I’m Jesenia,” she said, as if everybody at the table should’ve known her.

“Who?” one of the women asked.

She looked at Jaye, smiled and said, “You mean to tell me he’s been sitting here all this time and he didn’t tell you about me?”

“I thought you said you came here with your business partner,” Heather said.

“I’ll see you all later,” the older woman said as she got up from her seat. She could tell that J was not his business partner, so she decided to leave before things got out of hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you Jaye.”

J smiled. One down, three to go.

“Nice to meet you too, Jesenia.”

Still smiling, J said, “I know,” not loud enough for the woman to hear her.

“Call me,” Lisa said to him anyway as she got up and walked away too.

He didn’t know what J thought she was doing, but whatever it was, he liked it.

“So what happened to your partner?” Heather asked. She didn’t believe he even had a partner now.

“Keyon?”

“Could you excuse us for a moment?” J asked the last two women at the table. They seemed as if they were going to be stubborn, so she figured she had to use this assumed “girlfriend” title to her advantage to get them away.

J just continued to stare at them. She gave a look as if she was waiting for them to leave. She even used her hand to shoo them away.

Though they both had J in height, they didn’t want to cause any scenes, so they got up like she asked and left. “I need to check my makeup anyway.” He was fine, but he wasn’t worth fighting over at Kenya Shaw’s party.

J was holding her stomach in laughter as they walked away. Mission accomplished!

Jaye smiled, but he was happy for different reasons.

“Thank you,” he said. “You helped me out.”

“What?” She didn’t quite hear what he’d said. Or at least she didn’t think she did.

He said, “I didn’t want to just walk away, but I didn’t know how to get away from them.”

The smile slowly slid off her face. “Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious.”

Disappointed, she said, “You gotta be fucking kidding me.”

“I’m not playing,” he said, smiling. He understood now what she was trying to do, and how she had actually helped him despite the cock-blocking she thought she was doing.

She looked away, pissed off.

He smiled harder. “But thank you so much, J. You saved me the trouble.”

She was so angry. The only thing she could think of saying to him was: “Fuck you.”

She got up and walked away, very pissed off now.

He shook his head as he watched her walk away. But he started to feel bad about being facetious; she didn’t mean any real harm, and she had helped him out by coming over to the table, even if she didn’t mean it.

He got up and went after her.

“J,” he called.

“What?” she said sharply before turning around.

“Look. I’m sorry,” he said. “And I’m sorry about the other day too, okay. I mean, I didn’t trust your reason for coming back to my gallery.”

She crossed her arms while he spoke.

“So why did you come back?” he asked. “What made you change your mind?”

She looked down at the grass around her open-toe sandals trying to find a way to say this without it sounding like it meant something else.

“Because. I guess...” She looked up at him. “Guess I wanted to know you.”

He felt sincerity for real this time. He nodded his head. He appreciated that answer. He said, “I guess I wouldn’t mind knowing you too.”

She smiled as she thought about all they had been through already and they didn't even know each other.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. She was alright in his book now, and he let her know this in his cool, kind of hood-sophisticated way of speaking, which she found rather sexy: "You ah'ight, J. That was real clever what you did."

She said, "Aye, I'm J."

He said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm J."

He smiled. She had a confidence that was out of this world! "Well look," he said. "Seriously, I wanna thank you. Those women are crazy as hell. Do you know one of them felt me up underneath the table?"

J just laughed at him. She was kind of happy she'd helped him now.

"I feel so violated. It's not funny," he said. He waited until she stopped laughing to say, "You saved me."

She just looked at him. Again, something in those eyes revealed more than he probably knew. He wasn't a bad guy. He wasn't a bad person. He was new.

She said, "Okay. I'll tell you what: I'll let you hang around me for the rest of the day."

"You'd do that for me?" he asked sarcastically.

"I will," she said. "I'll keep the molesters away from you."

"Okay," he said smiling. "And I'll make sure to keep all the tall, charming, retired basketball players away from you."

She laughed. "Deal."



Jaye gripped the steering wheel of his three-week-old, black SUV as he cruised through a yellow light on his way to Home Depot hoping one of those stupid hidden cameras didn't get him.

As Keyon flipped past a basketball sneaker advertisement in the latest edition of Sports Illustrated, he said to Jaye without looking up, "You've been quiet about what's her name." He finally looked over at Jaye who was concentrating on the road in front of him. "J, right?"

Keyon waited for an answer. Kenya's party was more than a month ago; he knew that Jaye and the journalist had patched things up, but how much patching, he didn't know. He wanted Jaye to tell him who this girl was.

"What?" Jaye asked. "What am I supposed to say?"

"You s'pose to tell me *something*."



“S’nothing to tell. I mean... We talk,” Jaye revealed. “Well, we don’t talk like that, but I mean we speak on the phone sometimes. She’s cool.”

“You went out, right?”

“We didn’t go *out*. You make it sound like a date.”

“You went out,” Keyon said. “You left the house and went somewhere with her. You went out!”

“We went to a sports bar,” Jaye said as if the arcade-bar couldn’t possibly be a place people go out to. “We played air hockey, drank beer, and ate Buffalo wings for two hours.” He tried to simplify the night as much as possible. “We’re just cool. That’s it. It’s nothin’.”

Keyon accepted that answer. But he still wanted to know: “What’s she like?”

She was a Chicagoan who wrote about arts and entertainment for a living. She was schooled at the finest HBCU of all Historically Black Universities—The Real HU—Howard University. She traveled a bit because of her job, and she loved it. She drank beer; she liked the way it accompanied some non-special occasions. She didn’t have any kids; he never asked whether she wanted any. She wasn’t religious, but she wasn’t an atheist either. She was single. When the topic came up, she said, “No, I’m not in a relationship thing. And no I don’t wanna be.” He wondered why, but neglected to get too nosy.

Every generic adjective that could describe her came to mind—beautiful, intelligent, funny, outgoing, yada yada yada... Neither of them thought a platonic friendship could be real. But it was. That was good enough though, because anything more would be much too much.

Jaye paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts about her. All he said was, “She cool.”

“Your type?”

Jaye sneered at the question. “Type?” he asked.

He had eliminated that kind of thinking from his mind because right now he didn’t want to be interested in anybody.

“No,” he answered. “She’s not.”

He didn't explain why, and Keyon didn't bothering asking. He just looked back down at his magazine and left the situation alone.

\* \* \*

J was the last to arrive at the restaurant, and she took her seat seeming exhausted.

"Starvin'. I think I'ma get the steak," she said before picking up the menu.

"Steak for lunch?" Kenya asked.

"Yes, steak for lunch. And speaking of lunch," J said. "You remember that guy Sean?"

Ty asked, "The one you kept calling Todd to piss him off?"

"Yeah, well, I found out that he knows how to use his tongue for more than just running his mouth."

Ty looked around to make sure no one overheard what J said.

J sighed and said, "I needed that."

"The guy from my party? I thought you didn't like him?"

"Girl's gotta eat. I'll have the filet mignon with the potatoes," she said to the waiter. "And I want it done well."

Ty stared at J, somewhat embarrassed by her outspokenness. She ordered, "Crab cake, no bread. House salad."

Kenya ordered grilled salmon and asparagus.

"So... How's your man doing?" she asked.

J sighed and gave her friend a look that said that she didn't appreciate the comment.

"Oh, excuse me, your *friend*," Kenya joked. "The one you've been hanging out with."

"Talkin' bout Jaye?" J rolled her eyes. "We don't hangout."

"You say that, but I bet you'd be jealous if he was hangin' out with some other chick?"

“Jealous? Look at me,” she said, arrogantly. “J ain’t got a damn thing to be jealous about. He and I are just friends,” J said. “He can do what he wants, cuz you *know* I’m gon’ do what I want.”

“*Who* you want,” Ty corrected.

“Damn right,” J said.

Kenya and Ty both laughed at their friend. It wasn’t surprising to either one of them because for as long as they had known J, she’d been this way. She called it: “dating like a man.”

“Men do this shit all the time,” she’d say. “They lead you on, get your head all in it and shit, and then what? Fuck you and bounce. Fuck that. I’m gettin’ what I want from these guys and I’m out. I’m doin’ what they do.”

And that’s exactly what she had been doing. J was 30 and hadn’t had a serious relationship since... Well actually, she had never had a serious relationship. And as far as she was concerned, she never would.

“Speaking of which, Ty... How’re things with you and Keyon?” J asked.

Ty smiled. Then she started to turn all pink in the face. She leaned forward and sipped her soda, trying to cover up her giggles and grins.

“Things are good. Great, actually.”

“Mm. *Great*,” J said. “‘Great’ is generally an adjective used to describe...”

“Well I’m using ‘great’ to describe the *friendship* that we’ve established these last couple of weeks,” Ty said. “Nothing sexual.”

J smiled. “So is that the thing now-a-days—friendships?”

“Well I don’t know about everybody else, but Keyon and I ain’t playing no games. If things continue to go the way they’re going, hopefully we’ll have a beautiful and intimate relationship someday.”

“Well excuse me,” J said, smiling, happy for Ty. Playfully, she asked, “Don’t you think you’re moving too fast?”

Ty smiled and said, “Fast? No. You’re just moving too slow. Actually, you’re not moving at all, J.”

The conversation was still light—not as playful anymore, but it hadn't turned into an argument. Kenya simply listened to this conversation, not interrupting, because she wanted to see where this was going.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” J asked.

“It means you're almost middle-aged and you've never had a serious relationship.” She exaggerated J's age to help with her point. “You've finally met a man who obviously likes you, and who you like for reasons other than just sex, but you wanna play this... *stupid* ass game to ‘get all the *brothas* before they get you.’”

Ty shook her head, almost waiting for J to respond. She didn't.

“When are you going to just... just stop being scared and be loved?”

Ty waited again. No response.

“Ask Kenya,” she said. “Love is a wonderful thing, ain't it?”

