

The Rhythm in Blue

Crystal Senter Brown



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

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

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

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

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

Mason stopped home to pack a duffel bag with enough

clothes for a couple of days. He scribbled a note for his fiancée Sasha that simply said: *I'll be away for work until Monday*. He hoped Sasha would be so engrossed in planning the wedding that she would actually welcome this break from him.

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as Mason stepped inside he could smell what he missed the most these days: dinner cooking in the kitchen. Sasha

was far from domestic, and most of their meals came from the local take-out restaurants. Sasha tried 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 came in and sat down on the bed next to him. He could smell the coconut oil she always used after she showered.

“I’m worried about you,” she started.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jasmine looked at him, her lips curled.

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

Mason couldn’t argue; she was right.

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

Their faces were inches apart.

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

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

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

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

“Well, that’s my cue,” Jasmine said, getting up. “See you in the morning, homey,” she said before clicking the door shut behind her.

“Yeah. See ya,” he said to Jasmine.



The next morning Mason awakened to the smell of coffee brewing. He couldn't remember the last time he slept so well. At first he forgot where he was, but once he saw the slippers on the floor next to the bed, he remembered he was at Jasmine's. Knowing this put a smile on his face. He slid his feet into the slippers and made his way downstairs to the kitchen.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Jasmine said. Even though it was almost 9 a.m., she was not in her normal business suit and high heels. Instead, she had on a grey jogging suit and a pair of white sneakers. Her hair was swept back into a ponytail and she was wearing larger-than-life hoop earrings.

"You don't have to work today?" he asked her.

"Nope. And you don't either," she said, placing a plate of pancakes in front of him.

"What do you mean I don't have to work? I told them I would work from here!" he asked, startled. Mason had not missed a day of work in years.

"I called them for you. I said I was your sister and I needed you to help me handle some family business in Atlanta. I told them you'd be unavailable until Monday."

"But today is WEDNESDAY, Jaz!" he said. "I can't just 'unplug' and miss three days of emails!"

"Oh, you can," she said. "And you are. You need some downtime, and, truth be told, so do I. You can go back home to your fiancée AND back to that job you love so much on Monday, but until then, consider yourself kidnapped."

Mason was speechless.

"Oh and by the way, you may want to call your fiancée so she doesn't go any crazier than she already is. You know how she can get all deranged sometimes, especially if she finds out you're

here with me.”

“Yeah,” he said, stunned.

“Call her now.” Jasmine insisted.

“Okay!” Mason said. “I thought I left the nagging at home,” he said under his breath.

“Excuse me?” Jasmine said, folding her arms and looking at him with her piercing brown eyes.

“Nothing!” Mason said as he stepped into the living room to dial Sasha’s number. I’ll call her now.”

Mason dialed Sasha’s number and hoped to be able to leave a message on her voicemail. But instead, she answered.

“Hey, baby!” she said, sounding happy to be hearing from him. “Did you make it okay? Where’d you go anyway?”

“Hey!” he said, “I made it just fine. I’m actually just a few hours away. You know how my boss is- I won’t be back until Monday.”

“Did you forget? Tonight is our cake tasting! We can’t do the cake tasting without you!” she squealed.

“Babe, it’s cake. It’s not rocket science. Whatever you like is fine with me.”

“I will do NO SUCH THING! What if I choose coconut and you HATE coconut? What if you’re allergic? What if---”

He cut her off mid-sentence.

“Sash, whatever you choose is fine with me. I like everything, don’t worry. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Mason returned to the kitchen as Jasmine was throwing her purse over her shoulder.

“I gotta run to the store but I should be back in an hour or so,” Jasmine said.

“You want me to ride with you?” he asked her. He looked like a lost puppy.

“Take it from me, the bags under your eyes tell me that you need some serious rest. You can get that here. Plus, I’m sure

you didn't come all the way here just to follow me around," she said as she headed for the front door.

Just as Jasmine was pulling out of the driveway, Mason heard her cell phone ringing on the kitchen counter. The name "J.J." flashed on the caller ID. Mason wondered who "J.J." was. A rush of jealousy came over him and it caught him off-guard. Who was he to be jealous when he was three weeks away from being a married man?

As he sat at Jasmine's kitchen table, he reflected on all they had been through together. He had known Jasmine since the first grade, yet she never became more than a friend. After having a one-night-stand many years ago, they decided to remain friends. But although Mason felt that Jasmine wanted more from him, he also knew she respected his engagement.

He decided to take a shower before Jasmine returned from the store.

When Jasmine pulled back into the driveway, Mason was lying on the couch in his sweats and t-shirt.

"Dang man, when I said relax, I didn't say turn into a bum!" she laughed as she closed the door behind her.

"Can you open this?" she asked, handing Mason a bottle of wine.

"Jaz, it's 1:00 in the afternoon!" Mason joked.

"It's 5:00 somewhere," she said. "Besides, I thought maybe we could get a game of checkers going so I can kick your tail like I used to back in the day."

"Um, excuse me, but you NEVER kicked my butt in checkers. Never! Let's get that straight right now." Mason said. "You may have cheated your way to a few wins, but your checker skills will never beat mine," Mason said as he opened the wine and handed it back to Jasmine. Jasmine poured the wine into two glasses.

"Oh, your phone rang while you were gone. It was some

dude named J.J.," he said.

"Okay first of all, you shouldn't have even been LOOKING at my phone. And second of all, how do you even know J.J. is a guy?" she said.

"Is it a girl?" Mason asked sarcastically.

"That's not the point! You're getting married, remember? So that means you can't be putting your nose in MY business!" she said, picking up her phone to check her voicemail. After she listened to the message she put her phone back down on the cabinet. "Looks like I have a date tonight!" she said, sitting back down at the kitchen table.

"That's great!" Mason said. "Actually, I'm gonna run out for a few," he said as he suddenly pushed back from the table.

