

*Tarin and Jerome are both jaded on love. She believes relationships never last. He believes someone always cheats. Can they be each other's exception?*

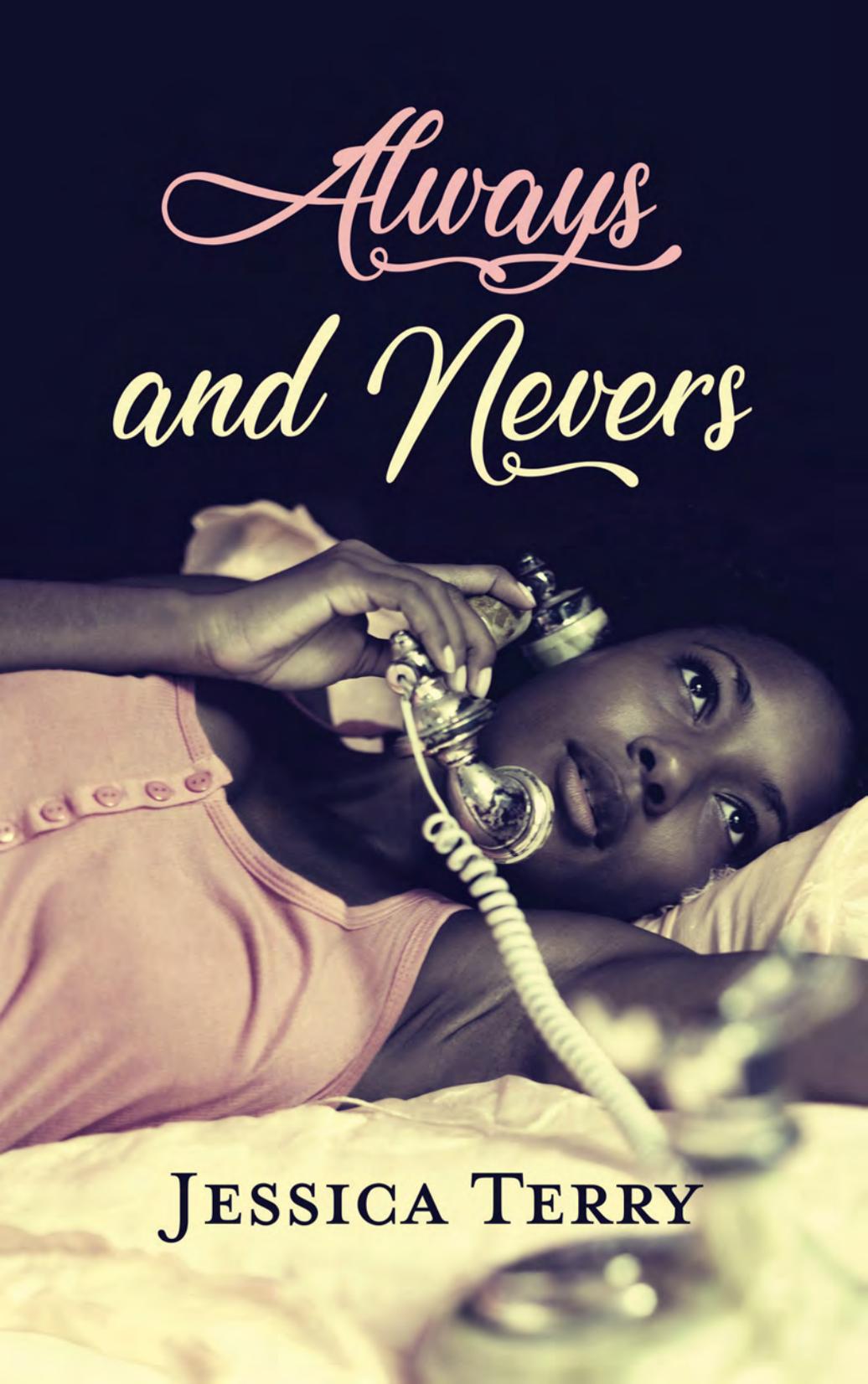
## **Always and Nevers**

By Jessica Terry

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A woman with dark skin is lying in bed, wearing a pink top with buttons. She is holding a silver rotary telephone receiver to her ear. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting her face and the phone. The overall mood is intimate and nostalgic.

*Always  
and Nevers*

JESSICA TERRY

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# ONE

Jerome already knew his first date with Courtney might be his last. If he wanted to hear a woman spend the evening bitching about another man, he'd hang out with his mother.