“A *wonderful* thing,” Kenya agreed, nodding, despite not being in it herself.

“And you're scared that it's gonna hurt you.”

“Love ain't *shit*, okay. I've seen you in relationships—motha-fuckas just downright disrespectin' you, cheatin' and lyin' and shit. I've seen people fall in love and get hurt and I ain't lettin' that shit happen to me.”

“Let me tell you something: love ain't do a damn thing to me,” Ty said. “Love don't hurt people. *People* hurt people.”

J said, “Yeah, well I'm not gonna let *people* hurt me. Okay? I need to wash my hands.”

\* \* \*

“Are you a playa now, Jaye?”

“What?” The question caught him off guard. He had no idea what Meka was talking about, or even where that question had come from. They were barely in the house and she was asking off-the-wall stuff.

She was out of school for the summer and in DC to spend the remainder of her vacation with her brother. After he picked her up from the airport that morning, they went everywhere. She had never been to DC, and he almost showed her the entire city in one day. She met a lot of people he knew.

She said, “You seem to know a lot of women.”

Jaye smiled—modestly though. “I have a lot of female friends,” he said. “But you gotta understand that people treat me a little differently now that they wrote about me in the paper.”

She smiled. She appreciated his humility. She still had questions though.

“That woman who was talking about different tints of blue... She was really into you.”

He said, “Okay,” heading to his bedroom, taking his shoes off. He hadn’t noticed what Meka noticed. All he knew was that the woman was a wiz when it came to interior design and she was going to help him redo his basement. He couldn’t handle a project of that caliber without help.

“So you never answered my question,” Meka said. She was standing at the bedroom door still waiting for answers. He was sitting on the bed taking his socks off.

“No, Meka, I’m not a playa.”

He laughed again because to him that question was funny.

*Me? A playa?* he thought. He couldn’t imagine himself even living such a lifestyle. That wasn’t his thing.

“Then who was that woman?”

“A friend, *Ma*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well that’s who you’re actin’ like,” he said. He got up and put his socks in the hamper, and proceeded barefoot. “She’s a friend.”

Meka didn’t believe that.

“She’s going to be helping me with the basement. She knows a lot more than I do about that stuff.”

He went into the kitchen and washed his hands before opening the refrigerator.

Meka followed him.

“So that J girl that came into the gallery today—who is she?”

He smiled. “You’re a trip,” he said. He knew Meka would inquire more about J. That was her job. “I told you, she’s a friend of mine, too.”

Meka quickly realized that he would probably say she was the friend who was helping him with maybe the living room. “How long ya’ll been *friends*?”

“Mmm... Couple months,” Jaye answered.

“You sure have a lot of friends.”

He said, “I’m a friendly guy.”

“Mm-hmm,” Meka hummed in distrust.

Trying to change the subject quickly, Jaye said, “We’re going to the movies tonight to check out that new Kung-fu joint right?”

But Meka wasn’t off the subject. She said bluntly, “I don’t like her,” referring to J.

Meka was always very straight forward with Jaye. He wasn’t one that read between the lines very well, so when she wanted him to know something, she let him know.

“You don’t even know her,” he said.

“I know I don’t like her,” Meka answered. “She just had this attitude.”

“What attitude? I didn’t notice any attitude.”

“Mm. There’s a lot you don’t notice.”

His sister’s older-than-her-age attitude was always funny to him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked, still smiling.

She was smiling too when she said, “It’s not funny, Jaye. I’m serious.”

“I know you are. I just wanna know what you mean—there’s a lot I don’t notice.”

“I have to point out everything to you,” she said. “I have to look out for you cuz you don’t know no better.”

He laughed.

“You *don’t*,” she insisted.

The smile slowly disappeared from his face. He thought

about what Meka had just said. Once a woman was in, it was easy for her to steal his heart. Well, it wasn't actually stealing because usually he gave it to them willingly.

He smiled to cover up the fact that perhaps Meka knew what she was talking about.

"Look, Meek... I'm not about to be in a relationship with anybody right now," he said. "I'm just not ready for that."

She didn't say anything else to him about the women because she knew why he didn't want to be with anybody at the time. She just stood there watching her brother as he searched inside the refrigerator for God knows what.

"Well I'm glad you're taking this slowly, Jaye. I really am," she said. "Cuz I don't like to see you hurt. You're a nice person. And people know that. These girls," she said, "can see that." She let him think about it for a moment before she added, "But that's okay though. That's what makes you *you*."

He thought about what she was saying and how true it was.

"I don't wanna have to shank one of these broads."

He burst into laughter. He said, "Listen to you." She was funny, but he was happy to hear her passion to be protective of him.

"You know I will," Meka said, smiling.

"Yeah, I'm sure you will, Jersey girl." He was still laughing. "So what do you want to eat tonight?" he asked.

Meka sucked her teeth and said, "I don't know. Won't you get one of your women to come over here and cook for us?"

He closed the refrigerator and grabbed her and started tickling her. "Real funny, big head."

\* \* \*

Dana Mitchell was ten when she met Hasaan Cobain. He was twelve. A boy from around the way—stayed a few blocks up from where she and her family lived in East Orange, New Jersey. They became boyfriend and girlfriend when she was fourteen, and she got pregnant when she was fifteen.

Hasaan had a job at a local barbershop sweeping floors and answering telephones for under-the-counter money, and occasionally he would make a few “runs” for the guy who owned the place. But when Hasaan was going to have a family to take care of, fifty or so dollars a week just wasn’t going to suffice; he needed more money so his girl and new baby could live comfortably. He dropped out of school and took over a couple of corners, which put hundreds of dollars into his pockets every week.

Dana gave birth to a seven-pound baby boy that July. They named him JayMahr Cobain. Hasaan added “mahr” to Jay as reverence to Islam, despite being estranged from the religion most of his life. He had been promoted by the time his son was born, and in just a few years, he grew from a small-time errands boy, to a local dealer, to one of Jersey’s biggest pushers. And though they had an on again off again type of relationship—real rocky—he and Dana were married on a warm summer afternoon.

Several years later, Dana was pregnant again, but Hasaan wouldn’t even see the child born.

He went to a convenience store one Friday night to get milk for Jaye’s breakfast, and Blunts for his.

“You want anything?” he asked Jaye, who sat in the passenger’s seat playing with a plastic water gun.

Jaye looked up at his dad sitting across from him in the driver’s seat. He wanted candy. He wanted popcorn. Soda...

“Don’t spray that stuff. It’ll mess up the leather,” Hasaan warned, as he prepared to run in the store for his grocery.

“I want cand...” Jaye looked over at the side mirror watching the figure get closer by the split-second.

A guy dressed in regular street clothes—black jeans and a red t-shirt with a red bandana around his mouth—walked up to the car. And without saying a word, he lifted a small handgun and shot twice into the driver’s seat. His movements were mechanical. His face was filled with madness. His wrath left blood all over the leather interior. And all over Jaye.

Jaye didn’t understand the severity of what had just happened. But he lifted his little toy gun—disregarding what his father had just told him—aimed it at the goon and shot twice, hoping that it would have the same effect on him as his seemed to have on his father.



It didn't.

For years he didn't cry. Despite years of psychological therapy when he was a boy, it wasn't until he was a freshman in college that it really hit him. That's when he really understood who his father was; he was Hasaan Cobain, the kingpin. It was then he realized *what* his father was—a drug lord. And it was then that he realized his father would never see him become a father. Sometimes he hated his dad for being selfish and bringing death upon himself. Sometimes he just missed him and wished that he could be there to help him be a man. Many nights, he lay in his room at college alone and cried himself to sleep.

**S**o how did you celebrate turning the big 3-0?” J asked, as she walked over and handed him the birthday dinner she’d prepared—fast food burger and fries on a plate.

He sighed as if his day had been too long and took a seat on the floor. He said, “I’m celebratin’ right now. It’s just the day after July 19<sup>th</sup>.”

“None of your girlfriends from Kenya’s party called you up to take you out?”

“Very funny.” He gave a fake smile and mumbled, “Bringin’ up that old stuff.”

Out of sheer curiosity—or maybe just nosiness—J asked, “What’s up with you, Jaye?”

“What do you mean? I couldn’t be better. I’ve got my health. And my hair.” He smiled at his own silliness.

She said, “No, I mean... How come you don’t have a girlfriend?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Girls don’t like me.”

J gave him a look that said she expected the truth. And she knew that wasn’t it.

He said, “I guess I’m...”

She wanted him to say more. He always said very little.

“I don’t know, J. I guess I’m just movin’ really really slow. I ain’t really tryin’ to... get into anything right now, you know.”

J looked at her food, which she hadn’t touched yet, then back over at him. She had another question, but she almost didn’t want to ask. She didn’t know whether he wanted to talk about that right now.

To her, Jaye seemed like the type of guy who would find that woman who was right for him and eventually, one day, get married, have kids, and live happily ever after. She knew men, and this man didn’t seem scared of commitment. She couldn’t imagine Jaye saying that he didn’t want a relationship because he wanted to “play the field some more,” because in that case, he would’ve been trying to take advantage of time he spent with her. But he wasn’t.

She remembered how dejected he seemed when they first met, and there was a part of him that hadn’t seemed to change, as if to have gotten over it—whatever “it” was. She still couldn’t tell whether something had happened to him more recently in his life, or whether his traumatic past was what hindered him from being happy now. All she knew was that he seemed fragile.

As a journalist, J learned to live by the saying: “You’ll never know unless you ask.” So as much as she wanted to know why he felt the way he did, the more she realized that she’d probably never know unless she came out and asked him.

“Why not?”

He picked up his cup and sipped a little bit of lemonade before answering.

“Because I still don’t think I’m ready t...” He sighed. “Relationships can be a bit difficult and I think I need a little more time before I get into another one.”