"All of a sudden you have somewhere to go?" Jasmine asked.

"Yeah, I...well...I'll be back a little later. I don't wanna hold you up from getting ready for your date," he said, grabbing his keys.

Jasmine was confused. "Whatever, Mase. I'll see you when you get back," she said, drinking the rest of the wine in her glass.

As Mason drove away, he was confused over the feelings he was having over Jasmine. Why had he gotten so upset? Why didn't he want Jasmine to date?

Mason drove through downtown Blue and discovered that a lot of what he remembered was no longer there. The water fountain that was once the focal point of the downtown area was no longer there. Instead, a drive-thru coffee stand was in its place.

The small grocery store where Mason worked for much of his high school years had been leveled, and in its place was a natural foods store. The shopping mall that had been erected years earlier looked to be busier than ever.

But what impressed Mason the most was his childhood

church, Elm Street Baptist. What once was a small, one-room country church was now several church buildings. The sanctuary had a capacity of 2,000 members. Mason drove into the driveway of Elm Street just to take it all in. As he sat in his car, he reminisced about the many nights he had spent in this very parking lot, hanging out after youth service. He had even spent a few evenings in the parking lot with his high school sweetheart. That is, until his grandmother caught him one evening.

Mason noticed a familiar face on the church sign: Jacob Anderson. Jacob and Mason were best friends in high school and had played sports together from little league football until they graduated. They even went on a double date to the prom together. After high school, Mason kept in touch with Jacob from time to time, but Mason hadn't seen him in several years.

Just then, there was a knock on Mason's car window.

"Good evening, sir." It was a young man, around 18 or 19 years of age. "Would you like to join us tonight?"

"Oh, no, actually, I was just passing through. Besides, I'm not dressed appropriately."

"Well I believe you're here for a reason, no matter how you're dressed." The young man opened Mason's car door.

"Come in!" he said, smiling.

Mason couldn't say no. He turned his car off and followed the young man inside.

As Mason stepped inside the doors of the sanctuary, he was met by several young people, who each extended their hands to shake Mason's. "Wassup man?" they said individually.

Mason was taken aback by the friendliness the young people showed. This was not the treatment he was used to when he worked at the community center.

"Come this way," one of the young women said. Mason followed her to an empty seat near the front of the church. She handed Mason a program and said "Welcome!" Her smile was

contagious.

As Mason read the program, he felt someone watching him. When he looked up, a woman was standing right beside him.

“Mason?” the woman said.

“Yes....who...” Mason was confused.

“Oh, you don’t know me. Well, not really. We went to high school together but we ran in different cliques. You were with the jocks, and I was with the not-so-popular girls. My coke-bottle glasses probably could have started a forest fire if the wanted to,” she laughed nervously. “My name is Keisha. Keisha Jennison. Well, my maiden name was Jennison, now it’s Anderson. My husband is the pastor of this church!”

“*You* married Jacob?” Mason said, stunned. He was more surprised over the fact that Jacob had actually gotten married than the fact that he had married Keisha. Mason did remember her. Keisha was popular with the guys when she started high school. But one day she left school and didn’t come back until the beginning of their sophomore year. When she returned she was much different. She was withdrawn, and the rumor around the school was that she had had a nervous breakdown.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Mason continued, trying to smooth over what he said. “It’s just, it seems like everyone is getting married!”

“Are *you* married, Mason? Let me guess: no.” Keisha asked smiling and folding her arms.

“No. Well, not yet,” Mason said. “I’m getting married in a few weeks.”

Keisha smiled.

“Well, whoever she is, she’s a lucky girl!” she said. “I remember how nice you were to me in high school, even when I left for the *crazy house*. I’m sure that hasn’t changed. Well, I better get back so we can get this program started. You gonna stay for a meal afterwards? All visitors can eat for free.”

Mason hadn't planned to stay, but realized he could not say no. Besides, Jasmine needed some time to cool off.

"Have you ever known me to pass up a good meal?" Mason asked. "Of course I'll stay!"

"Mama!" a voice called out from across the sanctuary. A little girl ran over to Keisha, and Keisha picked her up. "This is Mia," Keisha said. "I'll send Jacob back here to say hello!" she said as she walked away.

Mason thought about how it must feel to be married. He hoped he was making the right decision. As he waited for the service to begin, his mind automatically wandered to Sasha. What made her marriage material? And why had Mason decided that *now* was the right time? Sure, they had been dating for over two years before Mason asked Sasha to marry him, but he still felt uneasy about settling down with one woman for the rest of his life.

Pre-engagement Sasha was a joy to be around; however, post-engagement Sasha was a maniac. Her whole personality had changed once Mason placed the engagement ring on her finger. She went from an easy-going and laid-back woman, to a woman who was completely obsessed with having the perfect wedding. Mason knew Sasha had gone over the edge of sanity the night he had planned a quiet dinner at home only to discover that Sasha's definition of a quiet night at home meant a four-hour conversation about what color they should use for the church aisle runner. Sasha carried a three-ring "wedding" binder with her everywhere she went and it drove Mason crazy. After the first full year of their engagement, Mason was ready to elope. He loved the pre-engagement Sasha; he barely liked the new Sasha.

But eloping was out of the question. Mason suggested running away several times, but Sasha laughed it off and handed him yet another invitation or favor sample. Sasha's entire life had become consumed with their wedding and he couldn't wait until

the big day. Mason was not as excited about the wedding day itself as much as he was to finally be able to put an end to all of this madness.

The lights dimmed in the sanctuary and the worship team began to play. Mason remembered attending services every Sunday here with his parents and his grandmother and now he truly felt at home. As the band began to play he couldn't help but to tap his sneakers to the beat of the drums. The churches he visited periodically in D.C. and Maryland didn't have the feeling of home. Although Elm Street was now a mega-church, it still had a small-town church feel to it.

