



A Taste of Grace

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Category: Romance

Description: Dr. Gracelyn Toliver's world unraveled the day she lost her federal job—the career she'd poured her soul into. That loss, coupled with the recent death of her mother, becomes too heavy to bear, driving her to a dark place she barely escaped.

A move to a small Georgia town offers Grace a chance to breathe again, unexpectedly leading her into the lives of the broad-shouldered, swoon-worthy Pastor Caleb Stallings and his two young daughters, who see Grace as the mother they've been praying for. As Grace and Caleb navigate the delicate dance of caring for the girls, their mutual attraction quickly ignites, forcing them to reckon with feelings neither expected.

Can Grace and Caleb shed the weight of their pasts and embrace the possibility of a union built on trust, honesty, and faith? Or will old scars threaten to steal the promise of joy and restoration that is finally within their reach?

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Goodbye

“Sister Toliver is in the sweet arms of Jesus.” Elder Reed’s deep Southern drawl boomed across the southwest corner of the massive Loving Gardens cemetery as he stared at me with droopy eyes.

He concluded his words with a faint smile and raised bushy eyebrows as if he needed validation from me about my mother’s spiritual destination.

Since I had learned how to people please over the years, I gave him what he wanted, a closed-mouth nod of appreciation with my eyes crinkled at the corners.

I hoped that gesture encouraged him as he poured what he probably thought were perfect words to console me.

I adjusted my body in the funeral home’s wobbly front-row folding chair, moving to the edge to steady it.

My sunglass-covered eyes darted to the oversized flag pole across the cemetery then to raised headstones of various shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see.

I clasped my hands in my lap, lightly tapping my right foot over the turf covering the wet ground beneath me to work off nervous energy that had been building all day.

The elderly mortician stepped into Elder Reed’s spot and threw another sympathetic glance my way.

“On behalf of the Going Home Funeral Home, we thank you for entrusting your loved one to our care. You could have chosen anyone during your time of bereavement, but you selected us. We offer our heartfelt condolences to Ms. Toliver and the Glass and Toliver families.” He gestured to a smattering of aunts, uncles, and cousins who stood behind and sat beside me.

Instead of looking their way, I lowered my head and closed my eyes, lifting my crumpled tissue to my right nostril.

Y’all are pissing me off so bad right now.

As the mortician droned on, I reflected on what led me to my low mental state.

Life had become unbearable since I got caught in the crosshairs of a national political battle that resulted in me being one of the casualties of conservative disdain for educational progress and equity. With little fanfare, I lost my federal job over a month ago.

It had not mattered that I earned a doctorate from Princeton University and served as a senior appointee in the Office of Educational Innovation and Strategy, supervising more than fifty people in our Washington, DC office. It wasn’t enough to have accolades a mile long.

My career shifted without my permission. I had no one else to rely on when my bills kept coming, and I had to manage the affairs of two households.

I barely had time to care for myself as my mother entered her final days of hospice care. As she got weaker, my spirit broke more. I often cried silent tears, praying for a miracle that never came. Over time, I lost hope for my future.

Real tears finally left my eyes as the reality of my life hit me like a blow with a

baseball bat. Mama and Daddy sacrificed so much for me to be successful, but I had nothing to show for it. No one would miss me.

I inhaled and smiled faintly, taking in the chilly winter air. I raised my eyes toward the sky as the sun tried to peak through the grayish-blue clouds. That beauty was my confirmation that Mama, Daddy, and I would be together before the new year began.

Like those who marched across that bridge in 1965, I fought the good fight, but it was my time to go. I took another big breath, accepting my fate.

But where was the God my parents taught me to serve? Sadness and anger quickly overtook me as I realized how unprotected I was. He betrayed and abandoned me, ignoring my cries for help when I needed a reprieve from the pressures in my life.

I shut my eyes tightly as heaviness that never went away rested on my heart and mind and nearly suffocated me.

Don't scream.

I willed myself to maintain my composure as everyone around me acted normally. This farce of a funeral service may have meant something to them, but to me, it was a permanent stain on an unfulfilled promise of protection and hope.

"I'm sorry for your loss." My mother's brother, Uncle Keith, the kind one who always smelled like sandalwood, bent down and reached for my hand, interrupting my thoughts.

He had always been focused on his business as a car dealer and came across as clueless when it came to family matters.

Like my mean as rattlesnake aunts, he was a senior citizen, but at least I didn't have

to fight him like we were peers.

Thank goodness he behaved with some semblance of sense a sixty-five-year-old man should have.

“Thanks, Uncle Keith.” I held his watery eyes and received what I believed were sincere condolences.

Despite his kindness, I gave him the fake smile I perfected to mask my pain.

“Time to go, Keith.”

Both of us whipped our heads around to my sixty-seven-year-old aunt, my mother’s youngest sister, who treated me like a wayward stepchild my entire life. Her shrill voice cut through the sacred silence of the space like nails scraping the center of my heart.

“Coming. Take care, Grace, and call me if you need me.” He gave me a quick nod and patted my hand again before walking in the direction of the family cars parked behind the limousine that brought me to the cemetery.

Everyone entered their vehicles and pulled off, leaving me alone as I stared at the metallic peach casket I chose for Mama. She would have been pleased with my decision since she loved warm colors.

The silver lining of my mother’s death was that I would never have to deal with those heartless heathens again.

My mother’s sisters made my life hell as I took care of her.

From busting in the house to steal my grandmother’s mementos or reporting me to

the state's elder care services program with allegations of abuse, I learned quickly they had no care for me.

I was proud that I did not let that emotional abuse prevent me from centering Mama.

I shielded her from the hell that was happening as best I could, but my mother was nobody's fool.

Our family strife was probably what took her out sooner than the hospice nurses predicted.

As the matriarch of a complex family, Mama most likely died of a broken heart and probably worried if I would be able to survive without her.

My eyes gravitated to the fragrant spray of white and pink roses on her casket.

"The service was beautiful, Mama. Please don't be angry with me, but I can't live without you," I spoke softly and eyed the plot of land next to us, realizing that soon, I would be buried there.

Fresh tears rose as I stood with my hands clasped in front of me. My eyes blurred as I pictured how no one would be at my funeral the following week. They'd be preparing for festivities with their loved ones right before the Christmas holidays.

"Do you need anything else?" The elderly mortician interrupted my thoughts.

His extended hand lingered near my arm as if he genuinely wanted to comfort me. The faint scent of his cologne met my nose, reminding me of my late father and how he never left home without smelling good. As he peered into my eyes, waiting for me to say something, hot tears burned my throat.

I wanted to pour my broken heart out to this stranger who asked the right question at the wrong time. I wished someone, anyone, had asked me what I needed weeks ago, but it was too late for that now.

“No thanks. I’m fine.” I spoke the words with a crispness that sounded rude and dismissive, but I didn’t care.

“Okay. We’ll drive you back to the family home since there’s no repast.” He spoke his words slowly, never taking his eyes off me.

He turned his broad body sideways, extending one arm to the late-model gray limousine parked on the side of the road and the other arm toward me as if he was waiting to catch me if I collapsed.

I straightened my spine and nodded, following him closely. I took deliberate steps, remembering to keep my smile intact until we reached the car.

“Thank you again,” I said softly as he opened the door and finally stopped staring at me with concern.

When I entered the vehicle, warm air from the backseat vents hit my face.

Tender, contemporary gospel music filled the high-end speakers, tempting my body to sway as the choir’s three-part harmonies promised hope and renewal.

Their words threatened to embrace me like a hug, but I shut my eyes and blocked out that warmth. It was too late for all that.

Instead, I allowed my body to go limp, bitterly thinking how critical people were probably being about not having a repast for my mother, who was one of the best cooks in the county. I didn’t have enough time or energy to do more than plan the

service and contact everyone about the funeral.

Thank goodness for that kind mortician. He would do a great job with my service too.

We slowly began the trek toward my childhood home. Familiar landmarks, the Piggly Wiggly, the community bank, and my high school, all decorated in festive Christmas lights, met my eyes for the last time.

Could I have done something differently? Something more? I clenched my fists hard and dug my nails into my flesh so deeply that the black lace on the glove in my right hand tore against the thin fabric.

Nothing mattered or made sense anymore. I was alone, abandoned, unloved, unseen, unheard, and invisible.

The last person who truly ever saw the good in me was dead in the shiny box at the cemetery.

Death made more sense than life. Thank goodness that tomorrow, on my fortieth birthday, this pain would finally end.

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Revelation

Two Days Later

“She’s up.” A soft country voice across the room spoke as I opened my eyes and turned toward it.

Two women wearing aqua hospital scrubs, one slim and the other thick, huddled in the corner with medical charts in their hands.

When I groaned, they turned toward me. The slim one smiled as bright as the light that shone from the rectangular windows behind them.

The thick one exited and quietly shut the door.

Oh no.

Panic filled me as the steady beeps of the machines interrupted my thoughts. This wasn’t heaven or even hell. I was still very much alive and in a hospital bed, hooked up to complicated-looking machines.

I raised my hand to massage my throbbing temple but couldn’t. Like a caged animal, I was tethered to the bed rails on either side of me.

“Uh!” I shouted and jerked the loose restraints that held my wrists firm. “Cut me loose!”

My voice rang above the room's machines. The friendly-looking woman rushed to me and patted my right leg.

"Calm down, Gracelyn. You're safe." She repeated her pats and assuring words until my body stilled.

"It's Grace." I closed my eyes and took several breaths, inhaling the sharp smell of disinfectant.

Mama always kept a clean house .

"Where am I?"

"In the psych ward." She spoke the harsh words like a lullaby, sweet and gentle like Mama.

My eyes panned the room as I struggled to control my shallow breathing. This wasn't part of my plan.

The nurse turned around and picked up a clipboard, her pen held high.

"I know you have a lot of questions. The doctor will be in soon to answer them and to discuss your treatment plan."

"May I go to the bathroom?" I honed in on the closed door to my left.

"We have a catheter in you now..." Her downturned eyes displayed pity.

I lay my head back and sighed, replaying the day of my mother's funeral in my head. When was that? Yesterday? The day before?

“What day is it?” My eyes sought a calendar but found no indicator of the date.

“The ninth.”

The day after my birthday.

“How am I here?”

The heart monitor beat louder as my pulse raced. The nurse followed my eyes to the notification.

“My head hurts.”

I reached for the spot that throbbed at the back of my head but was stopped again by the restraints.

“Cut me loose.”

I wiggled and pulled the restraints hard before she rested her hand on my bare leg.

“It’s for your safety, dear.” She sat down in a chair next to my bed and stroked my hand. “You slipped backward off the Edmund Pettus Bridge and hit your head on the concrete. A guy saw you on the side of the road and called the paramedics. They brought you to us.”

“Hold up. Slipped? What guy?” I shut my eyes tightly, trying to recall what happened but could only remember peering over the vast water.

“He wants to remain anonymous, but you’re a very blessed woman. You have guardian angels looking out for you.” She leaned over and almost whispered her words.

“Let me outta here.”

“I need you to relax.”

“But...”

I wanted to argue but didn't have the energy to process everything fully. Maybe it was the drugs.

“Rest, Grace. You need your strength.” The nurse touched my arm and smiled.

“I don't even know your name,” I mumbled as a sudden wave of heaviness overtook me.

“It's Patricia.”

I closed my eyes and held my breath, unable to quell the dam of tears that now flooded my cheeks. Patricia turned around and pulled several tissues from a box on my bedside table, wiping my face with care.

“What's wrong, Grace?”

“Patricia was my mother's name. I miss her so much.”

As the seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold in the Montgomery County hospital neared, Uncle Keith showed up as my one approved visitor.

He pulled one of the heavy chairs beside my bed and squeezed my hand, which no longer required restraints.

I squeezed it back, adding a faint smile despite being embarrassed that he had to see

me in such a fragile mental state.

“What do you want to do, Grace?” Uncle Keith’s low, steady voice soothed me more than I expected.

I pressed several buttons on my remote to position my body upright in the bed and then shifted my back to get more comfortable. I gave him my full attention. For the first time, I realized how much his thick lips resembled my mother’s.

“The right answer is to get better, but the real answer is to be out of my misery.”

Unlike me, Uncle Keith didn’t have a poker face. His eyes bulged like he’d seen a ghost. I lifted my hands and shook my head.

“Not like that. I no longer want to die,” I said the words softly, still not comfortable admitting out loud that I had wanted to harm myself. “It’s just that I don’t know how to live without Mama or my job. I thought death would take my loneliness away.”

To my surprise, Uncle Keith leaned over the railing and received both of my hands in his. His touch triggered something in me, almost making me cry.

“Pain goes away.”

I shrugged.

“I guess.”

“I know. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, Grace. You would have left behind people who wanted more time with you.”

I chuckled, wanting to believe Uncle Keith but unable to trust his words. No one else

cared whether I lived or died.

“Nobody cares about me. You’re here because of your loyalty to Mama, not me.”

“That’s not true.” Uncle Keith’s raised voice made me look him in the eye.

He lowered his head before speaking.

“I asked the hospital staff what I could and could not say to you. We agree it’s important for me to be truthful, so here goes.” Uncle Keith took a big breath. “Could I work with you to get better?”

Warmth touched my soul as I contemplated that question. As a single woman, I wasn’t used to having help, although I told myself that I desired it.

“I think so, but I don’t know what that means.”

“It means that I would have your back...like I should have had it all those years you took care of Pat. You did a good job.” Uncle Keith pursed his lips and smiled with his mouth closed.

My lip quivered as that unfamiliar yet recurring warmth overtook me again. Before Uncle Keith, only the hospice workers had said that to me.

For years, I cared for and wondered if I made the right choices with my mother as she battled a debilitating and rare neurological disorder.

I often had to make quick decisions and focus on minimizing her pain.

It wasn’t easy to do, often from a distance, as I managed a large portfolio of work projects that required more attention than I had to give them.

At one point, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to maintain the demands of my job and caregiving responsibilities.

Only at the end of my mother's life, when paramedics wheeled her out of the home my father left her, did I feel that I'd done right by her.

"Thank you. That means a lot."

"You were a good steward, so I want to be one too. I have a plan if you're serious about wanting to live."

I nodded.

Over the past few days, my parents came to me in my dreams. Mama kept telling me to go on, and Daddy walked me down the aisle in an intimate wedding.

Although I didn't usually remember my dreams, those lingered.

I cried each time I woke up. Since I didn't want to forget their words, I wrote them in a small journal Patricia gave me.

"I think there's more for me to do in my lifetime. As my nurse said, guardian angels surround me. You're one of them."

Uncle Keith blushed.

"You've been given a second chance, young lady. You have a lotta work to do on earth."

Uncle Keith was right. I don't know why I thought suicide was a good idea when I hated pain so much.

“I agree. I hope God gives me a family and kids so I can be a good mother like Mama.”

With my admission, I felt like a kid. That innocence was refreshing and scary.

Uncle Keith smiled and clapped his hands.

“Then we have a plan. We’re moving you to a comprehensive psychiatric hospital. It’s time for you to remember how valuable and precious you are.”

A surge of hope tingled in my belly.

“I’d like that a lot.”

He pulled paperwork out of his bag.

“Let’s get you transferred to this program.”

Uncle Keith enrolled me in Whetworth Heights, an affordable private facility in the Atlanta suburbs. I spent the Christmas holidays and New Year there quietly celebrating what should have been the happiest time of year with strangers who were nicer than most of my family members.

My treatment plan involved stabilizing my mental health and treating me with medication, therapy, or a combination of both. The facility’s sunny yellow walls and natural light forced me not to hide the increasing joy that filled my heart as the days went by.

“You are worthy, valued, and more than enough.” I read these affirmations to myself daily from my journal, often in the mirror of the bathroom in my single-occupancy room.

At the end of the first week, I felt so good that I practically skipped around the facility, greeting other patients and checking out books from the onsite library. Even my wardrobe reflected my enhanced mood as I wore several of Mama's colorful statement earrings around Whetworth.

My first Friday afternoon, Dr. Westmoreland, the facility's in-house psychiatrist, scheduled a one-on-one session with me.

"You look great, Grace." She smiled widely with her silver braces and nude-colored lips as she tapped her pen on her clipboard and flipped through several pages.

"Thanks. I feel a lot better than I did coming in here." I smiled sheepishly, happy to admit I had made progress despite my initial embarrassment at being so depressed.

"Are you ready to be Dr. Gracelyn Toliver again?"

Over the past few weeks, I had been given a reprieve from the pressures of my former life. As I was taught during sessions, however, I acknowledged the grief I felt about work but didn't allow the feeling of failure to hover like fog.

"Yes. The new and improved version of her."

Dr. Westmoreland nodded then smiled.

"I like that."

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“Thanks. Do you think I’m cured?” I held my breath and placed my hand over my stomach, awaiting her answer.

“The key is not isolating yourself. Rely on those closest to you for your healing. No matter how down you feel, you’re never alone.”

“I want to be healthy for a relationship and kids. I was always too busy for it, but I’d love to give it a shot now.” I beamed, pleased that I spoke positive words about my future out loud.

That simple action confirmed that was I was healing.

“From what you’ve told me about your mother, you’ll be as amazing as she was.”

I allowed Dr. Westmoreland’s compliment to wash over me like a waterfall. Through journaling, I began to realize it was okay for my plans to change and for me to dream new dreams.

“Will I have to take medication for life? I don’t want my mental state to impact my ability to be normal.

Dr. Westmoreland shook her head.

“Not necessarily. I’ll start you on a fifty-milligram dose of Zoloft. Connect with your family doctor for monitoring and adjustments. They will be part of your wellness team. Don’t overthink. Take it one day at a time.”

“Okay.”

By the end of my time at Whetworth, I felt better than I did before caregiving for Mama. With my bags in hand, I exited the facility with a new perspective, hopeful for what my new normal might be.

Uncle Keith hugged me tightly, nearly lifting me off the ground as he rocked back and forth to greet me with the most beautiful bouquet of pink fringed tulips I’d ever seen.

“I’m so proud of you, Grace.”

“I’m proud of myself, too.” I entered Uncle Keith’s car and buckled up, ready for the four-hour drive back to my parents’ home.

I looked up to the sunny sky and smiled, noting an angled beam of light that ascended directly from heaven. I took it as a sign that my parents were looking down on me and were pleased. They wouldn’t want me to go back to a dark place I might not escape.

Thank you, Father, for giving me a sound mind.

“I’d love for you to move to one of my empty properties in Farmerton. Rent free, of course.” Uncle Keith threw his idea out as we crossed the Alabama state line two hours after leaving Whetworth.

“I don’t do small towns anymore,” I spoke the words as respectfully as I could, given Uncle Keith’s ongoing kindness toward me.

He turned the air down and shot me a disbelieving look.

“What you talkin’ about? Once a country girl, always a country girl,” he teased.

“No sir, Unc, I’m done with peanut farms and tractor trailers. If there’s not an airport within a fifteen-minute drive, I don’t want it.”

Despite my protest, I couldn’t deny that the tall pine trees outside the passenger window were beautiful, reminding me of my childhood and the innocence I left behind.

The South was pretty and peaceful with its mild winters.

Most of the year, I could wear flowing sundresses and the open-toed sandals I loved so much.

“Come on now. Farmerton’s one of the fastest-growing cities in South Georgia. We need smart women like you building our community. One of the biggest megachurches in the area is there too—Haven of Hope and Blessings.”

“I’ve heard of that place.”

“Folks are moving in like bees to a honeycomb. You could meet Mr. Right there.” Uncle Keith’s voice trailed off as I stared out the window.

Since I shared my parents’ dreams with him, he didn’t hesitate to hint at the possibility of my “settling down with someone who could take care of me like a woman should be cared for.” Those were his words, not mine.

I shook my head.

“I’m doing just fine keepin’ in touch with my DC friends. We do virtual happy hours and quarterly girls’ trips. It’s hard to make new friends after forty anyway.” I plopped

my hands in my lap and sighed, slightly discouraged that I'd have to start my life over no matter where I lived.

"Grace..." Uncle Keith hesitated and kept his eyes straight ahead, alerting me that he was trying to filter his words so they didn't come across too harshly.

"Don't start off with that isolation mess.

We may have started our relationship late, but I want to be close to you now that you're back in my life. "

I smiled, appreciative of my uncle's protective nature.

"I'll think about it."

"Tell you what. Talk to my friend, Nita, about Farmerton. She knows everybody and can get you connected real fast. Dr. Westmoreland said you need good people in your life so you don't get sick again. I'm just trying to help." He spoke the words softly as if he didn't want to hurt my feelings.

Uncle Keith's puppy dog eyes melted my heart. He had gone above and beyond for me since Mama's death. The least I could do was hear him out.

"You're right about the possibility of something new."

He tapped the steering wheel with his fingertips in sync to the old school R&B music playing in the background and grinned from ear to ear.

"Pat raised me when Mama died, so I've got to do this for you. I can't say I love Pat if I don't help take care of you in your time of need."

I beamed as I processed what my uncle told me. He was a lot more emotional than I thought. I closed my eyes briefly and counted to three, absorbing the positivity and compliments from Uncle Keith.

His kindness is real. Embrace it.

I opened my eyes and smiled.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, so I’ll consider your offer. How would this work?”

“For the next year, I’ll give you space and grace to heal in my favorite rental condo. It’s secluded but close enough for you to go to the store and grab a cup of coffee in town if you want. The utilities are on autopay, so you’ll only be responsible for your personal needs.”

“That’s gracious.”

“For a gracious person.”

There it was again, praise that made me feel seen.

“Since you aren’t employed by the feds anymore, this could open new doors for you. I have a little bay window seat where you can read and write to clear your head when you need to.”

Uncle Keith was right. I needed a break and a healing space since I wasn’t in the headspace to seek full-time employment right away.

“Okay.” I spoke the words with caution.

Uncle Keith beamed as if I'd given him a winning lottery ticket.

"Perfect. Nita and I will take care of you. She's the director of the women's ministry at Haven of Hope and Blessings. Y'all will get along just fine."

"I can't wait."

It took me three weeks to move to Farmerton, Georgia. It was the right mix of country with a dash of cosmopolitan. As expected, the slow pace forced me to reflect and focus on my long-term healing.

When I entered the grocery store or perused the quaint shops in the town square, people stared. Some of them asked my name while others lingered as I spoke with associates.

"You're not from around these parts, are you?" A short lady with a flowing muumuu asked when I entered the Wild and Free stationery store to purchase a couple of new journals. I remembered my manners and smiled.

"No, ma'am. I just moved here."

No matter how nosy the woman was, the city girl in me wasn't going to share all my business with a stranger.

"Welcome," the woman said before moving toward the back of the store.

"Thank you." I smiled again, determined not to let the natural nosiness of older Black folks in the South make me oversensitive or self-conscious.

The culture was different here, friendlier.

I forced myself not to shut down at the people's unexpected kindness.

Part of my healing required that I be comfortable enough to share information about myself without being defensive.

I tapped into the advice of my therapist, knowing putting myself out there was the only way I would build community.

I completed my purchases and drove back to the single-story dwelling.

The two-bedroom, fully furnished house with modern amenities and old-school charm was the perfect place for me to rejuvenate.

Although it was much smaller than most homes in the area, its coziness aligned with where I was in this season of life.

Since Mama was a hoarder, I committed to being a minimalist, or at least, I tried to be. Because of that, I sold most of my belongings before moving from DC, including almost all of my heavy winter coats, scarves, hats, and gloves, which were a staple for East Coast winter weather.

Later that night, as Uncle Keith and I ate the homemade meatloaf with gravy, mashed potatoes, and greens I cooked to thank him for his hospitality, I looked around the house, pleased with my design choices. Small houseplants and personal photos reminded me of better times in my life.

"I swear you cook just like your Mama." Uncle Keith grinned and scooped a big creamy pile of potatoes on his fork and put them in his mouth, rolling his eyes and moaning like he was in ecstasy.

"Help yourself. Mama left me a box of recipes. I figured I needed to put them to use."

Uncle Keith nodded and wiped brown gravy from his graying mustache with a paper towel.

“Didn’t I tell you this would be the perfect place for you?”

“You did.”

Uncle Keith puffed his medium-sized chest out and beamed.

“Thanks for looking out for me.”

I was serious about that. No one owed me anything, so a place to start my freelance business and reestablish myself as an entrepreneur was a gift that exceeded my expectations.

After dinner and coffee, we walked out to the small porch and eyed the neat property.

“Uncle Keith, people here are nosy. If they ask about me, could you skip the part about being in a psych hospital? I don’t want that to be my primary identity.”

He nodded.

“I’m not messy like that.”

“I just want to make sure we’re on the same page.”

No matter how generous Uncle Keith was, I didn’t want to assume anything.

“We are.”

“Oh, and if anyone asks what I do, tell them I’m a writer. And my name is Grace

Toliver, not Dr. Grace. People can be funny actin' about titles.”

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Although I was a darn good researcher and analyst, I wasn't lying about being a writer.

I'd always been a solid editor and creative, so it was easy for me to craft a plan for my new profession in rehab.

I joined several freelancer sites and advertised my services as a ghostwriter, picking up a couple of jobs that would keep me busy for the next few weeks.

I also marketed myself as a creative writing coach with a specialty in writing intimate scenes between protagonists.

Several romance authors had already contacted me.

I even had a pending opportunity to write a screenplay draft for a primetime television host whose husband was a big-time Hollywood movie producer.

Uncle Keith crossed his arms across his chest and stared at me with light brown eyes that always appeared watery despite his never shedding a tear about anything other than the final words spoken over my mother's dead body.

"As a writer, you can craft any story you want. It's not my place to tell your business, but you earned that doctorate and deserve the respect that comes with it. Pat was so proud of you."

At the mention of my mother's name, my heart swelled. I would consider Uncle Keith's words but didn't want to stand out too much in such a small place.

“I will.”

“Oh...before I leave, here’s Nita’s info. Call her when you’re ready.” He pulled a small canary-yellow business card from his wallet and handed it to me.

I received it and read the relatively small words out loud.

“Prophetess Nita Stallings, Woman of God.” I raised an eyebrow. “Why does she need to advertise being a woman of God?”

Uncle Keith chuckled.

“Nita’s different.”

“Different how?”

“You’ll see.”

“Because she’s a prophetess? Like a fortune teller?”

Despite my growing trust of Uncle Keith, I didn’t want my first connection in the city to be too radical. I needed to take baby steps in my recovery.

“Calm down. She’s not spooky or mystical. She has a pure heart and is drawn to people who need direction. Give her a chance. What do you have to lose?” My uncle’s smiling eyes displayed hope that matched how I wanted to feel.

As had become my habit since rehab, I forced myself not to overthink.

“I’ll call her tonight.”

“Good.” Uncle Keith gently patted me on my arm and walked to his Chevy truck. With a final wave, he drove off down the narrow dirt road that led to the main highway.

Before it got too late, I called Nita.

“Hello?” Her crisp voice rang through the phone.

“Hi...this is Grace Toliver, Keith Glass’s niece.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been expecting you. What time are we meeting tomorrow at Sunbeams?”

I was shocked by her forwardness despite my intended request to meet her at the cute little coffee shop down the road from my home.

“Does ten o’clock work for you?” she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Uh...yes.”

“Alrighty then. See you then. Rest well, Grace.”

“You too.”

I hung up with a keen interest in her. She was anxious to engage. Could she be the friend Uncle Keith said she might be?

That night, I had a vivid dream. I stood over the Edmund Pettus Bridge, looking into the brownish waters of the Alabama River. My heart raced as my mind told me to turn back.

“I want to live.”

When I said the words out loud, a firm hand pulled me back.

“It’s okay, Grace,” a man said in a voice that melted my fear like a piece of warmed chocolate.

I couldn’t see his features, but his presence comforted me. I pressed my face into his broad chest, inhaling the spicy cologne that covered his soft cotton shirt. This stranger rescued me from death.

I woke with a start and sweat popping off my face. After going to the kitchen and drinking a glass of water, I finally settled down and went back to sleep, wondering what the dream meant.

The next morning, I finished my hygiene routine quicker than normal since I overslept.

I threw on a flowing teal wrap dress and cardigan with my favorite ballet flats.

Translucent Fenty peach lip gloss Mama bought me last Christmas completed the look.

She told me that it reminded her of how cute I was as her baby girl. That memory made me smile.

I pulled my late-model Kia into the only empty parking space on crowded Main Street five minutes before ten. When I stepped out of my car, I took a deep breath, something I did often since my suicide attempt. I didn’t take life for granted anymore, even down to the air I breathed.

Small groups of people walking up and down the street smiled and laughed as if they wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I loved that for them.

When I entered the Sunbeams Coffee Shop, my eyes instantly landed on a beautiful older woman with snow white pressed hair and red-rimmed eyeglasses.

When her eyes met mine, I knew it was Nita.

She rose as I walked toward her, giving me one of the sincerest smiles I'd ever seen.

The closer I got to her, the more familiar she felt.

Like Patricia at the hospital, unspoken joy and peace radiated from her.

When I was inches away from her, she opened her arms. Although I wasn't a hugger by nature, I wanted to embrace her. I clutched her tightly as she squeezed me back. The longer she held me, the more I felt...something. I closed my eyes as unexpected tears welled up in me.

What was going on?

I stepped back and wiped my eyes with the pads of my fingers.

"Sorry about that. I haven't been this teary since my mama died."

Nita reached for the napkin holder in the middle of the table and pulled a couple of rough brown napkins out before handing them to me.

I dabbed each of my eyes and sniffled, eventually balling up the used napkin and slipping it into the deep pocket of my dress.

Before Mama's death, I knew how to hold everything in, but rehab opened up emotions I couldn't bottle up.

"There's no need to apologize, sweetheart. You only get one mother. Let's sit." She gestured to the table where her red leather purse lay.

I slid into the metal chair closest to the door and briefly lowered my eyes to the wooden floor of the shop before giving Nita a closed-lip smile. I set my arms on the table and composed myself as best I could. Nita didn't flinch as I squirmed, feeling like a little girl under her steady gaze.

"Crying is cathartic. It's better to get it all out." Nita reached across the round table and covered my hands with hers.

Her gentle voice and nurturing presence soothed me as the scent of shea butter entered my nose.

"Thanks, Nita. I learned that recently." I mustered a faint smile.

"You're beautiful with that voluminous hair and smooth skin." She gushed over me in the most animated way.

Her hands moved toward my hair. She patted it lightly as if she were in awe of what she saw.

"Thank you. I'm cute but not anything special."

As a naturally reserved person, I wasn't comfortable receiving this kind of attention.

"You are gorgeous." She emphasized each word dramatically.

“Thank you for the generous compliment.” I placed my hand on the patch of hair Nita touched, patting what I used to think was an unruly lion’s mane.

It took years for me to master my thick hair that grew fast and shot from my scalp like a sunburst. My mother began trimming it into its signature round shape when I decided to stop relaxing it and cut it off in college.

Once it was “trained,” as my mother would say, the tight coils that were now my signature curled into a round shape that looked like a queen’s crown.

The topic of hair pricked my heart since one of Mama’s final acts was to comb her fingers through mine and tell me how healthy my jet-black coils were.

She wore hers just like mine when she was my age.

Because of that, I was never going to dye it when it turned gray.

Tears welled up again as I recalled how soft her silver strands were when I brushed my fingers through them a final time.

I wiggled my fingers and examined my hand with my palm down.

Mama called my skin peanut butter creamy, the same shade as my Daddy’s—the man who turned any number of heads throughout his life.

Mama swore he was the most handsome man she had ever met.

The older I got, the more I envied Mama for experiencing that once-in-a-lifetime love that I didn’t see in my future.

No one my age was as handsome or generous as my dad.

Nita watched me for several moments before picking up one of the worn menus on our table and handing it to me.

“Let’s order.”

Nita ordered hot black tea and a gluten-free orange scone. I decided on a cup of decaf coffee and a piece of vegetarian quiche. We then settled back into our conversation.

“Your mother sounded lovely,” she said.

“My parents were beautiful, generous people who gave me the best of themselves. They had me in their forties, so I knew early in life they would not see me grow old. Because of that, I have always been something of an old soul. They poured everything they had into me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I suppose. That seriousness forced me to make the best of my time with them.”

Our server brought our order, pausing our conversation. I picked up my cup of coffee and stared into the hot liquid, thinking of the Christmases, birthdays, and countless holidays I’d no longer spend with the two people who loved me most.

“Do you have any regrets?”

I hadn’t thought about that question before.

“I just wish we had more time together. I miss having a loving family.”

The topic of my parents always pulled raw emotions from me. No matter how many healing tools I had in my toolkit, their physical absence felt like salt being poured on

an open wound that never healed.

“Your compliment reminded me of them. It’s bittersweet.” My voice lowered as I recalled how fragile my mother was on her deathbed.

Her muscles atrophied, but her spirit never dulled. That was how I wanted to remember her.

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“My parents are gone too. It’s been twenty years, but it feels like yesterday. That’s why we need to stick together.” Nita reached for my hand and squeezed it.

“But you don’t know me.”

Nita grinned.

“I do. You radiate light. Your ancestors’ prayers precede you.” Nita’s fiery voice rose and fell as she continued. “The devil thought he had you, but no weapon formed against you will ever prosper.”

When she recited my mother’s favorite scripture, chills ran down my spine.

“You’re never alone.” She squeezed lemon juice from a thin lemon wedge into her steaming hot cup of tea.

I closed my eyes for a moment and thought about Nita’s words. They were the same one Dr. Westmoreland spoke over me in rehab.

“As an introvert, I’ve kept my circle tight. Some might say I’m lonely, but I call it selective.”

Nita chuckled.

“I can relate.”

At what had to be almost seventy, Nita wasn’t messy. I had no doubt I could trust her

with my business. She placed her slightly wrinkled hand over mine.

“We’re going to get along just fine. I’ll introduce you to some people so you won’t feel so alone. You good with that?”

I nodded, pleased to meet someone with such sincerity.

Over the next few months, I was alone in Farmerton but not lonely.

Once a week, I worked half a day, taking time to learn about the city and pour into myself.

From the artist-run art gallery to the old-time movie theaters with ushers who dressed in classic uniforms, I loved the simplicity of the growing city.

In the evenings, I often sat on the back porch of my house with a glass of wine and a personalized charcuterie board, journaling and making declarations for a future full of peace and love.

My favorite thing to do was watch the sun set.

In my spirit, I knew I wouldn’t always be alone.

These were sacred moments that gave me time to think.

Since my coffee house meeting, Nita checked in with me almost daily. She invited me to join her at women’s Bible study on Thursday nights at her home. I met some nice women, although some of them were a little standoffish. That confirmed that I needed to be just Grace the writer with them.

Over time, I felt more comfortable sharing information about my past with Nita. As I

traveled to and from my excursions, I would call her to tell her how my days went.

“What did you do today, Grace?” Nita’s high-pitched voice rang through my car’s Bluetooth speakers.

Like many of her calls, I assumed she was working out on her exercise bike since she spoke somewhat breathlessly.

“I met with a couple of clients and hung out. What about you?”

“This and that. Ministry doesn’t sleep.”

“I hear that.”

“How are your books coming?”

I gripped my steering wheel, thinking about how I wanted to answer Nita. She was a holy woman, and I didn’t want to offend her delicate sensibilities. She didn’t come across as a fake Christian, though.

“Please don’t judge me when I say what I say.”

“I don’t judge. Be your authentic self.”