J said, “Oh. Okay,” as if she were content with that answer, though it really didn’t tell her anything. She wanted to

know why he felt like this. But she decided to separate herself from the *FACE Magazine* employee inside of her. She was going to be patient. She was his friend, so it would only be a matter of time before she knew, anyway. She was going to just let him tell her when he was comfortable.

“I never told you about my girlfriend.” And then he corrected, reluctantly, “*Ex... girlfriend.*”

Obviously, he was comfortable now.

“We started seeing each other... ‘bout a year and a half ago.” He took a sip of the lemonade then sat it back on the floor. “She was perfect. She was the perfect girl: smart, beautiful, funny... And she had picked me,” he said with pride. “She was perfect for me. And everybody thought so. I even told her so—that I had found my perfect woman. I was what you would call ‘head over heels.’” He looked down at the floor between his knees.

“Keyon and I decided that we were gonna open the gallery this year. DC was definitely the place. It was a dream since college,” he said. “Well, Nia—that’s her name; she came here with me to look for a place and everything. I’d asked her to move to DC and she said that she would. My house was supposed to be *ours.*”

He paused again.

“She was supposed to come the day before the gallery opened. She was packed.” He took another sip from his cup. Sighed.

“She came. Came all the way to DC to tell me... that she wanted to be with *him.*”

He hated to talk about this. Every time he thought about it his emotions would get all stirred up. He felt like he should cry. He felt mad. He sometimes felt like if he just threw a few fragile objects across the room he’d feel a little better. But it had been months. He had cried all he was going to cry, and had thrown all he could bare to break. She was gone and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Military guy. I guess she never got over him,” he said. “She asked me if I thought it was possible to love two people. Equally.” He stopped. Then he said, “I told her that I wouldn’t

know. I usually give all of my love to one person.”

J wasn’t used to conversations like this. She wasn’t used to hearing such talk from a man.

“I never said it—out loud, I mean—but Nia was... I don’t think I’ll ever find that again.”

J had to interject: “Jaye, I don’t think anybody’s perfect.”

“Nia was.” And he knew what J sitting across from him was thinking—that if Nia was so perfect then why wasn’t she here? So he added, “She just, she made a choice that... She chose somebody other than me. It was me.”

“Well...” J felt like she had to say something. “Consider it a favor. She let you go, so maybe now you can find somebody that deserves you, and who can love you the way you need to be loved.”

That was all she could come up with.

He appreciated that comment, but nothing could really change his outlook. This was something that he was going to have to overcome on his own. That saying, “Time heals all wounds” hadn’t lived up to its words for him.

He picked up his burger and asked, “So what’s your excuse?” and took a big bite.

“What do you mean?” J asked.

He finished chewing. “I mean, I’ve known you for a minute now and I’ve yet to hear you talk about somebody you’ve been seeing, or somebody you’re interested in, an ex... What’s up?”

“That’s because...”

She had thought about this before—telling Jaye some more things pertaining to her past, personal life and lifestyle, especially since they talked so much. But she always avoided it.

“That’s because I don’t have a man.”

“Why?”

“Because...” she smiled, thinking about how she was going to phrase this: “I don’t think that everything is for everybody—relationships especially. I don’t think that that’s for me.”

A grimace appeared on Jaye’s face; he didn’t understand.

He was a strong believer in love—in man/woman intimate relationships—so it was surprising to hear that somebody else, especially a woman, believed the complete opposite.

“Hold on.” He sat his drink on the floor beside him. “Hold on.”

“What?”

“Hold up. What do you mean you don’t think relationships are for you?”

“I mean...” She finished chewing her food. “Like you said earlier: relationships can be difficult,” she said. “And I’ve seen people get hurt...”

“Wait a minute,” he cut in. “You’ve seen *people*? Haven’t you had some experiences of your own to learn from?”

“Ahh...” She smiled, guiltily, almost ashamed or embarrassed to admit to him the truth. “Well... I’ve never really been in a relationship,” she said.

Of course she had been in relationships before, just not the type sweet little JayMahr was familiar with. J seldom kept guys around for longer than a month—two tops. “Any longer than that,” she’d say, “and they’re ready to start claiming a sistah. Uh uh. I’m not havin’ that.” She didn’t want to be called anybody’s “girl,” and she didn’t like people expecting things from her. She didn’t like those responsibilities.

But she liked sex. Correction—she *loved* sex. And guys were useful; it was especially rewarding when they were constructive—could fix a car, do things around the house, etc. So to avoid the drama of a long, drawn out situation when she was ready to move on to the next best thing, she’d just cut it off four to six weeks into it. None were serious, real, *loving* relationships; none were like those “things” Jaye was used to.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Jaye exclaimed. “Why not?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I guess you can say I’m a bit pessimistic. Pessimistic and reluctant,” she added, smiling. Then the seriousness came back to her face. “It’s hard to... to believe in something you don’t see. Something you’ve *never* seen. It’s hard—virtually impossible—to think something might happen for you if you’ve seen it fail for everybody around you.”

“And that’s how you feel—like it’ll never happen for you?”

She thought for a second.

She looked him in his eyes, fought off a smile and said, “Yes.”

He noticed J’s slight tomboy-like attitude—the pride and the discomfiture that consumed her when they conversed about topics that were beneath the surface. She would cover up her emotions with arrogant, quick-witted responses or jokes. She was very in touch with her masculine side, but he could see right through the façade.

She thought about what she was going to say—how she was going to explain exactly what she felt to him.

“I date,” she said. “I spend time. I talk to guys, and it’s like... outta all the guys I’ve ever spent any amount of time with... none of them have come close to helping me change my mind about the whole relationship thing. Matta’ fact, they contributed to the way I feel now.” She smiled and said, “I won’t *say* ‘never,’” (even though she felt and believed ‘never’). “But I will say that I just... I gotta be convinced. Whoever he is—he gotta make me *want* to change my mind.” She said, “And that’s gotta be a *bellava* man.”

She had told him this much—enough. She had phrased it right and said it in a way that let her friend know what she thought he should know. Of course, certain feelings were left unsaid, but that was only for the best. He was a friend, but he was also one of *them*—a man. He wouldn’t understand her position in the game—because that’s what it was. He wouldn’t understand why she made the moves she made.

“Hm.” Jaye thought about what she had told him; he had one last question. “So do you *want* to be loved?”

J looked at him with somewhat of a smirk on her face. She interpreted the question as meaning, in other words, did she want to keep playing this game with a never-ending story (a wishful belief that she could one day win) or did she want to forfeit—stop playing the game all together. The truth was: she hadn’t really thought about the answer to that question—whether she really wanted to be loved. So she thought quickly right then.

Her answer: “I don’t know. But to be honest with you, I haven’t really been looking for it.”

He could appreciate her honest answer this time though. He looked at her and said, “You don’t have to look for love. All you have to do is wait for it. It’ll come to you.”

They talked until 3 a.m. She gave him a pillow and a blanket so he could sleep on the couch or on the floor in the living room. But he wouldn’t stay.

“I gotta... meet with this artist from San Francisco at eleven,” he said. He was obviously sleepy, because he talked slowly and he kept yawning. “We’ll probably be puttin’ some of his work in the gallery.”

“Okay,” she said. “Good luck with that.” She walked him to the door and opened it. “Guess I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yeah,” he said, standing in the door looking at her. Out of nowhere, he said, “Gimme a hug,” still sounding sleepy.

“What?!”

“Come on. Gimme a hug.” He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight. “I love you,” he said, as innocently as a child would. “You’re a good woman. And a good friend.” His words were innocuous. “And I hope you find somebody that will love and appreciate you.”

She had told him that a man had never loved her. That was sad to him. So he hugged her. Tightly. He wanted her to feel the love he had for her, even though it was nothing more than platonic. He loved her nonetheless.

She was speechless. Embarrassed. She blushed and said, “Thank you, Jaye. You are so sweet.”

He kissed her on her forehead and said, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Hey,” she called, catching him before he could get too far. When he looked back: “The perfect girl?” she said, “She will choose you too.”

He smiled, which made her smile. And then he took off, and she stood in the door and watched until his car was no longer in her neighborhood.

Jaye had touched her that morning. Surprised her. No man had ever told her that they loved her. That meant a lot.





**A**utumn was here. The leaves had already taken it upon themselves to begin jumping from the branches of the trees in a race to see who could get to the sidewalks the quickest. And the weather was nice—wind breaker weather: not *too* cool, but not at all warm.

J had just returned home from a two-day trip to Atlanta. Tired, she virtually dragged her suitcase into the house and dropped it on the floor in her bedroom. She flopped down on the bed and looked over at her answering machine to see if anybody had called while she was away. It wasn't blinking. No calls.

*RIIIIINNNG!*

Just her luck. It was as if the person on the other line was across the street watching and waiting for her to come home.

She noticed a Chicago area code, but didn't recognize the number.

"Hello," she answered with a sigh.

"Hi, may I speak with Jesenia ahh... Llaureano?" a male

asked, as if he were reading her name from a piece of paper or something.

“Who’s calling?” she asked.

“I’m ah... My name is Gavin Lane. Her... Well she’s my sister. Can I leave a message?”

She nearly stopped breathing. It was almost as if everything was in slow motion at that point. It wasn’t that she didn’t know she had a brother; it was just that she had never spoken to or seen him or his... *their* sister before. Her mother didn’t even tell her until she was a senior in high school that she had siblings: a brother her age and a sister two years older. But J didn’t have a relationship with her father, and she didn’t care about some *half* brother and sister. She certainly never bothered to try to get in contact with them.

“Hello?”

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’m ahh... I’m still here. This is J.”

“Oh. Did I catch you at a bad time?” he asked.

“What would’ve been a *good* time?” she joked.

He snickered, relieved that his first impression of her didn’t consist of a bad attitude.

“I know this isn’t exactly the most comfortable thing for you to hear right now.”

*Got that right*, she thought.