The congregation leapt to its feet and the youth choir began to sing. It was a real celebration!

The service only lasted an hour and when the hall began to empty, Mason looked up to see Jacob making his way over through the crowd. Jacob hadn't aged one bit. In fact, he looked even better than he did in high school. Mason remembered how competitive they were back then, challenging each other in everything from sports, to girls, to who could eat the most pizza in one sitting.

"My man, Mason!" Jacob said, grabbing Mason and pulling him in for a hug. "How you been, man? No, better question- WHERE you been?"

"Living in DC, trying to put my law degree to work and getting ready for my wedding in three weeks."

"What are you doing all the way down here? Who you staying with?" Jacob asked.

"Jaz." Mason answered. Jacob laughed, patting Mason on the back.

"I see some things never change, huh?" Jacob said. "Still a playah! Yo, does she still look as good as she looked in high school?" he said. "Because she was FINE!"

"Of course she does! And man, it ain't even like that. Me

and Jaz are just good friends. I'm engaged, remember? And, in fact, Jaz is out on a date right now with some guy, so she ain't hardly thinking about me!" he said laughing.

"Whatever you say," Jacob said, giving Mason a wink. He didn't believe him. "But, hey man, I hope you're gonna stay for dinner."

"Yeah, Keisha already asked me. I'll stay."

"Good. Hey, let me take care of our guest preacher and I'll meet you in fellowship hall," Jacob said.

Mason made his way through the crowd to the back of the fellowship hall. One of the ushers pointed him toward the swinging door and directed him to go two doors down to find the dining hall. As he walked he looked at the walls and recognized some of the old photos. Mason's late grandmother's portrait hung right outside the nursery. Because of her love of children, Mason's grandmother left an endowment to fund the church nursery. They even named it after her. Mason looked inside to see five or six children sitting in a circle while one of the nursery volunteers read a story to them.

Mason could smell the food before he even made it to the room. Once he stepped inside, Mason basked at the table filled with baked ham, macaroni and cheese and cornbread. It smelled like Easter Sunday!

Mason spotted Keisha across the room and she motioned him over, patting the empty seat next to her.

"Mason do you want me to fix your plate? I know that sounds so old fashioned doesn't it? But I do it for all of our guests. You just have to tell me what you'd like to eat."

"The real question is, what DON'T I eat," Mason said, laughing.

Keisha laughed, too. "Okay! I'll be right back."

Mason looked around the room. He recognized some of the faces but saw a lot of new ones, too. They all looked so happy.

He liked the range in ages of all the people in attendance. At almost every table there were senior citizens sitting with the youth group members. As he looked around, he spotted Jacob coming toward him.

“Yo!” Jacob said, slapping Mason on his back. “I am so excited about you being back in town! What made you come here? Did you see us in the paper? Did you see the spot on television about our new seminary? You know we're famous around here, right?”

“Nah, man. I just drove past and saw your giant head on a billboard,” Mason said, laughing. “That’s why I look like I’ve been shooting hoops all day. I’m sorry,” he said, lowering his head for a moment to look at his sweatpants and sneakers.

“Man, please. You know you can come as you are. There’s no dress code in God’s house! And we don't have a cover charge unless you count the collection plate,” he laughed. “So anyway, I wanted to see how long you’re gonna be in town. I want to shoot a few things by you to see what you think. You free tomorrow?”

“You mean you need some free legal advice?” Mason joked.

“No, nothing like that. I just know you’ve always been really good at planning and I need someone to help me brainstorm some ideas before I talk to the deacon board. I’ll stop by and pick you up in the morning at Jaz’s if that’s okay.”

Jacob was excited, and this made Mason excited, too. Mason felt as though he was put in this place for a reason, and maybe that reason was Elm Street.



Jasmine was excited to be seeing J.J. again; especially after the disaster of a date they had a few months ago. Every time they were together, she always had fun. Jasmine hoped J.J.'s call made Mason jealous but she was unsure if it did. But Mason being jealous shouldn't matter to Jaz, right? He was an almost-married man and Jasmine should have considered him off limits.

Jasmine scanned her walk-in closet and nothing seemed appropriate. Her closet was filled with the latest fashions but this date was special, so she needed to look the part. She looked through each rack and sighed. Even her "little black dress" seemed dull. She decided on her red wrap dress and black stilettos.

As Jasmine held the dress against her curvy frame and looked in the full-length mirror, all she could see was her stomach. It looked a little more round than normal, something Jasmine chalked up to her overindulgence over the past few weeks. She opened her lingerie drawer and found her favorite slimming tank and figured that should do the job of holding everything for the night, as long as she didn't plan to eat anything. Or breathe.

She jumped into the shower and let the water run over her, quickly washing her hair before getting out. As she wrapped the towel around her head, she heard the doorbell ring.

It was J.J.

Jasmine stood frozen in her hallway. Should she answer the door in her robe? No, that would just give J.J. the wrong idea. But she also didn't want to make him stand outside while she got dressed. She wrapped her robe around her and tied the belt snugly around her waist. "I'm coming!" she called out as she walked to the door.

When she opened the door, J.J. was standing there with a bouquet of flowers and a box of her favorite chocolates.

“Well, hello, miss lady!” J.J. said as he threw his arms around her. Jasmine’s robe almost flew open.

“J.J.!” she said, quickly re-tying her robe.

“Girl, please. You act like I’ve never seen a naked woman before,” JJ said, laughing.

“Not *THIS* naked woman” Jasmine said, stepping back to let him in.

J.J. flashed his million-dollar smile as he handed Jasmine the flowers and chocolates.

“You are too much!” Jasmine said. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you know I had to get something nice for you, especially after the last time we were together.”

“Yeah, about that...” Jasmine started.

“Shhhhhh” J.J. said, placing his finger over her lips. “Get dressed. Let’s see what good ole’ Blue Ver-gin-nee has to offer a lil ol’ city boy like me,” he said, faking a southern accent.