“Well...I met a couple of clients who want me to write romance novels for them, the kind of humping and bumping ones women of God like you might not approve of.”

Nita’s silence had my mind racing, despite me not being ashamed about writing to make a living.

“How does it make you feel to write your novels?”

I thought about it for a few moments and smiled.

“It gives me hope that I can have that kind of love, too. I used to be vibrant, but...”

“But what?”

“I’m plain and boring now.”

“Girl, please. You’ve still got milk on your breath.”

I chuckled.

“You know how to make me feel special.”

“My pleasure, love.”

We said our goodbyes, and I disconnected our call. I pulled into my driveway, ready for my nighttime routine.

“Do you like kids?” Nita asked the question a couple of days later during my daily call.

I cocked my head to the side, confused about the odd direction of today’s conversation.

“Kids like me. Why?”

“I can’t babysit my great-nieces this Friday and need a sub I can trust.”

“How old are they?”

“Six and eight.”

“Oh. They’re ‘no filter’ young. I’d love to help, but my expertise is writing, not babysitting.”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t in a bind. My nephew’s little girls can be quite a handful.” Nita tsked.

Since Nita had been so considerate during our visit, I wanted to repay her kindness.

“I’m happy to help. What are their names?”

“Hannah and Esther.”

“Will their father be okay with me being around them?”

Nita chuckled.

“It’s not that serious. Keith vouches for you, so you’re good.”

Nita must have picked up on my continued hesitancy because she added, “I’ll tell my nephew I vetted you.”

“How long will he and his wife be out?”

“He’s not married, dear.”

“Oh.” My eyes widened.

My analytical mind went into overdrive. I instantly wondered what happened to his wife. Or was she a baby mama? Was she dead?

“He’s the new pastor of Haven of Hope and Blessings and a busy man. I need someone around the girls with discretion.”

“You know I don’t know enough people to gossip about anything.”

“Cool. I’ll text you his address.”

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Unexpected

“Sorry for the last-minute notice, but I’m not able to babysit tonight.” Aunt Nita’s voice rang through my cell’s speaker phone as I finished tying my black tie for the night’s ministerial gala.

“Do I need to drive by and lay hands on you? I’m looking at a fresh case of anointing oil, so I’m ready to rebuke sickness in the Name of Jesus.” I rubbed my hands together and honed in on the unopened brown box on my dining room floor.

I was serious. Aunt Nita was the most reliable woman I knew. If she cancelled, I wouldn’t hesitate to cover her in prayer.

“Boy, I’m fine. Take that pastor hat off and save that oil for somebody who really needs it. Callie had a bad day. She’s still struggling after Willie Earl’s death.”

Mrs. Callie was one of Aunt Nita’s best friends. Just last week, I eulogized Mr. Willie Earl at Haven of Hope and Blessings. The paramedics had to carry Mrs. Callie out on a stretcher right behind Mr. Willie Earl’s casket.

“Do what you need to, Auntie, and tell Mrs. Callie I’m here if she needs me,” I said as my oven timer dinged.

With my tie still hanging loosely around my neck, I rushed to the kitchen and turned off the oven to pull out my girls’ dinner.

“I won’t leave you hangin’...as the young kids say. I’m sending my replacement over

right now.” Aunt Nita chuckled.

Relief overtook me, but curiosity quickly replaced it. As a self-proclaimed control freak, I wanted to know who would be in my home in my absence.

“Are you sure they’re trustworthy?” I tried to be as respectful as I could without grilling Aunt Nita.

I could never be too careful with the two most precious gifts I had on earth, my six- and eight-year-old daughters.

“Do you think I would allow anyone to harm my precious babies? Grace will probably take care of them better than I would.”

Grace. I sighed in relief as I sliced the kids’ cheese pizza.

I pictured one of Aunt Nita’s elder friends with grandkids around my girls’ ages, reading Bible stories and singing sweet songs to my little angels. They would spend the night with an elder who knew how to raise Godly children and teach my girls how to be respectable young women.

“I should have known my main girl wouldn’t let a brother down.”

“You know it, nephew.”

We laughed in unison.

More than any other family member, Aunt Nita got me.

From my wild playboy days to my ascension as pastor of the largest nondenominational church in the region, she saw every side of me, even the ones that

weren't always holy.

Over time, she had become more like a friend than an auntie, always having my back.

She was my safe space, my wise counsel with keen discernment.

She didn't judge me when I slipped up as a new pastor but directed me to the Word of God for final instruction.

Her unconditional love and reverence for God motivated me to love Him more, too.

"I just want to do right by my girls," I spoke the words like a scared little boy, revealing my insecurity about a role I didn't expect to hold without a woman by my side.

"As you should. You're a wonderful father, baby. Don't let the enemy plant seeds of doubt in your brilliant head."

I smiled at Aunt Nita's praise.

"I appreciate that. They deserve the best. I'm only one person, though."

For the past five years, I raised Hannah and Esther alone, engaging in more tea and princess parties than I could count.

As a burly guy with a linebacker build, I learned how to tap into my feminine side, though, watching countless social media videos about how to shampoo, condition, and style Hannah's fine hair and Esther's coarse hair.

I messed up more times than I cared to admit with my mother and auntie gently coming behind me so my girls wouldn't leave the house looking like little circus

clowns.

They deserved the world, but I didn't have the capacity or skills to give them everything they needed.

I sighed, slightly frustrated and guilt-ridden. It would only get harder as they approached puberty.

"God won't give you more than you can bear."

"Just say a prayer that the girls won't run over Grace."

Aunt Nita laughed again.

"Stop worrying."

"I'll try. I've already fixed dinner and cleaned them up for bed. All she'll need to do is entertain them, keep them alive, brush their teeth, and put them to bed before I return."

"That's all?"

"Auntie's got jokes."

"I forgot to warn Grace about your obsession with to-dos."

"It's called order." I huffed.

"If you say so. But seriously, with your entrepreneurial mind, have you given more thought about transferring your guide to a caregiving book for little girls?"

“No, ma’am. When would I have time to do that?”

It was my turn to laugh. I was meticulous about my daughters’ routine by necessity. Otherwise, our household would fall apart. I had to set a firm foundation so they could become independent earlier than their peers. They had to be if we were going to stay sane.

“If I had a helpmate, I might be less anal, but since I don’t...” My voice trailed off.

“Grace is on her way. Have fun tonight, Caleb. Remember that ministry isn’t all business. This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

“Perfect words from a perfect auntie. Thanks for looking out for us. Love you.”

“Love you, too, baby.”

I disconnected the call and walked to the full-length mirror in my master bedroom. I frowned at my reflection as I considered how many more Friday movie and pizza nights I would miss with Hannah and Esther because I decided to answer the call of God on my life.

Please, Lord, protect my daughters and let them lead full lives in my absence.

I hated to leave my girls alone with a stranger, but I couldn’t miss tonight’s fundraising event for the local homeless shelter. My father was one of the shelter’s biggest donors, so I had to continue the advocacy he started before his death.

Two weeks ago, I vowed before God and man to devote my life to my duties as the senior pastor of Haven of Hope and Blessings Christian Church without compromise or hesitation. I’d been preparing for this role for three years, so it was my time to step up.

As I straightened my tie, a twinge of sadness entered my heart.

In my forty-three years, life hadn't turned out like I expected.

I lost a marriage I thought would last forever.

Madeline knew how seriously I walked with God, even when I was a little wild.

She didn't respect my calling. That, and drug addiction, pulled her from our family, leaving me to carry a weight that was already heavy.

She gave you Hannah and Esther.

When I got in a pissy mood about my relationship status, I remembered that. Even in darkness, light could shine bright.

But I'm horny as a mother.

I wanted to curse out loud but bit my tongue instead. God had the biggest sense of humor when he called a former hoe like me to be a pastor. That was why I delayed my call to the ministry and married Madeline.

Don't get me wrong. I was an excellent pastor and leader.

I could fast for days and pray like nobody's business, but that love box between a woman's legs was my kryptonite.

Even now, I remembered the amazing sensation of inserting my tip and gripping some of the tightest and wettest cooches in the South.

I sighed.

Celibacy was for the birds. Nothing in me wanted to be single like the Apostle Paul.

Sacrifice.

The word rang out in my head as I finished my preparation for the night. This life wasn't about me. I would cut my penis off if that was what it took to be a great father and be obedient to God.

"Daddy, my hair looks ugly." My daughter Esther ran around the corner from the hallway into my bedroom, pulling me from my reflection.

I couldn't stand seeing my youngest daughter cry. She was as tough as steel about most things, but when it came to her appearance, she was oversensitive. At least in my opinion.

Both of my girls had tender hearts that made me say extra prayers for them so they would not spend a lifetime suffering at the hands of others.

"Don't cry, sweetheart." I kneeled and wiped the tears that pooled in her pretty almond eyes with the pads of my fingers.

"I don't have time to fix your hair how you like it. I'll give you a ponytail. Is that okay?"

"Yes." Esther tilted her head forward so I could remove the loose barrette from her hair.

I quickly raked through her full head of wild, thick hair with my fingers, feeling several tangles.

"Ouch!" She shouted.

“Sorry.” I paused and then resumed my process.

Since Esther’s hair was coarse like mine, Mama told me I needed to comb it gently from the root to the tip. Unfortunately, Esther was tender headed. That required extra time I rarely had.

Esther sucked in her cheeks and pursed her lips, slowly nodding her approval when the pain stopped.

I walked to my bathroom and returned with a small black hair tie. Within a couple of minutes, Esther’s hair was contained in the messy hair tie and barrette combination. Still squatting, I patted her hair and smiled.

“There. You’re ready for the circus.”

“Daddy!” Her face scrunched up, and her eyes got wide.

Let me stop playing with this child.

“I’m kidding. You’re more beautiful than the rising sun.”

She faced me again in her two-piece ice cream cone pajama set and rubbed the stubble on my cheeks. I poked my finger into her left cheek, causing her to release a giggle that was music to my ears.

“Am I pretty like my mommy?” she asked with drawn brows.

It was my turn to suck in my breath as I forced a grin and spoke as I always did when one of my babies spoke about my ex-wife. I kissed her round cheek and wrapped my hands around her little waist.

“Prettier, sweetheart. You’re unique in your own right. God knew you when you were in Mommy’s belly and said you would be queen. That is why we named you Esther. You’re royalty.”

“Like a princess?”

“No, a queen, sweetheart, like one who rules a kingdom. You’re worthy to sit on a throne.”

“Can I be a nice queen?”

I tickled her stomach until she bent over in laughter.

“You better be. It’s who you are, little one.”

Every time I shared this story with Esther, she lit up like a Christmas tree.

Although Madeline gave up on motherhood, I would not tarnish my ex’s name until Esther was old enough to ask questions about why her mother left our family.

Esther was as sharp as a tack. If she asked too many questions, I might call Madeline a crackhead.

“A new sitter is coming tonight, so tell me the rules of good behavior.”

Esther raised her short fingers and, one by one, recited our house rules in a strong, clear voice.

“Be kind. Listen. Have fun.” She lowered her hand and beamed, pleased that she remembered my exact words.

“Good girl.” I tickled my precious daughter until she bent over and almost fell on the carpeted floor.

When she caught her breath, she straightened her body.

“Now, get Hannah so you’ll be ready to meet our guest. I need to go.”

“I love you, Daddy.” Esther smacked me on the cheek, then whipped her small body around and rushed from my room as quickly as she had entered.

Madeline and I disagreed about a lot of things, but we did well when we created our girls. I loved them so hard it hurt. I would do anything to protect them as they grew into fearless women who never doubted that their daddy had their backs.

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Breathless

I called Nita as I packed for my babysitting assignment with her great-nieces.

“Should I take anything special to your nephew’s house?”

My eyes roamed my room, looking for anything that might interest elementary-age kids.

“Not at all. Our family spoils those kids rotten. All they need is you and your beautiful spirit.”

“I can handle that.”

“Just tell my nephew hello. He can be uptight sometimes, so remind him to breathe.”

Uptight? Good to know.

“I will. Enjoy your evening, Nita.”

“You too, Grace.”

Since Nita’s nephew sounded a little high-strung, I refused to babysit unprepared.

I walked about my family room, retrieving my laptop, colorful markers, drawing paper, and a new box of Uno cards.

Did little kids play Uno? I'd find out tonight.

I moved to my bathroom and rummaged through a small case of nail polish.

I pulled out the glittery ones and put them in the bag along with other nail supplies.

Manicures and pedicures were always a hit with little girls.

I walked by the bathroom mirror, checking myself out and brushing my peach gloss over my moisturized lips. I was cute.

“You’ve got this, girl.”

Time for a new adventure.

I pulled into the wide driveway of a gorgeous ranch house that looked like a relatively new build. It sat on at least an acre of land with a thick patch of trees behind it. It was a perfect home for a pastor, neat and painted in neutral colors that didn't draw unwanted attention to it.

Rays of light from the dusky night reflected off the back bumper of a shiny white Lexus SUV parked out front.

That vehicle was the only indication that the pastor might enjoy the finer things in life.

With a vanity plate of HAVEN, I also imagined him to be outgoing and boisterous.

He obviously didn't mind people knowing about his goings and comings.

I exited the car with my bag and took a deep whiff of the pine-filled air. As had

become my habit this time of day, I lifted my eyes to the sun beams that now settled at beautiful angles across the house's dark roof.

I stepped onto the modest-sized porch where a couple of bikes were perched by the door.

Joy filled my heart at my assumption that the girls were girly girls.

The cotton candy pink bike had white tassels hanging off the handlebars.

The taller bike was lavender with pretty white ponies on its body.

I smiled, using the heights of the bikes to prepare myself for how tall Hannah and Esther would be.

I rang the doorbell and waited with my large bag on my shoulder. Although I'd never been a fidgeter, I planted my feet shoulder width apart, hopping from side to side. I mentally ran through my plan to keep the girls occupied for hours.

When the doorknob twisted, I straightened my body and peered ahead, ready to plaster a big smile on my face. Instead, my jaw dropped so low that if there was a swarm of bees above me, they'd be all in my mouth and down my throat.

Damn.

I wasn't prepared for the exquisite hunk of manliness that opened the door. He was so handsome, I couldn't, no wouldn't, look away.

My boy was cool as a cucumber, though, because he didn't display an etch of shock at my initial reaction. He was big, intimidating, and stoic like a statue that erotic dreams were made of.

“Ms. Grace?” His deep voice rang out like a bell as his eyes pierced mine.

I fanned my face with my hand, trying to get temporary relief from a presence that overwhelmed me. He had the nerve to step even closer and hover over me, staring down with a crooked smile and pretty white teeth that sat just right in his mouth.

“Um...yes.” I realized I hadn’t even bothered to find out this man’s name.

All I knew was that he was Nita’s nephew and had two little girls. Was I that dense?

The expensive-looking black tuxedo he wore molded to his broad chest like plastic wrap. Thank God for open top buttons because I also had a front row seat to the thickest, most muscular neck I’d ever seen on a man up close.

My lower body tingled. It had to be a sin to lust after a preacher this way.

I was about to take in the beauty of his symmetrical face in more detail when I shook myself, clutching the straps of my oversized Vera Bradley bag harder. Hunky Preacher Man had a name I still didn’t know.

“Please forgive me for staring.”

There was no way I could play it off, so I might as well be honest. I willed myself to remain calm and extended my hand in greeting as his eyes never left mine.

“I expected you to be...” His voice trailed off as his eyes scanned my face then my body slowly.

“To be what?” I held my breath, anxious to hear what he had to say.

He tightened his lips and shook his head, placing his hand over his heart before he

gave me a panty-melting smile.

“Never mind. Forgive me. It’s just that I thought you would be older. Like Aunt Nita. Your name is Grace.”

“Yes. It’s Gracelyn. But people call me Grace.” I don’t know why I had to say all that, but the pastor pulled it from me.

“Gracelyn. Very pretty. Like you.”

I blushed harder than should be allowed.

He scanned my body again and gestured toward it.

“You’re so young and attractive.”

“Thank you again. I’m not that young. Please don’t laugh, but I don’t know your name. All I know is you’re Nita’s nephew.”

“Pastor Caleb Stallings. But you can call me Caleb.”

To my surprise, he reached for my hand and pulled me over the threshold of his door.

“I’m going to stop talking and welcome you to my home properly.” His kind eyes twinkled as the overwhelming scent of his spicy cologne met my nostrils.

He looked and smelled good—a lethal combination for a man who was touching me and close to God. I tried to push the gushiness I felt aside as our hands touched, but I blushed anyway.

You are too fine.

He finally released my hand.

“I can be awkward at times. Forgive me again, Ms. Grace, but you caught me off guard. I don’t meet many women around here my age who are spoken of so fondly by Aunt Nita. She has discriminating taste. You must be special to her.”

When I was fully in the combination foyer and dining room, Caleb closed the door behind me.

I placed my hand on my cheek to temper my emotions.

I couldn’t stop blushing at this man’s blatant compliments and openness.

He must be what Nita called an exhorter.

Everything he said about me made me feel so good.

More than lifting me up, he confirmed that I wasn’t burdening Nita with my presence.

She really did care for me as much as I cared for her.

“Nita is a sweetheart, a real blessing since I moved here. That was why I didn’t hesitate to say yes to babysitting.”

“I’m glad you’re so loyal to my aunt. So, you’re new to the community?”

Caleb’s raised eyebrow was adorable.

“Yes. I’ve been here since the new year.”

“I’d love to show you around and invite you to my church.”

“Okay.” I accepted his invitation to be polite, never expecting a man who was so busy in the community to take time out of his schedule to show me around town.

“Where are the girls?” I peered around the pastor’s broad body, hoping to see the young charges I would be responsible for this evening.

I needed a break from this closeness. I could barely catch my breath and think. It wasn’t every day that I came in contact with fine, virile men of Caleb’s caliber.

“Yes, the girls...Hannah, Esther, please come here.” He shifted his body and shouted toward the back of the house.

With his head to the side, I noted how perfect his profile was.

His black beard was trimmed neatly and nicely moisturized.

I wiggled my fingers at my side, wanting to touch his face to see if his hair texture was coarse or soft.

Either way, I bet it would be ticklish if it brushed against my skin.

I watched him for several more seconds before two of the most beautiful little girls I’d ever laid my eyes on ran and stopped inches in front of me.

Like their father, their hair was nice, but theirs was wild as if they had played outside all afternoon. Both of them smiled at me, the older with her front teeth missing and the other with a slight gap between her teeth.

Caleb bent down and held his arm out like a gate to stop them as they jumped and danced with energy. They finally calmed down, their little chests rising and falling visibly.

“No running in the house. I didn’t want you to knock Ms. Grace down.”

Instead of paying attention to him, they stared at me like beautiful frozen dolls.

“A princess is going to babysit us?” The taller of the girls’ eyes widened as she gawked at me.

“Yay!” The younger one cheered, jumping up and down before doing a cute little happy dance.

I smiled, smitten with these angels as much as their daddy. What a beautiful family they were. I dropped my bag at my feet before moving toward them and squatting.

“I’m not a princess, pumpkin, but thank you for thinking that. You can call me Grace.” I extended my hand in greeting.

The shorter one broke past her father and jumped into my arms. I held her body tight and gave her a big squeeze.

“It’s Ms. Grace,” Caleb corrected. “Girls, please introduce yourselves to our guest.”

“I’m Hannah.” The older girl clasped her hands and rocked from side to side with a big smile before she moved to me and gave me a hug on the opposite side of the little one clinging to me.

“And I’m Esther.” The shorter one squeezed me tighter and placed her hands in my hair.

To balance myself, I sat on my bottom and crossed my legs.

“How old are you, Miss Hannah?”

“Eight,” Hannah said with her head ducked into her chest.

“I’m six.” Esther held her head high and sang the number to me.

She touched my cheek and looked directly into my eyes, reminding me of her daddy’s piercing gaze.

“You’re the lady we pray for every night.” Esther peered up at Caleb without letting me go. “Daddy, she’s here. Thank you so much.”

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I was confused. I stared at Caleb for an explanation. Instead of meeting my eyes, he looked down at his girls as if he were embarrassed.

“Girls, please give Ms. Grace space. She is here because of Aunt Nita.”

Esther released me and stomped her little bare foot.

“No, she’s here because of God.” She ran to the back of the house, and about thirty seconds later, returned with a large piece of paper.

She held it over her head and toward my face. I retrieved the paper and perused it. The crude drawing held a stick figure of a woman with brown skin and a big afro.

“She’s pretty.”

“Yep. This is Princess Mommy. It’s Ms. Grace. Isn’t it, Daddy?”

Caleb appeared stunned as Esther stared at the paper. He shook his head slowly with a slight frown on his defined face.

“That’s not who that is, baby girl. It’s just a draw...”

“Yes, it is.” Hannah interrupted him, surprising me at how animated she became after being so reserved. Her voice quivered as she looked at her father and said, “You told us if we prayed hard, God would give us a mommy. Look at the picture. It’s her, Daddy.”

When I didn't think Caleb could be any cuter, he blinked rapidly behind the most luscious eyelashes I'd ever seen on a man. Distress covered his face at his daughters' outbursts. I had the urge to rescue him but stayed silent.

He squatted before them and took a deep breath.

"God doesn't work like that. Mommies don't just pop out of the sky."

"Why not? Ours went away like a thief in the night." Esther spread her fingers like an explosion.

Hannah nodded.

"Who told you that?" Caleb asked with a downturned mouth.

"Maw Maw," Esther replied.

"My mother..." Caleb rose and checked his watch before tapping his foot impatiently in his fancy black dress shoes. "I don't have time for this. We can talk about it when Ms. Grace leaves. Okay?" He raised his eyes and the pitch of his voice.

It was a parental cry I knew well as a signal for them to behave.

"Okay. We'll talk to Ms. Grace about it, won't we?" Esther nodded, nudging Hannah, who nodded.

My, my, my .

I gave him a slick smile. He returned my look by subtly rolling his eyes and pursing his thick lips. Caleb had his hands full with these two little old ladies. They had him wrapped around their little fingers.

“Let me show you our house rules.” He walked to the kitchen counter and handed me a white piece of paper.

I followed behind him, sniffing his alluring cologne like a fiend as he moved down the list and added several points from memory.

“My girls have taken their baths. Dinner is on the stove. Cheese pizza. They can have no more than two slices. Hannah doesn’t like carrots.

Esther isn’t eating broccoli this week. They can have one blueberry muffin.

Bedtime is at 9:30 p.m. No exceptions. No violent movies or ones with curse words or S-E-X.

” He spelled the word ‘sex’ slowly and with precision.

My carnal mind went straight to the gutter.

“I’ll be back around midnight. Text me if you need anything.”

Did he slow - drawl when he said the word anything?

“Here’s my cell number. Text me so I’ll have yours.” He held out his hand and licked his lips, raising his eyebrow at me until I obeyed him like he was my daddy.

Did he do that on purpose?

“I will check in midway through the event and on my way home. Do you have any questions for me?”

My eyes almost bucked out of my head at the overwhelming meticulousness with

which Caleb laid out the nighttime plans with his daughters and the charm he exuded by simply breathing. I wasn't sure there would be time for us to do any of the spontaneous activities I planned.

Without waiting for a response, he rushed to the refrigerator and removed cartons of low-fat milk and reduced-sugar orange juice. He set them on the counter and reached into the cabinet for two small plastic cups.

"They can have no more than two cups of diluted juice. Half water, half juice. If they don't want juice, they can drink one cup of milk or water. Before bed, they must brush and floss between all teeth and say their prayers. Any questions, Ms. Grace?" He stared at me with intensity again.

To avoid squirming, I picked up the paper with the information he shared and reviewed it, suddenly feeling overwhelmed.

"I think I have it. Were you in the military?"

"No. I'm just a man of routine. Text me if you need me. I can be here in thirty minutes." He walked toward what I assumed was his bedroom.

"All will be well, Pastor." I gave him a reassuring smile and saluted him.

He laughed hard.

"You are hilarious."

He stood still and raised his eyebrow.

"It's Caleb, Grace."

“Excuse me?”

“You called me Pastor. I’m Caleb to you.” He winked.

“I’m just honoring a man of the cloth.”

“I’m also a man with flaws, opinions, and needs.”

Whoa.

“You’re honoring me when you care for my precious children in my home.” His megawatt smile and lingering gaze behind those long lashes had me starstruck.

“I can already tell your girls are angels.”

“Believe that if you want,” he said with a smirk.

“See? I told you she was a princess!” Hannah ran from behind the couch and threw a shy smile my way, which I returned with a wink.

I was so focused on Caleb’s demeanor and presence, I forgot the girls were so close. I walked to them and squatted to get at eye level with them again.

“Let Daddy get ready. Wash your hands, and I’ll fix your plates.” I turned to Caleb, remembering Nita’s message. “Nita wanted me to remind you to breathe.”

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A Sign

After I checked my home security system to make sure that Grace and the girls were secure, I walked to my Lexus and settled into the driver's seat, taking Aunt Nita's advice to breathe in and out to calm myself.

There was no way this side of heaven a woman that perfect dropped on my doorstep without God having something to do with it. Grace's sexy ass was exactly my type. Her chestnut-colored eyes, pretty white teeth, and hourglass-shape made me want to release a nut with each step she took.

It wasn't even that she wore seductive clothes. In fact, she was the opposite with modest attire, subtle makeup, and classic beauty that hinted at an untold story. She was observant, not too loud but gentle and demure with a nurturing spirit that my babies sucked up like water in a sponge.

When she sat on the floor with my kids like she was their peer, I smiled hard.

They climbed on her and touched her hair and body, violating normal boundaries, yet Grace didn't flinch.

She listened to them and made them feel as if their words mattered.

The quiet attention she gave them opened them up to her so quickly that I was shocked.

Aunt Nita was right. I had no reason to worry about my girls' well-being around her.

Was she from the South? Her faint accent hinted at a polish I hadn't heard since my graduate school days at Emory. A woman that educated stuck out like a sore thumb in Farmerton. Why was she babysitting my kids?

I didn't see a wedding ring, so I assumed she wasn't married. If she did have a man, he was stupid to let her stay at my house on a Friday night. Maybe I should have thought about that before I nearly undressed her with my eyes.

I'd heard of love at first sight, but I had never experienced it.

The second I opened the door, I was mesmerized, stuck, yet I didn't dare show it.

I was on a tight schedule and didn't have time to process all that.

What I knew was Grace's intense stares and probing eyes had me feeling like a horny teenager.

I could tell she was aroused too. Sweet Lord, her aroma was sweet and spicy. Even now, my mouth watered as I imagined what it would be like to kiss her shiny lips and bring her to a place of ecstasy she probably only dreamed about.

Calm down, playboy. Does she even know the Lord? You can't be in these streets pursuing a woman who isn't of the faith .

I gripped my steering wheel for another couple of minutes before starting the ignition. In a semi-haze, I turned on my lights and pulled away. As was my habit when I was alone, I talked to God out loud.

"She does kind of look like their terrible drawing, though." I chuckled. "And the girls adored her."

My girls could be little monsters with people they didn't like. Grace came in like a magician and calmed them all the way down.

At times, I was too soft with them, so it was different being on the other end of their admiration. Grace was definitely their favorite tonight, and I was what? Jealous? I didn't know. I shrugged and continued my conversation with my Creator.

"Thanks for looking out for my heartbeats and for me. You showed out big today." I raised one hand in praise and tapped the steering wheel hard, pleased that my God brought little pockets of joy my way in unexpected ways.

"She's exquisite, Heavenly Father. I know you hate lust, but could I be honest?" I shook my head and smacked my lips as I made a right turn at a stop sign and picked up speed on the four-lane highway.

"Her body, Lord, that body that You created...Sir...her hips and behind were so..." I thought back to the dark denim culottes Grace wore.

"And them doggone titties...full and round how I like them. I bet her nipples taste like honey too." I shook my head and screamed like my favorite team made a winning touchdown.

"Hol' up, hol' up." I shook my head and tapped the steering wheel again. "You know how disciplined I've been, so please give me grace. Amazing Grace, that is." I laughed at my joke.

One thing I believed in was keeping it real with God. Once I got serious about my faith, I talked to Him like he was my big brother. It may not have been conventional, but it kept me real. That was why the young people could relate to me, even calling me Pastor C.

My mind wandered about Grace. One of my prayer requests was to find a woman who cherished my daughters. She already passed the first test, so I needed to learn more.

Since I was still twenty minutes from my destination, I called Aunt Nita through my car's Bluetooth. She answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Auntie."

"Hey, baby. Is everything okay with Grace and the girls?"

"Yes, she's great. But I've got some questions for you."

"Shoot."

"About Grace..." My voice trailed off as I searched for the right words. "Is she married?"

Aunt Nita laughed.

"Has she opened your nose already, sweetheart?"

I sucked in a quick breath, knowing Aunt Nita had a special gift of seeing through any bull I threw her way. I sometimes hated that she knew me so well.

"Well..."

"I told you I wouldn't steer you wrong."

"So is she married?"

“No.”

“Does she have children?”

“No.”

“Is she looking for a husband?”

Aunt Nita cackled like an old hen.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?”

When her chuckles died down, she continued.

“I can’t speak for Grace, but based on my observations and conversations, I believe she might be receptive if the right person courted her. She’s not a hit it and quit it kind of woman, if you get my drift. She needs to be handled with care.”

Oh, really?

“Good to know.”

“Why is she in Farmerton?”

A shrill voice in the background traveled through my speakers, causing me to turn my speaker volume down.

“Caleb, dear, Callie needs me, so let’s connect later. You hear from God clearly, so let Him lead you in the direction your heart is taking you. Trust yourself, baby. Gotta go.”

I drove the rest of the way in silence, thinking about Aunt Nita's words. I let my mind wander to the possibilities.

What would it be like to have someone that amazing around my girls and me every day? Something was different about Grace... in a good way.

My job as a pastor would take me away from my girls when they needed me most. Grace could provide consistent support to them in my absence.

Although I'd never want to take advantage of her time and use her without proper compensation, she had the missing pieces of what I needed in my life right now.

By the time I pulled into the banquet hall's crowded parking lot, I knew what I had to do. I would have a conversation with Grace to learn about her goals and what she wanted in the future. I checked myself out in my driver's side vanity mirror before exiting.

Couples dressed in formal attire walked hand in hand to the brightly lit venue where strands of LED lights covered the entrance.

Several of them waved or shouted kind greetings to me.

Most of them had been married for years and prospered in their relationships.

Despite my gratitude for life and my elevated status, a slight twinge of jealousy and sadness tugged at me.

I wanted someone on my arm too. Grace was the first person who came to mind as I said a silent prayer.

Search my heart, God. You know what I need. And you know my past. Give me

clarity about what I'm feeling and the right words to say when I see Grace again.

The second I entered the main hall, I felt like a piece of prime meat at a butcher shop. A lot of these undercover hoes salivated like they had rabies. Some of them even gawked at me despite being on the arms of their partners.

Since I'd become the senior pastor of Haven of Hope and Blessings, the level of interest in me changed.

There was always someone with a "special" request, but the church freaks were definitely on the prowl.

Call it game knowing game. The freakiest ones weren't shy about seeking me out.

Over the past week, I had a pair of used thong panties mailed to my work office, a nighttime pop-up visit to my home by a naked woman in a trench coat, and a \$10,000 "donation" from one of my widows to service her needs since she no longer had a man in the house.

When I told Aunt Nita this, she encouraged me to start my courting process immediately. My stronghold was lust, and both of us knew I was bound to fall into temptation if I didn't get a handle on women's objectification of me.

On my way to my seat near the front of the room, Roxanne Bolz, a former church member and lover, jumped in front of me.

"Hey, Caleb," she lowered her voice. "I need to talk with you for a second."

I looked around the room then back at Roxanne. I figured she was up to no good, but I wasn't going to make a scene in public.

“What’s up?” I kept my voice steady despite my irritation.

Her black-lined eyes traveled straight to my crotch.

“Hopefully, that good dick you used to sling my way.”

I sighed, pissed but not surprised that my former ways would come back to haunt me so soon after I stepped into my new role.

“Senior pastoring looks good on you, by the way.” She licked her wet lips and rested her long mahogany nails on my tuxedo’s lapel, checking me out like we were at the club down the street.

I plastered a smile on my face and quickly darted my eyes across the room to see if anyone was watching our awkward exchange. When I realized no one was paying attention to us, I stepped closer to her and spoke through clenched teeth.

“Don’t mess with me, Roxanne. I may be holy on the outside, but I know how to take heifers down if I need to. For the last time, I don’t whore around anymore. What we had is over.” I took a step back and focused on her eyes.

Roxanne tilted her fit body forward, offering me a scandalous peek at the bountiful blessings underneath her dress that used to overflow in my mouth during our raunchy sex sessions.

Her floral perfume wafted to my nostrils, making me want to sneeze.

I sucked in a big breath and quickly swiped my finger under my nose to filter out the overpowering smell.

Nothing about Roxanne tempted me anymore.

“Do you do house calls, Pastor?” She batted her long eyelashes like she had debris in them.

This messy hoe was dense and unrelenting. Despite that, I wasn’t in the business of breaking people’s spirits, no matter how annoying they were. I reached for Roxanne’s wrist and removed it from my person as gently as I could without making a scene.

“I’ll direct you to our prayer team for that. It’s led by my Aunt Nita. Remember her? I’d hate for her to have to rebuke you in Jesus’ Name.”

Roxanne frowned, her face reddening. She poked her long red fingernail into my shirt.

“That hag better stay away from me. You’re a damn wolf hiding behind a pulpit. Nothing about your rotten ass is holy. You could learn a lot from your daddy. He never turned away a woman in need.” Roxanne’s shoulders drooped when she mentioned my father.

I know. That was the problem.

My father and I both had Roxanne. I wasn’t proud of that, but I didn’t know he was cheating on my mother at the time.

Madeline had just left me, and I was lonely.

Roxanne filled the bill by cooking hot meals for the girls and me.

One night, she popped up with a tuna casserole after Hannah and Esther were asleep.

It started with an innocent kiss but ended with her sucking me off so good my toes curled.

I became addicted to her and didn't care how reckless I was.

We fooled around about six months, but one day, the Holy Spirit tugged at my heart.

I woke up realizing that if Roxanne ever got pregnant by my father or me, it would take the entire ministry down.

That was when my sorry behind got right with God.

Everyone involved in that fiasco deserved better, most definitely my mother.

I still hadn't shared with her how much of a dog I was during that dark season of my life.

"I may not be like my father, but I promise I strive every day to be like my heavenly Father." I lifted my hand toward the ceiling and raised my eyes, indicating that I now answered to a power much higher than anyone else. "The only clit I'll suck from now on will be my wife's."

"Yeah, right." Roxanne had the nerve to shoot me a bird and scurry off.

As much as I criticized my father's adulterous ways, the apple didn't fall too far from the tree.

My whoring started at Morehouse College.

I was so bad that the ladies called me Sir DickALot.

I threw my penis into any vagina that opened for me.

I temporarily got on the straight and narrow when a pregnancy scare almost made me

a daddy at twenty.

I considered that my warning to take my relationship with God seriously until I messed around with Roxanne.

How was I going to make it through this senior pastor life when mess like this kept happening?

I needed a wife.

My mind went back to Grace. Maybe God saw what was before me and brought her to me so I wouldn't fall again.

Who was she, and what did she need from me?