“But I decided to stop procrastinating and being scared and just call you,” he said. “I really want to meet you and get to know you. But the other reason why I’m contacting you is to tell you that... Well our father is in the hospital.”

She was silent. She didn’t know what to say to that, or whether she should say anything. She didn’t know whether the news required a comment. Did they want or need something? was what she wanted to know.

“I was calling to let you know, just in case you might’ve... wanted to... I don’t know. I just thought you should know,” he said.

“Well thank you... Gavin... for the thought, but...”

“It’s serious.” He paused for a moment, then he added, “The doctors say they’re gonna have to operate. Just thought

I'd... call you in case you—y'know—might've wanted to pay him a visit. I know he would love to see you."

Her high school graduation was the last time she'd seen him. That was more than twelve years ago.

"Gavin, I don't think so."

"I mean I can't tell you that I know how you feel," he said, "because I don't."

She said, "Yeah, he was there for *you*."

"I can understand if you have some hostilities."

J didn't say anything this time, just sighed.

"If you change your mind, give me a call."

She wrote down his phone numbers—home, work, cell—and hung up the telephone with the same blank look on her face that she had when he introduced himself as her brother.

For hours that evening she thought about it. She contemplated the pros and cons of going to Chicago to visit her father in the hospital. One side of her couldn't care less; the other side wanted to be mature and do the mature thing.

She picked up her phone and called her friend on the other side of the Key Bridge.

"How was your trip?" he asked.

"Oh, it was nice." She had forgotten all about her trip to Atlanta just that quickly. "I was actually calling you to get your opinion on something."

"What is it?" Jaye asked.

"Well..." she sighed. "I yah... I received a call today from..." She even felt funny saying it. "From my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yeah. His name is Gavin."

"So what did he want?"

"Well... He says that Michael—*our* father—is in the hospital. It's serious."

"Oh, wow. Sorry to hear that."

"He wants me to come to Chicago. He thinks Mic... My *father* wants to see me." She stopped again as she thought about it some more.

"Well?"

"Well I wanted to know whether you think I should go."

Jaye knew how she felt about her father; they had talked about this situation time after time. And though he knew she didn't *want* to hear from him that she should go, that's what she *needed* to hear.

He said, "I know it's hard to put the past behind, but that's really what you need to do in a situation like this." Knowing Jaye, she knew what his answer would be—the politically correct one.

"I knew you would say that." She paused for a moment. She had something else to ask him. "Jaye..."

"Yeah."

"Ah... Would you come with me?" She cleared her throat. "I mean... I would feel a lot more comfortable if... if you were there with me."

"Sure," he said without thinking twice.

"Your mother won't mind?"

He smiled. "My mother," he said, knowing that she was referring to Meka. "Very funny."

\* \* \*

Marien Scott was a successful independent filmmaker from St. Louis, Missouri. He had attended Howard University for undergrad where he was a film production major; he and J met the second semester of their junior years. At the time, she was the entertainment news editor for the *Hilltop* and he had just finished a documentary on Black college life, which had been picked up by a cable television network. Nearly every paper in the DC area, college and local, did a story on him. The two of them met when she interviewed him.

Their association now? Fuck buddies. He was the ultimate fuck of fuckable buddies, and had been for at least the past nine years. Marien phoned her that night; he was in town and he wanted to "see" her.

Marien was one of very few guys that knew where J lived. Playas almost never divulge the whereabouts of their living quarters. But see, Marien wasn't being played; they had an agreement—an understanding. An arrangement. They knew

where their relationship stood.

There was a knock on the door around 11:45 that night. She knew who it was. She opened the door without bothering to look through the peephole and inspected him from head to toe as he stood on the other side looking just as good as he wanted. Just like she remembered. He stood about 5'9", and was a cinnamon-colored brother. He worked out, but he wasn't very athletic. He had dark brown eyes, close cut facial hair; the hair on his head was the same. He had on khaki colored cargo pants, a white collarless cotton shirt, a pair of sporty/casual boots, and a three quarter length black leather jacket.

"You gon' let me in or are we just gon' stand here and look at each other all night?"

She smiled and stepped aside so he could come in, then closed the door behind him. She looked at him again; he actually looked *better* than he did the last time she saw him, which was about a year ago. They usually saw each other no more than thrice a year, but when they were together, nothing even mattered. He never asked her if she had a boyfriend, she never asked him whether he had a girl. Their time was their time, and the life they had outside of it was just that—the life *outside*.

He took off his jacket and laid it across the couch. He didn't bother sitting.

"Anything new with you?" he asked.

"Not really. You?" she asked.

"Mm. Workin' on a new movie. That's why I'm in town. I was actually scopin' some places here and in Baltimore where I'll be filming."

Marien had had a few movies do pretty well with the critics, but still no real blockbusters. His last film actually got him some attention in Hollywood and had a few established actors wanting to work with him, so people were looking forward to seeing what he was going to do on this next project.

"It'll prob'ly be comin' out in about a year."

"Oh," she said. "What's this one about?"

"Nothing," he said as he came toward her. "Enough talking."

Nothing else was said. They began kissing and taking off each other's clothes right there as they made their way toward the...

“Steps. Why couldn't you get an apartment like normal people?”

\* \* \*

Elsa, her two brothers, two sisters, and her parents emigrated from Santa Ana, El Salvador when she was thirteen and settled in Chicago, Illinois. For all of her life, she lived the typical lower class lifestyle; her parents did odd jobs here and there, and when she was old enough to work, she didn't have luck finding anything better. On the bright side, she learned to speak English quite fluently, so during high school she found jobs that embraced those abilities.

By the time she was twenty, office work had become her full-time gig. She was a receptionist in a dentist's office—Dr. Michael Lane, D.D.S. She wasn't working there a whole year before she and Dr. Lane were involved in a romantic relationship. Michael was ten years older than Elsa, Black, and married with a daughter. But she was in love with him. So in love that by the very next year, she gave birth to his child.

She named her Jesenia Lorena Llaureano.

Jesenia was Elsa's first and only child. She didn't even believe she could have children; she had miscarried three times before giving birth to a healthy baby girl. The only disadvantage to this dream come true was having to raise this child by herself, which she wasn't prepared mentally or financially to do. Michael already had a family prior to his affair with Elsa and he wasn't interested in another one. Sometimes though, he'd make a birthday party or some holiday if it was convenient, or maybe a Monday if he felt like he could spare a little of his time. But it was hardly *enough* time for Jesenia to get to know him—know who he really was. So by the time she was fifteen, she stopped caring. As far as she was concerned, she didn't have a father. She had gone from calling him “Poppa,” to “Pop,” and eventually “Michael.” Before long. . . she didn't call him at all.

\* \* \*

They arrived in Chicago the next day just after 7 p.m., and at her mother's house by 8. Well it wasn't actually a house; she lived in an apartment, the same apartment she had been in since J was about thirteen. And the place looked the exact same as it had all those years ago. As J walked by the red box where the fire extinguisher *should've* been, she sighed and shook her head in repugnance as she always did when she passed it. She hated that place, and she hated the fact that her mother had to live there.

"Sorry I couldn't pick you up," Elsa said as her daughter and her friend walked through the door. They had caught a cab from the airport. "I just got home about an hour ago, myself. Hi," she said, grabbing Jaye's hands. "You're JayMahr."

"Yeah," he answered, smiling, though it wasn't a question.

Her mother looked just like he had imagined. She was barely five feet, not fat or thin, skin tone just a shade or two lighter than J's, and the same dark brown hair. And she spoke with an accent. She pronounced J's name with an "H" sound.

"Jesenia told me about you. She said you were really cool."

"Oh I'm cool, huh?" he asked J.

"Anyway," J said, not paying his silly question any attention. "What's that smell? What are you cooking?"

"Just spaghetti and garlic bread. It should be done. Are you hungry, JayMahr?"

"Ahh... Yeah," he said as if he didn't know whether he wanted food now or not. He wasn't really hungry, but he decided to eat just because she offered. Just to be nice.

J followed Elsa from the living room to the kitchen. And she stood by the small, quaint, oval dining table and watched her mama put the finishing touches on the marinara-soaked ground meat that simmered in the big silver pot on the front burner.

All she could come up with to ask was, "Is that ground turkey?"



Elsa looked back making sure that J was talking to her. She hadn't seen her come in behind her. "Yes," she answered. "I have to watch my diet."

J looked down at the floor, and then back over at her mother. For some reason—maybe the smell of the garlic in the air was nostalgic—as she stared at the small Hispanic woman trying to hurry-up and get the food ready, it reminded her of when she was a girl in this same apartment, hungry and tired from a long day at school (or maybe not at school), and how her mama would come in after a ten-hour workday and make what seemed to be miracles in the kitchen just to keep her stomach from growling any longer.

She remembered how bad she was when she was younger—getting in trouble at school, not going to school, smoking, staying out all night and partying, and verbally disrespecting her mother. Elsa was a soft woman—easy to get over on. There was a huge cultural barrier and J took advantage of that too. Back then, she hated her mother simply because she was a foreigner and couldn't identify with her, couldn't help her become a Black woman. She hated her mother because she had made her different; she told people to call her "J" and she formally introduced herself as Jesenia Llaureano with an American pronunciation, not ("Hes-sen-neh-ya Lor-deh-yah-no" as it should've been pronounced) as Elsa intended when she named her. She didn't want to be Spanish; she didn't want to speak Spanish; she didn't want to eat Spanish food...

But as a senior in high school, when she began seeing less and less of her friends, and more and more of the doctors and nurses at the local hospital because of her mother's health... She had to get her act together. As she sat by a hospital bed holding Elsa's hand and talking to her—*really* talking to her—for the first time, everyday, she saw that her mama actually wasn't that bad. J had never noticed her mother's sense of humor before. But as she lay in the hospital bed making snide comments about the food or her inability to use the "pee-pot" properly, J realized that her mama was actually quite the comedienne.