“Don’t joke on my city, J.J.!” she said. “Have a seat. I’ll be back in a few.”

Jasmine went into the kitchen to put the flowers into a vase of water. As she arranged them on her countertop she remembered the first time J.J. gave her gerbera daisies. She smiled.

“Hey, can I use your bathroom?” J.J. called out from the living room.

“Yeah, use the guest bathroom,” she said, without even thinking. After a few seconds, she heard J.J.’s voice again.

“What the hell are these?” J.J. yelled, walking into the living room holding a pair of Mason’s boxers.

“My friend is visiting,” Jasmine said as she peeked her head out of her bedroom door. “He’s having a hard time right now with work, his fiancée...”

“And holding onto his boxers?” J.J. said, angrily. “Look, I’m not up for any games. You told me you were single. Why would you have me drive all the way here and you had another man in your bed?”

Jasmine stepped back out of her bedroom. “Mason is not in my bed! He’s sleeping in the guest room. And “I AM single. He’s just a friend.”

Jasmine was beginning to get angry, too. How dare J.J. question HER about her own home?

“MASON?” J.J. fumed. *THE* Mason? The same Mason you’ve had a crush on since the seventh grade? The same Mason you gush about every time we talk about the past?”

Jasmine was silent. J.J. was right; she did talk about Mason quite often.

“Come on, J.J. I told you Mason and I are just friends. He’s getting married in a few weeks! He’s just stressed out and he needs a place to rest for a few days. That’s all.” Jasmine walked over to J.J.

J.J. began to calm down as he saw Jasmine coming toward him in her robe.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Positive!” Jasmine said, looking J.J. straight in the eyes. “Now, give me a few so I can get ready, and we’ll see what Blue has in store for us this evening.

“Okay,” J.J. said. “You sure know how to calm me down, girl!” he said, laughing.

“It’s my specialty,” Jasmine said, winking.

J.J. sat on Jasmine’s sofa and began to look through Mason’s proposal.

When Jasmine re-emerged, J.J. was speechless.

“Well, hello!” J.J. said as he stood up.

Jasmine spun around. “You like?”

“I LOVE!” J.J. said. “Maybe we can just stay here and

order in,” he said with a chuckle.

“And waste all of THIS?” Jasmine said, putting her hands on her hips.

“Girl you are tight!” J.J. said.

And so is this girdle, Jasmine thought. “Thanks, baby. Let’s go!”

As they walked toward Jasmine’s front door, the door opened before Jasmine’s hand touched the doorknob. It was Mason.

“Masel!” Jasmine said, surprised. “I didn’t expect you back here until...”

“Until your date was gone?” Mason said sarcastically as he stepped toward J.J. “I’m Mason,” he said, holding out his right hand.

“J.J.,” J.J. said coldly. “I’ve heard a lot about you, man,” J.J. said.

“That’s funny,” Mason began, “Because I’m JUST hearing about you today.”

“Well I’m sure you’ve been busy, you know, with your wedding and all. Your *fiancée* is probably missing you right about now, huh?”

“Don’t worry about my fiancée,” Mason said, stepping closer to J.J.

“Oh, did I hit a nerve, playboy?” J.J. said.

“Not at all,” Mason said, trying to sound like he was not upset.

“Okay, so we’re gonna go!” Jasmine said as she pulled on J.J.’s sleeve.

Mason’s phone began to ring. Sasha’s number flashed on the caller ID.

“Hey, baby! I’m on my way home,” he said, thinking Sasha was on the other end of the line. But it wasn’t Sasha.

“This isn’t Sasha, Mason, this is her father. I’m not sure

where you are right now, but we need you to come back as soon as you can.”

“Didn’t Sasha tell you I’ll be away for a few days?”

Mason said. “I hope she didn’t put you up to calling me so that I’d drive all the way back for the cake tasting. Did she tell you tonight will be the EIGHTH cake we have tasted?”

“Mase, this has nothing to do with the cake...”

Mason noticed the strange tone in Mr. McCarthy’s voice.

“Did something happen? Mr. McCarthy, did something happen to Sasha?” Mason asked.

“There’s been an accident. You need to get here as soon as you can. We’re at Baptist Hospital on Jerome Avenue,” he said before hanging up.

“What is it, Mase?” Jasmine asked, seeing the panic on Mason’s face.

“It’s my fiancée...she’s been...in an...I have to go!”

Mason said as he started out the front door onto Jasmine’s porch.

“Mase, wait! Let me go with you! You shouldn’t be driving in the state that you’re in!”

But Mason was already outside and getting into his car.

“I’ll call you when I know something,” he said.

Jasmine and J.J. stood in her doorway and watched Mason drive away.

two

There was an awkward silence between Jasmine and J.J. as Mason disappeared into the night.

“So, do you still want to go out? Get something to eat?” J.J. asked.

“Why don’t we do what you suggested before? Order in? Maybe order a movie, too?” Jasmine hated to waste her perfect outfit on a night at home, but she knew she would not be able to enjoy her evening. Besides, she couldn’t wait to get out of her girdle and into her yoga pants.

“That sounds good.” J.J. said.

“I’m gonna go change. Look and see what movies are available to order.”

Jasmine sat on the edge of her bed and wondered what happened to Sasha. Was she hurt badly? Was she dead? Jasmine couldn’t wait for Mason to get to the hospital and call her with the details. When her cell phone rang, she jumped back to reality. It was her mother.

“Hi, Mom!” Jasmine said, in her most cheerful voice.

“Jaz! Well, bless your heart. How are you doing?”

Jaz’s mother lived just a few hours away, but Jasmine still didn’t see her as often as she wanted to.

“I’m awesome! I have a houseguest this week, so I took a few days to hang out with him.”

“*Him?*” Jasmine’s mother sounded surprised.

