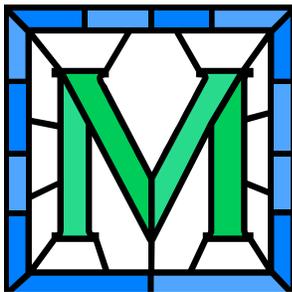


EXCERPT FROM THE RHYTHM IN BLUE  
BY CRYSTAL SENTER BROWN, PAGES 8-15



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

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

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

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

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

Mason stopped home to pack a duffel bag with enough clothes for a couple of days. He scribbled a note for his fiancé that simply said *I'll be away for work until Monday*. Luckily his fiancé was so engrossed in planning the wedding, she would actually welcome this break from him.

But Mason felt selfish running away. Real men were supposed to stick around

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as Mason stepped inside he could smell what he missed the most these days: dinner cooking in the kitchen. Sasha was far from domestic, and most of their meals came from the local take-out restaurants. Sasha tried to cook one time during their entire relationship, and that attempt ended with the fire department being called to the scene. But what Sasha lacked in the kitchen she more than made up for in other ways. She had a great personality and everyone seemed to love her.

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

Mason kicked his sneakers off under the coffee table and leaned back onto her sofa. Jasmine's home was the only place he felt relaxed enough to truly sleep. He picked up the remote to change the channel to the game but noticed Jasmine had already done that for him. She was not a sports fan, but she always watched it with him when he visited. He locked his hands behind his head and propped his crossed

legs up onto the ottoman. Within a few minutes Jasmine reappeared with a plate of food, and as she put it down in front of him he marveled at the plate and then at her.

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

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

“Where'd you get those slippers?” Mason asked.

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

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

“I'm just kidding”

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

“Tired,” he said. “Just tired.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You're right. Hey, on another note, I was hoping you would read over my community center idea. I think I can get some funding for it if I can get it completed

by the end of the month. The proposal is in my bag,” he said, pointing to his leather messenger bag on the recliner.

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

He watched her walk away. Her hair was piled on top of her head, and she was wearing one of his t-shirts, one he had probably left at her house years ago. She was beautiful. She looked back and caught him watching her.

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

Mason smiled. He was just happy to be there.

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

“This is amazing, Mase,” she said.

“You think so?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

As Jasmine continued to read, Mason leaned his head back onto the futon and looked around. Jasmine’s office was more like a sanctuary. The walls were painted a shade of blue that reminded him of the water he swam in when he visited Bermuda the year before. She had citrus and sage candles burning, which gave the room a warm and inviting feeling. Mason’s eyes traveled the length of the room and he read each degree and award that hung on Jasmine’s wall. He also looked at the dozens of framed photos of friends, family, and people Jasmine had met over the years. But there was

one photo of a person he didn't recognize.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah,” he said. “Come in!”

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

“I’m worried about you,” she started.

“Why are you worried about me? I’m okay!” he said, immediately on the defense.

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

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

“Yes! I could have stayed in there all night!”

“I’m glad, I just want you to get some rest while you’re here,” Jaz said. “You always stay so busy! You’re always on your grind!”

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

Jasmine looked at him, her lips curled.

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

Mason couldn’t argue; she was right.

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

Their faces were inches apart.

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

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

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

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

“Well, that’s my cue,” Jasmine said, getting up. “See you in the morning,

homey,” she said before clicking the door shut behind her.

“Yeah. See ya,” he said to Jasmine.