Doctors expected her to get worse. But everyday that J came to that hospital—making it her second home as she did her

homework and slept there many nights—she saw Elsa get better with each passing day. Their connection as mother and daughter, and as friends, grew stronger too. And one day... Elsa was able to get up and walk out of that hospital at her own will. And to this day, J took *no* day that she had her mother alive with her for granted.

Now, they talked on the phone at least once every single day, even if just to check in with each other, and she went to Chicago at least once a month to spend time.

J stood there watching her mother as she made sure everything was turned off. She walked over and placed her hand on her shoulder. When Elsa looked up at her, J smiled, leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek, and then wrapped her up in her arms, hugging her tightly.

“I got it from here,” J told her, letting go. She realized that her mama hadn’t even taken her shoes off yet.

Elsa held her daughter’s hands and smiled, so proud of her every time she looked at her.

“Go and get comfortable,” J said. “I got it.”

They all sat at the kitchen table eating and talking. Elsa had a lot of questions to ask Jaye because...

“You’re the only guy that Jesenia has ever brought home.”

He looked over at J with a smile on his face after her mother said that.

“She said that none of the guys she date are special enough to bring home. I guess she considers you to be special.”

“Come on, Mama. Stop tryin’ to start somethin’, okay. And I told you that Jaye and I aren’t dating anyway.”

“Right. I’ll leave him alone.” She took a sip of her water, then asked J, “So you’re going to the hospital in the morning?”

“Yeah. Probably around ten,” she said, still reluctant.

“I’m happy you’re doing this. I’m happy that you are so mature, Jesenia.”

She got up and kissed J on the head, then left the dining area to wash her plate.

J was about twelve or thirteen when she realized the situation between her mama and poppa. At the time, she didn’t even really like her mama, and with that she lost all respect for her,

which made it easier and internally excusable to be mischievous. She couldn't understand why a woman would live *knowing* that she will never be number one in the man she loves life and be content with it. That was stupid to J.

"She's washing dishes," she said to Jaye. Louder so Elsa could hear her: "Mama, I said I got it. You can rest now."

\* \* \*

At 10 a.m., J was at the hospital standing outside the door to Michael's room.

"I really don't wanna go in there," she whispered to Jaye.

"You want me to go in with you?"

"No." She sighed. "No. I... I gotta do this. I might as well get it over with." She sighed again. "I gotta do this," she said again, softly.

The door opened and a young man their age, tall, dressed in a gray business suite came from the room. He closed the door behind him. He was handsome—well groomed; close haircut; had a peanut butter complexion and hazel colored eyes; stood eye-to-eye with Jaye.

He and J locked eyes.

"Jesenia?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

He smiled and said, "I'm Gavin."

They shook hands. And since it was appropriate, as well as mutual, they hugged.

"Nice to finally meet you."

"You too," she said. She wasn't half as enthusiastic as Gavin was, but she had a little smile on her face. She was happy to finally be meeting her brother. "Gavin, this is Jaye."

They shook hands.

Sill smiling, Gavin turned back to Jesenia and said, "So we meet. *Finally.*"

"Yeah. Thirty years," she said.

"Thirty years," he repeated. "Look, we have a lot of catchin' up to do. How long are you gonna be in town?"

"I planned to leave tomorrow morning at 11."

"How 'bout dinner tonight at my place? I can't really cook, but we can order in. I know this great Chinese restaurant that delivers," he said. "We can have dinner while we talk."

"Sounds good," J said.

"I can introduce you to my daughter."

J's eyebrows rose, surprised to hear that she would be meeting her brother's daughter. Her niece, technically.

"Don't you have a sister? Well... we?" she asked.

"Yeah. Michele," he said. "Michele is... Well... Michele isn't exactly..." he looked for the word, "*open* to meeting you. She can be a little... difficult sometimes."

All J could say was, "Oh." She didn't know Michele, so all she could do was take Gavin's word for it.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Well... Maybe she'll come around sooner or later."

"Yeah."

He looked at his watch. "I gotta get outta here. I gotta go to work," he said. "Well I should be home about seven. I'll give you a call then."

"Okay. I'll talk to you later."

"All right. It was nice meeting you, man," he said to Jaye before walking off, hastily.

J sighed.

She turned from Jaye and slowly twisted the door handle. She didn't know what to expect once she got on the other side of that doorsill.

*Does he really want to see me? Will he know who I am? What will he have to say to me?* She thought.

She wanted to back out; go home; forget she had ever even come to Chicago. But she couldn't; she was already there. And the door was already open.

"Jesenia," he said, as she slowly walked in. He had a smile on his face.

He was much older-looking than she thought he'd look, and though he was always a dark man, he seemed even darker now. She wouldn't have been surprised if he had problems other than the ones he was in the hospital for.

"Hi," she said, closing the door behind her.

Nobody else was in the room, which made her a little more comfortable, but she hadn't moved from that spot by the door where she had been standing since she closed it.

"You can come closer. What I have isn't contagious," he said, still smiling. He was so happy to see her.

She wasn't smiling. She still didn't know what to feel. She slowly walked closer until she was close enough for him to touch her hand.

"May I have a hug?" he asked.

She didn't want to, but before that thought of reluctance could process, he was on his way up for a hug. So she bent over to meet him halfway. He hugged her tight. She gave him one of those weak arm-wrap-arounds with the pat on the back.

"Pull up a chair and relax ya'self. You don't have to stand over me the whole time."

She hadn't planned to stay very long, so a chair, to her, was unnecessary. She pulled up one anyway and took a seat.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

It took her a moment to digest his words. "Thank you."

He looked at her, admiring his daughter he hadn't seen in over a decade.

"When did you get here—in town?"

"Ah... Last night. I spoke to Gavin for the first time on Monday. He told me everything and I... I came as soon as I could."

He looked at her with that almost-in-tears smile on his face and said, "Thank you. I really wasn't expecting you to come, but you... you did, and you made my day."

She had one of those fake smiles on her face, and a "yeah, whatever" expression in mind, wishing that she could find an opening so she could leave.

"Well... I'm sure you know why I wanted to see you." He said, "I want to apologize to you. I'm sorry for being a bad father. And I'm sorry that I waited until I was damn near dead to tell you that. But I am."

He stared at the wall just past his feet as if it would help structure his thoughts the way it did the room.

He coughed uncontrollably for a few seconds. Then he looked over at her. “I just want to... to spend this time admiring you and appreciating you. Because I’ve never done that before.” He asked, “May I have the honor of doing that?”

She looked at him in the eyes—those watery eyes—and she said, “Why not?”

She felt as if a weight should’ve been lifted off of her chest—her heart—after the visit to the hospital. But as she looked out the cab’s back window at the stores and the houses and even the children playing on the streets of her old stomping grounds, she realized that the weight was still there. That feeling that she had—that desire for answers—was still there. Her visit lasted over two hours. They tried to play catch-up. She let him know what she was doing in life; how she was living; what her plans were for the future; and she even introduced him to Jaye. But the question that every fatherless child wants to ask still lingered in her mind—why?

She just didn’t know how to ask a man constrained to a hospital bed facing a life-threatening situation to state his case.

So just like the stores and the houses and even the children playing on the blocks of the Southside—not a thing had changed.

She went to Gavin’s house that night; they ate; caught up. She met his two-year old daughter. They talked about their careers—his as an Information Technology Marketing Manager for a computer company. They talked about their lives—his as a single father of one. They talked as much as they could about the past; their childhoods; their father.

She sat on the couch in the living room at her mother’s apartment that night beside Jaye with her head resting comfortably on his shoulder. He had his arm around her. He held her because he knew that that was what she needed at the time. He comforted her.

“It went well. He is really nice. And his daughter—she is *so* adorable.”

“Did you get to meet your sister?”

“No.”

She thought about it. She wondered, *Damn, will I ever meet her?*

Out of nowhere, she said to Jaye, “Thank you for coming all the way here with me on such short notice.”

“You needed me. What was I s’pose to do?”

That meant that he’d be there for her. That was a good thing to know.

She looked at the television at Bugs Bunny for a moment, then she said, “Jaye.”

And he said, “Yeah?”

And she said, “I don’t know if I’ve ever told you this, but you are a good friend.”

He smiled and said, “I try.” Then said, “You ain’t so bad yourself.”

She smiled. And she watched television some more. She watched Bugs Bunny. She had more to say, but she watched Bugs. Like Jaye, he made her feel better.

When the cartoon went off, she said, “Jaye.”

He said, “Yeah?”

She said, “Jaye... I don’t want you to see other people.” She stopped, but he could tell that she wasn’t finished. “I had to share my father. I don’t wanna share you.”

\* \* \*

She could tell that something was wrong even before she answered the phone. She had a feeling.

“The doctors said that the surgery went well. They don’t know what happened.”

She was barely in her house from the airport when Gavin called to tell her the news—their father had passed away that morning.

J didn’t feel sad or upset. She didn’t cry. She felt like a child would feel; somebody had died, but she didn’t really know how to accept it. It was almost as if she didn’t even understand the concept of death or what it meant to pass away. All she knew was that now he was gone forever. She couldn’t miss him though. Because how could he be gone from a place if he was never really there in the first place?

**M**s. Llaureano is here to see you. Should I send her back?" Linda, the gallery manager, said as she interrupted, buzzing in on the phone intercom.

"Yeah," Jaye answered.

Meka said, "That's my cue."

"Why are you so hard on her?"

"Jaye, I told you," Meka expressed. "I don't like..."

Meka stopped talking just as J tapped on the open door. She stood holding a dozen dark pink roses. She didn't hear what they were discussing before she came in, but she allowed them to finish before she said anything.

Meka was already standing, ready to leave. "Thanks for the money, big bro. I'll see you later."

"Whoa, wait. I want you home at a reasonable time," Jaye said before she got away.

"What's a reasonable time?" she asked.