“Yes, Mom. Him. You remember Mason, right? Mama Joseph’s son? Well he’s visiting me for a few days.”

“Now Jaz, you know he’s an almost-married man. You shouldn’t have another woman’s husband layin’ up in your house.”

“Mom, he’s just a friend. I promise you that nothing is going on here.” Just then, J.J. called to Jasmine from the living room.

“How about watching *The Boogeyman Strikes Back*?” J.J. asked.

“Is that Mason? Tell him I said hello!” Jasmine’s mother said.

“Actually, no. That was my friend J.J.”

“Jasmine, what on earth are you doing down there? Running a brothel?” Her mother was obviously upset.

Jasmine knew it sounded worse than it actually was.

“A brothel? Come on, mom!” Sometimes Jasmine wondered whose side her mother was actually on.

“Well, all I know is what I hear, since you never seem to have time for me.” Jasmine rolled her eyes on the other end of the line as her mother continued. “And right now, it doesn’t sound good, what with one man in your guest room and another in your living room.”

“Mom, I gotta go. I’ll call you back later on,” Jasmine said. She was trying to end the conversation before it became heated.

“I’m not done talking to you yet!” Jasmine’s mother fumed.

“Well I have to go. I’ll call you later, I promise!”

Jasmine ended the call and changed into her yoga pants and zip-up jacket. When she stepped back into the living room, J.J. was looking at her take-out menu folder.

“What do you feel like? Chinese? Italian?”

“I don’t care,” Jasmine said. She didn’t really feel like eating.

“So, Chinese it is!” J.J. said. He didn’t notice that she was still upset.



Lucille Jennison had always been the source of stress in Keisha's life. Even though she was a wonderful mother to Keisha and her little sister Frankie, as Lucille aged she became more and more demanding. Frankie never seemed to be stressed about Lucille's care, but Keisha was constantly worried.

When Lucille was diagnosed with leukemia a few months ago, Keisha didn't know how long she would have to live. Lucille's health began to decline, and with each passing day Keisha felt more and more relieved. She loved her mother, but she was also afraid her mother would reveal the secret she had been keeping on Keisha's behalf for more than twenty years.

As if on cue, Keisha's phone rang. It was her sister Frankie.

"Hey, Keish!"

"Hey! I was just thinking about you!" Keisha said.

"Funny! I was thinking about you too. I was wondering when you're gonna come and see Mama?"

"Tomorrow, actually," Keisha said before thinking first. "I was gonna drive up in the morning. Is that good?"

"Is that good? Are you serious? ANYTIME is good, Keish. Besides, mama said she has to talk to us about something." Keisha's stomach turned.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow then. Are you bringing the girls?"

"Of course I am!" Keisha said. "Where else are they gonna go?"

"True. Okay well I'll see you tomorrow!" Frankie said.

The next morning, Keisha woke up bright and early to drive to Frankie's. It had been almost a month since she had seen her last.

The ride to Frankie's was always peaceful when Keisha remembered to pack activities for the twins to do. They played car bingo, colored dozens of pictures and napped.

Frankie was already standing in her doorway when Keisha pulled up. Frankie's smile widened as soon as she saw the twins. They ran toward her yelling "auntie!" and she scooped them up in her arms, picking them both up off the ground.

"Hey sis!" she said to Keisha, kissing her on her cheek. Frankie swept her dreadlocks into a bun on top of her head and stepped back inside the house to motion them in.

"Is that new?" Keisha asked her, pointing to the tattoo on Frankie's left foot.

"Yeah, you like it?" she asked, holding up her foot.

"What is it?" Keisha asked.

"It's a prayer bead. See? The strands go..." Frankie stopped talking when she realized Keisha wasn't listening. She was too busy tying Mia's shoe.

"Why'd you ask if you didn't even care? Dang, Keish! You can be so rude!" Frankie said as she flopped down on the beanbag chair.

"Whatever. What you got to eat?" Keisha asked. As Keisha opened the refrigerator and looked inside, she laughed and said "are you kidding me?" The refrigerator was bare, aside from a few oranges and a bottle of wine.

"What do you eat, Frankie?" she asked.

"I eat at work!" Frankie said. "Don't worry about me. Besides, I could stand to miss a few meals," she said as she raised her shirt to reveal her stomach. "See these?" she asked, pinching her tiny love handles.

"Girl, please! That's nothing a few weeks at the gym won't take care of," Keisha said. "So, what's up with mama? Have you been to see her this week?"

"Yeah, I went by there on Saturday. She's okay, I guess.

She said she wants to see you, though. All she talks about is Keisha this and Keisha that. I'm like 'jeez, Mama, I'm your daughter, too!'"

"You know she's getting older, Frank. Don't sweat it okay? You ready to go see her now?"

"Yep! Let me grab my jacket. I'll meet y'all in the car."

As Keisha buckled the twins into their seat belts, she thought again about their mother. Keisha hoped Lucille would be able to keep the secret at least long enough for Keisha to be able to talk to Jacob first. Keisha also wondered why Lucille would decide to reveal it now, after keeping it hidden for so long.



With Keisha and the twins away for the day, Jacob finally had some time to relax. As he lay on the sofa and prepared for a full day of doing absolutely nothing, he began to think about how much he had been through with Keisha. He loved her, and he was thankful to have her as his wife. But he always felt she was on guard, even when they were relaxing at home. When he married her 11 years ago, he promised to always be faithful. But lately, she was even turning him away in the bedroom. She always seemed to be worried about something.

As he dozed off to sleep, there was a knock at the front door. He expected it to be the landscapers, but instead he found a young boy standing on his front porch. The boy looked to be around nine or ten.

“Are you Jacob Anderson? Um...PASTOR Jacob Anderson?” he said.

“Yes. Who are you, son?” Jacob asked, wondering who this young man could be.

“Oh. Well, hello sir. My name is Joshua,” he said as he extended his right hand to Jacob. “Joshua Hiwassee. My mama Sarah said she knows you?”