Fun Time

“I like this color, Ms. Grace!”

Hannah giggled and wiggled her hands near her face after I painted each of her little fingers cotton candy pink. She squirmed in the small chair near the desk in her bedroom.

“Remember what I said, sweetheart. Put your hands in this dryer and don’t touch anything until I tell you, okay?” I placed my fingers around her wrist as she spread her fingers on the desk and inserted them into the small nail dryer that matched the color of her fingernails.

“Sorry.” Hannah lowered her eyes and frowned.

I lifted her chin and smiled.

“It’s okay. You don’t do this all the time. Never feel bad when you’re learning something for the first time. That’s called growth.”

Hannah’s smile matched mine as she steadied her body and held it still as her nails dried.

Before I gave the girls manicures, I had styled Hannah’s wavy hair into several loose plaits that hung low over her head.

Each plait was held by small rubber bands that matched her dark brown hair. I turned

to Esther, who sat on the bed.

“As for you, Little Miss Esther, I’m going to finish your hair so it will be exquisite for Sunday service too. How did you say you wanted it again?”

“Two long plaits here and here.” She pointed to the places on her head where she wanted me to put the plaits.

I picked up my comb and gestured for her to sit between my legs on her bed.

“Tilt your head back and be really still so I can get this part straight.”

Esther did as I asked. I parted her thick black hair down the middle and brushed it with care, giving her the style she requested. Fifteen minutes later, I guided her to the mirror where she examined the finished product, twirled in a circle, and clapped her hands.

“Daddy doesn’t fix hair that good. Ariel and Nene make fun of me.” Esther poked her lips out.

My heart dropped as I recalled my own childhood experiences.

I’d been loved hard by my parents and been given nice things, but that often brought unwanted attention.

People made fun of me because my mother sent me to school with the prettiest Shirley Temple curls every day.

Some said I thought I was better than they were when my mother dressed me like a doll.

I couldn't blame her. I was her miracle child.

My grandparents said I carried light and favor on my life, but it made me feel uncomfortable.

Only as an adult did I realize how judgmental and petty people could be about situations they didn't understand.

"A lot of daddies aren't great at doing hair, but they do a lot of other things well. And you should never be ashamed of his good efforts. No matter how your hair is styled, it's beautiful, and you have a heart of gold." I squeezed Esther's little shoulders.

Hannah joined us at the mirror.

"And Daddy's a great cook. We have the best lunches. He's funny. Lots of ladies at church like him."

Really?

"How do you know the ladies like him?"

"They laugh and bring toys and stuff. Daddy looks like this..." Esther scrunched up her face like a bulldog, making me laugh.

"They want to do our hair, but Daddy said no. They won't be good mamas." Hannah turned to Esther, who nodded her head up and down in agreement.

"Why don't you want them?"

Hannah and Esther looked at each other and remained silent.

“You can tell me.”

Hannah spoke up.

“They want Daddy, not us. Mamas like their kids, right?”

My heart fell again. Did Caleb know his children were being bullied by other kids and that those messy women were talking trash about them?

I stared at the girls, my heart full at how kind and thoughtful they were.

They loved their father so much that they probably confided in each other, thinking they were protecting him.

In that moment, I pictured how amazing they would be as adults, caring, generous women who could do anything they set their minds to.

I had an urge to protect them from anyone who treated them poorly.

If it were up to me, I'd send those ladies straight to hell with gasoline drawers.

I wanted to probe more about how much they confided in their father but felt it was wrong for me to gossip about him. If the girls wanted to tell me more information, however, I would listen willingly. Maybe I would chat with Caleb about my concerns later.

“Do you have a husband?” Esther asked with an innocent look on her face.

“Or little girls?” Hannah halfway turned around, a look of concern on hers.

“I don't. It's just me living by myself. I've never been married.”

Hannah beamed, revealing an adorable dimple before turning around to dry her fingernails.

“You’re a nice lady. Do you want to be our mommy?” Hannah’s gave me a serious look.

“Are you an angel?” Esther asked the question before I could respond to Hannah.

Their innocent voices made me smile. I brushed the right side of Hannah’s wavy hair, trying to figure out how to answer such an unusual question.

“I’m not an angel, but I don’t believe in accidents. I think I’m meant to be in your lives. Let’s start by calling me your friend.”

“But I want a mommy.” Esther’s narrow shoulders slumped as she poked her lips out.

I turned to her and lifted her chin.

“Whoever God sends as your mommy would be such a blessed woman,” I added quickly. “You girls are so sweet and smart, exactly what a mother would want in daughters.”

The girls smiled at each other, displaying all their little teeth.

“Your nails should be dry, Hannah. Come over and let me see.”

She rose and spread her fingers wide.

“Those are gorgeous,” I said.

She nodded.

“Daddy will love them!” Esther squealed and did her happy dance.

Hannah reached for Esther’s hand and smiled too, holding her hands out.

“They’re as pretty as mine.”

I loved that the girls were so happy. To capture the moment, I reached for my phone on the side table and remembered I hadn’t texted Caleb with an update.

“Hold your hands out so I can send a photo to your father. When I’m done, we’ll read a story, pray, and go to bed.”

The girls wiggled their fingers and posed in silly ways with each other and with me as I snapped several shots of their fresh manicures and hair. I texted the photos and wrote a message for Caleb.

Me:

We’re having a GREAT time. I hope you’re having a good time too.

I didn’t want to come across as flirtatious, but I sincerely wanted Caleb to be carefree about being away from Hannah and Esther.

Within seconds, he sent a selfie with a raised eyebrow as if he was puzzled.

Man, he was photogenic with his smooth mocha skin.

Behind him, I saw long strings of gold balloons and throngs of people.

Caleb Stallings:

Their hair is cute, but those nails are a little mature for girls so young, aren't they?

I frowned. Surely, he was kidding me.

Me:

Not at all. Next time I'll get approval before I style them. Any special requests? An old lady bun, perhaps?

Caleb Stallings:

Next time? *shocked face emoji* As long as you don't put weave down to their waists, any style will do.

I paused, pulling together a response to match Caleb's tone.

Me:

Oh no, you spoiled the surprise! I was going to redo it with a blonde Beyonce wig for Hannah and a Rihanna pixie cut for Esther. *wide eye emoji*

Caleb Stallings:

I don't listen to secular music, so I don't know who that is. *tongue emoji*

The good pastor's sense of humor was adorable. If he showed this side of himself often, I see why those hot-in-the-pants church ladies liked him so much.

Me:

Remind me to educate you one day. *wink emoji*

Caleb Stallings:

I can't wait, Ms. Grace. I'll be home before 11.

Me:

You're welcome. Drive safely, and enjoy the rest of your event.

Caleb Stallings:

I will. You look cute with the girls btw. *smiley face wink emoji*

Caleb was such a flirt, but I liked it so much. I was tempted to respond back, but I needed to stick to the girls' strict routine.

I tucked the girls in their beds by 9:15 p.m. Around 10:45, I woke up as heavy rain pelted against the windows. Nothing put me to sleep faster than a thunderstorm. The last thing I remembered was plopping on the comfortable couch in the family room to watch a movie.

The headlights from Caleb's car flashed across the blinds in the front room before turning dark.

I lowered the volume on the forty-two-inch television and turned it off, placing the intricate remote on the wooden coffee table in front of me.

I hopped up and quickly folded the comfortable, oversized throw that covered me, making sure to place it in the exact position it was in when I arrived.

When I stood, the two lamps in the room illuminated my outfit.

I looked down my body and focused on my thin leggings and socked feet, realizing how casual I appeared.

The snug Angela Davis black t-shirt with her neatly shaped black afro said “I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I’m changing the things I cannot accept” in bold black letters.

This shirt was one of the few I still wore from my undergraduate days at Tuskegee University almost twenty years ago.

Although it was priceless to me, the worn cotton had faded and shrunk.

It didn’t help that my body had grown several sizes since I graduated with my degree in educational psychology.

That combination hugged my pronounced DD-size bust and caused my curvy hips and butt to poke out of my leggings like they were besties.

I tugged the shirt over my protruding bust and tried to stretch the hem of my shirt as best as I could, but knew I still looked a mess.

I regretted dressing like this was my home.

I calculated if I could rush to the kids’ bedroom, grab the clothes I arrived in, and change in the bathroom before he entered. I didn’t want Caleb to think I was trying to tempt him at booty o’clock in his house.

You have to plan your life better, Grace.

I stood in the threshold of the open frame separating the modest-sized kitchen and the living room and then scurried toward the bedrooms as quickly as I could. The

doorknob turned with Caleb entering quicker than I anticipated.

“Grace? Are you okay?” His deep voice registered concern.

I stopped in my tracks and then turned around quickly to face him. His heavenly scent filled my nose like a cartoon scent bubble, even several feet away. Although his voice sounded slightly weary, he looked delicious and more tempting than should be allowed this late at night.

Since I didn’t want to run away like a frightened rat, I stood straight and held my head high.

His eyes met mine. Much like our initial meeting, we stared each other down.

I held the bottom of my shirt and forced myself not to squirm.

Since this outfit was painted on like a second skin, I hoped my nipples weren’t poking out disrespectfully.

“It was great. Please forgive my appearance.”

“Why? You look good.” Caleb paused as he read my shirt.

His eyes lowered slowly to my hips, legs, and feet before walking toward me.

“Thank you. I was on my way to the girls’ room to grab my bag and change. I brought comfortable clothes since I didn’t know if I’d be doing something messy.” I rambled on.

“My girls can be pretty rough. I’d hate for you to mess up those good clothes fingerpainting or baking with them.” He tightened his lips and blinked several times

as he stared at my leggings.

Good clothes? Where?

His slow and deliberate voice filled the room at a volume that was respectful and sensual—or maybe I wasn't used to hearing the sound of a Southern man who was undoubtedly an eloquent orator. A bundle of nerves and excitement overtook me.

There was that dry sense of humor again. Maybe it was the leader and daddy in him. He wasn't the stereotype I thought he was. To become a father, he had to be familiar with tits and ass, so I dropped my hands to my side and spoke to him like I had good sense. I wasn't a darn baby.

“Did you have a good time, Pastor?”

“I can't complain. How were you and the girls?”

In a nonsexual way, he loosened his black tie and slid it from his shirt collar before unbuttoning the top two buttons of his starched white shirt, revealing that pretty chest hair again. He inhaled and exhaled deeply as if he were exhausted.

I bit my lip. The way Caleb undressed was a sexy, natural move. The romance author in me could almost hear sultry strains of a nineties R&B song as the low recessed lights in the kitchen highlighted Caleb's strong jaw and pretty brown skin that had me yearning to pet him like a mink coat.

“They are precious. You have done an amazing job raising them. If I ever become a mother, I want daughters just like them.”

“Hopefully, you'll get that chance one day soon.”

That was enough. I couldn't help but laugh at how Caleb and I spoke in code. I crossed my arms and took a deep breath.

“What are we doing here?” I motioned between the two of us.

He leaned toward me and held my waist, positioning his ear so close to mine it sent shivers down my spine.

“What do you want us to be doing here?”

“I... I...” I darted my head back and reached for Caleb's shoulders, holding them firm.

Before I could overthink, I raised myself to my tiptoes and kissed Pastor Caleb Stallings right on his mouth.

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Temperance

With every fiber of my being, I wanted to pick Grace up and take her to my bedroom, undress her, and make love to her until she screamed my name.

From the minute I entered the house, my patience was tested.

Everything that made me a man came to attention as I took in the fullness of her body.

When she wore her culottes earlier, I couldn't fully discern her shape, but in her casual clothes, I saw everything then some.

Between her too-tight shirt with her breasts perked up just right and those child-bearing hips and shapely legs in those flimsy leggings, I was seconds from coming undone.

If she were mine, I'd have her welcoming me home after a long night by lifting her sexy limbs around me and clutching me tight before I ripped every stitch of clothing from her body, oiled her down, and pounded her senseless.

But she wasn't mine. I remembered that after I welcomed her warm, sweet lips and tongue wrestled her as if my life depended on it. When we parted, I saw concern in her eyes. Before she could apologize, I reached for the back of her neck and gave her another peck on her juicy lips.

"I wanted that as much as you did." I whispered the words into her ear.

She grinned and touched her fingers to her mouth.

“Have a seat. I’m going to get us some water.” I retrieved a cold bottle of water from the refrigerator and gulped it like I was a parched man who had hiked in the desert for a week.

I handed Grace her bottle. She opened it and sipped it slowly. I sat on a stool at my high-top kitchen counter and ushered her to do the same.

“I should go home.” Grace tapped the face of her small silver wristwatch with her finger.

I shook my head, taking in her carriage. She was extremely calm and very introverted, unlike me. That meant I would most likely have to ask her a lot of questions or initiate certain topics to assess how she processed our interaction.

“Not in this weather, you won’t. A thunderstorm is coming through tonight. I have a guest bedroom you can stay in.” I pointed toward the back of the house and spoke quickly and quietly.

“I live only fifteen minutes from here.”

“I don’t care. The roads are slick, and it’s dark. I need you to stay safe.”

“I rested after the girls went to sleep. I grew up in the country, so I’m not afraid. I’ll take my time.”

“No, Grace. Allow me to protect one of God’s most precious gifts.” I extended my hands.

Grace looked at them with a slight look of confusion on her face before placing her

hands in mine. I closed my fingers in hers and held them firm. She smiled, her deep dimples popping from her cheeks as our gazes locked.

“You are so pretty.” The words flowed from my mouth effortlessly as I took in how stunning she was even in casual attire.

I didn’t think Grace’s dimples could get any deeper, but they did.

“That, sir, is why I need to take my behind home.” She released my hands and placed hers in her lap.

Her soft voice soothed me like instrumental jazz. When I reached for her hand again, she gave it to me. I intertwined our fingers and placed our hands on the counter.

“I am mandated as a minister to praise the beauty of God’s creation and care for His sheep. It’s rare for me to have such a special gift enter my home.”

“I’m only allowing you to praise me like this because I love the Lord and want Him to be pleased with me.”

I licked my lips as she teased me in a way that made me want to tease her more. I also rejoiced that she was a woman of faith.

“Believe me. He is quite pleased with you. Receive the compliment, Grace.” I grinned.

She took another sip of water before saying, “Thank you.”

“Seriously, I want to thank you for taking care of the girls. I’ve never seen them gravitate to anyone like they did you. What’s your payment for services?”

“I adore Nita, the girls, and you, so it’s free.”

It didn’t go over my head that Grace included me in her adoration list. Those subtle, flirty insertions made me want to draw even closer to her.

“I always pay my debts. Tell you what. Join the girls and me after church for Sunday dinner. Come to Sunday service too. You can then drive over here afterward.”

Grace gazed into the dining room as if considering my offer.

“I’d love to see the girls again, so yes. But only if you let me bring something for dinner. I’m a pretty good cook, even if I say so myself.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I released her fingers and thrust my hands in my pockets.

Grace made herself comfortable on the couch as I went to my bedroom and changed. When I returned in a crew neck T-shirt and basketball shorts, she was snuggled on my couch reading some Bible Study notes I left on the coffee table.

“First Corinthians, chapter ten. You’ve highlighted the passage about temptation,” she said.

“Yes, as a pastor, I have to crucify my flesh daily. Look at how you’re tempting me tonight.” I gestured toward Grace’s body and shook my head.

Grace lowered to the table and stared at me.

“The feeling is mutual.”

Grace’s eyes drew me in like magnets as she checked me out and bit her lip before giving me the sweetest of smiles. Although she wore no makeup, her natural beauty

shone as bright as the morning sun.

I often counseled couples about the temptations of the flesh, but it always hit differently when I felt tempted. My time with Roxanne came from a place of pain, but being with Grace warmed me from the inside out.

Since I had a strong relationship with God, I trusted the peace that overtook me in Grace's presence.

What I felt was more than lust. I wanted Grace's body, but I hungered to know the mysteries of her mind and emotions too.

It was as if I had broken a fast and was at an endless buffet.

I didn't know where to start, but I knew that Grace could satisfy my hunger.

Her eyes held something mysterious and drew me to her like a drug.

We matched wits, and that wasn't easy when I had to be so serious as the senior pastor of one of the largest churches in the tri-state area.

"Tell me about yourself, Grace."

She checked her watch and frowned.

"It's almost midnight. Aren't you tired?"

I reached for her hand and held it firm.

"No. It's rare for me to connect so quickly with someone who makes me want to get to know them better. I'm a conversationalist by nature. As a single father and a pastor

who most people think is superhuman, it's nice to just be Caleb."

"I see." Grace's eyes crinkled.

"You're kind and go above and beyond for my girls. I checked in on them. Their hair and nails are beautiful. Because of your care, I trust you and your heart." I released her arm and leaned back, placing a throw pillow over my lap.

"Thank you. Speaking of your girls, do you know how badly they want a mother?"

I laughed.

"It's all they talk about."

"I know. They're getting bullied at school because they aren't like the other girls. They also told me how the women at church want you but not them." Grace kept her voice low as silence lingered in the air.

I breathed deeply, disappointed that my babies shared such disturbing information with Grace. I had no idea they knew all of this. I felt the need to defend myself.

"It's not easy being a pastor. People are drawn to the anointing of God on me as much as they are to me as a man. I try to protect my daughters as much as I can, but I guess I'm not doing enough." I stared toward the hallway, my mind wandering as I tried to problem solve yet again.

I thought of Hannah and Esther's pitiful faces as they begged for a mother.

"I know you're trying, but there is no way that your daughters should carry that burden."

“They obviously trust you, so thank you for easing some of that tonight.”

“It’s my pleasure to assist as I can. I may not be their mother, but I told them I would be their friend. To do that, I need to know you all better. Tell me who you are, Caleb.” Grace reached for me and squeezed my hand.

When she touched me, I sensed her nurturing spirit. Like the girls, I wanted to reveal my truth too.

“I never wanted to raise my children without a mother. I do the best I can to be there for them, but the older they get, the more I realize I am not enough. I want a wife and mother for them as much as they want a mother. I pray for her to come and believe that even if she doesn’t love me fully, it will be enough for her to respect and adore my girls. ”

“Do you have any candidates?”

I stared at Grace in disbelief, wondering if she was serious. Hadn’t she picked up on how attracted I was to her?

“Do you want me to answer truthfully?”

“Of course, I do.”

The sincerity in her voice strummed parts of my heart that hadn’t been touched in years.

“When a woman like you enters my life and pays attention to my girls, I pay attention to you. I’m not selfish enough to want companionship only for me. That’s why I want to know more about who you are. You stand out, and you are worth knowing since my girls already adore you.”

Grace blushed and nodded. She readjusted the throw over her legs before meeting my eyes.

“Well...I’m Dr. Gracelyn Toliver, an only child from a country town in Alabama.

I lived in DC after graduating from Tuskegee University.

I was an Office of Educational Innovation and Strategy employee until last year.

I was at the top of my field, a data analyst who oversaw a department of fifty employees before my unit was shut down by the government.

My mother died a month and two weeks ago.

I turned forty a day after I buried her.

It was a really dark time for me, so I moved to Farmerton.

I live in a house owned by my Uncle Keith. ”

Grace spoke matter-of-factly, as if she was reading a script. I could tell how much courage it took for her to share her story, so I wouldn’t press her for more details right now.

“Smart and pretty? Man...” I reached for her hand and kissed it.

She giggled but maintained her focus on my eyes.

“Thank you for sharing. Are you okay now?” I asked.

“Yes. I was thinking about Hannah and Esther and how much it means to have a

mother. I can't imagine being as young as they are and hungering for something they know is good but is out of their reach.

I want them to have their hearts' desires so they can be headstrong and independent without fear.

I wouldn't be who I am without my mother's influence. They deserve that chance too."

"I love that you see that in them. That shows me your heart. That's why I want to elaborate on my stance about marriage."

Grace squirmed, but I continued.

"Man was not meant to be alone. I know that better than anyone. Before I was a pastor, I was one of the whorish men you could meet. A few years back, I made a commitment to honor God in every area of my life, especially my body. I will only court the woman I plan to marry. No more dating to date. No premarital sex. It is too tempting." I pointed to the Bible study notes.

"That means I'll be firm and fast when I meet my bride.

Once my wife-to-be and I know we are committed to each other, I'm puttin' a ring on it... expeditiously."

"So the fact that I'm all snuggled up with you on your couch means..." Grace spoke the words almost in a whisper.

"That you are a viable candidate."

Her hands gravitated to her chest.

“My goodness. Do you act like this with every candidate? ”

“There are no other candidates.”

“Oh.” Grace looked at her watch again and cleared her throat. “It’s getting really late.”

Grace’s deflection signaled to me that I might be saying too much too soon. I rose, and Grace did too. She folded the throw that covered her legs, watching me with intense eyes.

“Are you good?”

I needed to hear her say she was okay.

“I am. And Caleb?”

“Yes, Grace?”

“I am honored to be a candidate.”

Warmth spread through my chest as Grace gave me a toothy grin. In our exchange, I felt wanted at the most basic level.

“We’re going to get along just fine.”

When I smiled, Grace smiled right back. I put my hands in the pocket of my shorts so I wouldn’t grab her waist and suck her face off.

After she settled in for the night in my guest room, I went to my bedroom, got on my knees, and prayed.

“Thank you, Father, for unexpected blessings and answered prayer. You broke the mold when you created Gracelyn Toliver.”

The last thing I remembered before falling asleep was Grace’s sweet smile. That night, I got the best sleep of my life.

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Truthteller

I woke up slightly disoriented. The barely there sun shone dimly through the blinds of the guest bedroom at Caleb's house.

The room was neat and smelled fresh, as if someone recently vacuumed it with a peach fragrance.

I stretched and smiled as I recalled how unexpected my babysitting session was last night.

Although he gave off an undercover bad boy vibe, Caleb was nothing but a gentleman after we ended our conversation early this morning. He walked me to my bedroom door and gave me a clean set of towels along with an oversized white t-shirt.

"You can change into this unless you prefer to sleep naked." He licked his lips and gave me his crooked little smile.

"Please don't start." My heart raced for the umpteenth time as Caleb's flirty words washed over me.

Did he sleep in the nude?

"I'm kidding." He reached for my hand and held my fingers loosely in his, rocking his body back and forth.

I opened my arms to receive Caleb's magnificent body. He walked toward me and

gently scooped his arms under mine.

When Caleb nuzzled my neck with his nose, I closed my eyes and tightened my grip on his body. I held this amazing man as close as I could, rubbing the firm muscles in his lower back. I missed warm hugs .

“You smell so good.” Caleb spoke the words into my neck.

Our bodies fit together perfectly, connecting like long lost puzzle pieces.

I pressed my breasts deeper into his chest, inhaling his signature scent and getting lost in a fantasy of resting in his arms forever.

Never had I craved such a connection, but this felt right, like hopes and possibilities rolled into one.

When we finally released our grasp, I brushed my hair behind my ear. Caleb reached for my hand again and kissed it.

“Good night, Grace.”

“Good night, Caleb. Sweet dreams.”

I stopped daydreaming and checked my watch. It was 6:15 a.m.

Me:

Good morning. I want to be out before the girls wake up. If you don't get a chance to respond before I leave, I'll lock the door behind me. *smiley face hug emoji*

Caleb:

I wake up at 5 to pray and exercise. Come out when you're ready. I'll fix your breakfast to go.

My heart pounded. I hummed my favorite song while I completed my hygiene routine and walked down the hallway into the kitchen with my bag on my shoulder.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Caleb gave me his biggest smile to date as he fiddled with pots and pans in the kitchen.

"Good morning, King."

When I said that, he stopped what he was doing and stared at me from head to toe.

"King, huh?"

"I said what I said."

"I've got your king, Ms. Grace."

"I bet you do."

"Woman, it's too early for all that." He shook his head and redirected his attention to the stove.

When he stopped paying attention to me, I stared at his body. He was so fine in the same T-shirt and shorts from last night. His bare, big feet told me everything I needed to know about how well-endowed he was underneath those shorts.

Damn, Grace. The man is good dick on a stick.

That phrase came to me as I thought about what it would be like to wake up to a sexy

man in my kitchen every morning.

“Here’s an egg and cheese breakfast sandwich.” Caleb wrapped the steaming hot biscuit in a square piece of foil and placed it in a plastic Kroger grocery bag before setting it on the counter. “Sorry I don’t have anything fancier for you.”

“Thank you for making the effort. It’s perfect. I really must go though.” I pointed toward the front door.

“I understand. The munchkins will be up soon. I’ll walk you to your car.” He slipped on his slides, opened the front door, and followed me outside.

When I was inside my car and buckled up, I turned on the ignition and lights and rolled down the window.

Caleb placed his hands on the roof of my car and leaned into the window, his lips temptingly close to mine.

Neither of us said anything as we stared at each other like teenagers crushing on each other.

“Call me when you get home.” His low voice made me want to groan.

“Okay.” I focused on his pretty lips then met his eyes.

Before I turned my head, he tilted his head forward and kissed me softly and sweetly. I closed my eyes and opened them slowly, taking in the perfection of his mesmerizing face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow after church and the day after that and the day after that if you’ll let me.”

“Uh...” I didn’t know how to respond to such directness.

“Think about what I said. If you want me to pursue you, I will. Just know when I play, it’s for keeps.”

“I understand. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Grace.”

“Bye.” I rolled up the window and disappeared into the morning sun.

The entire ride home, I thought about how fascinating Caleb was.

He was serious and funny with old school charm that had me blushing so hard I couldn’t contain my giddiness.

He was holy and irreverent in a way that didn’t make me uncomfortable.

The bad girl in me wanted to see how dangerous he could be.

Maybe it was the temptation he talked about.

There was something about potentially pushing him over the edge that intrigued me.

Let that man be celibate in peace.

I thought the words and tightened my grip on my steering wheel, taking a deep breath to recenter after the whirlwind of emotions Caleb pulled from me. I didn’t expect to be like a dog in heat when I agreed to care for two motherless girls.

When I entered my house, I locked up and tossed my bag in my room, readying

myself for a day of chores and writing. Only after I threw the dirty sheets on my queen-sized bed in the washer did I remember to call Caleb.

“Hello?” His buttery voice made my heart thump.

“I made it home.”

“Thanks for letting me know. The girls are up and want to speak to you. I’ll put them on speaker.”

“Okay.”

I heard the airiness of the room when Hannah and Esther’s voices rang through the phone.

“Good morning, Ms. Grace. We had fun.” They repeated the words after each other.

“I enjoyed you, too. Remember to listen to your Daddy and be good today.”

“We will.” They chimed.

“Say bye.”

After a pause, they each said goodbye. Even through the phone, I heard the patter of their feet as they ran away. I smiled, recalling how energetic they were when something excited them.

“I’m back.” Caleb’s voice deepened again, alerting me he was off speakerphone.

“Call me anytime, Grace. Day or night. I like talking with you.”

“Same. Have a good day.”

“You too.”

For the second time that day, I felt warm and fuzzy as I engaged with Caleb. He knew how to put a smile on my face and keep it there. If I could bottle this goodness and sell it, I would be a billionaire.

I felt so good about my night with Caleb and the girls, I texted Nita and invited her to my house that afternoon as a thank you.

As soon as she accepted, I began my preparation of a light lunch of homemade tuna and fruit salad.

Around noon, I readied a table outside, mirroring the festive, laid-back summers I enjoyed with my parents.

When Nita arrived, she gave me a big hug and presented me with a devotional book and a cute mug that said “Blessed.”

“You didn’t have to do this. Your presence is gift enough.”

“You deserve good things, sweetie. I’m pouring into you so you can pour into others.”

“It’s funny you said that. I thought I was meant to live in my quiet corner of the world and just be.”

Nita rested her eyes on me but didn’t say anything. After we fixed our plates and sat, she blessed the food. We ate in silence for several minutes before she propped her elbows on the table with her hands clasped.

“Tell me about your time with the girls and Caleb.”

I smiled.

“The girls are precious. They stole my heart.”

“Did Caleb steal your heart, too?”

I lowered my head and blushed. Nita was so darn direct, just like her nephew.

“No. I mean, I don’t know. I just met the man.”

Nita shook her head and clicked her tongue.

“You’re deflecting. What happened between y’all last night?” She popped a grape in her mouth.

I poked around my plate, then raised an eyebrow.

“If he weren’t your nephew, I might say. But I don’t want to be messy or inappropriate.”

“I can be an auntie and a friend. We’re having girl talk.”

I took a big breath and nodded.

“Caleb is fascinating and kind. I want to know more about him.”

Nita wiped her mouth with her napkin and chuckled, her body jiggling with each laugh.

“Caleb is the son I never had. He was smart as a whip as a kid and the head of his high school class. He went to Morehouse for his accounting degree then Emory for an MBA. He and his daddy, my brother, were entrepreneurial, so they bought several fast food restaurants and became multimillionaires.”

I didn't expect that news since Caleb's house was humble. He must have been a frugal man.

“He was laser focused on his career until he met his ex-wife, Madeline. She was pretty, seductive, and conniving. Caleb's nose was wide open.

We warned him about her, but Caleb was headstrong.

Like God, I believe in free will, but I prayed that everything would work out.

” Nita's voice trailed off. “The girls were the bright spot from that union.”

“When did he become a preacher?”

“Before his daddy died of a heart attack. Caleb was called to the ministry years before he accepted his calling to preach. It was a little before he met Madeline. When he said yes to the Lord, all hell broke loose in his marriage. That devil in Madeline came all the way out. Nearly destroyed my baby. But God...” Nita waved her hand and wiggled her body like she had caught the Holy Ghost.

“Where is she?”

“Who knows? She got caught up in drugs. Caleb held on as long as he could, but God said no. It nearly broke him.”

“That's really sad.”

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“Like you, everyone has a story, even if they look perfect on the outside. The God I serve protects and redeems. You may walk in the valley of the shadow of death, but you don’t have to stay there. You and Caleb have a lot in common.”

“I agree. This helps me. I’ll have a better perspective at dinner with him and the girls tomorrow after church.”

“What’s this?” Nita’s mouth dropped.

I blushed, hiding my smile behind my glass as I sipped my water. I set it back on the table with a serious look.

“He asked me to join his family for church and dinner.”

“Hold up, Miss Ma’am. My nephew has standards. The only woman he will entertain is one he courts. Is he courting you? And did you agree?” Nita shrieked her questions.

Her animation startled me. Only now did it fully hit me to what I agreed to when I accepted Caleb’s invitations.

“I think so...yes? Maybe? I’ve learned not to overanalyze potential blessings. You only live once.”

Nita smiled so hard it made me grin.

“Praise God.”

“I’m exploring whatever courting means, so please don’t put the cart before the horse.”

“The way y’all are going, I’m going to be at a wedding soon.” She pulled out her phone. “Let me buy that sky blue dress I’ve been eyeing at Nordstrom.

“You are a holy mess.”

Nita dropped her phone and resumed her meal. Her smile was so big; I wondered if it hurt her face.

As I ate, I thought about what a modern-day courtship might look like. Would we only kiss? How would his previous admirers feel about me?

When Nita left, I went grocery shopping for Sunday dinner and wrapped up tasks for work.

Throughout the day, I tried not to ruminate about visiting Caleb’s church and joining his family after service but couldn’t help but wonder what they might think about me.

This was still a relatively small town, and people had strong opinions about strangers, especially those who caught the eye of one of Farmerton’s most eligible bachelors.

To calm my nerves, I sorted through my accessories and dress clothes, pairing my mother’s pearl choker with a below-the-knee sheath dress that accentuated my legs and hips.

I smiled as I ironed the hem of my purple dress on low heat, recalling how grateful Hannah and Esther were to have me style their hair for tomorrow’s service.

They would look like little dolls and probably wouldn’t be able to sit still the entire

day.

I drew my bath for the evening when a notification popped up on my phone.

Caleb:

You good for tomorrow?

Everything Caleb said made me smile. When I didn't text back immediately, he called me.

“Yes, King.”

“Hey, Queen. I want to confirm that I'll see you in the morning. I can't have you backing out.”

“My clothes are ready. Anything I should know about your church? I don't want to embarrass you or anything.”

“You could never embarrass me. Just wear something tight and sexy so I can ogle your body again.”

“If you don't stop being so mannish...”

Caleb's low laugh rumbled through the phone.

“I haven't had sex in years, woman. When it looks as if the drought is almost over, you've got to give a brother some slack. Dang.”

It pleased me that Caleb was as horny as I was.

“In that case, I’ll wear a see-through teddy so you won’t miss me.”

“As long as it’s red.”

I snorted like a pig when he said that. We both laughed hard.

“I’m so sorry.” I wiped tears from my eyes and took a deep breath to compose myself.

“It’s fine, but seriously, we’re a laid-back bunch. Come as you are. When you enter the sanctuary, tell the ushers your name, and they’ll escort you to the front near my mother and Aunt Nita.”

“I’ll stay in the back if it’s okay with you.”

“Okay. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Thanks. What’s the topic of your sermon?”

“Waiting and trusting in God for the blessings coming our way.”

“That sounds encouraging. I can’t wait.” I smiled, instinctively knowing Caleb was a rock star orator who would preach the stank off a sermon.

That was another reason I wanted to sit in the back of the sanctuary. It would allow me to praise God and observe Caleb in action without feeling self-conscious.

“My mother will be joining us for brunch tomorrow. Aunt Nita might be there too. I know you wanted to bring something, but you don’t have to.”

“My mama told me never to show up to a meal at someone’s house empty-handed.

I'll bring my great-auntie's Mae Jimmie's banana pudding. Family myth says the man who eats it will marry the woman who makes it."

"You already know I'm down for that, so save two servings for me, sweetheart."

Of course, Caleb would snap back with a witty comment that made my clit tingle.

The next morning, dread tried to overtake me.

I grew up in the church and relied on God to support me, but I still had concerns.

What would the people at Haven of Hope and Blessings say about Caleb giving attention to me, an outsider?

Church people could be petty, and I didn't need that kind of mess in my life.

I wanted to support Caleb and the girls, get a word, and fellowship with them afterward.

I picked up my phone to text Caleb good morning and tell him I wasn't going to be at church or show up at his house. As I washed my face and brushed my teeth, I gripped the corner of the bathroom counter, hating what I was about to do.

"Lord, please give me strength." I said the words out loud, not wanting to relapse.

The devil was fighting me hard when a notification popped up on my phone.

Nita:

Good morning, Sunshine. Your blessing is just around the corner. I feel it. See you soon.

I rinsed my mouth and read Nita's words several times.

I knew firsthand what it felt like to be immersed in darkness.

Why was I allowing it to squash the light coming my way?

I pulled out my journal. Many of my entries from the psych hospital had become daily affirmations and prayers. I turned to one from two weeks ago.

Lord, help me become part of a thriving community and connect with people who want to know the real me. Give me the courage to show people who I am now. Let my authenticity shine through.

Today was a test that I was about to fail. The devil was a liar, and he wouldn't talk me out of my blessing. I texted Nita back.

Me:

Thank you so much. I receive it.

I smiled and took a deep breath, believing by faith that the manifestation of my prayers rested on my showing up today.

Later that morning, I pulled my car onto the grounds of the massive campus of Haven of Hope and Blessings, following a trail of worshippers arriving for the 9:30 service. Although Farmerton was a relatively small city, thousands of people from the tri-state area worshiped here.

Caleb's orderly influence was everywhere from the perfectly landscaped grounds to the overall flow of the traffic and uniformity of the staff outside.