Kayona Ebony Brown

“11,” he said.

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“12,” he said.

“How ‘bout 12:30?” she negotiated.

“How ‘bout 12?” he said. “And not a minute later.”

She said, “Bye,” rushing by J so that she wouldn’t have to speak.

Jaye sat behind his desk rubbing his face with his hands. He sighed.

“This big brother/daddy thing is more than you bargained for, huh?” J asked.

Meka had convinced Jaye to let her stay in DC with him to finish high school. After she found out about Duke Ellington School of the Arts, a place for the elite and most gifted young artists, as a young actress she *had* to go. Jaye gave in and said she could stay as long as she got in. She killed the audition.

“It’s crazy,” Jaye said. “I’m used to it, but she’s getting older. I don’t wanna talk to her like a baby... Never mind,” he said when he remembered she was standing in his office with a bouquet of dark pink roses. Dark pink says, “Thank you.”

“What’s this?” he asked.

“I wanted to thank you. These are for you,” she said, handing him the bouquet.

“Thank you.” He took them from her hand. “But what for?”

“Come on, Jaye. Chicago? You took two days out of your schedule at the last minute just to go there with me. I appreciate that.”

“Told you it was no problem.”

“And I heard you when you said it. I just want you to know that the favor is greatly appreciated.”

“Anytime,” he said smiling, almost uncomfortable. Nobody had ever given him roses before.

“And another thing,” she said. She ran her fingers through her hair before she made her second point. “I wanna apologize to you too.”

He frowned with a question mark on his face.

She sighed. “I told you that I didn’t want you to see other people. And that wasn’t right.”

He looked at her standing there in his office, nervous, as she tried to find all the right things to say. So he asked her, “Why wasn’t it?”

His question threw her off. Only thing she could think of saying back to him was, “What?”

“Why wasn’t it right?” he asked again.

“It was selfish.”

“It was real,” he said. “Bold as hell.”

She wasn’t expecting that response from him. As she thought about what she’d said to him, she too realized that it was bold. It took confidence to say something like that. Or blatant selfishness.

“Did you mean it?” he asked. “I mean is that how you feel? You were vulnerable, J.”

“I wasn’t vulnerable.” Maybe she *was* vulnerable—a little bit. But it was how she felt. Of course, she had no idea what her statement actually meant though. If he didn’t see other women and she cut off other men, what did this make them to each other—friends who didn’t have any other friends?

“So... I mean... Where is this coming from?”

He was confused. He was also scared. If he said “yes,” what did that mean? They were friends—platonic friends—who had already seen each other naked. Every day, he looked her in the eyes—the last person with whom he had had sex. That was more than most platonic friends could say. He kept wondering whether this was too soon for him. He was confused because he didn’t understand why this had come about now. He was scared because he wasn’t necessarily prepared.

“Jaye. I had to say how I feel,” she said. She had left Chicago feeling the same way she had when she left the first time for college more than a decade ago.

“But why now?”

She shrugged her shoulders implying that she didn’t know the answer, but she knew the answer. She finally said, “I went to Chicago and I saw a man who was *supposed* to be so much to me. He helped *make* me. I watched him die. I was in the room,” she said, “while he was dying. I had so much to tell him, so many questions... I wanted to know why he treated me like shit. I wanted *him* to know how I felt about being *treated* like shit.”

She took a deep breath, looking at the floor more than she was looking at Jaye.

“But, you know... I sat there in that room and I didn’t say any of that.” She regretted it. “So I said what I said to you,” she told him, as she finally looked him in his eyes, “because I couldn’t—I could *not*—pass up another chance to say how I feel.”

He knew that her feelings were honest and real, and he appreciated the fact that she could articulate them.

She said, “I ain’t never asked a man for nothin’. And I know it’s a hellova start by asking one to give up other women, but... Jaye I know how I feel when I’m with you. I wanna be with you—all the time. And honestly?” She made sure he was hearing her when she said, “This friendship just isn’t enough. Anymore.”

Silence suffocated the room.

This was all new to her. But obviously, the way things were was old. She wanted something different—something more. So why not now? What was so wrong with now?

Jaye said, “Okay,” and walked from behind the desk and sat on the front of it facing her. He asked her, “So what would this be?”

She looked in his eyes. She didn’t know what this was. He was obviously accepting her proposition, but she didn’t know what was next. What did this make her? What did it mean? Were they a couple? Was she a girlfriend?

She sighed. “Jaye... I don’t know. I don’t know, okay. Let’s just do whatever this is slowly. Okay? Slowly,” she said.

Though she had made the proposal, she was actually second to surrender. One man... The girlfriend... Exclusivity... She needed a little time for all that.

He took her hands in his. “Slowly,” he agreed.

Unsuccessful relationships were becoming redundant. How much time is enough time to fully recover from heartbreak? A year? Nine weeks? Eight days? How about seven hours? It had been six months since Jaye’s last relationship ended and he was still in the process of healing.

J had become a very good friend. He loved her very much, and he would've been lying to himself if he said that he never thought that she could be more than a friend, because he had. But his biggest fear was that things would never be the same if a relationship wasn't as successful as their friendship. He was afraid that his issues might mess up her first experience with a man capable of being so much to her. He didn't want his past to hinder him from showing her everything monogamy could be. What a man should be.

\* \* \*

“Damn,” she swore, quietly, yet with much frustration in her voice. A heavy sigh and her teeth smacking followed her swear. “Oh God!” She was fed up.

She decided to take a break. She pushed her chair back from the computer and went to the window to look out, hoping that maybe she would see something that would inspire her. She had been sitting at that computer for over an hour and all she had written was her name and a mere two sentences. She was up shit's creek because the essay was due the next day—all three-to-five pages.

The doorbell disrupted her concentration.

She walked downstairs to the door and looked through the peephole.

J.

She rolled her eyes as she pulled the door open.

“Hey,” J said to her, walking in wrapping up her umbrella.

“Hey,” Meka said, unenthusiastically, already walking back up to her room.

Meka wasn't fond of J. Not since the first day they met at her brother's gallery. Jaye said that she was “just a friend,” but it wasn't a surprise to Meka that the two of them were an item now. Yeah, real convenient. She had no concrete reason for disliking J, she just didn't like her. Actually, she never cared for any of the women her brother dated. Some would act too nice by trying to win her over because they knew she didn't like them; others just

ignored and avoided her completely as if that would make her go away. They were all intimidated by her, though they were usually more than ten years her senior.

“How are you?”

“I’m cool,” Meka said with her back still to J.

J looked around. She could tell that Meka was home alone; the place was too quiet for someone else to have been there.

“Jaye hasn’t gotten here yet?” she asked anyway.

“Nah,” Meka answered. She continued up to her room and softly pushed the door behind her. She sat back at her computer and attempted to type again, but after two sentences, she found herself sucking her teeth and sighing heavily. “Ahhg,” she grunted, aggravated. She would mumble what she thought she wanted to say in her paper, and then she would suck her teeth after realizing that it didn’t sound good.

This went on for about five minutes before J got up and slowly walked upstairs to the room door. She could hear Meka from where she sat on the couch, so instead of just sitting and letting time pass, she figured this could be her opening to say something other than “Hey” today.

The door was half open, so J walked up and knocked softly. She could see Meka sitting at the computer from where she stood.

Meka looked over at her wondering why she was standing there. She looked back at the computer and reluctantly said, “You can come in.”

J fell into a unique category. She wasn’t scared of Meka. She never patronized her, nor did she ignore her; she always faced her head-on. She spoke to her—asked her how she was doing. She invited her places, genuinely. She asked her opinion because she really wanted to know. She wasn’t intimidated by Meka. She actually admired her prowess.

J slowly walked in looking around because she had never been in this part of the house before. There was a twin-sized bed in the middle of the room; the head of the bed was against a wall decorated with pictures of all her favorite musicians, television and movies stars, and sports figures. She even had a spot dedicated to Aaliyah, whose music she’d just recently discovered. All of

her furniture was maple wood. The computer desk was near the window on the left side of the bed where she sat.

As J looked around, she wondered what she was going to say. She had to say something quick or else Meka might've thought she was crazy for just standing there in her room for no reason, looking at her walls.

Meka sucked her teeth again and said, "Shoot."

This was J's opening. She asked, "What are you typing?"

Meka didn't answer right away, simply because she didn't want to. She didn't feel like talking, and she especially didn't feel like talking to J. But just so she wouldn't seem like she was being an utterly disrespectful, stubborn little bitch, she said, "A paper."

She was going to leave it at that, but that answer was vague. And rude. So she said, "I'm *trying* to write this stupid paper for English class."

"How is it coming?" J asked.

Meka really didn't want to answer. She really didn't want to talk to J. She said, "Look... It's due tomorrow so I don't really have time to waste." She looked at the computer screen and said, "Jaye should be here shortly."

J didn't understand why Meka hated her so much. She had hated people herself, but she had good reason—they were pricks and assholes. But she had never done anything to Meka to be considered either.

"What do you have against me?"

Meka rolled her eyes thinking she was never going to finish this paper now.

"Look, I don't have anything against you. I just need to fini—"

"You don't like me," J said. She shrugged her shoulders. "I mean that's cool." Meka wasn't the first and probably wouldn't be the last person to dislike J. J was used to living with the disapproval of others. "But your brother and I are close, and I wanna know why that bothers you."

Meka thought about an answer. She tried to find something nicer to say than what her real reason was, but she couldn't. Without regard, she just told the truth: "Because you're not good enough for him."

J said, “You don’t even know me.”

Meka looked at her and said, “I don’t have to.”

J didn’t say anything. She couldn’t. The words hurt like a bat coming across her face in mid-swing. She wanted more than that—an answer with more basis. But she got the bare-naked truth.

Meka looked back at the computer and continued trying to think of something to type.

“Okay,” J said, accepting Meka’s answer. She didn’t like it, but she was fine with it.