Jacob didn’t think he knew anyone named Sarah. Then he remembered the waitress he met eleven years ago when he spent the summer in Seattle.

“Sarah Hiwassee?” Jacob asked. “From Seattle?”

“Yep! Can I come in?” he asked. Before Jacob could even answer, Joshua pushed past him into the living room.

“Wow, nice house!” Joshua said as he dropped his duffle bag on the floor. “Yo, preachers must make A LOT!” he said, laughing.

“Well, not really. I’m just very frugal,” Jacob said. He still

didn't know why this young man was there. "How did you get here? How did you know where I live?"

"Oh, my auntie dropped me off. I wanted to meet you!"

"Well, you've met me. Now what?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we can hang out? My mama's not doing so good. She's not eating, and her doctor said she may have to go away for a long time," he said as he ran his fingers along the staircase banister.

"What's wrong with her?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know. People always whisper when I'm around."

"I'm sorry about that, son."

"It's not your fault, dad."

"I'm sorry, did you just call me 'dad'?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah!" Joshua answered. "Is that okay?"

"It would be okay if I was your dad, but I'm not. Why would you call me that anyway?"

"Because you ARE my dad! Duh!" Joshua answered. "Do you have any snacks?" he continued.

"There must be some sort of mistake. I'm not your dad, Joshua. Your mother must have me confused with someone else."

"Nope. She's not confused. I've always known you were my dad. Since I was little!" Joshua said. "Every time we pass your billboard Mama says 'wave to your daddy!' And I do!"

"There's been a mistake. Can I have your mother's number? I need to call her."

"Sure!" Joshua said. "You can use my phone!" he said, handing the phone to Jacob. "Call Mom," Joshua said into the phone's mouthpiece as he handed it to Jacob.



“Joshua? What did your father say?” Sarah said, instead of saying hello.

“This isn’t Joshua, Sarah. This is Jacob. What is going on? What kind of games are you trying to play? And why did you tell him I was his father?”

“Oh, Jake, I am so sorry. It’s a long story. We lost touch... it’s been so long. Jake, I’ve just been so sick. I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“So you leave him on my doorstep like a newspaper? Not cool, Sarah. Not cool.”

Sarah was quiet.

“I’m bringing him right back to you, Sarah. You should already know I’m not one to be played with. I have a family now. What we had was a long time ago. I knew I shouldn’t have even dealt with you in the first place!”

“That’s harsh, Jake! And he IS your son! But if you wanna be a deadbeat, bring him back. And you call yourself a man of God!” Sarah said.

Jacob began to respond but realized Sarah had already hung up.

“Get your bag, Joshua. I’m taking you home.”

“But mom said THIS IS my new home. You have plenty of space for me! You have like twenty bedrooms!”

“We have four bedrooms. But that’s not the point. You’re not my son. I’m almost positive. But until we can figure this all out, you can’t stay here. Not until I’ve had a chance to talk it over with my wife Keisha.”

Joshua hung his head low as he picked up his duffel bag.

“This isn’t fair!” he said as he walked toward the front door.

“I know, son, I know,” Jacob said as they closed the front door behind them.

As they drove down the highway, Jacob glanced over at Joshua from time to time. His jawline was definitely the same as Jacob’s, even the way he held his mouth when he spoke. But that didn’t mean anything. Jacob still needed to have a DNA test done as soon as possible.

“Turn here,” Joshua said, pointing to Chesney Rd, which was a small one-way street that Jacob used to visit when he was participating in a door-to-door ministry. It had been years since Jacob had been on this road, but not much had changed. The houses still looked abandoned, and most of the lawns were overgrown.

As Jacob drove down the narrow road, he was careful not to hit any of the numerous potholes along the way.

“Slow down,” Joshua said. As they slowed to a stop, Jacob was amazed at the condition of Sarah’s home. It looked like it used to be a nice home, but that was in the past. Now the home was falling apart. As Jacob stepped out of the car, his foot crushed a syringe.

“You live here?” Jacob asked. Now he knew why Joshua wanted to live with him so badly.

“Yep! This is home sweet home,” Joshua said sarcastically.

As Joshua fumbled for his keys, Jacob took another look at him. He was almost Jacob’s height, and he shared the same tall, slim build. But Jacob still couldn’t be sure that Joshua was his son. The only way to prove it for sure was to have a DNA test.

Joshua opened the door and motioned for Jacob to follow him.

As soon as Jacob and Joshua stepped inside, Jacob was overwhelmed with the smell of marijuana. There were piles of laundry on the sofa and loveseat, and the trash was spilling out of

the trash can in the kitchen.

“What’s up with the trash?” Jacob asked Joshua.

“Mama hasn’t had a chance to take it out,” he replied.

“Don’t you have two hands? Please take out the trash. No one should have to tell you to take the trash out in your own home. You live here, too!”

“Yes, sir,” Joshua said as he did what he was told.

“Sarah?” Jacob yelled, wondering where Sarah was.

“Back here, Jacob! Third door on your left.”

Sarah’s bedroom door was ajar and she was sitting on the edge of her bed, smoking a cigarette.

“Jacob!” she said as she stood to her feet, throwing her arms around him. She looked as though she only weighed about 90 pounds.

“Hi Sarah” was all Jacob could muster up. He was shocked over the condition of Sarah’s home, and even more upset over the way Sarah had let herself go. She looked like a drug addict.

“So this is why you dumped your son on me? So you can lie around all day, smoking and watching television?” Jacob was upset.

“Are you kidding me? I’m SICK, Jacob. I’m an addict. I’ve been an addict for years. A little cigarette smoke never killed anybody,” Sarah said as she took another drag.

“Well the least you could do is put that cigarette out when you have company. Or when your son is in the room.”