Several men wearing black pants, boots, and neon orange safety vests ushered the cars into the massive, paved lot.

Lexus, Audis, Mercedes, and other luxury vehicles alerted me to the prominence of the people who would meet me inside.

I parked, grabbed my Bible and purse, and walked slowly toward the tinted double glass doors of the main building.

My nervousness dissipated as I took in other aspects of the church campus and the busyness of preparation for morning worship.

Parents rushed toward the side entrance to a large children's wing with wiggly, enthusiastic children in tow.

I spotted Caleb's Lexus on the side of the administrative offices along with several other big shiny cars.

These people have money.

My eyes landed on the building to the right of the sanctuary. The words above its doors said Community Center. I could already tell it was a wonderful place that uplifted and brought people together.

"Good morning. Welcome to Haven of Hope and Blessings." A jovial, petite woman greeted me with a smile that reminded me of my grandmother.

She extended her arms, inviting me to give her a hug, which I appreciated.

"Good morning." I returned her smile and directed my attention to the open doors of the sanctuary.

When I walked into the open layout of the rectangular room, goodness met me.

An overwhelming sense of peace that enveloped me as melodic, long musical strains that sounded like a mix of angelic notes and my yoga playlist filled the air.

From the decor with banners of scripture to the raised platform and regal colors, the atmosphere indescribably soothed my spirit.

Since it was about fifteen minutes before service, I moved toward a seat in the middle of the massive room, which I guessed could hold about 2,500 people.

Despite Caleb's instructions, I wanted to remain hidden and not sit too close to the front. Once settled, I watched as small clusters of families and friends were ushered into the space. It was rare for anyone to come in alone like me.

The meticulously dressed, no-nonsense ushers balanced order with kindness as they smiled at people who entered the sanctuary. I made a mental note to share with Caleb how friendly they were, making me feel as if they wanted me to be here.

At 9:30 a.m. on the dot, a string of dignitaries entered the side doors from the left. A man who had to be Caleb's armor bearer preceded him, followed by Hannah and Esther. Nita already sat in the front with her signature smile.

Another woman, whom I assumed was Caleb's mother, sat next to the girls.

She leaned over them, pointing to the seats next to her.

From her animated gestures, I knew she wouldn't hesitate to reprimand them if they bounced around too much.

They flipped their heads back and forth, still wearing the plaits I laid down for them

Friday night.

Hannah wore little yellow bows and Esther lavender ones to match her dress.

As expected, Hannah and Esther plopped their small bodies in their respective seats quickly when their grandmother gave them a stern look.

The ostentatious yellow church hat with huge feathers Mrs. Stallings wore moved like a puppet with each of her gestures.

When the girls met her approval, she finally settled in and held her head high, facing the raised platform in front of her.

Queen Elizabeth had nothing on Church Mother Stallings and the throne she sat on as she ruled her little subjects this morning.

From behind, I observed them all closely.

They were a picture-perfect family who made good choices that placed them in positions of authority and prestige.

People respected and valued the Stallings.

Their gifts mattered as they sowed into the community and those who needed them.

Undeniable favor rested on them as they walked fully in God's purpose.

That could be you.

I imagined sitting next to them. With my little girls, my mother-in-law, and my husband. That image pricked my heart in a way I hadn't expected. Did I want all of

this? All of him?

I lowered my head and prayed silently, allowing quietness to overtake my spirit. In this anointed atmosphere, I tapped into a place that was now familiar. I kept praying, wondering if I could open my heart so quickly to a man I had just met.

Thirty days.

That was how long I would give Caleb to woo me. If anything became a red flag, I would go about my business and not look back.

But your heart could pay the price if something goes wrong.

Doubt instantly filled my mind. I closed my eyes to block out all distractions.

After several seconds, the soft flow of praise overtook me.

Like a floating body in the ocean, I lifted my hands and let go, realizing this life was no longer mine.

I tried to do things my way, but I didn't get it quite right.

I wanted to surrender to something bigger than I was.

A gentle breeze moved above my head. Peace covered me like a cloak.

It's called faith, Grace.

Perfect Timing

When I arrived at church on Sunday morning, I sat in my office and prayed, preparing myself for service. Although the thermostat was set to sixty-eight degrees, I fanned myself with a stack of papers on my desk to cool off. I couldn't get Grace off my mind.

Every part of me was intrigued by her empathy, meekness, and overall sexiness.

I enjoyed our banter and how she pulled emotions from me that I didn't share with others outside my family.

Grace also proved to be an advocate for my girls, challenging me in a good way.

I loved that she was the closest I had come in years to finding the woman who would help me not burn in hell for needing a hot and ready body under me every night.

I still couldn't shake how open my girls were with her.

They were often rude to more of my female candidates, but they couldn't stop talking about what Ms. Grace said or did or how pretty she was or how good she smelled or how smart she was.

Although they were young, Hannah and Esther had discerning spirits.

My babies were so smitten that I had to tell them to stop talking about Grace long enough to go to sleep so they wouldn't be tired today.

That told me a lot about how genuine and gentle Grace's spirit was.

In less than forty-eight hours, she had become Super Grace.

That was why I wanted to court her.

A tap on my office door pulled me from my reflection. I rose and said another silent prayer to center myself, lifting my hands in surrender to the Lord. When I crossed that threshold, Pastor Stallings would be the center point, not Caleb.

I entered the long hallway from the administrative offices and walked through the corridors until I reached the side entrance to the sanctuary. As praise and worship progressed, I deliberately kept my eyes on the platform, pushing down my disappointment that Grace wasn't up front with my family.

Everything in me wanted to hunt Grace down and pull her to the empty seat next to Mama. I feared that if I looked behind me, I'd gush over her, alerting everyone I had a grown man crush. Sunday service wasn't the time or place to show my cards like that.

Was she even there? Only when I ascended to the pulpit did I spot her sitting in the middle with intense eyes that held mine.

I gave her a huge smile despite myself. Even from far away, I noticed a barely there blush stain her high cheeks.

She was stunning in a shade of purple that symbolized royalty.

I bowed my head, first saying a silent prayer to God, thanking Him for bringing Grace into my life, and another out loud, preparing people for the word I would deliver today. I opened my Bible.

The Holy Spirit instructed me to preach about trust. I moved through three foundational scriptures in Proverbs, Psalms, and Isaiah, building a foundation as the pace of my sermon increased.

At some point, I progressed beyond the words on the page into a prophetic realm where words of exhortation entered my spirit.

As always, when the Spirit of the Lord overcame me, something like a cloud descended over the sanctuary.

I saw the bodies before me, but I no longer focused on their features.

In that moment, I had become an instrument that the Spirit spoke through.

“Someone here needs to know they are not alone. God wants you to know that you still have a purpose. Your latter days will be better than your former. No matter what it looks like, you are seen. The Lord hears you, even in your darkest hour. Trust Him with your cares.” I delivered the words as loud wails met my ears from the right, then left, and finally, the middle of the sanctuary.

As the low melody of the organ played, I wiped my brow with my handkerchief and steadied my body on the glass lectern before me.

“If these words mean something to you, come forward. Our prayer team wants to agree with you.” I descended the steps and stood in the front of the church as several members of the prayer team stood on either side of me.

I walked from one side of the sanctuary to the other as dozens of people awaited prayer.

I stopped deliberately when I came to Grace.

She was even more beautiful up close than she was from a distance.

Her soft lips and subtle makeup drew me to her, even in my highly spiritual state.

Purity radiated from her as she stood with upturned hands and bowed head.

In her moment of surrender, I wanted to protect her, not just as a pastor but as a man.

She has gone through a lot. Don't hurt this precious vessel.

I heard the words clearly in my spirit. I inched close to her and smelled the freshness of her full hair, taking a big whiff before I turned off my portable mic. I placed my hands behind her neck and leaned down to speak directly into her ear.

“God sees your heart, Grace. He knows how much you’ve sacrificed and lost. You will be recompensed for everything you’ve gone through. This is the beginning of a future your parents showed you in that dream.”

Grace’s head shot up, tears rolling down her cheeks. I quickly wiped a tear with my thumb as she reached for my wrist. Only the pull of the Holy Spirit kept me from embracing her and cradling her like a baby.

Thank you, she mouthed.

“Let me pray for you. Lift your hands.”

She raised her hands to her sides. I placed my hands in hers as tongues left my mouth.

Within seconds, she began to speak in tongues, too, the tears rolling down even faster.

Something like fire burned through my hands so quickly that I had to remove them from Grace's.

Never had I felt that kind of energy or been stunned like that during an altar call.

I stepped back and to collect myself. A female prayer member took my place and put several tissues in Grace's hands for her to wipe her eyes.

When I turned, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I faced Elder Peyton, the senior elder of the church.

As members of the prayer team continued down the row, he pulled me back and to the side.

It was rare for him to interrupt me during service, but since he also flowed strongly in the Spirit, I wanted to hear what he had to say.

He spoke in tongues for a couple of seconds, then rested his hand on my head as he delivered his message directly into my ear.

"God showed me that the woman in purple is your wife. That surge you felt is how God is going to move in your life, quickly and unexpectedly. You've had a connection with her from the moment you met, haven't you?"

I nodded as he continued.

"People may not understand it, but be obedient. Flow as the Lord instructs you. She is the anchor for your daughters and son."

Son?

I closed my eyes and silently thanked God for the message delivered through Elder Peyton. As was my habit when others delivered a prophetic message to me, I would dive into the word later and seek additional insights from the Holy Spirit to discern how He wanted me to move.

I regrouped quickly and stepped back into the prayer line as the prayers concluded.

The praise team finished ministering, and we closed out the service with calls to salvation and membership after the offering.

I wanted to go to my office to decompress after service, but as the shepherd of the flock, I stood in the receiving line after church, greeting parishioners.

Since Grace didn't come forward, I assumed she went home. Hopefully, I would see her later.

After church, Aunt Nita tapped on my office door.

"Today's sermon was right on time, Pastor." She hugged me tight, the fragrance of her Chanel No. 5 cologne tingling my nose.

As she always did at church, Aunt Nita referred to me by my formal title.

"Thank you, Auntie. Have you decided if you're coming to dinner today?"

Aunt Nita shook her head.

"No. That time is for your girls, your mama, and Grace."

I jerked my head.

“How did you know Grace was coming?”

“She told me at lunch yesterday.”

My interest was piqued.

“Really? Y’all talked about me?” I stroked my chin and puffed my chest out a little.

“Among other things.”

“Spill the tea. What’d she say?” I sat on the edge of my desk and crossed my arms.

“I’m not getting in the middle of y’all’s business. Talk to her yourself.”

“You’re chatty any other time.”

Aunt Nita wagged her finger at me.

“That little attitude is exactly why I’m leaving you to your own devices. Being grown for no reason.”

I wanted to tell her I been grown but knew she’d keep going back and forth with me. We were the king and queen of one-liners.

“Let me go so I can pick up the girls from children’s church.” I kissed Aunt Nita on the cheek and headed across campus.

When I finished my church work, the girls and I headed home. They chatted with each other in the seat as I processed the day’s activities. The low hum of Marvin Winans’ latest album played in the background.

“Is Ms. Grace still coming over?” Esther’s voice rang through the car.

“I think so. When we get home, I’ll check to see if she messaged me.”

“She’s fun, Daddy. Can you call her?” Hannah asked.

“We’ll see her soon enough, so wait until we get to the house. We don’t want to bug her, sweetheart.”

“But she’s our friend,” Esther whined.

I eyed the girls in my rearview mirror.

“What did I say about patience? We will chat with Ms. Grace when she joins us today.”

My girls finally shifted to talking about dolls until I pulled into the driveway.

“Please take off your clothes, hang up your dresses, and remove the bows from your hair. Put on the play clothes we laid out before church. Then I’ll give you a snack. Maw Maw will be here soon.”

The girls unbuckled their seat belts and hopped out of the car, rushing to the porch and the bikes by the door.

“No. What did I tell you about obedience?”

“You said we lose privileges if we don’t listen to you,” Esther chirped.

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Esther and Hannah stepped away from the bikes.

I nodded then opened the door, holding my suit coat and work bag in my hands, pleased that my girls retained some of the lessons I taught them.

“Tell me more about your lady friend before she gets here.” Mama stirred the big pot of mustard greens on the stove, halfway turning to me as I set the six cornish hens I grilled on the wooden cutting board on the counter.

“Her name is Dr. Grace Toliver. She’s the reason your granddaughters looked presentable around the head today. I tied those silk scarves over their plaits like she told me. All I had to do was throw a couple of bows in their hair, and they looked like princesses.”

Mama flashed all her teeth at me and tapped my arm.

“Hmm...I’ve been giving you the same hair tips for years. It takes this Dr. Grace lady for you to listen. She must be quite attractive and persuasive. My baby has never given the time of day to an ugly woman.”

Mama wasn’t lying.

“She’s nice looking.”

“What kind of doctor is she?”

“Ed psych. She worked for the government before moving here.”

“Smart with practical skills to help my grandbabies be the best they can be? And someone you actually listen to? She must be sent by God. Why didn’t I meet her at church? Does she love the Lord?”

“Hold on, Mama. You’re doing too much. She’s a behind-the-scenes woman who prefers to keep to herself. You can ask her all the questions you want at dinner, but please have some tact.”

“When have I not had tact?” she huffed.

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not answering that question.”

“Fine. Can she cook?”

“I think so. She’s bringing homemade banana pudding. Your favorite.”

“It’s your favorite too, so she earns even more brownie points. She sounds perfect, like an answer to a lot of prayers. Those girls need a God-fearing woman around them, not like that whore Roxanne.” Mama stopped stirring the greens and set her spoon down.

“You know...about Roxanne?” I lowered my eyes and squirmed like one of my kids when they were about to get in trouble.

“Baby, who didn’t? Y’all couldn’t sneak around worth shit.

You know how hard I had to fight to get you appointed as pastor of your daddy’s church after all that?

To be fair, you got them undercover hoe genes from yo' pappy.

That, plus, I can spot a shiftless tramp a mile away.

I eventually forgave Bishop, but he was still a hoe until the day he died.

I hope the lady that's coming over can keep the Roxannes at bay.

"Mama pointed her spoon my way. "Because if you don't get married soon, you're going to have a reputation ten times worse than your daddy.

I know about them nasty panties and donations too.

"She wiped her hands on the towel nearest her and planted her eyes on me.

"Mama! Who's telling all my business?" I shouted, embarrassed and completely shocked at her language.

I looked around to make sure the girls were still playing in their room.

Mama put her hands on her hips.

"Don't worry about that. And don't Mama me.

Yo thick-headed, limp dick daddy made me a cussin' Christian, putting that Vienna sausage of a penis in any wet hole he could find.

That's why I made him wrap it up when he came poking around me.

I need you to do right. It's up to you to redeem the family line as senior pastor.

I won't leave this earth with the only son I got left being called Sir DickALot or the Holy Hoe.

"She turned around in circles as if she were having a mini fit.

This conversation was nasty and embarrassing. I was ready to run away and hide. My mother had always been the epitome of decorum in public, yet here she was, spilling all my scalding hot tea and not giving a damn about it. Jesus had to be coming back soon. None of this made sense.

"Back to this Grace woman. What makes her so special?" Mama asked the question as if she hadn't just scarred me for the rest of the year.

I sighed and set the carving knife on the counter. I crossed my arms and closed my eyes briefly, silently seeking permission from God to share what I knew in my heart about Grace. I spoke low and with precision, preparing my ears for the words that were about to come from my mouth.

"As hoeish as I used to be..." I paused for emphasis.

"I want to settle down. Grace is the one I want to court. If she'll have me," I added quickly.

"I plan to be faithful to her and move with her as a husband should. I am attracted to her in every way a man should be attracted to a woman. She moves my spirit and my body."

Mama gasped and reached for my chin. She held my face firm and smooshed my cheeks with her fingers.

"Tell me you're not lying."

“I’m not.” I kept my voice steady.

She released my face.

“Tell me exactly what God told you.”

“I’ve received confirmation in multiple ways. I heard for myself. Elder Peyton told me, and Grace is receptive. I want to follow up with her today. Could you keep the girls busy after dinner so I can have a private chat with her out back?”

“I’ll do one better. I’ll take them to the park after we eat dessert.”

“Thank you, Mama. Please don’t let Grace know what I’m thinking. I’m trusting you with my secret.” I walked to her and kissed her cheek.

Mama rubbed my cheek with her thumb then turned off the oven as the timer for the baked mac and cheese dinged.

“It’s not my place to share your business with the outside world. Just make sure she ain’t no damn Roxanne.”

I smiled.

“I will.”

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Leap of Faith

After church, I regrouped at home. I changed into a comfortable gray cotton dress and returned to the kitchen to compile the ingredients for my banana pudding.

I added the final touch of vanilla extract to my sweet, heated pudding and lowered the temperature in the double boiler as I cut perfectly ripe bananas.

Since I would join Stallings family for an early dinner, I warmed up a cup of leftover spicy tomato soup just the way I liked it. I didn't want to stuff my face like a pig in front of Caleb's mother.

As I savored my steaming cup of soup, I sat at my kitchen table and reflected on the happenings of the morning. Nothing prepared me for the essence of Pastor Caleb Stallings. He was not only charming but anointed.

When Caleb asked who needed prayer toward the end of the service, I had no intention to get out of my seat.

I'd grown up in Pentecostal churches my entire life, but I'd never felt the intensity and overwhelming love I did when Caleb's endearing voice reminded me that I wasn't alone and that I still had a chance for a bright future.

I wanted to trust God fully with that future.

God used Caleb as his conduit. For that, I was grateful.

The second Caleb laid hands on me, I felt a supernatural connection to him.

For a second, I thought my knees might give out, but an invisible force held me up.

In the midst of that spiritual fire, my panties got wet.

Over a prayer. Caleb's smell enveloped me, and his deep voice sent butterflies directly to my stomach as he spoke my dream to me.

The good pastor could have lifted my dress and pulled my panties down to take me right there on the altar.

I was no longer nervous about seeing Caleb but needed to talk to him about what happened today.

Since I caught Caleb staring at my legs when I was at his house, I chose a knee-length violet A-line dress that accentuated my curves to wear to the Stallings.

I pulled my thick curly hair into a high bun and dabbed on a modest face of makeup.

When I looked in the mirror, I smiled, pleased that Black didn't crack.

For the first time in quite a while, I saw my mother's delicate features that reminded me of the angelic presence she had on Earth.

When I arrived at Caleb's, Hannah and Esther rushed out of the house to my parked car. I exited and retrieved the dessert from the cardboard box I used to keep it from falling onto my front passenger seat.

"Hold on, little ones. I don't want to drop this banana pudding. Please open the door for me."

Hannah hung back as Esther rushed to open the screen door.

“Ms. Grace is here!” Esther proudly announced as if I were royalty.

When I entered the door, Caleb rushed toward me and took my container. Once the glass dish was secure, he leaned toward me and kissed me on my cheek.

“Hello, gorgeous. Come in and meet my mother.” He spoke the words into my ear and gave me a panty-melting smile.

When he walked away, I checked him out. Instead of being the sultry guy in a form-fitted tux I met Friday night, he was more laid-back and dressed in a stylish black tracksuit. From behind, I got a glimpse of firm glutes that hinted of a consistent workout routine.

I smiled and followed him into the kitchen, where his mother opened her arms wide.

“Dr. Grace, I’m Denise Stallings. I’ve heard so many good things about you.” She placed her hand over her heart and gave me a puppy dog look.

She was a medium-sized woman with mocha skin that matched Caleb’s. From the photos on the mantle of the fireplace, I saw that Caleb’s height came from his father.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Stallings. Please call me Grace.” I closed the distance between us and extended my hand in greeting.

She accepted my hand and enclosed it in hers, never taking her eyes off my face.

“Then call me Denise. I have a feeling we’ll know each other really well in the future. She’s as breathtaking as you said she was.” Denise exchanged a giddy glance with Caleb, who winked at me.

Although I was embarrassed by her gushing, I received Denise's compliments without flinching.

"Thank you, Ms. Denise."

"Of course. Everyone raves about you in this family. It's great to finally meet the woman who has charmed my granddaughters and my son." She released my hand and embraced me in a tight hug.

I hugged her back and beamed, delighted that the Stallings enjoyed my presence as much as I enjoyed theirs.

"The feeling is mutual. The Stallings are quickly becoming my favorite family."

Ms. Denise squeezed my shoulders.

"You'll fit right in. Banana pudding is our favorite dessert." She eyed the glass container of pudding and smiled.

The woman before me was much friendlier than the regal lady sitting at the front of the church. I see where Caleb got his charm.

"Girls, help me in the kitchen while Daddy takes Ms. Grace out back to show her the patio." She opened the pantry door and removed two monogrammed aprons for Hannah and Esther, who came running as soon as she called them.

"Can we taste the dressing and red berry sauce?" Esther hopped like a bunny as Hannah shifted from foot to foot.

By now, I recognized their gestures of excitement and grinned at how happy and loved they were.

“Of course. Pass me a couple of spoons from that drawer so you can sample this cornbread dressing and cranberry sauce.”

As the girls followed their grandmother’s instructions, Caleb offered his hand to me, leading me outside and to the back of the house. When I exited onto a large wooden deck, he ushered me to the corner of the deck where I stood and viewed a small pond in the distance.

“This is beautiful.”

Caleb turned his head my way.

“You’re beautiful.”

When I met his gaze, he set his hand on my waist and left it there. I moved closer to him and put my hand on his shoulder, allowing myself to relax in his arms.

“How are you, Pastor Stallings?”

I didn’t want to call him Caleb after I became aroused from a darn prayer.

“I’m better now that you’re here. Did you enjoy today’s service?”

In his eyes, I could see how sincere he was about the question and wanting me to answer him.

“I did. You’re an amazing pastor. The people love you so much. It was an honor to see God’s presence move through you.”

“Thank you.” Caleb stepped so close to me that I smelled the heady scent of his cologne.

I stilled my body and closed my eyes to take in the chirping of the birds around us.

This moment centered me. Being with Caleb made me feel as if I was home, or at least in a version of home that represented who I desired to be.

This was the healed and open version of me.

Without overthinking, I raised my arms and wrapped them around his neck.

When he leaned closer, I smiled. He lowered his neck and spoke directly into my ear.

“I want to kiss you again.”

A delicious shiver traveled down my spine as I let my mind soar.

“You know you can.” I sucked in my lips and smiled, feeling shy yet wanting to experience the warmth of his full, naturally pink lips again.

Caleb chuckled then lifted his hand to the back of my neck and pulled me closer to him.

I closed my eyes, anxious to feel his lips on mine.

When they landed, my heart leaped. I relaxed my jaw, allowing him to press his hard body close.

Muscles filled my hands as heat and anticipation overtook me.

I parted my lips, hungry to taste more of this anointed, sexy man whose presence enticed and comforted me.

He didn't hesitate to slide his wet tongue between my teeth.

I reached behind him and rested my hands on his muscular back to hold him in place as I boldly twirled my tongue with his.

"Damn." I opened my eyes and caught myself, instantly covering my mouth with my hand.

"It's okay, Grace. I feel the same way."

He finally released me then brushed his thumb over my lips before staring into my eyes with intensity that had me wondering how it would feel to take our physical attraction to another level.

I rested my hands on his shoulders.

"I want you," I spoke the words boldly, not fully understanding what that might look like for us, given Caleb's belief about celibacy.

"You prayed for me today, and I wanted to jump your bones. Please forgive me for being so bold, but I need you to know how attracted I am to you. It's only fair given your beliefs. "

"Would you give your body to me if I asked you to?"

"Yes."

"What would you want in return?"

"I don't know...respect...friendship...companionship."

Caleb placed his hands behind my neck and kissed my forehead.

“I want you too. More than you know.” He spoke the words in a raspy voice. “But I can’t have you.”

I sighed heavily, my shoulders drooping.

“I know.”

“Unless...”

I smoothed the sides of my dress down with my hands and held my breath.

“Unless what?”

“I married you.”

I stepped back and rested the tips of my fingers on my lips, lowering my eyes to the worn wood of the deck as I slowly processed Caleb’s words.

Thirty days.

The time that came to me at church returned. I stepped and paced, periodically meeting Caleb’s eyes as he watched me. The ball was in my court.

“I will marry you after a thirty-day courtship. I get to know you, then decide if this is something we want to do.”

Caleb shook his head.

“I can’t date for thirty days in the open and then break it off with you publicly. I

already have a reputation.”

I frowned.

“What kind of reputation?” I scratched my cheek, wondering how much I didn’t know about Caleb.

“Ladies kind of throw themselves at me.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Caleb was an attractive man, so that didn’t surprise me.

“I picked that up from what the girls told me.”

“It’s more than that.”

“What does that mean?” I asked the question in a low voice, afraid to hear the answer.

“My daddy and I messed around with the same woman, and word got out.”

My eyes widened.

Oh, hell no.

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“Y’all messed over Ms. Denise? That sweet woman in there?” I scrunched my nose up and pointed toward the house. “Y’all are nasty as hell. Yuck, Caleb. Damn.” I held my hands up and backed away. “I’m outta here.”

I turned toward the house to grab my stuff and leave.

“I’ll give you twenty thousand dollars every month you stay with me. I promise I’m good for it.”

I stopped in my tracks. That was more than I got paid in my government job. I wouldn’t have to freelance as much, and I could take time out to actually heal from losing my mother and my job.

“We’re already attracted to each other. My girls need stability. You’re my last hope.”

He wasn’t playing fair by tugging on my heartstrings so hard. I faced him again and stomped my foot.

“Dammit, Caleb. Why are you like this?”

“Like what?” He raised his hands as if he was the most innocent person in the world.

“Charming, a good father, a great pastor, and sexy as hell.”

He stepped toward me and bent down to kiss the tip of my ear.

“You think I’m sexy?”

I tilted my head back and moaned.

“Shut up. You know I do.”

“Why are you so grouchy, Grace?”

“Because you’re making me actually consider this stupid deal.”

“Good.” He moved his lips to the other side of my neck.

“Let me think. Dang.” I pushed him off of me with my hand.

“I need an answer before we go back in the house.”

“Why?”

“Time is of the essence.”

“Is this marriage going to be real? Are you going to whore around with other women and use me as a cover? And babysitter?” I asked the questions with a frown.

“Yes, the marriage will be real. I would never cheat on my wife...that is...you.”

Caleb peered at me with what appeared to be an honest face.

“I mean, are we going to enjoy each other?”

He laughed.

“You will be mine, and I’ll be yours. We will enjoy each other in every sense of the word. You will have access to me in ways no one else ever will.”

“I see.” I bit my bottom lip and stared into the distance. “I don’t want a boring sex life either.”

“Has anything made you think I’d be inadequate in the bedroom?”

“You never know. Everybody screaming big dick energy doesn’t have a big dick. Let me see it.”

I laughed, but Caleb didn’t.

“Come here. Trade places with me.” He reached for my waist and shifted my body so his back was to the house and I stood in front of him, facing his big chest.

He reached for my hand and placed it on the crotch of his track pants.

“You can feel what I’m working with. Explore if you want.” He widened his legs.

Without meeting Caleb’s eyes, I slowly traced my fingers over the front seam of his pants before cupping Caleb’s balls. I massaged his penis until he hissed.

“You’re big and girthy. Your balls are heavy too.”

“And full.”

His penis jumped a little at his admission, shocking me and bringing me back to reality. I removed my hand and returned it to my side.

“I refuse to feel you up in front of your family. As long as you’re not old-fashioned in the bedroom, I’m good.”

“What does old-fashioned mean?”

“Sex in bed in the dark when Hannah and Esther are asleep and vaginal penetration only. Vanilla sex is cool, but I want to know if you think it’s a sin to be adventurous. Do you expect me to play the dutiful wife and lie back during intercourse as you get yours?”

Caleb closed then opened his eyes quickly before giving me a huge smile. He patted my thigh through my dress.

“I’m ready to fulfill any fantasy you can imagine and push you to new limits. Hebrews 13:4 says that the marriage bed is undefiled, so prepare to be sick of me once we’re married. You’ll be satisfied beyond your wildest dreams.”

“So you’re nasty, nasty?”

Caleb leaned toward me and gently kissed the tip of my ear, speaking directly into it.

“I wasn’t always saved, Grace. If my congregation knew how freaky I was, they’d probably kick me out of the pulpit.”

I jerked my head up and met Caleb’s eyes. If I agreed to this, what exactly was I getting into?

“Are you into whips and chains? Do you have a secret dungeon underneath the house, because baby, no grown man is whipping my Black ass without getting punched back.”

Caleb circled my right wrist with his index finger and thumb and pulled my hand back to his crotch, holding it there as he spoke in a steady voice. He placed his other hand over my left nipple and rubbed it back and forth with his thumb. I bit my lip to stay quiet as I became aroused.

“I’m not into all that, but don’t be surprised when I lift your fine ass on the kitchen counter in the middle of the night, pull your panties off with my teeth, finger you until you lose your mind then lick you until you cum.

Then I’m gonna thrust this monster dick in you so deep I’ll have to kiss you and suck on your tongue so you don’t scream my name when I flood you with my seed and our babies arrive nine months later. ”

I sucked in my cheeks and took a big breath, feeling the hardness of Caleb’s shaft against my stomach. I lifted my arms on his shoulders and stared into his dark eyes as he bit his lower lip. Pheromones were heavy between us.

“Since you want to have a potty mouth, Pastor Stallings, what would you do if I lifted my dress and straddled your fine ass right now? I’d rub my hot slit against you so hard you’d cream in your pants.”

Caleb’s breath quickened, and he lifted my chin.

“You like tempting me, so tell you what. When you’re Dr. Grace Stallings, you’d better rock my world so hard I see stars.” Caleb kissed my forehead and embraced me in a bear hug.

“I promise you’ll see the entire solar system when I’m done with you.”

Promises

“It’s disrespectful to play with my emotions like this.” Grace placed her hands on her hips.

I took my hands in Grace’s and kissed her inner wrists one by one. I lingered on her right wrist a little longer than the left.

“I’m not playing with you, Grace. I think about you nonstop.”

“Infatuation is not a good enough reason for me to marry you.”

“It’s more than that. Hannah and Esther adore you and want you to be their mother. Their happiness matters to me. It is no accident that you dropped into their lives...in our lives.” I corrected myself.

“Whether you marry me now or five years from now, you’re meant to be my wife. I feel it in my soul.”

Grace closed her eyes and steadied herself with her forearms. When she opened them, her eyes were full of tears.

“I’ve been so alone since my mother died.”

“My family can value and support you. We can give you the fresh start you need.”

“If you’re playing with me, I’m going to curse you out so thoroughly you’ll never toy

with the heart of a single woman again. I don't care if you're a pastor."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that this impromptu proposal makes no sense but makes sense at the same time. I've heard of arranged marriages where people eventually fall in love. They're becoming more common. I also appreciate the money you're offering as compensation."

"And?"

"I want the best for Hannah and Esther. They need the care of someone who sees them for who they are—inquisitive, smart, precocious little girls. You've done a wonderful job raising them."

"Thank you." I smiled and kissed her on the cheek, appreciative of her kind words.

"But today, I saw the power of God in and on you. You're a good man who can bring me peace and stability...maybe love. If you're offering me access to your precious daughters and to you so humbly and sincerely, I'm willing to accept your proposal...for now."

My spirit soared. I stepped back and rubbed my hands together rapidly, my eyes darting around as I thought about next steps.

"Should I ask someone for your hand in marriage? I know your parents have passed, but I still want to be respectful."

Grace rested her hand on my arm.

"As long as you consulted with God and are serious about being faithful and kind to

me, I'm good. But what about the girls? What will they say?

"I don't think they'll oppose since they called you Mommy the first time they met you."

"I hope you're right. Are we crazy?"

I intertwined my fingers with Grace's and rested my forehead against hers.

"No. We're taking a leap of faith."

She smiled and took a big breath.

"Okay. Then let's tell the family about our engagement."

"She said yes, Mama," I said the words calmly as Grace and I walked back into the kitchen.

My mother shrieked and rushed toward Grace, almost knocking her down before giving her one of her tight, over-the-top hugs that would most likely be the norm now that Grace agreed to become my wife.

She cupped Grace's cheeks and kissed each of them as the girls ran toward her and tugged the bottom of her apron.

Mama still hadn't paid any attention to me.

"I've been waiting for my child to be with someone who would care for him the right way. Thank God for answered prayer." She pressed her hands in a prayer position and hugged Grace tightly.

Esther ran toward me with a confused look.

“Daddy, why is Maw Maw so happy?”

I squatted and signaled for Hannah and Esther to come my way.

“Ms. Grace is going to be my new wife and your Mommy.”

Like my mother, the girls screamed and jumped up and down. They almost pushed me down and cut between Mama and Grace, wrapping their arms around Grace’s waist.

“Mommy Grace! I told you.” Esther squeezed Grace harder and closed her little eyes, rocking her body back and forth as Grace held her shoulders with her hands.

“Hold on, everyone. Give me a minute to take all this in.” She raised her arms.

I rushed to Grace’s side and gently pulled the girls from her.

“Everyone, please give Grace space. She’s not going anywhere, right?” I checked her face to confirm that we didn’t overwhelm her with our excitement.

“Right. Let’s just get through dinner and go from there. Everything smells so good.”

When she peered into the kitchen, Mama took her by the hand.

“It is. I taught my son how to cook, but he has little interest in showcasing his skills. Now, I can share my recipes with my daughter-in-love-to-be.”

I smiled, feeling in my heart that Grace wasn’t going to be the kind of woman to sit around the house cooking meals and waiting for us to come home. She was a former

corporate baddie who chose to be a recluse. I hoped that, when we married, the spark of who she used to be would ignite.

As a pastor, I knew that was a big gamble to hope she would change, especially since I advised those I counseled that you got what you married when you tied the knot. Something in me was sure that Grace would blossom as a wife. I couldn't wait to find out.

After dinner, Grace and I swung on the wooden Amish swing on the wide front porch, holding hands.

True to her word, Mama took the girls to the park about half a mile from my home after dinner, leaving Grace and me alone.

The girls almost bounced off the walls with excitement as they discussed how they would be flower girls in our wedding a month from now.

As the chains securing the swing to the hooks in the porch's ceiling creaked in a repetitive rhythm, I let my mind wander.

Grace was a sexy woman who reminded me how long I'd been celibate.

When she kissed me and felt me up, a surge of desire bubbled up, reminding me that, by marrying her, I was getting more than a mother figure for Hannah and Esther.

Grace would be the woman I would be in covenant with, for better or for worse, in good and bad times.

Over time, I would share secrets with her that no one but God knew.

Although I was married to Madeline for almost five years, my moments of intimacy

with Grace were deeper than any I experienced with my ex.

Something in me never rested around Madeline.

Even in our sporadic times of joy, I was on guard.

That was the Holy Spirit trying to warn me about her, but I was too caught up in coochie, a bubble butt, and a smile to listen to that inner voice.

I turned toward Grace, who stared at the vast farmland across the street from my house.

As far as the eye could see, soybeans and peanuts blew in the wind.

Since we lived on a secluded back road, anyone who pulled into my driveway had to have a reason to visit.

For that reason, this private moment felt sacred, as if God gave Grace and me time to bask in His glory and in the comfort of each other.

I shifted my eyes to Grace's profile. Her high cheekbones and heart-shaped lips alluded to how beautiful she must have been as a child.