“You know,” Meka said, “I might’ve come off rude, but I’m just being honest. And I know you were just trying to be nice, but I have a paper to wri-”

“Right,” J said. “You got less than a day to write this paper and you’re sitting across the room insulting a professional writer.” J let that sink in for a moment.

Meka sighed and relaxed in her chair. She realized that she had probably burnt a good bridge, and for no reason. What did she have to lose? The paper probably wasn’t going to get done any faster if J left, so...

“So what does the paper have to be about?”

Meka gave in. “*If Beale Street Could Talk* by...”

“Baldwin,” J finished. “That’s a good book. What do you have to write about it?”

“Well,” she sighed. “I chose to discuss the role of relationships: man and woman relationships, black and white, family relationships,” she said, lazily. “It has to be between three and five pages and I can’t even get a paragraph.”

J walked over to the side of the bed nearest the computer and took a seat facing Meka and the desk.

“That’s a pretty good topic. You got a thesis yet?”

Meka looked at her with one of those “yeah-right” expressions on her face.

J said, “Okay, we can start by coming up with a thesis. That might make things a little easier.”

Meka sighed once again, bit her bottom lip and shook her head. Her face was long and blank, and she looked like she was holding back tears. J could tell that something else was bothering her besides the three-to-five-page paper.

“Aye,” J said, softly. “You wanna talk about it?”

Meka shook her head implying that she didn’t, then threw her right hand over her eyes. Tears rolled down her face. She wiped them away and said, “Sorry. It doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

J looked at her. She didn’t know what to say.

Meka continued to wipe tears. But it seemed like the more she wiped the more they ran. She grabbed a tissue from the desk drawer and proceeded to wipe them away. She said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” J said. But she had to ask: “Boy problems?”

Meka sniffed and wiped some more.

“He broke up with me today. Over the phone,” she said. She sniffed. “One year of my life wasted. *Jerk.*”

“What happened?”

“Another girl,” she said. “Said he was lonely cuz I’m in DC.”

J didn’t say anything. She didn’t know what to say to that.

“He was supposed to help me with this stupid paper and now I’m stuck with...” She stopped and wiped her eyes. “I can’t believe he cheated on me. Guys are so... *stupid!*”

“Not all guys. You just gotta... You gotta find ah... *Wait* for a good one to come along.”

J felt weird even thinking this, but she had to say it for the sake of Meka; she wouldn’t have wanted to agree with her and have her thinking such a thing, regardless of how true the statement may have been.

Though she had no idea what to tell a young girl in a situation like this, they talked. She had to wing it.

“I know you really liked him,” she said in conclusion, “but believe me—there are gonna be so many other guys... Good ones too.”

J thought about how parents must’ve felt having to talk about Santa Claus.

“Especially when you become a big time actress,” she threw in.

Meka started to look a little cheered up after J said that.



Kayona Ebony Brown

“See,” J said, smiling too. “You know what I’m talkin’ about.”

“I guess,” she said. She looked at J and she said sincerely, “Thank you. Really.”

“Anytime.”

Meka looked J up and down as if she were inspecting her. She said, “I guess... I guess it’s okay if you date my brother.”

J laughed.

But Meka was serious when she said, “But *don’t* hurt him.”

J stopped laughing. The words pierced her chest and hit her right in the heart. They almost took her breath away. She had no intentions of hurting him, but hearing Meka say it brought “what if” thoughts, and for the first time ever... Meka scared her.

All she could say was, “Okay.” She cleared her throat and said, “Now let’s finish up this paper.”

**I**t was Friday and Jaye had spent the day in his art room working on his latest piece he had yet to name. Around 8 o'clock, he put the paint up for the night so he could do one of his most favorite things in the world—watch a good basketball game.

He had just taken a break to get some more chips and another beer when the doorbell rang.

She was standing outside looking apologetic and nervous and cold all at the same time. She asked, “Can I come in?”

He moved to the side and welcomed her in, quickly closing the door behind her.

She untied the wool belt that was the same material as the coat and allowed the knee-length cold-protector to slide off her back and into Jaye’s hands. He hung it for her on the coat rack.

He knew she would come to her senses and talk about it.

He figured the reason for her actions might be a little deeper than what he knew, so he wanted to allow her some thinking time.

Without bothering to walk to the living room and get comfortable, she stood right where she stopped in the foyer and said, "About yesterday..." She shook her head and sighed. "I wanna apologize for the way I acted."

Yesterday after a highly needed visit to her hairdresser's, J made her way to Georgetown to meet Jaye at the gallery. And like she did every time she went to Georgetown, she spent more than ten minutes driving around looking for a place to park and yelling at the nine out of ten drivers on the road whom didn't deserve licenses. So by the time she got inside, she was rolling her eyes and swearing heavily under her breath, still frustrated with what she just had to go through, again. She walked in and went straight up to Linda behind the desk.

Linda asked, "Georgetown traffic, huh?" before J could even say anything.

The fact that Linda saw right through her made her snicker a little bit. "Yeah," she admitted. "How you doin'?"

"I'm fine."

"Jaye around?"

"He's in the back," she said.

"Thanks."

J made her way down the short hall to his office. When she got there, the door was slightly ajar and she heard laughter. It was the laugh of a woman.

The laugh was followed by Jaye saying, "Aww... Stop."

"Seriously," the woman said. "You are *fine*. You should think about modeling."

"Come on," Jaye said modestly, obviously blushing.

"You never thought about it?"

"No," he replied, probably still smiling.

Suddenly, J's heart sunk to the bottom of her shoes. She pushed the door open slowly and walked into the office with pain and one of those no-the-hell-you-didn't-bitch looks covering her face.

"Hey. I wasn't expectin' you until later," Jaye said, looking at his watch. She usually took longer in the hairdresser. "J, this

is Autumn. Autumn this is ah..." He looked at J. "This is J," he finished.

"It's nice to meet you," the woman said, throwing her hand out in front of her.

J looked at it and decided to shake it only for the sake of good manners. She looked the woman in the eyes thinking all sorts of things about her. The woman was shorter than J; dark skinned; short curly hair too; wore a gray business suit and a smile. Very pretty.

"Well I'm about to get outta here. I'll see you later," the woman said to Jaye. She didn't leave before throwing in, "Cutie."

The woman left from his office closing the door behind her.

J took a deep breath, trying not to display her anger and pissed-offness.

He walked over to her and kissed her on the cheek, then asked, "What's up?"

She had come to the gallery to meet him for dinner. She was a half-hour early.

She looked away from him deliberately. She wanted to keep her cool. She asked, "Who was that woman?"

He sat on the edge of his desk and answered, "Autumn? She's a frequent costumer. Good buddy of mine. Loves art. I mentioned her before."

J didn't remember no Autumns.

Autumn was a decorator who worked mainly with the interior décor of houses owned by people in the DC area with lots of money. There were several galleries that she purchased from for her customers and Black Girl had recently been added to her list.

"Yeah, well... What was she doin' in here?" J asked.

He looked at her with a question mark lingering on his face. It was accompanied by a slight smirk.

"What is this?" He was almost laughing now.

"What is what?" She didn't find anything funny.

"This," he said. "This emotion you have. Is this jealousy?"

“Jealous? I don’t get jealous,” she said. “I just wanna know who the hell that woman was hit’n’ on you, that’s all.”

“Hitting on me?”

“You’re fine? You should think about modeling? She called you ‘cutie!’”

Jaye snickered, not believing what he was hearing.

“You don’t call that flirting?” she demanded to know.

Holding back the smile, he said, “No. I don’t. I call it one person giving another person a simple compliment. She was joking, mostly.”

That wasn’t what it was to J. She became more irate because he wasn’t admitting to it, and said, “Fuck that. I *know* what flirting is. That... *woman*,” she said, holding off from calling her something else, “was tryin’ to get with you.”

He was still smiling.

“And why the hell are you laughin’? This ain’t funny, Jaye. Do I look like I’m laughing to you?”

Still smiling, he got up and walked over to her and said, “You’re serious about this. That is so cute.”

“What? What the fuck is cute?”

“You,” he said. “I never seen you this way. It’s cute.”

He tried to kiss her, but she moved her head. “Don’t touch me,” she demanded. “You just sat there and let some bitch come on to you. What would’ve happen if I hadn’t come in?”

The only thing J could think about was that woman and what she was saying to him before she walked in. Yes, he was fine. But how long would he remain so modest? Women loved him. When would he realize all of this and start taking advantage of it?

He sighed and stopped smiling. “J. She was not flirting with me.”

She rolled her eyes and looked away so he couldn’t see her face.

“Come here,” he said, finally realizing that she was serious. He wanted to hold her close. “Come here.”

“Don’t fucking... Don’t touch me.”

She stormed out the door before the unspeakable happened. She couldn’t let him see that.

“J!” He jumped up to follow her. He didn’t want to yell in the gallery, so he just walked fast behind her until they got outside.

“J, come on. J!”

She ignored him and continued walking. He followed her.

“J.” He slowed down realizing that she wasn’t going to stop for him.

“J!” he yelled again, but the only response he heard was the sound of cars and buses on M Street and his own voice echoing through the night.

When she got inside her car, she took a few deep breaths, and it worked a little bit, but her heart was still pounding. Still pounding. Still...

She felt like she couldn’t breathe no more. She closed her eyes.

She opened them and there it was. The unspeakable.

The salty water ran. Unstoppable. Down her face.

She sat in the car, steadily trying to wipe them away with the complimentary napkins she had taken from fast-food restaurants and stuffed into her glove compartment. She started her car and drove off without looking in the rearview mirror once.