“Okay, *DADDY*,” Sarah said, putting the cigarette out on her headboard. “But, wow, look at you! You made a very nice looking man, Jake. I remember you all those years ago when you weren’t much more than a twig with raging hormones. The way you chased me around that summer still makes me laugh!” she said laughing.

“Well, that was a long time ago,” Jacob said as he stood with his arms folded. He searched Sarah’s face for any resemblance of the woman she used to be. Her once-thick mane of hair was now thinned and dry. Her olive-toned skin now had a dark, muddy appearance. And her once-voluptuous body was now little more than skin and bones.

“Mama, can I come in?” Joshua asked from the doorway.

“Not right now, baby. Give me and your dad some time to talk, okay?”

“I’m not his…” Jacob said, but stopped before he finished the sentence. He moved the pile of clothes that was on the chair next to Sarah’s bed and sat down.

“Jacob, I didn’t know what else to do. I have no family here. I don’t even have any friends in this city. Joshua has been my life for the past 11 years. I can’t leave this earth unless I know my son will be taken care of. You’re the only person he should be with.”

“Sarah, don’t talk like that. You’re not gonna die! You just need to go to rehab,” Jacob said. “And I can’t take Joshua. I already have a family!”

“I know all about Keisha and the twins,” she said.

“How do you know about THEM?” Jacob asked.

“Blue is a very small town. Why do you think I moved back here after Joshua was born? And besides, you’re all over the paper at least once a month. Your church is doing so well. Your wife looks like a sweet woman, Jake. Believe me, the last thing I’d ever want to do is upset your wife or your congregation.”

“I appreciate that. So then you understand why I can’t take Joshua back home with me.”

“You have no other choice. You’ve seen the condition of my home. I catered to him so much as a child, that he doesn’t even know how to do ANYTHING on his own! You have to take him.”

“Yeah, I just noticed the trash falling over on the kitchen floor,” Jacob said.

“Jake, you know I’ve always been independent. Always. And honestly, if I hadn’t gotten sick, you would have never even known about Joshua! But I’m sick. I can’t take care of Joshua right now. And Lord knows, I don’t want him in foster care!”

“Sarah, I’m really sorry about you being sick. But I can’t take care of another kid. My wife would skin me alive if she found out I had a relationship with you the summer before we got married.”

“Relationship?” Sarah laughed and then began to cough. “I’d hardly call what we were doing a *relationship*.”

Jacob laughed nervously. “Yeah, you’re right about that.”

Jacob and Sarah, 11 years ago

Seattle, Washington,

“Excuse me, did you drop your name tag?” Jacob said, handing a packet of sugar to Sarah.

“Sugar?” she asked.

“Cause you so sweet!” he said, laughing. It was the corniest pick-up line she had ever heard, but she had to admit, it was unique.

“What’s your name?” Jacob asked.

“Sarah. What’s yours?” she asked.

“Jacob. You come here often?”

“I WORK here, A LOT” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said, remembering where he was and what she was doing.

“Anyway. I was thinking maybe I could come back and see you after your shift is over? We could go have a cup of coffee or something?”

“At midnight? Come on, man. Ain’t nothin’ happening at that time of night but trouble,” she said, walking away.

“So how ‘bout in the morning. Before you go to work? Would you meet me then?”

She stood and looked at him for a full minute before saying, “If you can find me, you can take me to breakfast.”

Sarah went back to the kitchen and told her co-workers not to reveal her last name or where she lived if he returned the next morning.

The next day there was a knock at her door at 7 a.m. “Who is it?” she asked.

“Jacob. You ready for breakfast?”

She was almost scared of her own reflection; she certainly

couldn't open the door this way!

"Sarah!" he called through the door. "Come on, let me in. You said if I could find you, I could take you to breakfast. What gives?"

"How did you find me? Was it my co-workers? My boss? I'm gonna kill them!"

"Nope, you're wrong. Now, are you gonna leave me out here or are you gonna let me in?"

"Give me five minutes," she said.

Sarah ran into the bathroom to brush her teeth, washing her face at the same time. She yanked the rollers out of her hair and slid into a tank dress. Within four minutes she was back at the door. She swung it open to find Jacob standing there with a bunch of daisies and a Kit Kat chocolate bar.

"What's with the Kit Kat?" she asked.

"I saw you eating one on your break last night. I dig them, too."

Sarah smiled. She noticed Jacob kept looking at the top of her head. She immediately knew why.

"I still have a roller in my hair, don't I?" she asked.

Jacob nodded. They both laughed.

"What do you feel like for breakfast?" he asked her.

"How 'bout pancakes?" she said, taking the roller out of her hair.

"Sounds good to me!" Jacob said. "Maybe we can check out that diner on the corner.

As they walked to the diner, Sarah asked Jacob her standard date questions. He answered them all with ease. He was 21 years old and originally from Blue, VA. He was a Global Outreach major at Seattle Bible College, graduating in less than a year. He had three sisters, two brothers and his parents had been married for thirty years. He didn't like cats, he had a secret crush on Mariah Carey, and he once slept outdoors to raise money for

the homeless. He wanted to move back to Blue when he graduated to preach full-time, preferably at his home church, Elm Street Baptist Church. His father was the current pastor at Elm Street.

But for the first time in Sarah's life, her questions were returned to her. Where was SHE from? What did SHE want to do?

She told Jacob she was 25 years old and originally from Nashville, TN. She attended college in San Diego before dropping out to make a go at becoming an actress. Three years and 134 casting calls later, she was a waitress at the Stop and Eat, a truck stop on the outskirts of Seattle. She loved all types of animals, owned a couple of cats and a dog and was a volunteer at the local animal shelter. She had a crush on David Bowie when she was a teenager, had one sister and her parents divorced when she was six. She once skinny-dipped on a dare, only to get caught by the campus security guard. Her dream was to become an actress and live in Beverly Hills. But she knew her chances of this destiny were dissolving with each heaping portion of corned beef hash she served.