With those deep dimples and slightly mischievous eyes, I imagined her parents loving and spoiling her so much.

No wonder she missed them. She was made to be loved and adored.

Anyone who didn't understand that was a fool.

"God has protected you, Grace." The words left my mouth before I could overthink

them.

She tore her eyes from the scene in front of her and furrowed her brow, giving me a cute, inquisitive look that made me wonder if any children we had together would have that same expression.

“Thank you for saying that. You’re right. He has kept me in the palm of His hand. I’m grateful for that.” She squeezed my hand and held it firmly.

The tenderness in her eyes matched the peace I felt in my heart.

I didn’t need a background check to confirm that Grace was trustworthy, kind, and honest. Although she wasn’t a holy roller, my spirit could tell she loved God and goodness and that she tried to do right by people.

Her character was solid, and like the sermon I gave earlier, I could trust her.

Although our courtship would last thirty days, I believed that God’s ways were higher than mine.

He knew what I needed, even if I had to pay for it.

Grace gave me hope for the future and more days like this, where I could rest and rejuvenate with a woman whose purity made me want to draw closer to her in ways I couldn’t explain.

The phone in my pocket rang. I put it on speaker.

“Hi, Aunt Nita.”

“Hello, Nephew. How was dinner?”

Grace's smile matched mine when Nita's voice rang through the phone.

"A little unusual, but your timing is perfect. Grace is here with me, and we have some news to share."

"Hi, Grace! It was good seeing you at church this morning. You rushed out so fast I couldn't say hello. Sorry I couldn't join y'all."

"Hi, Nita. No problem."

"That's fine, Auntie. It gave Grace and me time to plan some things."

"Like what?"

I extended the phone toward Grace and nodded, signaling for her to tell Aunt Nita our news.

"Caleb and I are getting married."

The tension in Grace's shoulders visibly left as she exhaled slowly and her eyes widened.

"What in the world? Hallelujah! My instincts were right. The Lord moves fast. Look at God." She spoke in tongues briefly and shouted for several seconds, so loudly I had to lower my phone's volume.

Grace and I grinned at each other as Aunt Nita calmed down.

"After y'all get hitched, it'll be my turn. Who's doing your marriage counseling?"

Grace and I laughed at Aunt Nita's running joke that although she was almost seventy

years old, she was going to be caught up like the rapture when her man showed up.

My experience with Grace was exactly what my auntie said hers would be like.

Grace's eyes got as big as saucers as she shook her head and mouthed I don't know to me about the marriage counseling. Neither of us thought that far ahead.

"I'll ask Elder Peyton. He has been like a father figure to me since Dad died. I'm sure he'll guide us in the right direction."

"That sounds like a solid plan. When's the date?"

Grace and I stared at each other again. Aunt Nita asked all the hard, common-sense questions we should have thought about but didn't in our excitement.

"We haven't decided but around thirty days out," Grace said.

"That's fast," Aunt Nita said with a thin whistle.

I chimed in.

"I'd like it to be soon so we can begin our life as a family. Right, Grace?" I gestured for her to get her energy up.

If we were going to be convincing, I needed her to sound excited about our engagement and nuptials.

She widened her eyes and made an "O" with her mouth.

"Yes, yes. I can't wait to be with the love of my life."

Too thick, I mouthed.

Grace and I were awful at improv. We needed to discuss our plans away from Aunt Nita.

“Auntie, we’ll let you know the details when they’re finalized.”

“Okay. Just know I’ll be here when you need me. I can’t wait to see Grace walk down that aisle. Look at God.” She tsked.

I imagined Aunt Nita rocking her body from side to side as she spoke. I was blessed to have the solid support of a mother and aunt who knew my past but didn’t make a big deal about my current choices.

When we said our goodbyes and I hung up, Grace looked at me in what I now knew was her cautionary gaze.

She had never told me she battled anxiety, but I sensed from her tense body language that her general preference to be alone came from deep hurt and fear of rejection.

Whatever it was, I would do my best to cover her from harm and let her know she didn’t have to face the world and its issues alone.

“I don’t want a big wedding. I told myself if I ever got married, I’d focus more on the marriage than the wedding. Could we do something small and intimate?” Grace’s eyes pierced my heart.

I imagined how overwhelming it could be to join a new community and marry so quickly. Her taking on the Stallings name would put her in the limelight. The least I could do was to compromise and honor her request.

“You’re the bride, but Mama isn’t going to be pleased.

She gave birth to twin boys who were the apple of her eye.

When my brother Joshua died in an ATV accident in fourth grade, she clung to me like we were joined at the hip.

This is also her chance for a do-over since my first marriage was a bust. I’m not scared of my mother, but I’m going to let you explain to her why half the county won’t be at the wedding of the summer. ”

Grace bit her bottom lip and reached for my hands.

“Tell you what. We can have a big reception after church one Sunday. I’ll stand by and greet your admirers as the girls look on wearing their pretty little dresses and manicures. We can even put fresh flowers in their hair.”

I reached for Grace and pulled her into my lap. A flurry of cute giggles escaped her lips as I tickled her. She wiggled over me in a way that aroused me. When she stilled, she placed her arms around my neck and pressed her body into my chest.

“As long as you’re next to me, Grace, I’ll do what you want. This will be good for both of us. I can’t wait to be your husband.”

Grace kissed me on my cheek and rested in my arms.

“This is so crazy, but I’m kinda excited to be your wife.”

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm

Call to Duty

The next two weeks went by in a whirlwind.

Caleb hadn't shared publicly that we were engaged, but we spent every day together.

To my pleasure and surprise, Ms. Denise and Nita kept their mouths closed too.

Caleb and I sat with the girls and explained that we wanted to keep the news that I would be their new mommy a secret, so they had been amazing not sharing details with anyone either.

Behind the scenes, I learned Caleb and the girls' routines.

As a freelancer, I adjusted my schedule and work locations so Caleb could spend more time establishing his ministry.

I picked the girls up and dropped them off at soccer practice.

Some people stared and asked who I was. Each time, I said I was a family friend or their babysitter.

After school, I prepared or ate dinner with the girls, sitting or staying at Caleb's house as he also traveled for the growing list of jobs he took on.

This made sense since before my arrival, Caleb transitioned to his full-time job as a pastor and part-time consultant who established the infrastructure for new ministries

around the state that wanted their fiscal and spiritual foundations to be sound.

He recently branched out into online coaching for select clients interested in audits of their current businesses.

We followed Nita's advice to engage in marriage counseling. I was nervous since I didn't want to reveal too much information about myself to a stranger. I pulled into the empty church lot around noon on a Tuesday and texted Caleb that I had arrived.

Caleb:

I'll be out in a few minutes.

I waited until Caleb came to the side door. He wore a crisp white button-down shirt and a steel gray suit that fit his body to perfection. I took a quick whiff of his cologne before taking a peek at his muscular body that couldn't be hidden beneath the tailored cut of the suit.

"You look dapper, Pastor." I held my clutch tightly as he allowed me to walk past him through the glass door.

Instead of moving aside, he remained in place, so I had to brush my body against his. I paused long enough to cut my eyes at our closeness, which nearly took my breath away.

"Did it take all that?" I spoke in a low voice since I didn't know who might be around.

"I'm just holding the door for you, sweetheart."

His innocent look didn't fool me one bit.

“Yeah, right. Seriously, please behave in front of Elder Peyton. Although I trust him because of the stories you’ve shared about his role in your life, he doesn’t know me. I’d hate to have to act a fool because you pulled the foolishness out of me.”

“I can’t pull anything out that didn’t already want to come out. It’s called temperance, honey. Only you can control how you respond. When we’re married, I’ll give you a private Bible study on the Fruit of the Spirit.” He chuckled, then shut the door behind us.

We moved down a long, narrow hallway before entering a large conference room full of pictures chronicling the church’s history.

In the center of the wall was a stoic photo of the late Bishop Paul Stallings.

I stared at the photo before sitting down, noting how handsome and boyish the Bishop appeared in his ministerial collar.

That gleam in his eye matched Caleb’s, making me wonder how much hell Ms. Denise gave the good bishop when he was fooling around on her.

“Hello, hello.” A voice boomed through the room.

I attempted to rise, but the man I assumed to be Elder Peyton gestured for me to remain seated. I recalled seeing him during my first visit to Haven of Hope and Blessings. He extended his hand, which I accepted. Caleb sat next to me as Elder Peyton took his place at the head of the oval table.

“It’s nice to officially meet you, Doctor Toliver. Our new pastor is marrying up, I see.” Elder Peyton clasped his hands and laughed at his own joke.

Caleb joined in and chuckled.

“Indeed, I am.”

Elder Peyton tilted his slim body toward me. My eyes caught the gold pinky ring he wore that matched the metal on his front tooth. Although he looked like a retired pimp, his gentle smile reminded me of a kind grandfather.

“Thanks for meeting with me today. Paul was my dearest friend, so it’s my pleasure to counsel his son and future daughter-in-law. I already know this union will be blessed by God Almighty. Let us pray.”

Caleb nodded, reaching for my hand under the table and squeezing it tightly as the elderly man with the bald spot on top and trimmed afro from ear to ear prayed. I opened one eye and watched as small beads of sweat popped off his shiny forehead. Was he an undercover hoe, too?

“We invite You in this session, Heavenly Father. Guide me as I guide Caleb and Grace. Establish a firm marital foundation that will ground them and center You until You call them home to be with you. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

“Amen,” Caleb and I said in unison before Caleb squeezed my hand and placed his on the table.

Elder Peyton pulled a notepad across the table and examined the paper before facing us again.

“I have three simple questions that will guide our conversation. If you answer these, you’ll be ready to take on the world.”

I took in a deep breath as Elder Peyton pointed his fountain pen at the top of the page and asked, “What does spiritual intimacy look like to you?”

I turned to Caleb, not ready to answer this question. I only knew church life as a parishioner, so I didn't want to respond in a way that wouldn't reflect a future first lady.

"I'm obviously attracted to Grace, so the physical intimacy will come." Caleb leaned closer to me and met my eyes.

I heard his words and sucked in my breath, trying to concentrate on what I predicted would be a deep response.

"I want someone who understands that I am more than a pastor. Grace needs to know that I am committed to being her covering, the person who God has made a steward over her well-being and future. I will love her as I love myself and will be supportive in every area of her life. Like God and His twenty-four-seven access, I'll answer her calls and will give her the grace and space to be the virtuous woman she was called to be from the moment she entered her mother's womb.

I'll be her friend when she doesn't even realize she needs one.

She will see God through me every day in every way. "

I rested my hand over my heart, touched deeply by Caleb's words. They were perfect. Without hesitation, I cupped his chin and leaned toward him for a quick kiss.

"You are such a good man, Caleb Stallings. Thank you for choosing me as your bride."

He ducked his head and nodded, reaching for my wrist and kissing it. As was becoming our habit, we stared at each other in comfortable silence, absorbing the peace of our budding relationship.

I took a big breath and turned to Elder Peyton to share my truth.

“I don’t trust many people, so intimacy of any kind is difficult. As Caleb said, I don’t think the physical connection between us will be lacking. No disrespect, Elder, but look at how fine he is.” I gestured from his neck down as Elder Peyton laughed.

“Seriously, when I went to the altar my first day at church, I felt the love inside Caleb radiate out to me. He touched me, and I felt the love of God working through him. It’s hard to describe, but a flood of peace overtook me.

I’m often anxious and an overthinker, but every bit of that angst left me in the presence of the Lord that day.

If God moved so mightily through Caleb in the sanctuary, I can only imagine how intense it will be when I have him to myself.

It will be one of the most precious gifts I’ve ever received.

I can’t wait for our intimacy to grow.” I blushed hard because I tried to share what I meant without being too graphic.

Even now, the familiar ping of arousal simmered in my loins. I adjusted my body in my seat and grabbed the hem of my dress under the table to stay in the moment. Every side of Caleb turned me on, especially the one that cared so openly and thoroughly for people.

Because of the anointing that rested on Caleb, I predicted that when we finally made love, he would cater to my body and soul so thoroughly I would be addicted to him like the women who had him before me.

Unlike them, I would be his wife. I silently prayed that I satisfied him as much as he

satisfied me.

“Those are beautiful answers. Are you choosing each other in your spirit or just in your emotions?” Elder Peyton peered between us above his little round rimmed glasses.

“This is a leap of faith for me. The only way I know how to move in a relationship this quickly is to trust a power that is higher than I am.” I spoke as honestly and directly as I could.

I turned to Caleb for his response. He cleared his throat and looked directly at me.

As occurred more often than not, when he stared at me for any period of time, I got distracted by his handsomeness—that strong jawline and stubble had me wanting to rub my fingertips over his dark skin.

Our closeness reminded me of his declaration to me on his deck.

Soon I would be his, and he would be mine in every sense of the word.

“Grace, I didn’t think I would ever remarry.

The pain of my first marriage was almost too much to bear.

My girls brought the sun out for me again.

When they shined their light on you and you returned it, I forced myself to open to something deeper than I thought possible.

” He turned to Elder Peyton. “I tried to push Grace out of my head but couldn’t.

God spoke to me, even through you, Elder, about the divine timing of our union.

” Caleb reached for my hand and lifted my wrist to his lips.

“Aw...young love is so beautiful.” Elder Peyton leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, beaming at Caleb and me like we made him proud.

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I gave Elder Peyton a half smile, wanting to push back about his use of the word young. Caleb and I were in our forties, nowhere near young in my eyes. Maybe he referred to the newness of our union more than our age.

“My last question is important. Name one thing your partner doesn’t know but should.”

Caleb and I eyed each other. I knew what I needed to tell him but didn’t want to go first. He must have sensed my hesitancy because he placed his hand over the one I rested on the table.

“I knew Grace would be my wife the moment I opened that door and saw her. I just didn’t want to scare her by telling her that first night.”

I blushed and sucked in my breath, surprised that Caleb would be so honest about his feelings. I had not been adored like that in a long time. His words flattered, shocked, and frightened me a little.

“Thank you for saying that. The feeling was mutual, King.”

For the first time since our session began, something akin to a blush covered Caleb’s cheeks. He raked his teeth over his lip quickly then returned to his previous posture.

“My confession is going to be intense, so give me a moment.” I pulled a tissue from the small tissue box closest to me.

Caleb rubbed my back in circles as I tried not to filter my words.

“Before I came to Farmerton, I wanted to end my life.” Tears left my eyes as memories of those dark days came back to me.

Although I saw Caleb’s shoulders lift in my peripheral, I kept my eyes focused on the tree outside the window in from of me as I spoke.

“I was going to do it on my fortieth birthday. My mother and father were gone. I was an only child with an extended family that ridiculed me for refusing to let them bully me as I cared for my mother in her last days. I lost a job that mattered to me and moved from DC back to the South, a place I never thought I’d return to.

I had no hope and no promise of a bright future—until I came here and Caleb saw and cared for me.

Although our love has not matured... Yet, I feel as if he is loving me back to life. ”

The men kept their eyes on me as I dried mine. I rested in the awkward silence, pleased that I finally shared my secret with Caleb. Nita was right about marriage counseling. This process allowed me to release a burden that was too heavy for me to carry alone.

“Are you safe? Do you still have thoughts of hurting yourself?” Caleb’s question was natural, one that a caring pastor should ask a troubled person.

I reached for his hands and nodded through my tears.

“I am. I stayed in a psychiatric center for a couple of weeks and worked through the issues that pushed me over the edge. I have coping mechanisms and journal every day to hold myself accountable for my thoughts and actions. Farmerton has played a role in my self-care. I’m concerned that my past might come back to harm me...

us. You need to know that your fiancée isn't perfect. ”

Relief and a little bit of fear overtook me as I braced myself for the possibility that Caleb might reject me. I was used to being cast away, so it made sense for someone I opened myself up to disconnect when I needed them most.

Caleb placed his arm around me and held me close. I relaxed in his arms, wiping my nose as I sniffled.

“I’m sorry you went through that. God is a redeemer. His faithfulness is new every morning. If He doesn’t hold your past against you, neither can I. No one else can condemn you either. I can’t judge anyone given my weaknesses.”

“Thank you for being a true man of God and for choosing me.”

“God chose you for me. Thank you for saying yes.”

Elder Peyton intertwined his fingers and smiled at us. Caleb and I may have piled the lovey-dovey answers on thick, but I believed what we said.

“Yes, yes, yes. I see a bright and glorious future ahead of you. Let’s discuss the ceremony. It’s coming fast.”

For the rest of the session, we discussed the order of service for our backyard wedding and opened up to each other about our child-raising beliefs. We agree that I wouldn’t use birth control and wouldn’t mind getting pregnant.

Privately, Caleb agreed to increase my allowance several thousand dollars per month for each baby I delivered.

As a businesswoman with a heart for kids, I appreciated that gesture.

Since Caleb would pay most of our household expenses, I planned to invest most of the money he gave me into accounts for any children we would have, including Hannah and Esther.

After our meeting, I stayed at the church for the rest of the afternoon, chatting with Caleb's executive assistant and learning about the church's history from Elder Peyton. Caleb worked in his office, returning calls and emailing people about church business.

When he finished, he walked into the conference room, his work bag in hand. I closed my laptop and started to pack up my belongings.

"You done?"

"Yes, and I have a surprise for you. But first, we're going on a date. Mama is picking the girls up from school and taking care of them for the night." Caleb winked at me and extended his hand toward me.

I put my hand in his and smiled as I rose and followed him toward the parking lot exit.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Although we'd been at the church hours after our session, neither of us discussed my confession in detail. I needed to hear any concerns he had.

"I am. Are you? I'm so sorry for what you experienced, and I want us to dig deeper into that if you're comfortable. I never want you to feel alone." He kissed me on the cheek and furrowed his brows.

"I am well, but I want to make sure you're okay since I didn't go into detail about my

mental health. It would only be fair if I gave you the chance to back out since I'm not the person you thought I was." I said the words carefully, feeling it was the right thing to offer.

Caleb reached for me and kissed me with such tenderness that I wanted to crawl inside him and take up residence in the warmth of his heart.

"Neither of us is perfect. I'm not judging your past. Thanks for finally opening up about it."

A veil of heaviness lifted off me at Caleb's response.

"Nita was right. Counseling was exactly what we needed to get on the same page. Elder Peyton is a kind, discerning man. I'm excited about getting married now."

"That pleases me."

Caleb followed me home, where I dropped off my car.

As we rode, we discussed our wedding plans and what life would look like once I moved into his home.

Before I knew it, we were thirty miles outside Farmerton in Romaville, the biggest place that served five-star meals.

After a quiet evening where we continued to debrief about our session, Caleb paid for the meal and escorted me back to the car.

"I have one more stop to make before we head home."

I nodded. Within minutes, he pulled into the empty parking lot of a jewelry store

called The Platinum Pagoda.

Caleb exited the car and opened the passenger car door, leading me to the front door of the posh store, and we greeted the gruff security guard standing at the entrance.

Caleb led me to the back of a store where a woman who looked to be our age waved at us.

“Caleb, I’ve been expecting you. This must be your gorgeous fiancée. She hugged Caleb then me before pulling a closed ring box from beneath the area where she stood.

She placed it on the jewelry display case that held some of the most exquisite wedding and engagement rings I had ever seen.

“Kimberle, meet Dr. Grace Toliver. Grace, this is Elder Peyton’s daughter, Kimberle.

“You must be a special woman to catch the eye of Pastor C. He told me your engagement isn’t public, so I’m honored to play a small part in this process. Here’s your special order.” Kimberle pushed the box toward Caleb, who picked it up and opened it close to his face before closing it again.

“Close your eyes, sweetheart, and hold out your ring finger. Don’t open them until I tell you to.”

“What are you up to?” I pursed my lips and squinted before doing as Caleb asked.

He held my hand steady as cool metal slid up my ring finger. It had to be my engagement ring. We’d been engaged for weeks, but he declared he hadn’t found the right one.

“Open your eyes.”

When I looked down, I gasped and extended my arm with my fingers spread wide.

“It’s...everything.”

The ring was set high with an oval center stone and two smaller diamonds on each side. It was a showstopper yet simple. I placed my right hand over my mouth, staring at the striking ring from multiple angles as it glimmered under the store lights.

Kimberle grinned at us as if she mined the clear-cut diamonds herself.

“Is it big enough?” Caleb held my hand as he lifted it and inspected from all angles.

“Are you kidding me? It’s perfect.”

“Check out the engraving.” He pulled the ring from my finger and handed it to me.

I raised it to my eyes and read out loud, “Chosen. Cherished. Covered.”

This amazing man is going to have me in a puddle.

“I wanted to give it to you here because of what it represents. The oval is you, and the stones on either side are Hannah and Esther. Because of them, I moved forward in my pursuit of you. They will be your girls as much as they are mine.”

“Oh, Caleb...”

Tears filled my eyes as I thought about the day in its entirety. God truly loved me. I could not have designed a more beautiful gift to represent the next phase of my life.

Kimberle handed me a tissue.

“I’ll give you two a moment. Let me know when you need me.”

“Thank you.” I dabbed my eyes and moved with Caleb to a private lounge at the side of the store.

When I sat, he slid the ring back on my finger before kissing my knuckle.

“It’s too big and flashy for what we have going on. This is a ring for a real wife.”

He sat closer to me on the couch. As always, I melted when the scent of his cologne enveloped me. He lifted my chin and peered deeply into my eyes.

“Sweetheart, you will be my wife in every way. I don’t know what I have to do to convince you that all of this is real. You are the queen God sent for me, so please get comfortable sitting on your throne. I’m going to spoil you rotten. Okay?” He kissed my cheek then rose.

“Yes, King.”

I followed him back to the jewelry case. With a slight head nod toward Kimberle, he called out, “This is perfect, Kimberle.”

Caleb stroked my cheek with his thumb.

“Will you wear it for our announcement on Sunday, sweetheart?”

I nodded and extended my hand again, knowing this ring made my engagement to Caleb real.

For our marriage to be believable and endorsed by those Caleb served, we needed to include them in our engagement and wedding in some way.

Caleb wasn't going to let me remain hidden. It was time for me to get used to it.

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Being Married

After I dropped Grace off at her home, I relieved Mama of her caregiving duties and checked in on my girls. They slept like angels in their twin beds. I got ready for bed then texted Grace as I did every night.

Me:

Sleep well.

Within seconds, she responded.

Grace:

You too, honey. Please kiss my little girls for me.

Me:

I will. Sunday is our big day! *smiley kiss emoji*

I cheesed hard.

Grace started calling me terms of endearment last week. I didn't correct or tease her about it. She also said "my" or "our" when she referred to Hannah and Esther. I enjoyed it greatly and couldn't wait until we shared our growing devotion even more openly.

Sunday morning, Grace arrived at my house around 7:30 a.m. to fix the girls' hair and get them ready for church.

We decided that our arrival with the girls at Haven of Hope and Blessings would be our first public appearance as a couple.

We knew that Grace would be the center of attention that day since we would announce our engagement and marriage plans.

She brought her dress over in a Macy's garment bag and had her silk-pressed hair up in big pin curls. She kissed me on the cheek and entered the kitchen, where she placed her bag over an empty bar stool. Hannah and Esther ate a hearty breakfast of biscuits, eggs, and bananas.

"Good morning, girls."

"Good morning, Mommy Grace." Esther jumped from her chair and hugged Grace.

"Eat your breakfast, sweetheart." Grace waved Esther back to her seat and smiled as she poured a glass of juice and took a big sip. "Are y'all almost ready for church?"

"Yes!" They wiggled their bodies and raised their hands.

"Daddy says today everybody is going to find out that you're going to be our mommy." Hannah smiled, revealing her missing teeth.

"That's right, angel." Grace nodded my way.

I moved behind her and held her waist as she set her glass on the table. Even dressed down and with her hair undone, Grace glowed.

“Are you and Mommy Grace going to be married?” Esther asked the question innocently after taking a big bite of her peeled banana.

I was confused by her question since every day and night we talked nonstop about Grace moving in with us after becoming my wife.

“Yes, sweetheart. I told you that.”

“No, Daddy. Esther is talking about mommies and daddies playing and kissing under the sheets. Being married.” Hannah’s serious face caught me off guard.

Grace coughed into her hand and shifted behind me, turning her back as she opened the refrigerator. I ignored her and focused on my daughters, who stared at me like I had stolen something.

“Who told you about mommies and daddies playing and kissing under sheets?”

“Maw Maw. That’s what they do on TV. Be married.”

“That’s cute.” Grace returned to the table and picked up her glass of juice.

“Really?” I jerked my head her way, not believing she was encouraging my babies as they talked about sex.

They were much too young to know about such things.

“Yes. They’re curious, Daddy.”

“In that case, girls, Mommy Grace and I are going to play and kiss every day...maybe multiple times a day when we’re married .”

“Did you say that out loud?” She mumbled through her teeth, her eyes wide.

“I sure did. They’re curious.” I mocked her previous answer.

“It’s too early in the morning to be so messy, Pastor C.”

“You started it.”

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes at me and sipped her juice.

“Are you going to play and kiss hard enough to give us a baby brother?” Esther raised her little shoulders and clapped several times, awaiting my answer with bated breath.

“I’ll let you answer that one, Mommy Grace. I’m calling my mother about all this.” I kissed her on the cheek and left her with Esther and Hannah as I moved toward my bedroom. “Welcome to the family.”

Grace changed in the guest room then got the girls ready.

They sat quietly in the living room watching cartoons as she finished dressing in the guest bedroom.

I knocked then entered, placing my cuff links in my shirt before I carried my suit coat into the room and laid it on the bed.

I closed the door behind us, mesmerized at how breathtaking Grace was in her white dress with patches of beautiful roses at the hem.

She placed a small hot pink fascinator on top of her full curls and examined herself in the floor-length mirror from multiple angles.

“You are an angel on earth.”

She blushed and then held her hands out to me.

“Thank you.”

I walked into her arms and hugged her before kissing her pillowy soft lips. She rubbed my beard as she spoke into my lips.

“We have to stop doing this, or I’m going to lift this dress and spread my legs open on that bed. We only have another week. In the words of the girls, I can’t wait to ‘be married.’”

Her reference to sex made me think about the moment I would plant my seeds in her with no restrictions.

“Same, love. Are you sure you want to have my kids?” I asked the question quietly, secretly hoping Grace wasn’t open to it only for the money.

If she really didn’t want kids, I would force myself to be okay with that too.

“Of course, Caleb. Any child I have with you will be my blood too. All of this...” she waved her hand around the room and between us, “...gives me hope they will be loved thoroughly by both of us no matter what, so the answer is yes.”

“That makes me happy.” I lowered my hand to Grace’s belly and held it there.

She placed her hands over mine as she held my gaze.

“Since I can’t touch you where I want to yet, I’m going to leave them right here and declare a blessing over you.” I knelt and spoke directly to Grace’s belly as she

continued to hold my hands.

“Okay.”

“I declare that your body remains healthy and flourishes as we pursue this next part of our lives. Every cell, blood vessel, and organ operates as it was designed to work. This womb will remain disease-free and ready for the implantation of any children that God blesses us with. I rebuke any growths, tumors, fibroids, or pain that will prevent you from enjoying every phase of motherhood. Our babies will develop perfectly in you full-term with no complications. May what we create together be better than who we are separately. Hannah, Esther, and the children carrying our DNA will grow into the people the nation and world need.” I lifted my eyes toward Grace.

She peered down at me and smiled, her eyes moist.

“May they have their Mama’s care and fiery spirit for justice and education. In Jesus’ matchless name I pray. Amen.”

“Amen.” Grace wiped a tear from her eyes. “And may they embody the strength and strong character of their fine, sweet daddy.”

“Amen to that too.” I rose and kissed Grace’s lips again, pleased that we were on one accord.

Our Time

My mother was obsessed with socks, bows, and barrettes when I was young, so I channeled her as I got my little angels ready. They were still talking about being married when I stood over their miniature chairs in their bedrooms.

“So when you’re under the sheets, what happens?” Hannah, who was usually quiet, was the one asking most of the questions.

I took extra time placing the heart-shaped yellow barrettes on the ends of her hair as I contemplated my answer.

“Daddy and I will love each other so much that he will transfer his special seeds to me, and a baby will grow. It has to happen at a certain time in a special way.”

“Like the stork?” Esther asked.

“No. This is a special connection between a mommy and a daddy.”

“So, you can’t have a baby until you’re married?”

Oh, boy.

“Not always. Your daddy and I think it will be better for everyone if we wait to be married before we start playing together like that.”

“What about kissing outside the sheets? Can you have a baby like that too?”

“No, pumpkin, but if you do a lot of kissing, it could lead to the sheets. Then the baby might come.”

Hannah and Esther remained silent as I finished their hair and zipped them into their dresses.

“May we watch TV?” Hannah asked.

I nodded then went to the guest bedroom to get ready.

As I slipped on my support wear and pantyhose, I paid attention to the curves, dips, and marks on my body.

I worked out several times a week but still have a little pouch in front that stuck out if I didn’t wear the proper undergarments.

I also had a dark, quarter-sized birthmark on the right side of my breast that disrupted the smoothness of my skin.

The small stretch marks on the side of my stomach weren’t cute either.

Dang, being a woman with a real woman’s body was no joke. No matter how kind Caleb was, did he expect me to be flawless when I was naked? I finished getting dressed and examined myself.

My outward presentation was meticulous today.

The flowing white A-line dress with the faintly painted pastel flowers on the base of the skirt matched the yellow and pink rose-themed dresses, tights, and barrettes I bought for the girls.

My thin belt cinched my waist perfectly, and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect hair day.

"Hey, Grace." Caleb knocked on the door.

"Come in." I faced the door and smiled hard when he walked toward me.

When Caleb asked if I wanted to have kids with him, I didn't hesitate to say yes.

Over the past few weeks, I'd prayed about our little family and wanted to expand it if God allowed.

My daily interactions with Hannah, Esther, and Caleb brought joy to me that I never expected.

Collectively, they awakened a dormant desire for me to be a good mother to all the children He would bless Caleb and me with.

My concern was my reproductive history. No woman in my family had a healthy first pregnancy.

I didn't want to say it out loud, but I worried that I would be barren too.

Would that turn Caleb off? I was a coward for not mentioning it sooner, but the wedding and engagement announcement were overwhelming enough.

When Caleb prayed for my body and reproductive health, I cried. I appreciated his consideration of my reproductive desires. He truly was a Man of God who flowed in the Spirit.

"You're going to make me mess up my makeup. I want to look perfect today." I

dabbed the corners of my eyes with the white handkerchief on the dresser.

“You are perfect no matter how you look. Just be yourself. Finish up here, and I’ll usher the girls to the car. You good?”

I nodded.

“Okay. See you outside.”

I was silent during the ride to church. As always, the girls sang and talked nonstop. Caleb seemed to sense my nervousness because he periodically rested his hand on my covered leg.

“You good?” He asked the familiar question with a gentle squeeze to my knee.

“I am.”

I took a deep breath and focused on the landscape, which transitioned from farmland and back roads to commercial properties then retail shops.

Haven of Hope and Blessings was located a couple of miles from a busy intersection, so the change in scenery reminded me of the changes that would be official within a couple of hours.

When we pulled up to the reserved spot outside the administrative office, Caleb turned off the ignition and faced the three of us.

“After church, everyone will know Grace will be your mommy. Remember that it’s a surprise until I tell everyone, okay?”

The girls clapped their hands and nodded.

“I can’t wait!” Esther squealed.

I grinned and pulled out my phone.

“I want to capture this moment. Smile, girls.” They put their arms around each other and beamed. “Now, everyone.” I repositioned the phone so we were all in the picture for a selfie. “Say family on three...one, two, three.”

“Family!”

We smiled hard as I pressed the button to capture our memory. I checked out the picture and put it back in my purse.

“Now, I’m ready.”

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Attention Please

I may have been the shepherd of my flock, but Grace was the center of attention this morning.

The second she walked in with the girls and me, people started leaning into each other and whispering.

I smiled and waved, acknowledging several church members who openly stared at us.

Like the queen she was, Grace remained focused with her back straight and head held high, guiding Hannah and Esther by their shoulders until they got to their seats next to Mama.

When we faced forward, she smiled at me. I winked back.

Although the scent of her sweet perfume filled my nostrils throughout the service, I remained focused on praise and worship and my pastoral duty to usher in the presence of God until it was time for me to deliver the word.

But when Grace crossed her thick, sexy legs at the ankle, I cracked.

They were moisturized to perfection under sheer pantyhose.

Her firm ankle caught my eye in the nude-colored stilettos that presented her lower body as a delicious treat I wanted to devour.

Her arm brushed against the skirt of her dress, accidentally lifting it and giving me an unexpected peek of her shapely thigh.

Never had I been tempted by a woman's legs like that before, especially in the house of God. Now was the wrong time for me to learn firsthand why the mothers of the church insisted that women use those little cloths to cover their laps when they sat in the front row.

Instead of watching me eye her thigh meat, Grace furrowed her brow, taking copious notes. The angle of her body, combined with her obvious hunger for the word, had me even more distracted.

Only when the tenor of my voice slowed did she meet my gaze.

She raised her eyebrow then followed my eyes to the place on her body that had me in a chokehold.

Within seconds, Grace blushed and reached for the hem of her dress, readjusting it to lie more securely over her knees.

She shook her head before mouthing the word focus so clearly I knew exactly what she was saying. I nodded and scanned the congregation.

“We must remain vigilant when Satan comes to tempt us.” The words of the sermon lined up perfectly with the warning I needed to tell myself.

Did they have the air on today?

I pulled my collar from my neck then picked up my handkerchief and wiped my brow before continuing. But I couldn't. I closed my eyes and paused to regroup. This made no sense. When I opened my eyes again, Grace gave me an encouraging smile. I took

a big breath and gripped the lectern with my hands.

“I’ve always been a man of order, but the Holy Spirit is moving me to let you all in on a little secret.

I was preaching and flowing until the presence of a captivating woman moved me.

Never in my life has the shine of a woman distracted me like it has today.

That is because it is time for me to share something with you.

Grace, could you please join me?” I extended my hand toward her.

Everyone’s eyes gravitated to Grace.

Her mouth fell as she sat up straight, looking like a deer caught in headlights.

My mother reached for Grace’s Bible, notebook, and pen, and nudged her with her shoulder.

Mama leaned over and whispered something in Grace’s ear, prompting her to hop up.

She brushed the skirt of her dress down as she stepped toward me then ascended three of the five short steps below me.

As she approached, I walked her way. When I extended my hand, she cupped her fingers in mine and gave me a shy smile.

She stood by me as people fidgeted, several in the middle and the back standing up and rocking back and forth.

Curtis, the organist, let out a flowery run on the Hammond B3 organ as more people stood.

When Grace giggled, I giggled too. It was as if the joy that was on her hopped on me.

I leaned toward her and spoke into her ear.

“You good?”

She squeezed my hand and nodded. I escorted her to the center of the platform where we held hands.

“Family, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Grace Toliver.”

Grace blushed and raised the hand that held the engagement ring to brush her hair behind her ear.

“Is that what I think it is?” Mother Wesley, the loudest woman in the church, rose and hollered out from the front row, pointing at Grace and me.

Grace dropped her hand to her side and covered her ring with her other hand, but it was too late. Mother Wesley started jumping up and down in her little heels, her hat flopping from side to side until she took it off and dropped it in the seat behind her.