She went home that night, took a hot shower, and crawled into her queen-sized bed with the intentions of going to sleep. Instead, she lay there all night thinking. She thought about the woman; about Jaye; about the tears. The tears said everything. She wasn’t a very emotional person; she didn’t shed tears easily. She maintained a hard shell on the outside, but on the inside she couldn’t deny what she was—a woman: aka, an emotional creature. She cried. The fact that he didn’t even know that she felt that way about him was what made her cry. He thought that it was a joke and he brushed off everything she said so easily. He took nothing she said seriously and that bothered her. He offended her.

But the tears—the tears let her know that it was her own fault that he didn’t know these things. When they ran down her face, it was confirmation of her feelings for this man. She hid them so he wouldn’t see them though.

He called her one time that night, but she let her answering machine pick up. He never left a message. He hated talking to machines.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not a jealous person,” she assured. “I’m not,” she reiterated, making sure he understood her point.

She looked at him for the first time since she’d come into his house to explain and he was staring back at her with inquisitive eyes. She could tell that he wanted to know more.

She sighed. “I don’t know what that was, okay? I’m not used to this.”

“I know you aren’t.” He stepped closer to her. “I know,” he said. “Autumn is just... an art lover,” he explained. “She’s a friend. She buys from the gallery a lot.”

“Jaye, you shouldn’t have to explain yourself to me.”

She wasn’t bothered by the woman’s identity, but by her own.

“She didn’t know who *I* was.” Her voice was filled with concern. The woman should’ve known who she was. Why hadn’t he told her?

He looked her in her eyes. “J, we been together for how long?” he asked rhetorically. “Baby, *I* don’t even know who you are.”

They were stuck between friends and a hard place.

He said, “I don’t wanna introduce you as my friend. But I don’t feel like I *can* introduce you as my lady. We’re not there yet, right?” The question was rhetorical. “We don’t see other people, but... I still don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, J.” He looked her in the eyes, looking for answers. “Who are you?” He wanted her to say it.

She had an expression on her face that was soft, almost apologetic because she completely understood what he was saying. She had confused him. And she felt sorry about that. But it was so difficult to want so much... But at the same time, know so little. She wanted him. But she didn’t know who she wanted him to be. She wanted to *be* somebody to him. But she didn’t know who she wanted to be either.

“Jaye... This is hard,” she said. Because of him, many of

her feelings had been tested. Cynicism wasn't so easy anymore. Neither was promiscuity. He was exposing her to a side of Mars she thought she'd never see.

"This is new to me," she continued. "Maybe I should've..." She sighed. "Maybe you should know more."

Uncertainty filled her voice because she didn't know whether she should say more—tell him more about her past. Yes, he should've known more about her. But would he feel the same after knowing? *Would he still want this?* she thought about herself.

"It won't change anything," he promised. He wanted her to feel comfortable saying anything she wanted to him.

She was so confused. She didn't know where to start. What to say. How to say it.

"This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to know you. I used to wish that I never met you. That I never had to do the story on the gallery. That we never slept..." She stopped and looked at him knowing that he was confused by her words. "After I got over the fact that I couldn't rewind time—couldn't change what happened... I accepted it. I accepted you," she said. "And that was scary. Because even though we said we were just friends... I was never satisfied with that. I always wanted you to be... mine." She looked in his eyes and said, "I wasn't ready to be yours. I was too scared."

He looked at her and softly asked, "Scared of what?"

She thought about all the things she was afraid of and chose instead to just say, "Monogamy. So much shit comes with monogamy," she said. "Never thought I would have it. Never really thought I could handle it."

He wanted so badly to ask her why, but if she wanted to explain, she would. And if she didn't? He trusted that if she didn't then she had her reasons for that too.

She sighed, knowing that there was so much more to this story. "Look. Jaye... I'm not like most women," she said. "I've lived a very ah... a very complex life. I'm really fucked up. I just want you to know that."

He smiled. "You're not any more fucked up than the rest of us."



She looked in his eyes and saw honesty. Sincerity. Just like in Chicago, he was there for her. He comforted her. Everything about him was new to her. He struck cords emotionally that she didn't even know she had. But it felt good.

She tried hard not to let her guard down though. She wouldn't give him the key. But she watched as he picked the lock—did all the right things and said all the right words that made her open up.

“So what now?” he asked. “What's next?”

She said, “I just wanna be with you. That's all I want. Okay?”

“Okay,” he answered, nodding his head and smiling, both relieved and happy. “We can be together.”

She nodded. “I'm not gonna be a coward anymore. I'm gonna do this.”

She never saw herself actually settling down and being somebody's woman—being with just one guy. She thought she was supposed to be a single woman forever. The life she was used to living was very different from the one she was trying to live now. She didn't quite understand what to do. All she knew was that she liked him. A lot. And if that meant playing the role of girlfriend, which she hadn't rehearsed for... Then she'd improvise.

“This means no so-called art fans hanging around either.”

He began to smile. “She wasn't flirting with me,” he insisted.

“Whatever, Jaye.”

“She wasn't,” he said. “J, Autumn is a lesbian. And married. I know her wife.”

He started to laugh. J had to laugh too. She said, “Hey, don't rule her out. You might have what it takes to convert her.”

Still smiling, he shook his head and joked, “Mm-mm, I tried. It didn't work.”

She grabbed a handful of his t-shirt and pulled him in for a kiss. “Don't fuck with me.”

Optimism.

Jaye was optimistic now. Not that he was ever pessimistic.

He just wanted her to say exactly what she wanted from him. He wasn't going to see other people anyway so she needed to say more than that. And tonight she had. Tonight, she gave him optimism.

She never told a man so much. She had never been jealous—so genuinely jealous that she didn't know what to do. She had never been so insecure because she wanted to live up to so much; she never wanted *so* hard to be *so* much to somebody. She was used to only living for herself; if J was happy, J was fine. But now, she wanted to be so much *for him*. She wanted him to be happy with who she was. She used to not care what people thought of her. Now she cared; she wanted him to think of her a certain way—highly. She wished she were perfect for him—not so tainted.

Truth was though: she *wasn't* perfect. She *was* tainted. But there wasn't a thing she could do about that now. That scared her. She knew that the closer she got to him, the more he'd know. And even though he said that things wouldn't change regardless of what she told him about her licentious past, it was hard for her to believe that.

\* \* \*

“To be this close,” Ty said, “is already scary. To be even closer... is even scarier.”

Her friend's words echoed in her head.

But the pleasure can be so hypnotic. It can make a person forget their name if it's good enough.

Oh, and it *was*. It was *real* good. Just like how it was that night they met.

Better.

She inhaled and let her eyes roll back as they closed. She bit her bottom lip to keep from screaming out.

Damn! It was so good!

“See, it's not that I don't wanna do it,” J told her friend. “I do,” she insisted. “I'm just... It's like I'm scared.”

The word “scared” had changed the direction in which the conversation was headed. Now, it wasn't that J didn't *want* to

have sex with him; she was just *scared* to. J, a woman who had looked at sex as a sport since her teen years and who had been drafted before she was able to legally drive a car, was now scared to take a swing. She had been in more consecutive games than Cal Ripken Jr. and now life had thrown her a changeup and she was scared to even try to hit it. The changeup was a tricky, off-speed pitch. She was used to a fast one straight over the plate, a slider, a sinker, or even an occasional curve, but not the changeup. Not too many guys had the balls to throw a *changeup*.

His pace had smooth, long, timed strokes that almost caused her to convulse from too much too-good. She couldn't seem to exhale right. He hit it *right*—in every vulnerable spot. In every place that seemed tender and ignored, he gave special attention.

Her back arched tightly almost like she was trying to get away from him. But getting *away* was the farthest thing from her mind. She wanted to—

“Come again,” Ty said. “You’re telling me you’re afraid that sex will change things?”

J nodded. “I am. Yeah.”

“How do you think things’ll change?” Ty asked.

He felt her slipping away, so he gripped the mattress and pulled himself into her more, bringing tears to her eyes.

“I wanna be able to have sex with him... and maintain what we have right now.”

“That’s understandable,” Ty said. “Why don’t you think you would be able to have what you have now if you bring sex into the picture?”

“Because sex makes stuff different.”

She turned him over on his back. Pinned his arms down with her hands. And straddled him. She became the aggressor. She leaned forward and grabbed the headboard for some leverage and support, and she rode slow... and hard. And with ease. And with rhythm.

She leaned down and kissed him.

“After I have sex with a man... I usually lose interest.” She sat up in her chair changing her posture as she explained her case to her friend over lunch. “I don’t really wanna be around them

anymore. I don't want them around *me*... What's the point?"

Ty concluded, "So it isn't necessarily sex that changes things; it's you that change after having sex."

Silence covered the room for a moment.

J thought about her first encounter with Jaye—him sitting on the crate outside of the gallery; the walk they took; the conversation they had. He was an incredibly beautiful man, inside and out, and even though she neglected to admit it to anybody, or to herself, she fell for him that night. She had valid reasons for wanting him around after sex—he was irresistible. And he still was.

And now, for the first time in their relationship, they were having sex. She had held out far longer than she wanted to. Longer than she expected. Months.

Jaye was patient though. If she'd announced a newfound lifestyle of celibacy, he would've stayed beside her until the day she was ready. But she couldn't take it anymore. She was ready now!

He grabbed her hips and followed her lead in the ride. He breathed slower and slower like it was difficult for the air to escape or enter his lungs. He kept his eyes closed, afraid that if he opened them the sight of her naked body on top of him would be too much.

He couldn't go first.

He had let her have her way with him for long enough now. She giggled as he put her on her stomach again. It was a competition now—who can make who scream first.

She was winning.

"You know what I think?" Ty asked, rhetorically. "I don't think that you're scared that you'll lose interest in Jaye. You're far past that stage. If you were gonna lose interest, I think you'd've lost it by now," she said. "Loss of interest is not your problem. I believe your problem is: you think that if you have sex with him, it would be more than sex; it would be somewhat of a validation that your relationship has officially moved to the next level. That's what scares you. To be this close," she said, "is already scary. To be even closer... is even scarier."

And just like that... he won.