"I'm only here until September- four more weeks. Why don't we just hang out while I'm here?" Jacob asked her. He liked her. He didn't have family here and she seemed like someone he would like to spend time with, even as friends.

"Now why would I do that? So you can sleep with me and throw me away after four weeks?"

"Sleep with you? Who said anything about sleeping? I have my own bed at my apartment," he joked.

"Yeah I've never heard THAT one before," she laughed. "Real nice, Jacob."

"I try, I try," he said, blowing his breath on his fingernails and rubbing them on his shirt.

They talked for hours about their lives and what they hoped to become. There were no worries about school or social

obligations, just the two of them, enjoying their morning. As Jacob walked Sarah back to her apartment, he thought about just how amazing this girl was, and how comfortable he was in her presence.

Sarah was usually guarded, but there was something different about Jacob. His wide smile seemed to welcome her into his heart and life, much like an old friend. On any other date, she would have ended it at her front door, but not this time. She decided to live carefree for the next four weeks. As they stood at her front door, Jacob leaned in to kiss her. But instead of kissing him back, she opened the door and led him inside. “Sit on the sofa. I’ll be right back,” she said.

Jacob was excited! He had never gotten this far in one day! Even back at school, the girls would usually put up a front and make him wait at least a week or two. Then they would say “I’ve never done this before.” That always made him laugh. He checked his pockets for a mint and smoothed the wrinkles in his shirt. He contemplated taking his pants off, but decided to leave them on.

But once Sarah reappeared, wearing only a t-shirt, he proceeded to unzip his pants. Then, he thought about Keisha. Sarah was already kissing him when he pulled away suddenly.

“Wait! I have to tell you something!” he said.

“What?”

“I have a girlfriend. Actually, she’s more like my fiancée. We’re getting engaged soon, and I wanted you to know.” He braced himself, expecting her to smack him or kick him out.

“And?” she said. “What’s she got to do with me?”

“I wanted you to know, I didn’t want there to be any lies between us,” Jacob said.

“Well, thank you for letting me know!” she said. “Now where were we?”

Jacob didn’t have time to wonder how on earth he had

gotten so lucky. A woman THIS fine, AND she was down on the first date? He didn't think about it, he just sat back and enjoyed the ride.

Once they entered her bedroom, they didn't leave her apartment for two whole days.

Jacob and Sarah spent the next four weeks together. For 28 days they swam in the ocean and danced and acted like a real couple. Deep down, Jacob believed they were soul mates, destined to be together.

They would lie awake every night and talk about their plans for the future and Jacob would go on and on about his dreams of becoming a preacher. But there was one thing he thought would stop him.

"What is it?" Sarah asked him one night.

"My lust for women," he said.

"Your lust? What do you mean? Everyone likes sex."

"No one likes it as much as I do," he continued. "I want it every day. I'd have it all day long if I could. And I'm afraid Keisha won't want it as much as I do. She's a virgin. What if she doesn't even like sex? Then what? Will I then step out and get me a jump off, just to stay sane? I don't wanna be that guy."

"You'll never be that guy, Jake. Never," she said. "I believe that once you are married to Keisha and you can have a regular sexual relationship with her, you won't need anyone else. Does she turn you on like other women do?"

"She does, but it's different. Like, she doesn't have her breasts all hanging out or her legs showing too much." He looked at Sarah's plunging neckline. "No offense"

"None taken."

"But you know, she's real modest and I like that. In fact, that's what made me like her so much when we first met. I met her at a weekend Bible intensive. It was the first time in my entire life that I was forced to spend time with a woman and I

didn't try to sleep with her. Every single woman I met up until that point just had their goods all out in the open for anyone to see. She didn't. I could tell she had a banging' body beneath her clothes, and I could imagine what it looked like without actually seeing it. All weekend she wore this standard church garb- a long skirt, a turtleneck and low shoes."

"She sounds so.....um.....inviting," Sarah joked.

"Don't make fun of her, Sarah. She's not a prude, she's just modest. She can't help it. Her father is a preacher, her grandmother too; almost everyone in her family has some connection to ministry. Honestly, her outward appearance made it easier to date for so long without having sex, because I could really focus on her and on what she was saying, instead of what I wanted to do to her. Let's be real, when I'm around women who don't cover their...assets...it's real hard for me to concentrate. And when they put it out there for me to check out, I do and I almost always try to see how far I can get with them. The more they show, the less time it takes for me to get what I want and go."

Jacob sat up in the bed and continued.

"So what happens when I'm pastor of my own church and I have a whole room full of women dressed provocatively for me?"

Sarah laughed.

"Okay, hold up. You think women dress that way for YOU? Get over yourself, man!" she said, laughing.

"Yep. I do," he said.

"We dress this way because we WANT to feel sexy. We WANT to feel WANTED. And sometimes men don't see you if you're not showing your sexy side. Now, me? I love to show off my breasts. I am proud of them. They have gotten me a free upgrade when I cruised last year, a raise in my last job and so many dates I can't even count them." She poked out her chest for an added effect.

“Are you serious? That's kind of crossing the line.”

“Okay, so what made YOU approach me the first time you met me, my intelligence?”

Jacob didn't answer. The truth was, he was drawn to her cleavage and the way her jeans hugged her hips.

“And if you hadn't approached me, we both would have spent the last four weeks bored out of our minds, sleeping in a cold and lonely bed” she laughed.

“But check THIS out. Just because I dress the way that I do, doesn't mean I'm gonna sleep with you. I mean of course I'm sleeping with you, but that's not always the plan. I dress like this because I feel sexier, more womanly.

Maybe she's onto something, Jacob thought.

“But back to what I said before- what happens when I meet another woman like you, when I'm already married.”

“Oh, baby, you'll never find another woman like me. When God made me he not only broke the mold, he rolled over it with his bulldozer and set it on fire.”

End of sample

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