“Come on, Pastor!” Mother Freeman, who sat by Mother Wesley, shouted.

Grace held her head down and squeezed my hand.

“I think they figured it out,” she said in a whisper.

I raised my free hand to calm everyone down.

“Hold on, everyone.” I turned toward Mother Wesley and Mother Freeman. “Ladies, please give a brother a chance to shine. I’ve waited this long for my rib. Please don’t snatch my news from me.”

When I said rib, everyone who was seated hopped up. Curtis and the rest of the musicians teased an instrumental praise as a couple of people started dancing. I let them have a few bars then held my hand up again. I shook my head and smiled.

“This is a place of order.” I chuckled.

The cheers got louder. I tried to hold back my laughter but couldn’t. Grace held me by the waist and laughed too.

“I can’t tell you what I have to tell you if you don’t let me.” I spoke through the microphone with a serious look.

Several people shushed as the congregation quieted down but remained standing. I gestured to Grace and drew out my next words.

“I’d like to introduce you to the woman who has agreed to be my wife.”

Tambourines, clapping, and every instrument in the pulpit competed for a starring role in the celebration.

As a string of “Praise Hims” waved across the room, I reached for Grace and kissed her cheek.

She held my hands in hers and placed her lips to my ear.

I turned off the portable mic so no one would hear what she said.

“Would it be inappropriate for me to kiss you on the lips? Is that allowed in your church by people who aren’t married? I want the hoes to know I don’t play about my fiancé. They can keep their nasty panties in their underwear drawers.”

Those pretty dimples popped and had me smitten.

I glanced at my mother, who had to be the one who shared that mess about the panties. She beamed at me as she waved her big white handkerchief in the air. Although she couldn’t hold water, I couldn’t be angry with her in this moment.

I spoke back in Grace’s ear.

“Let the Spirit move you, sweetheart.”

She nodded, then placed her hand on my cheek before lifting herself on her toes and kissing me on the lips with a combination of passion and respect that had my head spinning.

I reached for her waist and held her as she pressed her sweet lips deeper into mine, giving me a little tongue too.

When we finally separated, she smiled, then reached for the handkerchief on the lectern.

“So sorry about that, Pastor,” she said softly with mischievous eyes as she wiped her lipstick off my lips.

“No, you’re not.”

Grace smirked before dropping the handkerchief on the lectern.

I barely heard her as the floor beneath us vibrated, and people shouted so loudly the rafters shook.

Grace's open display of affection and closeness had me just as undone. She was a pro at marking her territory.

I ushered Elder Peyton up to finish the service.

He stood by me as I fanned my face with my hands and whispered to him that I needed to sit down.

He nodded his understanding and picked up the microphone, ushering in praise throughout the sanctuary.

Everyone laughed and clapped as Grace and I held hands and returned to our seats.

Elder Peyton finished the altar call, offering, and benediction.

After service, Grace and I stood at the sanctuary exit, greeting everyone who wanted to meet my future wife and gawk at her engagement ring.

"I'm Mother Wesley. You are so beautiful—perfect for our handsome pastor." Mother Wesley kissed each of us on the cheek as she held Grace's hand.

"Thank you, Mother Wesley." Grace's gentle voice and smile soon had the elderly woman wrapped around her finger.

She wasn't the only one. I glanced at her as she smiled at young and old people who embraced her and celebrated our engagement.

Grace was a natural hostess with genuine care for people, allowing strangers to hug

her and share their stories about the ministry, me, or themselves.

Although I knew she supervised a large group of people in her past, I'd never seen this side of Grace.

I understood why she grieved the loss of her job.

She glowed around people and stood out with undeniable poise and grace.

Grace —What a perfect name for a perfect woman.

In that moment, realization hit me like a ton of bricks.

I convinced myself Grace was here for my girls, but I already adored her.

Her heart and beauty mesmerized me as much as they did those greeting her in the receiving line.

I was honored to be near her and couldn't wait to get her alone.

When the last person exited, I took Grace by the hand.

"Mama took the girls home with her. We have the afternoon to ourselves. Come with me so I can change."

Grace followed me and waved at several people along the way.

When we entered my office, I closed the door and locked it. She stood in front of my desk and clasped her hands, her shoulders high.

"How did I do?"

She was as cute as could be as she sought my approval.

I unzipped my robe and placed it on the nearest chair.

“Sweetheart, the people love you.”

And so do I, I wanted to say but didn’t.

“Good. I’m glad Elder Peyton shared with the congregation that our wedding would be private. We’ll have a big reception after our honeymoon.”

I hung up my robe and placed it in the small closet in the corner of my office. When I turned around, Grace stood before me with her heels off.

“You okay?” I took in her picture-perfect form.

She slowly raised the hem of her dress, displaying her legs and the top of her thighs. She bent and took her time rolling down her stockings before stuffing them in her purse. I suddenly felt warm.

“Yes. I feel better having met everyone. I see why you give them so much. What a blessed congregation.”

I stared at Grace’s lower body as she shifted her clothes.

What is she doing?

“They are precious.” I nodded like a robot.

Grace reached under her dress and lowered her panties to the floor, lifting them and dangling them in my face.

My mouth fell open. When I gathered myself, I received them and instinctively lifted them to my nose. The smell of her womanly essence had my eyes rolling back in my head.

“Woman, don’t start nothing you can’t finish.” I dropped the panties to the floor then pounced on her.

I drew her to me, kissing her full lips and lifting her skirt before grabbing a handful of her juicy, naked behind.

She squirmed and reached for the side of my head, which I lowered to hers. When our lips touched, she inserted her tender tongue in my mouth. My head swirled as I grabbed her by the waist and lifted her off the floor. She looked into my eyes.

“Your mama told me about that woman who sent you panties. I wanted to give you a sample of what’s to come.” She bit her lower lip.

“Why is my mama so doggone messy? I knew she was the one who told you.”

When I lowered Grace to the ground, she rested her hands on my chest. I couldn’t believe this demure woman would be so bold with me...at church. As much as I tried to stay focused and controlled around her, I couldn’t resist temptation.

“Do you know how sexy you are?” I massaged her back and grinned at her.

“No. How sexy am I?”

“Come here.” I sat in the chair closest to me and ushered Grace toward me with my finger.

She came to me, her eyes focused on my lips. I planted my feet firmly on the floor.

When she rested her arms on my shoulders, I circled my arms around her waist and made sure she was steady. I sucked in my breath and lifted her dress, taking in the beauty of her neatly trimmed honey pot.

“You’re beautiful everywhere, love.” I traced her jewels with my fingers.

I inserted the tip of my index finger in her channel.

“And wet.”

“Caleb,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

The way she said my name had my mouth watering.

Grace moaned low and thrust her body toward me, forcing my finger deeper. I closed my eyes and inserted a couple more, concentrating on her pleasure.

“Yes,” she moaned, holding my shoulders to keep herself steady.

A loud knock interrupted us. When Grace jumped, I withdrew my fingers. As she pulled her dress down, I picked up her black thong off the floor and wiped my fingers clean with it before stuffing it in my pocket. She rushed to slip on her heels.

“Coming,” I shouted, realizing how ironic my greeting was.

Despite her scurrying, Grace snickered.

“We needed that disruption. I couldn’t have your pretty, sanctified self shouting in tongues in here when I murdered that cat.” I spoke softly so only she could hear me.

“You owe me a raincheck,” she said, adjusting her clothes and wiping the corners of

her mouth with her fingers.

“I got you.” I kissed her a final time then walked to the door.

“Here.” She rushed to squirt hand sanitizer in my hand before she returned it to my desk.

She sat in the chair where I fingered her, legs crossed and her hands on her knees, peering toward the door as prim and proper as a queen.

I rubbed my hands together then blew her a kiss, which she caught and placed over her heart. I opened the door to greet more parishioners offering their well wishes.

Grace and I were going to get along well.

Wet Dreams

For the next week, Caleb and I worked nonstop to prepare for our wedding. He surprised me with an extra five thousand dollars once I signed our marriage contract. The girls bounced off the walls, asking questions about how their lives would change once I moved into their house.

Members of his church's leadership team, along with several members of our extended family, including my Uncle Keith, gathered at Caleb's home for a spring barbecue and engagement party.

At each event, Caleb and I presented ourselves as the dutiful pastor and wife-to-be who fell in love at first sight and couldn't wait to start our married life with Hannah and Esther.

My biggest task was preparing our honeymoon retreat. Given the quickness of our marriage and the events that were already planned, we decided to celebrate at my house.

Over the past few weeks, I connected with Stacey, a former college roommate from Atlanta who specialized in event planning and decorating. She drove down the night before the wedding to execute our vision.

As she pulled decorations and pillows from the oversized boxes I helped her bring in from her van, I laid everything on the couch and tables.

"This is so exciting. No disrespect, but your man is fine. I streamed last week's

sermon and his proposal. When y'all kissed, I saw fireworks." She opened and closed her fingers, simulating explosions and making fireworks sounds with her mouth.

I laughed and nodded.

"He's special. That's why I want everything to be perfect for our first time." I unwrapped candles and set them on the table with care.

"What? He a pastor, pastor? You haven't tasted that chocolate log yet?"

I thought the escalating volume of Stacey's questions would break my eardrum. I gestured to the space around us.

"This will be where we feast on each other for the first time."

"In that case, I'm going to make it real special. That man will be stuck to you like glue."

"I hope so."

As Stacey continued setting up our romantic oasis, I packed everything I would need for tomorrow's wedding and loaded it into my car.

That night, I stayed at the Embassy Suites. With my white noise machine pumping the soothing sounds of ocean waves, I snuggled under the warm sheets earlier than normal and went to sleep.

Caleb's face came to me as I lay naked on our king-sized bed.

His firm body rested next to me as he spread my legs open with his hands.

I rubbed his waves as his mouth assaulted mine.

He tossed me onto my stomach then quickly mounted me from behind, lapping my neck and thrusting into me mercilessly until he pushed me over the edge several times.

“Caleb!” I shouted his name into the darkness and sat up, wet and sweaty.

The dream felt so real. The darkness met my eyes as I wiped my brow. Still aroused, I felt the area beneath the seat of my nightgown, rubbing my hands over the wetness beneath me.

I got up and washed myself, changing my clothes before placing a towel on the wet spot on the bed. Although I tried to go back to sleep, I was restless. I reached for my phone. It was 2:15 a.m.

Me:

Are you up?

My phone rang.

“Hey, baby.” Caleb’s raspy voice pierced through the silence in the room, reminding me of my freaky dream. “You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

When I didn’t answer immediately, he called my name.

“Grace? Talk to me. What’s on your mind?”

“Am I making the right choice?”

“Where is this coming from?”

“I...” I rubbed my neck and closed my eyes, drawing on the tools I crafted when I felt nervous or anxious.

“You are paying me to marry you. We’re starting our marriage off as a lie.

My friend saw the engagement video. The world saw it.

We’re going viral on social media. I wanted this to be small, but it has gotten out of hand. Aren’t you concerned?”

Caleb chuckled as he always did when something wasn’t as big as I made it out to be.

“Grace, this is a mutual agreement between two consenting adults. All that matters is how we navigate this marriage. Anyone else’s interpretation of it is their problem, not ours.”

I nodded, not wanting to self-sabotage this relationship before it started.

“Let the goodness of the day wash over you. God approves of our union.”

“Tell me again why you chose me. You know my past. What if people find out about my mental problems? Do you and the girls really want that?”

“God chose you first. I just obeyed Him when He told me you were mine.”

I processed Caleb’s soothing words.

“Today is our day,” he said.

“I just wish Mama and Daddy were here. He was supposed to walk me down the aisle.” I sniffled between words.

Caleb let me finish crying before speaking.

“They are here, sweetheart—in your actions and your memories. They were beautiful stewards of their only child. I see them in your care for Hannah and Esther.”

I dropped my head in my hands and cried again.

“Look at your ring. I chose you. You will be cherished, and I will cover you no matter what happens.”

I wiped the remaining wetness from my cheeks and picked up my engagement ring, holding it tight and rocking back and forth. When I was calm again, I took a deep breath.

“You always know what to say.”

“It’s my job. Get some rest so we can officially start our lives together tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Caleb.”

“Always.”

When my clock alarm beeped around 6:00 a.m., I stretched and meditated before beginning my morning devotion.

I slept like a log after my conversation with Caleb.

Joy and gratitude overtook me as I thought about the new life I would lead.

I said an extra prayer of thanks to God for giving me such wonderful parents and husband-to-be.

“Lord, please help me not get into a funk today. I bind the spirit of depression and loose the freedom that comes from being adored so thoroughly by Caleb and the girls. You’ve been too good for me to wallow in negativity. I am blessed beyond measure.”

I pulled out my journal and wrote a quick prayer of thanks for giving me a new family, even if Caleb had to pay for it. I was an expensive bride.

“Today is going to be a perfect day,” I declared.

Around 8:00 a.m., Caleb sent me a text.

Caleb:

This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it.

Me:

Amen. *praying hands emoji*

Caleb:

I woke up early to do my tongue exercises. I’m going to lick you from the top of your spine to your ass then turn you over and brand my name in you before I penetrate you. Have a good day, baby.

I sat on the bed for a full two minutes aroused beyond belief. Nothing I said could top Caleb’s message, so I sent a tongue emoji and continued with the final touches on my morning preparation.

I was excited to leave Grace Toliver and her insecurities behind in the small wedding that would take place in Caleb's backyard.

After a light buffet breakfast at the hotel, I packed my belongings and moved my clothes and toiletries to my car.

I peered into the heavens and blew a kiss upward, thankful for joy and a sound mind.

On the way to Caleb's, I thought about my parents. Caleb was right. They prepared me for motherhood and marriage before I realized that was something I wanted in life. I was built for this. As Caleb reminded me almost every night, God's plans were bigger than ours.

Six hours later, with self-control I never knew I had or needed, I stood before God and man ready to marry Caleb Evan Stallings.

As about twenty of our closest family and friends joined us in the private ceremony, I examined Caleb fully as he stood stoically at the end of his deck where a simple arch of fresh-cut red and white roses intertwined with ivy.

Charisma oozed from his perfect pores in a new black suit, his fingers circling his wrist.

I held Uncle Keith's arm firmly outside the sliding doors of the deck. At the last minute, I asked him to escort me down the aisle, realizing I had family who cared for me if I let them into my heart. Together, we walked toward my future.

I took my time, taking in every good thing about this day—the instrumental love songs tugging at my heartstrings, the massive ferns representing my mother's love of potted plants, and people who took time out of their lives to celebrate my unexpected marriage. I was not forgotten.

When I spotted Ms. Denise in her lavender two-piece church lady suit with silver sequins and bouncy bob wig, tears filled my eyes as she dabbed hers. I had a mother again.

I thought of my daddy with his big personality. He would have marched me down the aisle and given me to Caleb with the warmest of smiles. Mama and Daddy would have adored my Caleb. He was the kind of man Mama promised would come my way when I finally got married.

Thank you, God, for blessing me with such amazing parents. Because of their love, I know what real love feels like. Please give that to Caleb and me one day.

No matter how this relationship started, I wanted us to prosper. Caleb's stability and consistency were already priceless.

The service went by in a blur.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." Elder Peyton's eyes danced as he made the declaration.

Caleb flashed his drop-dead gorgeous smile my way and added a wink.

"Pastor, you may now salute your bride."

"Gladly." Caleb reached for the back of my neck then pulled me to him.

He started slow and gentle but ended roughly.

Every feeling from my erotic dream came back to me as I slipped my tongue between Caleb's teeth.

Within seconds, I devoured his mouth as if my life depended on it.

He matched my energy with gusto. When he moaned, I did too.

We finally separated, and he whispered in my ear.

“Behave, Grace Stallings. Don’t give these folks a show they’re not ready to see.”

My heart fluttered when he used my new name. I wanted to say, “Forget these people, and let me see that full package in your pants,” but knew that would be inappropriate.

You’re a pastor’s wife now.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:54 pm

I straightened my spine and smiled as one of Caleb's church members snapped several pictures of us. The guests slowly moved toward the reception table on the opposite side of the yard, leaving us to ourselves.

I leaned in and hugged Caleb tightly. He grabbed my butt and squeezed it before licking my ear.

"Stop looking at me like that, or I might need to escort you to our bedroom and get on my knees," I said.

Caleb leaned in and grinned.

"To pray?"

"If you prefer that over what I have in mind, sure."

Before Caleb could respond, Hannah and Esther rushed toward us and hugged us.

"We're married," Esther said, hugging Caleb's legs.

He picked her up as Hannah wrapped her arms around my waist.

"Are you really my mommy now?" she asked, her eyes big and bright.

I pinched her little cheeks.

"Yes, baby. I am."

Hannah squeezed me again.

Ms. Denise, who stood from a sturdy white folding chair in the front row, clapped her hands loudly and glared at the girls.

“Esther, Hannah, what did I tell y’all about that? Married folks need space.”

Hannah and Esther looked at each other when Mrs. Stallings said the word married and giggled. Caleb and I did the same.

Caleb set Esther on the ground and spoke to his mother.

“It’s okay, Ma. The girls are as excited as we are. Right, Grace?”

I nodded but didn’t believe the girls were half as excited as I was.

This was Caleb’s fault. When he fingered me in his office, I was seconds away from a release.

Since then, we did everything to avoid a repeat of that moment.

That didn’t stop him from flirting and teasing me with scalding hot kisses and sexy looks.

Everything he had done over the past month had me anticipating all the nasty things the “Holy Hoe” could do to me as his wife.

He didn’t play fair when he texted me about his tongue tricks this morning either.

I almost came undone, wanting to beg him to give me an early morning demonstration of his skills.

Both of us had been patient despite the temptation. If Caleb was as aroused as I was right now, he hid it well, although he seemed more distracted than usual during the ceremony. I chalked it up to nerves.

We greeted our guests for the next hour, his hand resting steadily on my lower back. He rubbed his fingers in a circular pattern that distracted me at random times.

“You still good?” His signature question in his low baritone made my heart flutter.

“Not really.”

Caleb’s eyes darted my way as he frowned.

“How can I make you feel better?” He whispered in my ear.

“You know what I need.” I picked up a church fan from a seat nearest us and started fanning myself. “When is everyone leaving?”

I sounded desperate, but I didn’t care. Caleb stirred up my horniness with his shenanigans. He winked.

“I’ve got you. Keep fanning and follow my lead.”

I nodded.

“Are you okay, baby?” Caleb’s voice got so loud that everyone stared at us.

I grabbed his arm with my fingers and wobbled a little.

“I need to lie down. It must be all the excitement.”

Caleb turned to everyone.

“Grace and I are going to cool off.”

“I should have worn thinner material on this hot day.” I nodded and started fanning myself harder.

“On behalf of everyone, thank you for coming to our wedding. Please help yourself to the food. We will be in touch. Love you all.” He blew a big kiss to everyone and waved.

People waved back and raised their glasses in salute.

“Love you,” I echoed, waving my hand like a beauty queen.

Caleb and I shook hands and hugged everyone as he escorted me by the arm toward the double back doors of the house.

“Y’all ‘rest.’ I’ve got the girls.” Ms. Denise used air quotes when she said the word rest.

I caught her eye roll toward Caleb. She leaned in to me and whispered, “Enjoy yourself, sweetheart.”

I blushed, wondering if others were aware of our intentions, too. Bump that, I was married now. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Thank you, Mama, for keeping them. We’ll be at Grace’s house if y’all need anything.”

“Turn those phones off, and enjoy your honeymoon. And make me more

grandbabies.” She told Caleb and hugged me.

“You know I will.” Caleb dabbed his mother up like she was his homeboy.

I watched them, my mouth wide open.

“You’re one of us now, Grace. Get used to it.” Caleb winked.

When we entered the house, he led me to the living room, out of sight of everyone in the backyard, and leaned in for a kiss.

“Come with me to our bedroom. Let’s get you out of those hot clothes.” He stood back and inspected me. “With your sexy caramel ass.”

My sanctimonious husband turned off his holy switch, knowing how much his potty mouth turned me on.

“Gladly.” I fanned myself and followed Caleb down the now-familiar hallway of his house.

We passed the girls’ room and stopped at his closed bedroom door. He turned and stroked my cheek with his thumb.

“Once I get started, I can’t promise I won’t mess up your pretty hair and makeup. Are you okay with that?”

I nodded, ready to ride Caleb like a horse. My biggest concern was how loud I might get. We still had a yard full of guests, so we couldn’t let loose just yet.

Caleb opened the door wide.

“You ready?”

“Been ready.”

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Manifestation

I was horny as hell throughout a ceremony that was supposed to be sacred.

It wasn't entirely my fault, though, since Grace stepped her sexy, caramel self on my deck in a form-fitting dress that hugged her curvy hips just right.

She showed the perfect amount of leg and thigh with each step she took toward me.

When she licked her sweet lips, I did the same, ready to combust.

As we held hands, I lowered my eyes and stared at her out of the corner of my eye.

She was such a beautiful woman with a big heart and even bigger breasts.

I had a front row view of her titties as they saluted me like a young soldier.

She caught me staring at her cleavage and blushed, squeezing my hand harder than I thought was necessary.

When she smiled, her dangling diamond earrings danced in the soft breeze.

Elder Peyton wasn't a stranger to my reputation, shooting pointed looks at me when he had to repeat his vows as I low-key ogled my soon-to-be wife. I had officiated enough weddings to know the routine by heart, but today, my attention was trash.

Grace smelled and looked so good standing next to me. She declared her vows in a

voice that melted my insides, drawing me back to the seriousness of this moment.

When we were declared husband and wife and her tongue finally met mine, I was ready for everyone to leave. Grace was hot and ready in a way I imagined but hadn't fully comprehended. Only when she softly told me that she needed me did the primal hunger in me erupt.

"I've got you, Grace." I declared those words in her ear as I rubbed her back.

When everyone cleared out and I reminded my girls to listen to Mama, I guided Grace to our bedroom.

"You ready?"

"Been ready."

I closed the door and held her hands in mine.

"Then come here."

She entered my arms, and I held her close. Grace reached for my tie and loosened it as she kissed me. I turned her around and reached for the zipper at the top of her simple wedding dress. I unzipped it a quarter of the way down her back.

"I dreamed about you last night," she said.

"Did you now?" I finished unzipping the dainty dress to her waist and rested my fingers on her lower back, massaging her skin with my thumbs.

"Yes." Grace twirled around, kissing my lips and throwing my tie on the dresser.

“What did you dream about, love?” I lifted her chin and pecked her lips as she unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt.

“All of this.” She lowered her hands to my belt buckle and loosened it with great care before unfastening my pants.

She slowly teased my growing erection with her fingertips as I pushed her dress down her shoulders. I gave each shoulder special attention, kissing and sucking them gently.

“You are so sexy.” I spoke the words into her soft skin as she unzipped my pants and pushed them and my boxers low enough for her to caress my hardness.

With each stroke of her soft hand along my length, I became more aware of her sweet scent and the steady pressure she applied to my manhood. When my member fully sprang to life, I groaned, mesmerized by Grace’s magical touch.

She lowered her eyes to my penis and bit her lip.

“He’s as thick as I thought he was. Do you like that?” she asked in the huskiest of voices.

“Oh, yes.” I threw my head back and closed my eyes as Grace continued her exploration.

“You’re soft and steely, just like your personality.”

I held Grace’s wrist to stop her motion.

“It has been a long time. I might explode if you keep that up.”

“But I want to explore you, baby.” She pouted and frowned, never stopping her motions.

I pulled my boxers up and kissed her lips again.

“You will, love. But first, tell me what you need. You were the one about to pass out in my backyard from horniness.”

Grace dropped her dress to the floor and placed it on the bed next to my tie.

I sucked in my breath, instantly aroused by the tight lacy white corset that pulled her round breasts up through the delicate material of her thigh high dress.

Her breasts were pushed so high I saw the top of her chocolate-brown areolas, which contrasted beautifully with the light, intricate design of the corset.

She turned around and thrust her almost fully exposed butt to me.

“What’s this? Another thong?” I grinned then ran my fingers up and down the string material of a lacy white thong that ate the crack of Grace’s flawless behind like a tasty lunch.

I lifted the thin string before smacking Grace playfully on each cheek as her butt jiggled.

“Another one to add to your wifey collection.” She rubbed against my crotch as she slowly bent down over the bed and lifted her butt toward me.

It looked like a succulent peach that was juicy enough to eat. She rubbed her right hip with her manicured hand and peered over her shoulder at me.

“I want it quick and rough. We can take it slow later.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I liked this aggressive version of my wife. I reached for her butt and held it firm with my hands before rubbing her skin from her waist toward her slit and back.

“Are you sure you can handle this? I don’t have lube, and I’d hate to go in too rough our first time. I want you to enjoy sex with me.” I brushed her slit with my fingers and teased her opening before planting my hands on her plump backside again.

“Then get on your knees and make me wet.”

Grace was a freaky freak.

I quickly gathered myself and smiled.

“If you insist.” I lifted the waistband of her panties and guided them down her legs, taking time to squat and tongue the back of each of her knees.

She stepped out of her thong and spread her legs so wide that my mouth watered. I massaged her thighs before getting on my knees, getting eye level with her womanly essence. I opened her lower lips with my fingers, rubbing the area in a repetitive circular motion.

Grace hissed and threw her head back.

“She’s gorgeous...all puffy and pink. You ready, baby?” I kissed her lower lips and blew cool air over them, causing her to shiver like a leaf in the wind.

“Uh huh.” She steadied herself with her hands on the bed then arched her back again,

bending and thrusting her folds closer to my mouth.

One by one, I inserted my fingers into Grace's vagina until they were coated with her juices. She moaned as I went in and out with increasing depth. She slowly rocked on my wet fingers until she dripped onto the floor below. When she was sopping wet, I removed my digits and held her hips steady.

"Now you're ready."

She wiggled her butt and groaned. I rose and lowered my pants, stroking my now erect penis a couple of times before lining him up with Grace's glistening slit. I guided the tip into her hole and slid in easily. She swallowed me whole.

"Damn," she hissed.

"Ohh..." I threw my head back and steadily found my rhythm as I thrust deeper and deeper into her. "Baby...you're so tight."

My mind wandered as my body took over. Grace had me losing myself with how thoroughly she grinded her body into me.

Her steady rhythm had me weak. I thought I would bust from the perfection of her technique—tap, squeeze, roll, repeat.

I grabbed her hips and held on, pressing into her hot tunnel and alternating between staying still and pumping into her as she repeated her hypnotic motions.

"Caleb, it's so hard and deep. Don't...stop."

"Keep throwing that ass back. Just...like...that."

She did as I said with an intensity that had me seeing the solar system...just like she promised when I asked her to marry me.

“That’s my spot,” she cried out as I pounded her harder.

I stayed in that position like it was my home, forcing myself not to ejaculate too soon from the sheer ecstasy of her movements. By the time I was ready to explode, beads of sweat popped off of my forehead.

“I’m cumming, Grace.”

“Me...too.” She held herself up on the bed as she shook and screamed.

I did the same and pumped into her every drop of cum left my body. I stayed in her and held her back, eventually pulling out before we both flopped on the bed. She laid her hands on her stomach and smiled at me.

“That was so good.” I lay on my stomach and rested my hand over Grace’s.

“Sorry it wasn’t slower.”

I grinned.

“It was perfect. You’re perfect.” I corrected myself. “With your freaky self.”

“Wait till I get to my house. I have lots of surprises in store for you, husband .”

“Okay, wifey . Let’s go.”

We cleaned ourselves and packed everything we needed for our honeymoon.

On the way to Grace's house, I periodically stared at her out of my peripheral vision.

The way she threw her tail back in my bedroom had me wondering about her past relationships.

She responded like a woman who had lots of sex and liked it.

Because of her introverted nature, I had assumed she was more innocent than what I witnessed at my house.

"Uh, Grace?" I stroked my chin, trying to form words that wouldn't sound disrespectful.

"Yes?" She rested her hand on my thigh and smiled at me, her dimples showing.

"Where did you...um...learn to please a man so thoroughly?"

Grace removed her hand and stared at me hard before tilting her head back and laughing too loudly for my taste.

"I'm forty years old. I had a life before I met you, Holy Hoe."

I knew she was teasing me, but I didn't like thinking her sexual past might be spotty like mine.

"I know that, but you really took control of the situation back there. I wasn't expecting all that technique and enthusiasm."

"You wanted me to be limp like a rag doll?"

"No. That's not what I meant."

She placed her hands in her lap and took a big breath.

“I was a high-end escort to rich guys in college. That’s why I’m okay with you paying me to be your wife. It’s actually lower pay than I’m used to, but since I like Hannah and Esther so much, I settled for your price.”

“What the fuck?” I shouted and swerved slightly.

Grace reached toward the wheel, her eyes wide.

“Be careful. I’m kidding. Control your mouth, Pastor.”

I clung to the steering wheel and kept my eyes on the road, ticked off that Grace thought joking about promiscuity and prostitution was funny.

“Seriously, I had an older lover in graduate school who allowed me to enjoy sex. I’m happy to share what I know and like with you. It’s also good material for the novels I ghostwrite. There’s no need to be jealous.”

I poked my lips out.

“I’m not jealous.”

But my ego was bruised. I didn’t like the idea of Grace sharing herself like that with another man, even if it was years ago. She was mine now.

“You had an entire wife before me. How are you upset with me when you created two lives with another woman? If I hadn’t come along, you’d still be with her. Their mother isn’t dead. Y’all have pregnancy memories. I only had sex.” Grace frowned as I tried to get over my feelings.

I couldn't believe we hadn't been married a full day before our first fight, which was about sex of all things.

Instead of enjoying my wife's enthusiasm during our lovemaking, I critiqued her.

I was insecure, jealous, and not grateful for the gift God gave me.

I reached for Grace's thigh and squeezed it.

"You're right. I'm sorry. Forgive me?"

She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, holding back a smile.

"I'll think about it."

I nodded and resumed the drive toward our honeymoon location, determined to receive and give whatever Grace offered from now on with an open mind and heart.

Eden

I wasn't surprised Caleb was a phenomenal lover. When he came at me sideways with that comment about my sexual history, I was tempted to tell him to drop me off at my house, and he could go back to his. In the silent car ride on our final miles to my house, I prayed we would be okay.

As a woman who believed in being free in the bedroom, I wasn't going to let Caleb shame me.

That was why I asked about his sexual preferences the day he asked me to marry him.

Only time would tell if he wouldn't turn into a chauvinist or be too stuck in his ways for me to be as sexually free as he was.

He parked the car in the narrow driveway and turned my way.

"Thank you for marrying me." Caleb touched my hand and lifted it to his lips.

I smiled and covered his hand with mine.

"We'll find our way together. Give me grace."

"No, give me Grace." Caleb leaned toward me and puckered his lips.

I kissed his full, soft lips and sat back, licking the lip balm he transferred during our exchange.

My ex may have awakened my body, but Caleb's kisses had me shivering in anticipation of what was to come.

"Okay. Bring in the bags and meet me inside. I'll make sure everything is ready for us."

Caleb nodded as I exited the car. When I unlocked and entered my house, I gasped. Stacey exceeded my expectations. I pulled out my phone to text her.

Me:

It's beautiful. Perfect in every way.

Stacey:

YAY! Put it on him good.

Me:

I will. Thanks again.

"Wow." Caleb entered the front door of my house and dropped our bags next to the door.

"Surprise!" I rushed to him and hugged him tightly.

He squeezed me in return.

"What's all this?"

"Our honeymoon oasis. Follow me." I led him by the hand as he trailed behind.

I stopped in the small family room that normally had a fireplace, a TV, and modest leather furniture. Now , a Garden of Eden sign hung above the fireplace in script letters.

Live, lush plants of varying heights gave our Eden a botanical garden feel.

Ferns, peace lilies, philodendron, and an artificial bird of paradise filled the room.

On the coffee table sat a crystal bowl of red and green apples and a wooden bowl of decadent assorted chocolates, Caleb's favorite sweet snack.

Gauze drapes covered the windows, offering the right amount of natural light to fill the room.

At night, lights strung across the wall would illuminate the space.

Caleb sniffed the air.

"What's that smell?"

I grinned.

"Diffusers of frankincense, sandalwood, and jasmine."

"Wifey thought of everything." He kissed me quickly.

"We have rules for Eden. But they're fun." I added the last part quickly as Caleb raised an eyebrow.

"Nakedness is mandatory. That's why I have blankets over the furniture and that fuzzy rug."

Caleb reached for the hem of my sundress and lifted it to my hips.

“I like that.” I held his hands and kissed his cheeks.

“Not yet. I need to show you the bedroom.”

“Boo...” He gave me a thumbs down and a frown.

“Delayed gratification.” I smacked Caleb’s firm butt and pointed toward the back of my house.

When I reached the closed door of the master bedroom, I turned to Caleb, my back to the door and hands behind my back.

“Close your eyes.” He covered his eyes with his hands.

I put my arm around his waist with one hand and turned the doorknob with the other. Once we were inside, I tapped his arm.

“Open them.”

He stood there with his mouth wide as he scanned the room. I picked up a remote as soft instrumental music filled the room.

“This is our sacred place. We’ll share our bodies, thoughts, and secrets.”

My canopy bed was covered with white sheer drapes that pooled to the hardwood floor.

At the head of the bed was an oversized peach throw pillow with an embroidered scripture of Genesis 2:25— They were both naked...

and felt no shame. On the other side of the pillow were our names, Caleb & Grace and today's date. Caleb picked up the pillow and laughed.

"Your sense of humor is something else."

"I'm glad you like it."

On an easel next to the bed stood an antique floor-length mirror. I pointed to it.

"I'm going to move it to the foot of the bed so we can watch each other cum."

Caleb's mouth dropped.

"I'm speechless."

I patted his chest.

"Good. I know that doesn't happen often. On this dresser are snacks, massage oils, and a bowl of fresh rose petals. Oh, and a blindfold." I pointed to each item as I described it.

I picked up a journal.

"This is for our thoughts. We can sit over there and pray too."

Caleb raked his hand over the cherry wood dresser.

"No handcuffs?"

"Not this time."

When we reached the end of the dresser, Caleb picked up a framed scripture in the same script as the Eden sign.

“I found the one my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go. Song of Solomon, chapter three, verse four. Absolutely beautiful.”

“Nita helped me come up with a vision of what love means to me. I prayed about how to make our time special.” I blushed, feeling vulnerable sharing my process for thinking of ways to seduce my husband.

“You heard from God on this one. The Bible is the original romance book.”

It delighted me that Caleb was pleased.

“Now that you’re mine, get used to being spoiled.”

Overflow

The way she moved in and out of being shy and bold turned me on more than any woman I'd ever been with.

“Later but get your rest for now. You'll need your strength.”

I meant that as I imagined all the ways I would take her across the house.

Grace's cheeks reddened.

“I'll give you privacy and wash up in my guest bathroom. I'm going to stick to you like glue.”

I licked my lips.

“I'll hold you to that, baby girl.”

Grace hid her grin behind her hands, making me want to say every naughty thing I could to her.

“Do me a favor. Slip on the silk kimono in the bag by the door.” I winked at her.

“I will. Meet me in the kitchen for dinner. Enjoy your shower, husband.”

I watched Grace sashay her full hips out of the room before I entered the bathroom.

Like the other rooms, various scriptures about love were placed in small frames.

Scents of coffee and cocoa filled the room.

A monogrammed S towel set lay on the counter along with the bath items Grace mentioned earlier.

I picked up the net and brown bar soap and entered the modest-sized shower.

As I turned on the water and lathered up, unexpected tears fell from my eyes.

“Abba Father, thank you for answering my prayers. Grace is what you promised. Show me how to step up for real.” I washed and conditioned my hair and beard and finished bathing and moisturizing my body.

I exited the shower and walked down the hallway with an oversized body towel around my waist. I found Grace in the kitchen with her silky robe draped loosely around her full body.

She bent over in front of the refrigerator door, giving me a view of her thick thighs and lower butt cheeks that had me bricking up.

For once, I could do something about it.

She closed the refrigerator door and halfway turned my way.

“This robe is perfect.” She faced me directly and froze, her mouth wide open as she stared at my naked chest.

I smiled.

“Are you okay?”

She closed her mouth and shook her head, pulling what I now realized was a too-tight robe over her full breasts. Since the pink satin fabric left nothing to the imagination, Grace’s pebbled nipples poked through the fabric like little rocks.

“Yes. It’s just that...” She grabbed the base of her throat and shook her head. “You’re fine as hell. Damn.”

I chuckled.

“Thank you.”

Grace walked to me and reached for my pec, stretching her robe. It fell open to the middle of her sternum.

“I can’t believe you have tattoos. They’re so pretty against your skin. Lift your arms for me.” She rubbed her fingers across my nipples and traced the eagle wings covering my left pec, tilting her head.

From there, she traced the vertical names of Hannah down by my right side and Esther on my left. I shivered as she alternated staring at my ink and into my eyes. I rarely showed my bare chest publicly, but for Grace, I’d run through downtown Farmington naked if she wanted me to.

“Are you going to tattoo my name somewhere?” She held my sides and bit her lower lip.

“No. Your entire essence is already tattooed on my heart.” I tapped my chest with my fingers and winked at her.

As she blushed and lowered her eyes, I picked up the edge of her robe and opened it, revealing the biggest, prettiest breasts I'd ever seen. Although I wanted to devour her, she deserved to be savored since this was her first honeymoon and marriage.

“Speaking of fine...Damn, baby, I need a taste. Remember those tongue exercises I told you about?” I lowered my lips to Grace's right nipple and flicked my tongue over it before doing the same with the left.

Grace arched her back and lifted the bottom of her breast to feed me more of it. I gladly accepted her offer, twirling my tongue over her skin and sucking hard before biting her nipple. When she moaned, I came up for air and said, “They're sweet just how I like them.”

“And they're so sensitive.” Grace moaned louder as I alternated nipple play across her breasts.

“Should I stop?” I massaged the skin I sucked with my fingers and kissed her wet lips at the same time, undoing her robe in its entirety.

I paused to take in the smooth curves of Grace's hips. The “V” at the apex of her thighs made me swallow several times so I wouldn't spit on myself.

“You're perfection in human form.” I placed my hands on her neck and worked my way down, cupping her breasts and kissing each of them before reaching behind her and jiggling her round butt with my hands.

I pushed Grace's robe down her body and dropped it before I turned her around. As I promised this morning, I licked her from the top of her spine to her ass. When I smacked it hard, she reached for my neck and kissed me.

“This slick tongue is divine.”

“It’s not done yet. Let’s go to Eden.” I walked backward to the family room, never taking my eyes off Grace’s form.

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat first?”

“I’m going to eat alright.” I licked my lips and brushed my fingers over her stomach.

“Save room for dessert,” she purred.

“Believe me. I will.”

Per the house rules, I removed my towel before I entered Eden.

“You’ve got a leg tat too?”

“Yeah.” I eyed Grace ogling my upper leg tattoo of a sword and shield.

Her eyes dropped to my manhood like it had her in a trance.

“The rumors are true. You are one of God’s favorites. He blessed you in every way.”

When I widened my stance, he jumped a little, making Grace wipe the corner of her mouth with her fingers.

“Damn.” She shook her head and bit her bottom lip. “I’ve seen a lot of dicks in my life, but I’ve never seen one as pretty as yours.”

Grace’s filthy mouth turned me on, but I wasn’t pleased with her comparison.

“How many dicks have you seen? Or touched? Or licked? I don’t want to beat a man’s shifty behind for turning my wife out.”

Grace knelt before me, resting her hands on my shoulders as she planted a quick kiss on my cheek.

“The only one I care about is the one on my hung, Holy Ghost filled husband.”

As Grace described me, she leaned in and planted the sultriest of kisses on my neck. She reached for my shaft and massaged it from head to tip, bricking me up harder than I’d ever been. I closed my eyes and moaned as her hands squeezed and rubbed repeatedly.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

“You’re not playing fair. That’s my... spot. Oh...”

“That’s it. Forget the past. Focus on the present. Let’s make new memories...nasty ones in our Eden.”

Grace buttered me up, and it worked. My ego soared from her admiration for my body.

“Lie down.” I hugged Grace and guided her shoulders to the plush rug behind us.

It was thick like grass and reminded me of a lush forest. Grace splayed herself on the rug as I opened her pretty legs, kissing her inner thighs and then going in with rapid licks to her glistening core.

“You taste like honey.” I spoke the words in between licks, raising my eyes to meet hers before they slowly rolled back in her head.

When she squirmed and tried to close her legs, I gently smacked them.

“Don’t you dare close my treasure chest. I need my reward.”

Grace smiled then widened her legs. I pushed them as far apart as I could. When I licked her labia, her juices started to flow.

“It’s yours, Caleb. Don’t...stop.” Grace’s breaths became ragged as I increased my speed with my tongue and licked her clitoris.

“Lift your legs.”

When Grace relaxed her limbs, I pushed them back over her head and nestled my body into hers, aligning my pole to her opening.

“I’m going to slide in real slow, baby. When I slip in, I can’t promise I’ll be able to stop. Are you ready for me to enter your fiery furnace?”

Grace giggled.

“Pastor’s got jokes. In that case, that friction better make me explode.”

“It will. Buckle up and hold on. Ready?”

Grace nodded.

“I’m going to count it down for you. One.” I teased the tip of my erection near her center as the wetness coated my shaft.

“Two.” I entered as Grace’s suction took me in.

“Three.”

With a big thrust of my hips, I gave my all to Grace again and again.

“Mother of God! It’s so big.” Grace’s nails dug into my back so hard they stung my skin.

I didn’t feel the pain of her nails because the connection I made with her was like a missing piece locking into a puzzle.

Grace’s intense eyes pierced my soul. Our bodies matched rhythms as we clung to each other.

Each time I entered Grace, I saw her capacity to give everything she had to me.

I needed to mark her as mine in every way.

“God made you for me.” I held my manhood in her tunnel as our eyes connected.

Adam and Eve messed up in the Garden of Eden, but Grace and I were about to get this covenant right.

Her eyes glistened as I lowered my lips to her mouth. When I parted, she held the back of my neck and whispered, “I’m yours as long as you want me.”

“Get ready to be with me forever then.”

My heart swelled as Grace’s body seized, and so did mine.

A guttural cry from the depths of my soul escaped me as Grace took every thrust I gave her.

I’d been waiting for this moment my entire life.

I wasn't sure how I could love Grace so deeply in such a short time, but I knew better than to try to figure something out that was bigger than I was.

"I'm going to flood you, sweetheart. You ready for my baby?"

"Yes!" Grace shouted as she came.

My seed entered her body seconds later and flooded out of her. Grace met me stroke for stroke. No devil in hell would be able to tear us apart. Like our cum, we were now one.

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Destined

God could come back and take me to heaven because I'd experienced the best he had to offer with his humble servant Caleb Stallings.

Caleb was all man with those hard muscles and mysterious tattoos that had him looking like a devious angel ready to punish me when he pounded my body.

I wasn't going to protest, though, because the naked version of Caleb gave off a semi-dangerous, authoritative vibe.

I was willing to bow down and call him "Sir" until he beat my soaking vagina into submission.

I'd never felt so tethered to another person in my life.

Caleb had me swooning so bad I thought he'd have to pick me off the rug we lay on.

It was already wet, capturing all our nasty Eden cum.

I couldn't care less about that rug or anything else in my house once Caleb catered to my body.

His supernatural dick had me praying in tongues under my breath.

He wasn't just a man. God must have given him a secret formula to take full control of me as his wife.

As I lay trying to gather myself, Caleb rose and walked toward the back of the house.

He returned with a wet washcloth, a small container, and a fresh sheet.

He put the sheet over the rug and motioned for me to roll onto it.

After wiping me clean, he placed the used cloth in the container.

He laid next to me and covered my chest with his arm, gently sucking my nipple closest to him.

“You good, baby?” He kissed my cheek and rubbed my stomach.

I turned to face him and smiled, stroking his cheek before resting my hand over his.

“I’m better than good. You’re exquisite. Thanks for being you.”

“You’re welcome. Are you ready for me to cook dinner? It’s the least I can do to thank you for making our honeymoon so special.”

I brushed Caleb’s lips with my thumb, honored that he would cater to my physical hunger as much as my sexual desires.

“Sounds good. What do you need me to do?”

“Sit on that counter with your legs open so I can feast my eyes on you as I cook. I might let you be my appetizer if you act right.”

“What do I get?”

Caleb lifted my leg and massaged my breasts.

“What do you want?”

I began to stroke his penis back to life.

“I can think of something that would satisfy me.”

Within seconds, Caleb was on me again, prepping my body for a new round of lovemaking that had me screaming his name at the top of my lungs before we collapsed in each other’s arms.

Thirty minutes later, I sat on the kitchen counter with my kimono robe tied loosely around my body as Caleb cooked us a meal of salmon and salad. We agreed that eating light would be best since we didn’t want to be weighed down as we romped around the house.

He flipped the two pieces of fish in my cast-iron pan with his back to me.

I crossed my legs and bit my lip as the muscles of his solid back flexed.

His loose lounge pants left nothing to the imagination as the fabric lay nicely over his firm backside.

He turned the exhaust above the stove off and placed his spatula down, facing me with a goofy grin.

“Are you going to stare at me all night?”

“Yes.”

He walked to me and rested his hands on my ticklish thighs, causing me to wiggle.

“Why me?”

Caleb frowned for a couple of seconds, then took a big breath.

“Because God told me you were my wife.”

I wanted to know the details.

“Was it an audible voice like I’m speaking to you now? What does hearing from God sound like?”

“Hold on a second.” He looked away, then went to the stove to plate our food.

When he returned, he placed his hands around my waist and kissed my cheek before directing his full attention to me again.

“It means that in the same way the girls had a list of requirements for a mother, I made my petition known to God for a wife. He gave me sign after sign that you were the one I needed to be with.”

“Did you ask him for perfection? I’m not perfect.”

“No. I asked Him for the person I needed and for the person who needed me.”

“I see.”

He lifted my chin with his fingers and held my eyes.

“What do you see?”

“You continue to teach me that God is gracious and forgiving. He takes imperfection

and connects it to goodness so it can be restored. Thanks for being obedient.”

“You are exactly what I needed.” Caleb hugged me and held me close.

“Thank you for saying that.” I closed my eyes and clung to him.

I didn’t mean to cry, but tears of joy rushed down my cheeks.

“It’s okay, Grace. Let it out, sweetheart.” Caleb rocked me as I silently cried, reminding me of how my daddy always encouraged me to release my sadness through tears.

In Caleb’s arms, I let go of a lot of pain I had been holding in.

Although I tried to convince myself this marriage was about the money, it wasn’t. What I had with Caleb soothed my troubled soul and satisfied my body. Caleb Evan Stallings was my person. For that, I was grateful.

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Love Language

Grace pulled emotions from me that I didn't know existed.

For the next two days, I tapped into her body, exploring every nook and cranny as she did the same.

She made me high like her body was my fix.

When I told her we wouldn't have vanilla sex, I wasn't lying.

Together, we elevated our freakiness to new heights.

I rested my hands on her legs as we sat on the love seat in the corner of her bedroom. We had just finished our morning devotion as she journaled in the notebook she bought for us. I nibbled on her neck as she wrote.

"Baby, I didn't realize you would be so handsy after we got married. I feel like your body pillow." She squirmed and readjusted her body in the seat.

"I love pillows." I sucked on her collarbone and squeezed her breast through her silk nightgown.

"You can't be squeezing my titties and rubbing my butt in front of the girls. You fell asleep sucking my nipple last night. Back up, bro, and give these titties a break before we go back to the real world."

I released Grace and frowned.

“I thought you wanted me all up on you with my ‘fine ass.’ What’s wrong with showing you affection? You’re addictive.”

“A sista needs a little space. I have eczema, so my skin is starting to flare up from all this contact. It’s a medical condition.” She pointed to a patch of skin on her arm that looked normal to me.

“You betta get a prescription for that. My love language is physical touch. I need lots of hugs and kisses. Blame my mama for holding me too much as a child.”

“Don’t blame Ms. Denise for your problems. Control yourself.” Grace wagged her finger at me. “And don’t take this behavior to church. I’d hate for you to have to call Elder Peyton up again.”

Grace stared at me with a look of genuine concern on her face. I rubbed my hands over her bare legs.

“Give me a little credit, baby. I know how to act in public and around the girls. Your limbs are gifts from God though. We need to show the young folks how to keep things spicy.”

“They got enough spice when I tongue-kissed you and it went viral. Mother Wesley still calls me fast. Next time, I’m sending her to you, Pastor.”

“She’ll just call me mannish and give me a peppermint to straighten me out.”

Both of us laughed.

“I’m glad that you’re working your clinginess out because I received an email about

some consulting work in DC. I'll be away for a week to chat with former colleagues about the potential for remote data science work. It will be a good opportunity with a bigger paycheck."

"When are you traveling?"

"The week after Mother's Day. You've got all the women of the church to take care of you. They love their pastor."

"But they're not you." I snuggled under Grace and rested my head on her chest.

She placed our journal aside and massaged my waves before kissing me on the top of my head.

"I guess I can coddle my man a little more since he's so doggone needy."

I lifted my head and puckered my lips for a kiss.

"God bless you, baby." I spoke in an old lady voice, which cracked Grace up.

"You are such a mess."

"And you love it."

Grace kissed me again and tweaked my nose with the tip of her finger.

"I really do."

Distractions

After our honeymoon, we settled into a steady routine where the girls got used to me living in the house with them. I prepared them for school and led the bedtime routine every day since Caleb hosted ministerial conferences and traveled to visiting churches for revivals.

If anyone were to ask me if Caleb was a breast, leg, or thigh man, I'd say he was an everything man. He stayed on my body like white on rice, humping and pumping into me every chance he got. I never knew a man could be so clingy and horny, no, make that attentive.

Our post-marriage courtship continued as we played icebreaker games like "Truth or Dare" and "Two Truths and a Lie." I enjoyed our simple conversations, where I shared more about who I was and how I had evolved over the years.

"I want to put your skills to use, Grace. You're so intelligent." Caleb sat at the foot of the bed, massaging my feet as I typed on my laptop.

I looked up from my screen and smiled.

"Let me know what you need. I'm happy to help."

"Tell me about your new career."

I bit my nail, wondering how much of my freelancing I wanted to share with Caleb.

I was still trying to build my clientele, so my income wasn't as steady as my monthly government checks.

Fiscal instability was why I accepted Caleb's generous allowance.

I could save up and buy more time if I needed to heal.

"Since I've always loved to write, I freelance mostly as a romance writer."

"I see."

Caleb loved to probe me when I gave vague responses, so I decided to use one of his tactics on him.

"What do you see?"

"There's more to you than meets the eye. It's like removing a veil. Second Corinthians 3, verse 18 says, When the veil is removed, the glory of God shines through. I enjoy seeing what else is under the veil that covers you."

My cheeks heated. When Caleb spoke about me in a spiritual way, his words were often suggestive, flirty, and wise. He had the unique gift of drawing me to him as a woman but also as a child of God. Even now, I was slightly aroused.

"You interpret and apply the word like poetry. When are you writing your book?"

He chuckled.

"I never thought about it, but since I sleep with an in-house author, it shouldn't be hard to push them out, should it?"

His humility was endearing, making me want to offer my writing and editing services to him if he ever needed them.

“If you give me the content, I’ll help you write your books. Let me know when you’re ready, Pastor C.”

I settled back into writing as Caleb positioned himself at the head of the bed. As was my habit when I wrote in bed at night, I put in my headphones so I wouldn’t disturb Caleb when he read before bed. He picked up his reading glasses and one of several books on his nightstand.

Within half an hour, I was in my groove, typing away and tuning out everything around me as low strains of Tank’s R&B Money album played through my headphones. In typical Tank style, he sang about licking body parts and getting women wet during nasty sex.

A light tap on my shoulder and a whiff of Caleb’s Versace cologne entered my nostrils, pulling me from my work zone. I paused my music and met Caleb’s eyes.

“What’s up?”

“Why’re you biting your lip like that?” He took his reading glasses off, peering into the screen of my laptop.

I straightened my face, unaware that I wore my arousal so openly when I wrote. I reached for the lid and attempted to close it, but Caleb gently removed my hand.

“Let me see.”

I held his wrist and leaned toward his cheek.

“No . Please go back to your nighttime reading.”

“If I’m going to be a published author, I need to know my wife’s writing style.” He rested his hand on my thigh. “Invite me into your world, sweetheart.”

I licked my lips, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Writing was my sacred space. I closed my eyes and steadied my mind, preparing myself for any criticism he might give me.

“I’m writing a scene for a second-chance romance. The protagonists have reconnected, and they’re going to make love.”

“Are they married?”

“Not yet.”

“Hmm.” He stroked his chin and held it in his hand, frowning as if he were deep in thought.

“Hmm, what?” I snapped at him defensively, sounding harsher than I intended.

Caleb’s voice sweetened.

“You don’t write Christian romance?”

“No. Why would you assume that?”

“That’s my world, so it’s what I know.”

“How would you rate it?”

“R. Sometimes X.”

“So they freaky like us. My baby’s explicit . Read a scene to me. And let me hear what’s in your headphones.”

“Tank’s too nasty for you. It’s inappropriate.”

“You do know my nicknames, right?”

“Holy Hoe ain’t a hoe no mo, so I said what I said. Go back to your...” I looked at the title of his book. “Men’s devotional.”

Caleb placed his devotional back on the nightstand and lifted his T-shirt over his head. He stood and removed his shorts and returned to the bed as naked as the day he was born. I held back a grin as he reached for my hand and held it.

“I might get some new ideas for ways to please your body and not get caught having vanilla sex.” He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it, making my heart flutter.

“Never vanilla sex.” I teased, biting my lip.

“I want to please you so thoroughly that all I have to do is look in your eyes and you’ll gush like a broken fire hydrant.” He kissed me on the cheek. “And...I want to know how your writing brain works.”

My heart warmed at Caleb’s thoughtfulness. My clit thumped a little too. No matter how freaky we were, I’d never played explicit music around him. It seemed like the proper thing to do, especially since we had little girls in the house.

I opened my laptop. When I stared at my screen, Caleb said, “Play the song, baby.”

I sat silently, pondering what I would read to him. When I decided, I pulled up the passage took a deep breath before playing Tank's song with J. Valentine called "Slow." When the music began, I started reading.

"Raven opened her legs wide and ushered Storm closer with her fingers. He brushed his slightly calloused hands up her legs and between her thighs until they reached her core. Her breath caught. As she tried to gather herself, he placed the pad of his fingers at the crotch of her panties and pulled them aside. Moisture pooled as he inserted one, two, and eventually, three fingers in her." I inhaled and exhaled quickly before closing my eyes and placing my hand over my heart. "Then she sucked him off."

"Let me put that song in the speaker." Caleb's voice caught as he picked up his phone, searched for it on his music app, and hit play.

The opening strains of the song filled the room.

He pumped hand sanitizer from the nightstand into his hands and rubbed them together before closing my laptop and placing it next to his book. With his face inches from mine he asked, "May I?" His fresh breath tickled my nose.

"May you what?"

"Do what Storm did to Raven."

My heart thumped at Caleb's willingness to explore new ways to be intimate. I nodded, also impressed with his impeccable manners at garnering my consent for the games he played with me.

He straddled my body and placed his knees on either side of me. When he rested his hands on my waist, I placed my hands on his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” His gentle voice soothed my heart as it raced.

Tank sang about going deep and touching his woman’s soul. When he got to the part about making her scream and not letting her go until she released, a shiver ran down my spine. The piano and beat took me away to a fantasy that replaced Storm with the sexy man in front of me.

“Yes.”

His finger toyed with the lace on my cheeky panties.

“You’ve done a great job learning our house rules, but I have one more for you.”

“What’s that?”

“No panties or bras under your clothes at home.”

I shook my head vigorously.

“No, sir.” I lifted my heavy breasts through my T-shirt and dropped them. “These would be a droopy mess, wiggling and shaking like they don’t have home training. Hannah and Esther will not remember me as their saggy-breasted mother.”

Caleb didn’t flinch as I ended my rant.

“You’re showing them how to be free,” he said calmly.

“Our kids don’t need to see swollen nipples every time they talk to me.”

“But I do.” He lifted my T-shirt and kissed my breast. “Take this off.”

He reached for the bottom of my shirt. I raised my arms and allowed him to pull it over my head.

“See?” I pointed to my full breasts, which drooped without the support of a bra.

“They’re perfect, baby.” Caleb licked his lips and circled my nipples with his fingers.

“Take your panties off too. Raise your hips.”

I did as he instructed. Caleb removed my panties and tossed them on the floor.

He lowered his body and positioned his palms inside my knees. He opened them slowly, snaking his body and keeping his eyes on mine as my legs widened. The way he moved didn’t scream preacher’s kid.

“Still good?”

“Yes, Caleb.”

My husband had me whimpering.

“I like how you say my name in that little sexy way.” He showed his perfect canines.

Caleb inched his fingers higher, never taking his eyes off mine.

“Is your breath catching like Raven’s?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Seduction is a lost art.”

Within seconds, I felt Caleb's fingers near my vulva, teasing me ever so lightly before he kissed then flicked his tongue quickly over my thigh.

"You're an amazing writer, very vivid and descriptive. I can feel that wetness you wrote about." He inserted one, two, then three fingers, pumping in and out of me as I squirmed.

He thrust inside me so much that I thought I'd explode.

"That's enough. Let me pleasure you. Come up here so I can suck you."

He lifted his body and did as I asked, grinning the entire time. I stroked him to life, leaned in, and tasted him, causing him to hiss as I took him in my mouth.

For the next ten minutes, Caleb was putty in my hands. By the time his seed slid down my throat, I probably could have asked him for anything, and he would have given it to me. When he composed himself and I wiped us off with tissues, he collapsed on the bed with a satisfied smile on his face.

"Your mouth is anointed."

"Go to sleep. I have another chapter to write." I inserted my headphones back in my ears for Tank to finish serenading me as I wrote.

Within seconds, Caleb was out like a light.

I stayed up another hour, processing how quickly my life shifted. When I finished my nighttime routine, I lay beside Caleb and placed my hand on his smooth back.

"Thank you, God, for a second chance at life." I spoke the words and drifted off to sleep.

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Steady State

Although married life made me happier than I'd ever been, I was concerned about Grace. Yesterday, she seemed down. This would be her first Mother's Day without her mother, so that was understandable.

After I picked the girls up from school and got home, she looked tired and her eyes were puffy.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"Just thinking about Mama and how much I miss her."

When I opened my arms, Grace walked into them. The scent of her freshly shampooed hair entered my nostrils.

"I don't want the girls to see me down."

I pulled back and held her shoulders.

"Although you're amazing, you're not superhuman. The girls will adore you even when you don't feel your best."

Tears filled Grace's eyes. She looked away to avoid my glance, but I guided her chin back to me.

“We don’t need perfection. We need you.”

Grace wiped the tears from her eyes and nodded.

“Thanks for saying that.”

Before dinner, we went to the local playground and wore the girls out. That night, before they drifted off to sleep, they huddled around Grace.

“Are you going to stay with us?” Hannah asked.

“I don’t want you to leave, Mommy Grace.” Esther’s pouty lips pulled at my heartstrings.

I knew these questions came from Madeline’s abandonment. I hated that the girls still felt unstable, even after Grace brought such love and stability to our home.

“I’m realer than real...feel.” Grace extended an arm in front of each girl as they sat on the edge of their matching twin beds.

They each squeezed her arms and smiled.

“Yep, she’s real.” Hannah nodded at Esther, who nodded right back.

“Time for bed.” Grace’s kind voice filled the room.

Esther rubbed her little eyes. Both kids got on their knees to pray.

Short of being in Grace’s hot folds, this was by far my favorite time of day.

“God bless Mommy Grace and Daddy and all the people in the world. Thank you for

making us a happy family. Please give us a little brother for Christmas. Amen.” Esther’s strong voice rang through the room.

“Amen,” I said with gusto, amused that when Esther led nightly prayers, she always prayed for a brother.

Grace remained silent and avoided my eyes. I tucked them into their respective beds before Grace and I kissed the top of their little foreheads. I checked the frog nightlight under the window. When we turned off the light, it flickered, casting a circle of lime green light in the space.

“Night night. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Faint “okays” filled the room before I closed the door.

In the hallway, I gestured in the direction of my office.

“I’m going to work on tomorrow’s sermon.”

“Mind if I keep you company?”

“Of course.”

I smiled and quickened my steps toward my larger - than - average home office in the front of the house.

My mind lingered on the girls. I hated that Hannah and Esther clung to Grace like Velcro, often acting like she was going to leave them.

She couldn’t even go to the grocery store without them asking if she was coming back.

I wanted to find new ways to assure them that Grace was here to stay.

That was why I did everything in my power to make Grace happy, even paying her.

Grace moved to the corner of the office I set up for her two weekends ago.

She wasn't a complainer by nature, but I noticed her weariness when she typed at the kitchen table or in bed.

I wanted her to have a designated space where she could perfect her craft.

We selected a standing desk and an ergonomic chair that she said felt like heaven.

We angled her work station, so she had a clear view of the backyard behind my desk.

Although I had studied the Bible, read, or written notes for my sermons and engagements in solitude for years, Grace's quiet presence in my office always comforted me, reminding me of God's faithfulness and love.

As was our habit, she made a beeline to her desk, opening her laptop, and writing almost immediately. Since she had her headphones on, I turned on music in the small speaker on my mahogany desk. The low hum of instrumental gospel music filled the air.

I set up my workspace, pulling out several big Bibles along with a silver fountain pen over a legal pad.

I put on my glasses and found the passages I needed, looking up the Hebrew and Greek origins of words in select scriptures.

After an hour, I took off my reading glasses, noticing that Grace stared at me.

“What is it?”

“You bring such consistency to our household. Next to the definition of stable in the dictionary would be a picture of you, front and center every time.”

Emotion filled her kind voice.

“Thank you. Where did that come from?”

“I thought about how kind you were about Mother’s Day. And your patience with the girls. You humor Esther every time she asks for a brother.”

I chuckled.

“I’m just in agreement with her.”

Grace blushed.

“See...you’re like a powerful king on a throne. All authoritative and confident. Such an amazing daddy.”

Grace rose from her seat and came to my side, resting her hand on my shoulder and kissing the top of my head.

I wrapped my arm around her waist and inhaled her shower-fresh scent. My chest swelled at her beauty and blatant encouragement.

“Don’t start anything you can’t finish, love. I’m the kind of daddy that fills mommies’ sweet mouths with things that have them begging for good loving.”

“You promise?”

Woman...

“I want to give Esther her prayer request.” I lifted her short gray dress with one hand and massaged her bare behind. “Thank you for being obedient. It’s so efficient when I need to slip between your hot legs.”

Grace wiggled beneath my hands as they roamed over her smooth flesh.

“Sit on me.” I pushed away from the desk, lowered my gray sweatpants, and patted my lap.

Grace rubbed my growing erection then straddled me, lowering and nestling her fat ass against my hardness.

I bit her earlobe.

“Remember when I told you I’d rub my hot slit against you so hard you’d cream in your pants?”

“Yeah, except I’ve already lowered my pants for you. Cream right on me, baby.”

“You’re so bad,” she whispered, making my spine tingle.

“Scream as loud as you want when you ride me.”

I lowered the spaghetti straps of Grace’s casual cotton dress.

Her dress pooled at her waist. I planted my hands on her hips, guiding her wetness toward me.

She slowly grinded on me, sinking deeper onto me each time.

Within seconds, I slid into her with ease.

I whimpered and bit my lip as she rode me slowly.

“Take what you need. You better not stop,” I growled.

“I...won’t.”

As Grace got lost in her rhythm, I massaged her pebbled breasts. Our bodies rocked in sync, and I bit my lip, almost drawing blood. She paused and tilted her head back at me.

“Tell me why Madeline left this angel dick.”

I grunted and frowned, ready to curse her out disrupting our flow to mention my trifling ex-wife.

“I don’t want to talk about a crackhead.”

To shut Grace up, I grabbed her hips and slowly pounded her body into oblivion.

“I’m cumming.” She rode me so hard she slipped off my erection several times.

I held her steady so I could get my nut out.

After a few more thrusts, Grace rocked her body harder and screamed. As another wave overtook her, I climaxed too. When we stopped shaking, she rose, facing and straddling me.

“Oh my goodness,” she whispered against my lips.

I placed my forehead on hers, trying to catch my breath.

“That was so good.” I squeezed Grace’s breasts and held them to my lips, kissing each of them gently.

She cradled me and gave me a tight hug.

“Get back to work, Pastor. You have a Mother’s Day sermon to finish.”

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Lovely Day

Mother's Day morning was beautiful in every way as the girls and Caleb gave me flowers and cards during breakfast. On our way to church, we sang and shared how grateful we were to spend our first Mother's Day together.

When his piercing eyes rested on me, I was reminded of how intense he was when he touched and licked me. He followed my movements behind the lenses of his small, rimmed glasses and tilted his head down to examine my frame from the top of my head to my heeled feet before giving me a faint smile.

At the close of the service, Caleb gestured toward Taylor, the young woman who read the church announcements. Before she could stand, a voice from the back of the church shouted out.

"I have something to say."

A hush fell over the congregation. I turned to see who dared to disrupt our church flow. A vision of elegance in a powder blue pantsuit stood and slowly sashayed up the aisle toward the front of the church.

"Who is that?" I turned to Ms. Denise, confused by the unexpected commotion.

She tapped my arm and held it tight as everyone watched the woman's smooth motion.

"The devil."

“Say what?”

Ms. Denise rose and pulled me up by my arm. We watched the woman as she approached our row with a mean mug on her face. I turned back to my mother-in-law for answers since none of the ushers did anything to stop her.

“Should we do something?” I jerked my head back and forth, searching for security.

Although the woman was out of order, she didn’t move as if she were demented or unhinged. In fact, she appeared poised as if it was natural for her to move freely among the congregation.

“That’s Madeline’s evil ass.” Ms. Denise didn’t bat an eye, cursing in church like she said praise Jesus.

Bile entered my throat as I took in Madeline’s exquisite body.

She was slim and stunning in a form-fitting designer suit.

Her ombre blonde and dark brown weave hung low as her nude stilettos elevated the daintiest of feet.

I saw firsthand where Hannah got her delicate features.

She may have been a crackhead years ago, but she didn’t look like one now.

She ascended the steps to the stage with the grace of a model and stood by Caleb...

much like I did when we announced our engagement.

She picked up the microphone from the lectern and skimmed the audience.

Half of the congregation stood perplexed and silent like me.

When she had everyone's full attention, she spoke directly into the microphone.

“Good morning, saints.”

At least half the congregation said good morning back.

“My name is Madeline Stallings...the former Mrs. Caleb Stallings for those of you who are new here.”

That heifer looked directly at me. I folded my arms in disbelief.

She paused again as a murmur filled the room. When it died down, she continued speaking with her head held high.

“God is faithful. Amen?”

“Amen.” Fewer people responded this time.

“Anybody ever gone through hard times?” she asked.

“Yep!” several people shouted.

I was ready to throw my shoes at those traitors. Why were they encouraging her? And why was Caleb standing up there like a bump on a log?

Madeline paused and looked up to the heavens, wiping what I thought were fake tears from her eyes.

“Take your time!” A female voice shouted encouragement.

“I went through hard times and left the city to get myself together. There’s no better day to seek forgiveness than right now.” Madeline clapped with the mic in her hand, eating up the attention from those who gave it to her.

“Happy Mother’s Day, everyone.” She lifted the mic as if it were a trophy then placed it back in its cradle.

Madeline ended her little performance by leaning toward a stunned Caleb and hugging him tightly as a smattering of people applauded.

I wanted to run to the platform and snatch her hair off her head. Instead, I folded my arms over my chest and waited for Caleb to set her straight. He swayed from side to side with a wild-eyed look on his face. I tried to catch his attention, but he looked like a deer caught in headlights.

“Why is he just standing there?” I spoke directly to my mother-in-law, whose mouth hung open. “Should I go to him?”

“Child, he’s in shock. And we’re live streaming, so he probably doesn’t want to go viral for cussing her out. Let him be the shepherd and do what he should. This is his demon to conquer.” Ms. Denise held my arm.

Madeline released Caleb and smiled at everyone as if she deserved a pat on the back. She exited the platform and walked back down the aisle to her seat.

Caleb finally moved and motioned to the people around him.

“Praise God for redemption. Sister Taylor, please come with our church announcements.” Caleb dragged his words and then moved to the back of the stage.

He stood in the darkness as the light shone on Taylor. His eyes were shut. He held his

wrists with his hand. At the end of the service, he offered a generic benediction and then slowly moved off the stage toward his office.

“Go, Grace. I’ll get the girls.” Ms. Denise pushed me as Nita nodded and wrung her hands.

I picked up my belongings and hurried toward Caleb’s office. I tapped on his closed door with my knuckles.

“It’s me,” I spoke through the door.

He cracked the door and peered out. I tried to push the door open with my hands, but Caleb didn’t budge. His eyes were red. I’d never seen Caleb in tears.

“Let me in.”

“I need a minute.”

“I’m here for you.”

“Give me time, Grace.” He closed the door in my face.

I stumbled back into the hall, my breathing shallow. I wanted to knock the door down but didn’t want to force myself on Caleb after he pushed me away. I rushed toward the annex where Hannah and Esther were. When I reached them, the lead teacher gave me a huge smile.

“The girls were so excited today. Your mother-in-law picked them up, and their mother greeted them.”

My heart sank.

“Where’d they go?”

“Mother Stallings took them to Pastor C’s office.”

I stepped back as my mind raced. I didn’t pass them on the way, so they must have gone out of the building and around the church. I power walked back to Caleb’s office in time to see his door cracked. This time, I barged in.

Madeline beamed at her girls, who had a confused look on their faces. Ms. Denise frowned with her arms folded, and Caleb stood as stiff as a board.

“Hey...” I waved at everyone but kept my eyes on Caleb.

“Hello.” Madeline’s chipper voice cut through the air as the girls rushed to me and looked between Caleb and me.

“Mommy Grace, this lady said she’s our real mommy. Tell her to stop lying.” Hannah pointed at Madeline and spoke with uncharacteristic boldness.

Her chest rose and dropped as if she’d been running. She and Esther held hands so hard their knuckles were white. My little girls were confused and frightened. I ignored everyone else and squatted, holding their waists in each of my hands.

“I’m taking you home.”

Caleb cleared his throat, forcing me to look into his eyes.

“That won’t be necessary, Grace. Madeline and I will tell the girls what’s going on. Mama can take you home. We’ll see you later.”

My mouth dropped. I knew this sanctimonious bastard wasn’t dismissing me. I

wanted to scream at him for excluding me, but I didn't want to scare the girls.

Madeline's smug smile pissed me off all over again.

"No worries. I'll take a rideshare and see y'all at home." I gave the girls a final hug and walked out of Caleb's office, slamming the door behind me.

I moved to the lobby of the sanctuary and stood out of sight of the remaining parishioners. I pulled out my phone to call a ride as hot tears of embarrassment burned my eyes.

I would spend the night at my house before leaving for my DC trip in the morning. When I returned, I would recenter myself and my mental health.

The day Mama died, I vowed that no one would treat me like trash again. Caleb was no exception to that rule. I refused to relapse because of my husband and his raggedy ass judgment.

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Unbelievable

Madeline threw me off guard so much when she stood up in the middle of the sanctuary that I couldn't think straight. Of all days, my crackhead baby mama chose one of the busiest days to waltz her wannabe diva behind into my church to show out and leave me fixing her mess like she always did.

Any other time, my ushers would have stopped her in her tracks, but the old school members of my church knew who she was.

They attended my over-the-top wedding and witnessed my commitment to my first wife.

They also remembered how crushed I was when I had to announce that I was divorced, although I never shared that Madeline was a drug addict.

They were probably as shocked as I was at how this played out.

I was too stunned to take the mic from Madeline as she cracked a buttery smile that used to turn me into jelly.

I was surprised drugs didn't rot her teeth out, but here she was, skinning and grinning like she had just returned from a European vacation and had not abandoned our girls without so much as a goodbye note.

Her entire performance, I bit my tongue so hard it hurt. Only after the service did I collapse.

“God, please help me,” I said the words over and over as tears flowed down my cheeks and onto my desk.

That woman caused so much pain in my life. I thought I would lose my mind and possibly my girls. I tried to process everything quickly, but it was too much and at the wrong time. My life was perfect, and she came back to ruin me.

When Grace knocked on my door, I was embarrassed and in my feelings. She had never seen me this weak, and she wasn’t about to today.

“Let me in...I’m here for you.” Her gentle voice cut to my heart, but I didn’t want her to witness my breakdown.

When I dismissed her, I stared out my office window until my mother arrived with the girls. By then, I was coherent. When I opened the door, Madeline’s conniving self stood next to Mama.

“Come in,” I said the words in a steady voice that surprised me.

The girls jumped on my legs, their eyes wild.

“Who is this lady, Daddy?” Hannah screamed the question.

Esther was uncharacteristically quiet. Her eyes were wide as she wrapped her small body around my leg like a pretzel.

I leaned down and motioned for them to jump into my arms. They rushed into them, then I carried them behind my desk.

I positioned each of them on my knee as they wrapped their arms around my neck.

I looked at Madeline, who gazed at us as if she sucked a lemon.

“This is your mommy, the one whose tummy you were in.”

The girls stared at Madeline in silence. My mother gave me a frustrated shake of her head. Madeline held her hands with a bowed head as she stole quick glances at the girls in my arms.

That was when Grace returned to my office. As soon as she walked through the door, the girls slid from my lap and ran to her. The alarm on their faces paralyzed me. I needed to nip this mess with Madeline in the bud, so I sent Grace and my mother home so I could take care of business.

In hindsight, I knew I hurt Grace, but I needed Madeline gone. If I didn't shut her foolishness down, she would return like a cancerous growth.

Madeline and the girls eyed each other but remained silent. Fortunately, the girls were occupied with a box of toys, art supplies, and a fully charged tablet Grace convinced me to keep for them in my office. Madeline and I spoke softly so the girls won't overhear our conversation.

“Why are you here?” I wasn't going to coddle Madeline after she showed out so publicly.

“To tell you I'm clean and to be in my girl's life. I want them to know me.”

“We'll have to go through legal stuff for all that. As you can see, they're content with my new wife and me.”

Madeline laughed.

“What wife?” She scanned the room with her hands in the air. “You mean that mammy you pushed out of your office? What kind of marriage do y’all have? Is she your beard? Or your whore?”

I sucked in my breath, taking in Madeline’s words. I wanted to slap the shit out of her. Her mean-spirited words always pushed me into a dark place I thought I’d been delivered from.

Although her words were vile, she was right about my disrespect to Grace.

How could I be so dumb? I barely spoke two words to her and didn’t introduce her properly.

I sent her away and kept Madeline, sending the wrong message to everyone.

Although everything in me wanted to rush home to Grace, I needed to finish what I had started with Madeline.

“I just want them to know I’m their real mama, and I’m alive. Your mammy will never take my place in their eyes.”

“Grace is the one who takes care of my girls, so she will always have a place in their lives too.”

“She’s their mammy, not their mother. They’re my flesh and blood, not hers.”

“She doesn’t need to be connected to them by blood to be their mother.”

Madeline tapped her long fingernails on her Birkin bag.

“Look. I’m not here to fight. My friend Roxanne told me that she tried to take my

place when I left, but you rejected her. I heard you got married, and I wanted the girls to know me. I'll leave my address and keep it moving," she said.

Roxanne and Madeline's evil tails were in cahoots all this time? If my ex could be that conniving, what were her intentions with our kids?

"Y'all are foul. But to be clear, you're not asking for custody?"

She turned and looked at the girls as they played dress up with their Barbies. She blew out a raspberry when she faced me again.

"Hell no. I don't want them kids. That's why I had a hysterectomy. Ain't no nigga eva nuttin' up in me and making my ass fat again."

For the first time since she arrived, Madeline's hood rat nature showed up. It was cute when I was in the world, but now that I had a pure woman in my life, I couldn't stand that ratchet behavior.

"Good to know."

When Madeline stared me down, I cocked my head, annoyed.

"Don't pop up like this again." I pushed my chair back and pointed to the door.

"Don't worry. I got what I needed." She chuckled and examined her nail bed.

"You're still petty, Madeline."

"And you're still a jackass."

Madeline eased from her chair and waved to the girls.

“Bye, girls.”

“Bye.” They waved their hands and watched Madeline waltz out of my office.

I had so much explaining to do.

On the way home, I called Grace, but she didn’t answer her phone. When I got to a red light, I texted her.

Me:

I’m so sorry about today. The girls and I are on the way home.

When she didn’t respond immediately, I put the phone down. At the next red light, a notification came through on my watch, alerting me that Grace had texted me.

Grace:

Lunch is at the house. I’m heading out tonight on an earlier flight to DC. Will be back later this week.

Me:

What?

Grace’s flight wasn’t supposed to leave until tomorrow. Was she so angry with me that she changed her itinerary? When she didn’t respond, I put my phone down again.

A feeling of dread rested in my stomach. Grace’s feelings were already tender. I hadn’t been a good steward of the gift God gave me. I needed to work this out sooner rather than later.

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Triggered

After church, I hurried to Caleb's house to get my car and to retrieve essentials for my work trip.

I drove home to hide out before leaving for DC in the morning.

I lied to Caleb about where I was. I wasn't in the mood to deal with him.

Too many triggers popped up today, and I needed to process everything away from the girls, who were probably confused about what was going on too.

The girls.

I wished I could snatch them up and bring them to me, but then I'd have to talk to Caleb.

I wondered if their diva mother was still with them or at Caleb's house. He loved touching on folks so much that I pictured him feeling her up. I fumed, saying a silent prayer of protection for Hannah and Esther before resuming my preparation for my trip.

I sucked in my breath as I walked through my house. The decor from my honeymoon remained, reminding me of my exquisite, sensual times with Caleb.

On the kitchen counter was an unopened bottle of champagne I left for us to drink the next time Ms. Denise or Nita kept the girls.

Since I wasn't letting Caleb between my legs anytime soon, I popped the liquor open and drank directly from the bottle, wanting to drown my sorrows before sinking into a hot bath.

With the bath salts Caleb and I bathed in.

Soul ties were no joke, because as I entered the bathroom, bottle in hand, I smelled him.

I moved throughout the rest of the house to escape his essence but couldn't.

His smell was tattooed in my nose. Even the ottoman and bedspread held his woodsy scent, taking me back to our private times like an erotic movie.

To gather myself, I sat outside on the patio, inhaling the fresh air that finally neutralized my senses. I lifted my eyes to the clouds, thinking of past Mother's Days.

"I miss you so much, Mama. I'm trying to make it without you, but it's hard. Please send a guardian angel my way. I need your presence now more than ever."

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I placed the nearly empty champagne bottle on the ground and touched my stomach.

A bubble of indigestion cut through me, pulling me from my musings.

I shouldn't have eaten that breakfast burrito this morning.

Pork hadn't been agreeing with me over the past few weeks.

The last thing I needed was to have an upset stomach flying out of town.

The phone in my pocket rang as Caleb's sexy smile came up along with his name. I sent the call to voicemail and texted him instead.

Me:

I only have time to chat with the girls, so if they aren't talking to me, you and I can talk tomorrow when I'm done with work.

Caleb:

I know you're mad at me.

No shit, Sherlock.

Me:

Gotta go.

I put my phone back in my pocket and sat on the wooden bench out back. My phone rang a few minutes later. It was Caleb again.

"What, Caleb? You said everything you needed to say today. I got your message loud and clear. Give me space."

"The girls want to talk with you. Don't cut yourself off from them."

"You know I wouldn't do that. They're innocent bystanders."

"Thank you for understanding that. Here they are."

"Where are you, Mommy Grace?"

I heard Hannah's angst on the phone.

"I'm on a business trip, sweetheart. I'll be back when I'm done."

"Are you leaving me like my other mommy?" Hannah's voice rose and fell before she burst into tears.

"I gotta go, Grace. Call you later." Caleb hung up the phone before I could comfort Hannah.

I wanted to call back but decided not to. Caleb made this mess, so he needed to fix it. When my phone rang several minutes later, I expected it to be Caleb. Instead, it was Nita.

"My dear, how are you?"

Lies filled my mind until I remembered this was Nita, a woman who cherished and comforted me during my darkest times. Although Caleb was her nephew, I trusted her with my thoughts.

"Not good."

Like Hannah moments earlier, my voice cracked as I finally released the tears and tension that had built up throughout the day.

"Get it out."

I cried until I gathered my breath.

"Where are you?" she asked.

“At my house.”

“Is Caleb with you?”

“No. He’s at his house with the girls.”

“I see. Have y’all talked about what happened today?”

“I haven’t had a chance to do that.”

“Haven’t had a chance or haven’t taken the time to talk with your husband about his ex-wife busting up in church and showing out?”

“It’s complicated, Nita.”

“Marriage is complicated. You’re a leader in that church , whether you want to be or not. Stop running away from your problems, Grace. God didn’t send you a husband for you to fight with him.”

I knew Nita was right, but my ego wouldn’t let me admit it.

“I hear you, but I’m good.”

“Hmm...if you say so, Dr. Stallings.”

Nita’s use of my married name pricked my heart.

No matter how much I wanted to abandon my vows, I was still Caleb’s wife.

At least, for now. My devotion to my girls was real.

I didn't care that Madeline carried them in her belly.

I carried them in my heart. What happened today wasn't going to disappear simply because I wanted it to.

"Thanks for being there for me. I'm flying out to DC for work in the morning, so I'll sleep on all of this and settle it when I get back."

"Never let the sun set on your anger, my dear. It's not healthy for your marriage."

"Thanks for your advice."

I heard what she said but dismissed her. I didn't want to forgive Caleb so easily. When Nita and I got off the phone, I got ready for a bath and bed.

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Jolt

Grace never left home without leaving a note for the girls or me but didn't leave one today. Her car, suitcase, and toiletries were gone, too. I huffed, ticked that her behavior mirrored Madeline's on a day that was meant to honor mothers.

I was the common denominator in this fiasco.

Madeline and Grace were opposites, yet they behaved the same when it came to me.

As much as I believed I was a good communicator, it had to be a lie.

God made me a shepherd to his flock at Haven of Hope and Blessings, but I repelled the women I married. That was foul.

The girls played board games after lunch and their call with Grace then took a nap. I called Grace in the evening, but she refused to speak with me. I finally gave up and settled into my nightly routine with the girls.

Around 7:00 p.m., a knock at the door pulled me from a random nature show I was watching. I laid the remote on the coffee table and checked my watch. I wasn't expecting anyone this late on a Sunday. When I peeked through the peephole, I saw Aunt Nita with an overnight bag on her shoulder.

"Auntie!" I opened the door and gave Aunt Nita a huge hug.

"My darling Caleb." She held me tight like she did when I was a little boy.

Her hugs always transported me to a safe space.

“To what do I owe the pleasure? Where’re you going with that bag?” I took her bag from her as she crossed the threshold.

“I’m spending the night with the girls.”

I frowned, genuinely confused.

“Why? Is everything okay at your house?”

She patted my arm and held it, her eyes boring into mine.

“Of course, but all is not well in yours.”

I stepped back and stared at Aunt Nita. I knew instantly she was aware of the continued turmoil between Grace and me. Like when I was a boy, I felt defensive and wanted to explain myself.

“I apologized, but Grace refused to talk about what happened. I’m sorry you’re involved in our fight.”

Aunt Nita didn’t bat an eye as she held my arm firmly.

“Pack a bag and go to your wife.”

“I’m not flying to DC.”

“You don’t have to. Go to her place across town.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m not trying to say anything. Go to your wife and your child.”

I shook my head. My mouth opened.

“Grace flew out today.”

She closed the distance between us and spoke with increased firmness in her voice.

“Go to your wife and your son, Caleb. Grace needs you.”

Everything in me wanted to argue, but I remembered Elder Peyton’s words. It was no coincidence that two of my spiritual mentors referred to me having a son with Grace.

I stepped back and pulled out my phone, dialing Grace’s number. When she didn’t answer, I shook my head at Aunt Nita.

“She’s not answering.”

“Go to your wife.” Aunt Nita’s elevated voice worried me.

Grace’s house was a short drive away. If Grace were there, the possibility of her being pregnant might be very real since Aunt Nita was a seer.

“Give me five minutes to pack some stuff. The girls are in their rooms. You know the routine.”

“Okay. Treat your rib with care, baby.”

If Grace was still in town, I would prove to her that she would always be my priority, even when the storms of life came our way.

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The Great Escape

I was deep in my sleep when I dreamed of Caleb.

Even with my eyes closed, I smelled his cologne as he reached under the covers and lifted my flimsy nightshirt.

His warm lips sucked on my breasts with tenderness that had me moaning.

As always, he applied the right amount of pressure to my mounds, making me squirm.

“Caleb!” My eyes shot open to see my husband kneeling beside my bed.

Even in the darkness, the moonlight from the window drew me to his hooded eyes. He held my breasts and sucked them as I lay on my side. As he assaulted my nipples with his long tongue, I put a barrier between his lips and my breasts with my arm.

“Why are you here?”

“You told me your home was my house too. It’s not fair that you still have a bachelorette pad where you can hide out from me, love.” His low voice made me tingle.

“Where are the girls?”

“At home with Aunt Nita. She’s keeping them until I get back.”

I loved Nita, but she was a snitch.

“You need to leave. I’m flying out early.”

“I’ll leave after we talk.” He resumed his licks to my nipples, twirling his tongue around them like they were lollipops.

“This...isn’t talking.” I groaned and lifted my hand, leaning back despite my reprimand.

Caleb knew sucking my breasts weakened me. I reached for his head and held it steady as he kneaded and massaged my tender mounds, smooshing them together to put both nipples in his mouth.

“Shh, baby. This is what you need.” He kissed a nipple. “I was wrong. Let me make it up to you in your titty sucking love language.”

Pools of moisture formed at the apex of my thighs. Caleb held my breasts high as he licked my collarbone and traced kisses back and forth over my sensitive skin.

“Sex can’t fix all our problems. It’s not normal.”

“What’s not normal to others may be normal to us. Do you want me to stop?”

I stroked his cheek and grinned.

“You know I don’t, with your touchy-feely self.”

“Then enjoy how I make you feel.”

I nodded and raised my body, patting the space beside me to usher Caleb to the bed.

He released me and stood beside me with a bare chest and underwear.

Like the stripper I suspected he was at Morehouse, he lowered his tight black briefs and stepped out of them one leg at a time.

He then eased my pajama bottoms off, dropping them beside the bed.

He hoisted his body on the bed and climbed on me, slowing down to let his manhood linger on my thigh as he straddled me and kissed my neck.

“Boy, you ain’t slick. I’m still mad.” I pushed him to his side of the bed as he chuckled.

He repositioned his body and made himself comfortable on the plush pillows with his knee raised and foot flat.

“You sure about that?” He pulled me to him and grinded his lower body into me slowly.

Like the needy woman I was, I held his back and scratched it as he repeatedly rubbed against my soaking core with his erection.

“Caleb Stallings.” I called out his name as if that somehow explained what my problem was.

“Grace Stallings.” He said my name in the same tone as mine.

“You hurt me.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” He slowly entered my soaking core.

I adored and disliked Caleb in the same breath, but his penis was my truth serum. He withdrew from me and kissed my stomach then my breasts and my lips again.

“Madeline means nothing to me, sweetheart. I got in my feelings. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“I need space away from you.”

“But I need you to be all up in my space. If I have to make love to you all night for you to hear me out, I will.”

I reached for Caleb’s butt and pushed him closer to me. With each thrust, my willpower weakened along with my pride.

“How do I know it won’t happen again?” I whimpered as his pace increased.

He paused mid-stroke and stayed inside me. I willed myself to concentrate on his words and not the heat between my legs.

“I’m just a man, Grace. Don’t put me on a pedestal. We’re on the same team, although I forgot that today.” He began to thrust inside me again.

I held him tight and savored our intimacy. Caleb’s admission humbled me as I thought about all the people who didn’t give me grace over the years. Unlike them, Caleb wanted me to be whole. He came to me and showed me how precious I was to him.

My stomach growled as I started to leak on the sheets. Caleb paused and lifted his body above mine.

“Are you hungry, love?”

“Kind of, but my appetite is off. I’ll drink some ginger ale when we’re done so I can settle my stomach.”

To my surprise, he withdrew from me and placed his hand on my belly.

“Oh, yes. The Black folks’ remedy for everything. Ginger ale? Have you taken a pregnancy test?”

I laughed. My voice filled the darkness of the room as I held his erection and continued to stroke it. He hissed and lay back on the pillows again.

“I’m not pregnant.”

“We haven’t used protection. You might be carrying our child.”

I removed my hand and raised it to my lips as I processed how moody and finicky I was about everything. Caleb was right. We loved each other raw and didn’t think twice about it.

“That would kind of be a mess.” I climbed on Caleb and rocked with him until we both climaxed.

When we finished, Caleb walked to his overnight bag. He turned on the light and pulled out a pregnancy test.

“I’m serious, Grace. I picked up a two-pack pregnancy test from CVS. I’ll help you test if you want.”

“I’ll do it on my own time, okay?”

He lifted his hands in surrender.

“No pressure. Are we good? Do you want to talk some more?”

“I’m not going to lie to you. I’m still kind of pissed. We have to work on our communication.”

“Agreed. Is there anything else you want to know about Madeline?”

“Do you still love her?”

Caleb’s shoulders collapsed.

“Not at all. She’s conniving and only wants attention. We agreed she wouldn’t have any real contact with the girls unless they wanted to when they were older. I’m not messing us up because of her foolishness. I’ve waited too long for my amazing Grace to show up. That was why I kept calling you.”

When I felt tears welling in my eyes, I reconsidered taking the pregnancy test sooner rather than later. It made no sense for me to be this emotional. No, I would stick to my guns and wait until I was alone. Although Caleb repented, I wanted to process what a baby might mean for us moving forward.

“Thank you for being kind. I’m going to wash up and get some rest.”

“I planned to spend the night.”

“If you stay, we won’t sleep.”

“As much as I want to sex you up, I respect your work.”

Caleb put on his briefs and reached for his T-shirt before pulling it over his head. He put on the rest of his clothes and returned to my side to kiss my forehead.

“I need to go so I’ll be ready to get the kids to school. Safe travels, love. Call me anytime, and let me know you’re safe. I’ll miss you.”

I threw on my robe and walked Caleb to the front door, giving him a deep kiss and a hug before he left.

“Thank you for not giving up on me. I’ll miss you, too,” I said.

“You’re stuck with me, love.” He kissed me a final time.

I locked the door and leaned against it, closing my eyes and allowing the goodness of this relationship to settle in my spirit. We were going to be alright. We had to be.

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Missing You

I didn't realize how much Grace filled the holes in our lives until she was gone. For the rest of the week, she and I texted throughout the day with three daily video calls—a G-rated family one in the morning and night and an X-rated Mommy and Daddy session in my bedroom after hours.

“I miss you so much, my love. How was your day?” I spoke the words as Grace lay seductively on the bed in her hotel wearing a red lace teddy that dipped low.

“Great.”

“Are the girls asleep? They love The Pout Pout Fish. ”

“Yes.”

Fifteen minutes earlier, Grace and I read their favorite book with them and said prayers. With my phone in hand, I locked my bedroom door.

“You look sexy, mommy.”

“Thank you, daddy.”

She held her arm out and brushed her hand across the bodice of the top with its sheer panels that barely held her full breasts.

“They look bigger. Put them to the camera so I can kiss them.”

Grace fell out laughing.

“You are so silly. Take off that shirt so I can get my fix too.”

I propped the phone on the bed and raised my t-shirt over my abs.

“Slow down,” she said.

I did a quick body roll and lifted the right then the left side of the shirt until she threw several imaginary dollar bills at the screen. I bent over laughing.

“Who’s being silly now?” I finished undressing and settled under the covers on Grace’s side of the bed since her pillows smelled like the lavender oil she put in her hair.

“Seriously, a sister is tired. I forgot how intense it was to be in front of people every day, sharing my thoughts. Marriage and country living have made me even more introverted.”

I chuckled at how quickly Grace transitioned to Farmerton. When we started dating, she often complained about how much she missed working with people every day, but now, she loved being a homebody.

“Don’t get too tired. I want you to speak to the congregation on Sunday.”

Grace pursed her lips.

“And say what?”

“What you should have said on Mother’s Day. You’re my backbone. You pour into me with your presence and kindness every day, reminding me to walk in love at all

times. Without you, I wouldn't be a good pastor. It's time I shared you with my sheep too."

Grace stared at me before putting her finger to her nose. I thought she was holding in a sneeze until she snuffled and wiped her eyes. She shook her head.

"Caleb Evan Stallings, you never cease to surprise me."

"Will you do it then?"

"Of course, I will. I promise to make you proud."

"It's not about me. Let God use you to share a word with the people. When you said yes to me, you said yes to them too. You are the mother of this church now. Just like you're a mother to our girls."

She nodded.

"I'll drive from the airport and see you there before praise and worship."

"That sounds like a plan."

I angled my phone so Grace could see the length of my now naked body.

"Now, it's time for your bedtime story." I licked my lips as Grace propped her phone on the bed and lowered the cups of her top.

"Let me get comfortable, daddy."

With that, I shared a beautiful fairytale of a gorgeous queen named Grace who rocked King Caleb's kingdom in ways he never imagined.

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Testimony

When Caleb told me he was wearing a navy-blue suit to service Sunday, I coordinated with a navy long-sleeved ruffled bodycon dress. My large Swarovski statement necklace had me looking like the queen that Caleb called me in his naughty bedtime story earlier in the week.

I walked into the sanctuary wearing open-toed iridescent heels that made my calves and thighs pop.

I roller set my hair the night before and kept it pin-curled on the early morning flight.

It was big and bouncy as I stepped in with my oversized Gucci bag.

I spent extra time doing my makeup, making sure it wasn't too heavy.

I didn't play when it came to dressing up and showcasing my God-given beauty.

"Good morning, Dr. Toliver. You're glowing today." The ushers smiled and scanned my dress with approval.

"Good morning, Brother Stewart, Sister Tammie."

This morning felt different and lighter as the opening strains of praise and worship began.

Caleb was already in his seat. I stepped in front of him and positioned myself next to

him.

When he saw me, his eyes widened, giving me the most glowing smile.

I set my purse down and reached for him.

He picked me up and held me before letting me go and peppering my cheeks and lips with kisses.

I couldn't contain how happy I was to be with him again.

"Welcome home, love." He spoke the words and lifted my chin with his fingers.

"Thank you. I missed y'all."

We held hands and rocked, grinning like we had been apart for months.

He kissed me on the cheek a final time before returning his attention to the platform as the six praise team members sang Israel Houghton's "Lord You are Good." We clapped and sang right along with them, smiling and gesturing throughout the animated parts of the song where they instructed us to jump and praise the Lord.

Service seemed to move quicker than usual as I sat in anticipation of the moment Caleb would call me forward. His huge grin hadn't left since I arrived.

"Praise the Lord, Saints."

The congregants repeated the phrase as Caleb surveyed the packed sanctuary.

"The last time I invited this lovely woman to the platform, I announced my engagement. Sweetheart, will you join me?"

I rose as Caleb rushed to the lowest step of the platform. The congregants applauded, then laughed at how fast and attentive Caleb was as he kissed my hand and inner wrist. We held hands on our way to our designated spot. Caleb stood by me, and I laid my paper on the glass lectern.

“I give honor to God and all the clergy at Haven of Hope and Blessings for allowing me to stand before this great congregation. I don’t take this opportunity for granted.” I turned to Caleb as I said my next words.

“I want to thank my husband, my friend, and my pastor, Caleb Stallings, for trusting me as I address the sheep he has been assigned to shepherd. We are all blessed to be led by such a generous man who sacrifices daily as he fulfills the call of God on his life.”

Caleb reached for my hand and kissed it again as a smattering of “Amen’s” filled the room. When it got silent again, I continued.

“Before I came to Farmerton, I appeared to have it together...just like I do today. But just because someone appears to have it together doesn’t mean they do.

Behind the suits, makeup, and perfect diction could be the most broken person you’ve ever met.

I was ‘up and out.’ I represented the elite, the educated with my Ph.D.

and the privileged. But inside, I was broken and in need of a touch from the Master.

” My voice quivered as the reality of my past hit me.

Caleb handed me the handkerchief from his pocket. I nodded and received it, clutching it in my left hand as my eyes found the next words I wanted to share.

“My mother died after I was a long-term and long-distance caregiver. As an only child, I missed my father, who transitioned five years ago. I was a Daddy’s girl, but I didn’t have time to grieve.

I worked in a high-demand job in the federal government.

For fifteen years, I committed my life to an agency that supported education programs at minority-serving institutions.

We analyzed datasets that enhanced the lives of all people until a political agenda obliterated my division and my government job.

I had no job, no father, and then no mother.

I decided to end my life on my fortieth birthday. ”

As I expected, gasps, “oh nos,” and “my Gods” filled the air. Caleb placed his arm behind me as I waited for the noise to die down. I felt the spirit of God move me as I went off script and placed my hand in Caleb’s.

“I didn’t die because some mysterious stranger saved me.

I later discovered I had hit my head on a bridge, and that person pulled me away from danger.

I was admitted to a hospital where I received the treatment my body, soul, and spirit needed.

In the same way that angel rescued me, my Caleb reached out and saved me.

He saw beyond my insecurities and imperfections.

He remained patient as I learned how to trust and believe God loved me.

Caleb held me up...exactly as he is doing right now... until I could stand on my own.”

Caleb kissed me on the cheek and embraced me tightly, showing everyone I belonged to him, and he belonged to me. He was a pastor to everyone else, but to me, he was my covering, God’s representation of His love for me on earth. Caleb reminded me how precious love with the right person could be.

Love .

“The church isn’t a place where many people always center mental wellness.

I want to change that. We need counseling for the generational trauma we have all experienced in this country.

My commitment is to be there for others who feel alone and don’t know how to keep their minds in perfect peace.

As a woman with a heart for education and learning, I want to uplift our community.

Everyone deserves to be seen and heard, especially those who are labeled strong and resilient.

Authenticity and care are what I bring to you, my new family. Thank you.”

Everyone stood to their feet and shouted and clapped. I felt their love in every way. When they quieted down again, I stepped back to the mic and stood by Caleb, holding his hand and looking directly into his eyes.

“Pastor C, you asked me a very specific question before I left for my trip. I told you I would find out the answer when I was away. As an act of faith regarding our future, I’m sharing our good news before God and our congregation.” I placed my hand over my stomach and smiled. “The answer is yes.”

My enthusiastic, emotional, beloved Caleb dropped to his knees and raised his hands in praise before placing his hands over my belly.

He kissed my stomach through the soft fabric of my dress.

I held his head next to me and bent to hold him as tears fell from my eyes.

When he composed himself, he rose and kissed my lips and hugged me tightly, murmuring “I love you” repeatedly across my lips and in my ear.

“I love you, too.”

Much like the day we announced our engagement, the congregation went wild as they realized what I was talking about.

Caleb picked up the microphone and signaled for everyone to calm down. He stepped up to the lectern as I took a step back.

“I’d like to pray a blessing over my unborn child.” He turned his head my way. “And my lovely wife.”

He extended his hand to me again and held it as members of the clergy stood and extended their hands toward us.

The organist played a slow, melodious tune that stirred my spirit.

Caleb turned on his cordless microphone and lifted my hands before placing his hands firmly on my stomach.

When he anointed my forehead with oil, I closed my eyes. Caleb's powerful voice met my ears.

“Gracious Father, thank you for the gift You have sent this house in the form of Dr. Gracelyn Tolliver Stallings. Please reward my beloved wife for her humility, courage, and obedience as she shared her testimony with all of us. May she be a role model for those who have suffered in silence and who haven't had the courage to share their dark thoughts and fears.

We release an anointing on her to minister to the brokenhearted and speak truth where darkness has reigned.

We cast out all hindrances to her calling.

I declare that this child will unite this congregation and represent the best of both of us.

May Grace have a blessed pregnancy with no complications.

Protect our family and strengthen it as we await this precious gift from God. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” the congregation echoed with loud cheers and applause.

I dabbed tears that wouldn't stop flowing as Caleb held me in his arms and rocked me back and forth like a baby. When I composed myself, I stepped back and returned to my seat. After a selection, Caleb ministered the word, which confirmed this was exactly where I needed to be.

Thank God for second chances.

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Seven Months Later

I closed my eyes and rubbed my round, pregnant belly with my hand as if it were a crystal ball, thinking about how different everything was for me now. It was hard to believe that this time last year, I was alone and wanted to end my life.

I also couldn't believe that I once accepted payment to be part of a family that reminded me why I was put on earth. Our relationship skyrocketed to another level when I no longer accepted payments from Caleb, sealing the deal for a genuine covenant based on mutual respect and trust.

There were days I still missed my parents and hated that I wasn't closer to my extended family, but I rested in the family Caleb and I created.

The doors of communication were now open wide with our words flowing better than they had in the past. We went back to counseling to address the issues about Madeline, who stayed away as promised.

Although I occasionally missed the hustle and bustle of DC and my executive position, I understood that life was about seasons.

I'd always had a hard time moving from one season to the next, but therapy taught me to let go of perfectionism.

There would always be a new challenge or situation to tear me from a place of peace, but I could control how I responded.

No matter where I worked, I would also be worthy. God's gifts in me were unerasable.

"Mommy, when is baby Solomon coming?" Hannah, who had grown closer to me and often chose to spend time with me instead of Caleb, rested her head on my stomach as she struggled to wrap her arms around me.

We chose the name Solomon because it meant peace and represented wholeness and completeness. The Song of Solomon also served as a playbook for some of our best marital fantasies. Caleb was right about the Bible being a great romance book.

"Any day now."

I set the spatula on the porcelain spoon rest then turned off the stove where I made the Mickey Mouse-shaped buttermilk pancakes she craved every Saturday morning.

Esther sat on Caleb's knee as he fed her small bites of her pancakes. Between bites, she hugged him tightly, something she did more as we approached Solomon's birth. Although she prayed for her baby brother, realization soon hit her that she would no longer be the baby in our family.

I periodically reprimanded Caleb about coddling Esther so much, but he insisted that his baby girl be allowed to cuddle up to him as much as she wanted. I chalked it up to both of them feeding off their above-average needs for physical touch.

"He will be so blessed to have the best big sisters in the world," I said.

"Can I hold him?" Hannah asked with her mouth full of jagged teeth of varying sizes.

"Yes, you may, little one." I pinched her cheeks.

“Did you settle everything with your clients so they know you won’t be available until six weeks after Solomon’s birth? I know you’ve found your groove with those government contracts, but you need your rest.”

Always the businessman, Caleb managed my post-delivery plans as we prepared to move into our five-thousand-square-foot dream house closer to the church.

“Yes, Caleb. How many times must I remind you that my assistant from Office Professionals has helped me create a master administrative plan? The CEO, Theresa Robertson, has been the blessing I never knew I needed.”

“Hiring a virtual assistant was one of the best decisions you made. The world needs all of your talents, love, not just us.”

I walked to Caleb and kissed him on the forehead.

“That’s one of the countless reasons I love you. You give me room to grow.”

He rested his hand on my belly and smiled, tugging at the finger that held my wedding band.

“It’s my honor to help you grow and grow and grow.” He patted my protruding baby bump and kissed it.

I laughed, delighted that Caleb wasn’t just anointed; he was an undercover comedian. No matter how low I felt, he found a way to tap into my joy, fostering a humorous side to our relationship that remained sacred and separate from our roles in the church and community.

“Remember what I promised. Chosen. Cherished. Covered.”

“Thank you for being the man I needed.”

“Always, baby.”

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Three months after Solomon was born, our growing family visited Grace's hometown before the Christmas holiday.

During Grace's pregnancy, we traveled back and forth to Alabama, eventually clearing out her parents' house and selling it to a nice couple who just moved to the community.

For the past few days, Grace showed us the area where she grew up and introduced me to several people who knew and respected her educator parents.

Our final stop before returning to Farmerton was at the cemetery where her parents were buried.

She had invested in headstones that displayed pictures of the three of them over the years.

As we stood overlooking the pristine cemetery, I silently thanked God for the man and woman who gave me my Grace.

Her intelligence and boundless love made my days easier and my nights full of fire.

The girls sat on a bench near the graves as Grace held a sleeping Solomon in her arms. On our way to the cemetery, we talked to the girls about heaven and told them this was our time to honor Grace's mother and father.

"Your parents would be so proud of you." I spoke the words as I rubbed her shoulders.

“Thank you, baby. I believe that. I didn’t know how I would feel coming here, but I’m at peace. I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

“You’ve been faithful in every area of your life. You’re never alone. We all adore you and value your leadership.”

Since Grace’s testimony at church, she guided a mental wellness initiative for our congregation and formed a nonprofit that combined her passion for racial equity, education, and wellness.

Under her leadership, Haven of Hope and Blessings was becoming a model of holistic care, garnering state grants that made us a go-to location to address racial disparities and suicide prevention in the region.

Grace hummed softly, rocking Solomon, whose deep dimples mirrored hers. She smiled toward the girls, who were engrossed in a PBS Kids show on their tablets. She smiled at me too, her eyes misty.

“Our kids deserve all the love life offers. This is an investment in our legacy, and I’m so honored to travel this journey with you.”

I embraced Grace and held our growing family in my arms. This happily ever after wasn’t what I imagined, but it showed me that God’s plan was better than anything I could have crafted without Him.

The End