They were only halfway through dinner and most of Courtney's conversation centered around something to do with her ex-boyfriend, Clint. How the restaurant reminded her of their first date. How Clint wore the same kind of cologne Jerome wore. How Clint had flat feet.

Jerome wasn't even sure how that one had come up.

What he *did* know, though, was that he was over this whole date.

"I'm about ready to call it a night," he announced before she could launch into another story about her ex. He eyed her half-eaten salmon then looked at her pointedly. "You done?"

"Oh...already?" Courtney looked disappointed. "I thought we were having such a nice time."

"I have to get up real early tomorrow."

Her honey-toned eyes drifted to some spot over Jerome's shoulder. "That's wild that you said that."

"Why?"

“That started to be Clint’s excuse when he was trying to get away. Turned out he was just going to meet his little side chick.”

“Hmm.” Jerome motioned to the waiter for the check and looked at his watch.

“But I’m sure *you* wouldn’t do anything like that,” she quickly added, turning her attention back to him. “All men aren’t the same, right?”

“Right. Yeah.”

“It took me a while before I could say I really got past what Clint did,” Courtney mused as she mindlessly raked her fork through her food. “But I knew I’d have to get over it or else I’d never find a good relationship.”

*I hope you don’t think you’ve found one over here,* Jerome thought wryly.

“Thank God I’ve gotten myself together. You have no idea how much of a mess I was after I broke up with him.”

“Yeah, you’ve got your shit together, all right,” Jerome muttered as he slapped some cash into the leather envelope the waiter had just brought over and handed it back to him before he could walk off.

“Oh my god, you have *no* idea how much I needed to hear that!” Courtney gushed as Jerome stood. She followed suit, grinning as she rounded the table and followed him towards the exit. “Sometimes I wonder if he’s really out of my system or not but it’s good to know I’m totally over it.”

Jerome didn’t bother responding. He just opened his passenger side door for her and admonished himself for getting sucked in by a belly ring and a nice rack.

He could’ve just been honest and told Courtney that she was talking about her ex-boyfriend too much, but he had already decided he didn’t care enough to bother. After tonight, he didn’t plan on seeing her again. It just served as

another reminder that most women had more issues than *Essence* magazine.

Courtney was thankfully quiet on the way back to her apartment. She just sat in the passenger seat mindlessly twirling her maple brown hair around her finger and looking out the window. Jerome had to stop himself from stealing too many glances at her thick thighs, complete with a humongous flower tattoo, underneath her short red dress. Annoying or not, she had the kind of body he loved: curvy with a tilt towards voluptuous. He should've just slept with her and gone on about his business instead of trying something different and courting her.

When they got to her place, Courtney placed a hand on his arm, smiling.

"I appreciate it, Jerome."

"You're welcome."

"I know you said you have to get up early tomorrow, but...you wanna come in for a little while? I won't keep you too long."

Jerome started to say no, but he recognized that gleam in her eye. She wasn't inviting him in just to talk.

"Yeah, okay," he acquiesced, killing the engine. "For a little bit."

Thankfully, Courtney didn't try to prolong things by subjecting Jerome to small talk or time-wasting offers of something to drink. She figured there was only one sure way to get him to forget about the time for a while, so as soon as they were through her front door, she grabbed his hand and led him to her bedroom.

They shared their first kiss, Courtney wrapping her arms around his neck and roaming her hands across his smooth bald head. Jerome readily returned her kiss, his hands sliding down to grab handfuls of her round backside. She squirmed when his lips slid to her neck, and he figured

he'd discovered one of her spots. The more he concentrated his attention there, the louder her groans and grunts became. Pretty soon, she was pushing him down onto her frilly flowered comforter.

"Still have to get up early?" she asked him with an arched brow, hiking up her dress.

"Yeah, I do. So we'd better not waste any time."

Getting the message, Courtney seductively but swiftly shimmied out of her tight dress, then her strapless lace bra and panties. When she was in nothing but her black peep-toe booties, she crawled onto the bed and on top of Jerome. In the next couple of minutes, his clothes were on the floor next to hers and he was tearing open a condom wrapper with his teeth.

"Oh god," Courtney panted as they were in the throes, her nails digging into his back. "You feel so *amazing!*"

Jerome just grunted, never having been one to say much during sex. But he was glad she was enjoying it and rewarded her praise with a deep kiss and a deeper stroke. Courtney squealed so loudly that Jerome thought he might have hurt her in some way.

"Please don't stop!" she pleaded, clamping her limbs around him. She made an array of strange noises as Jerome continued to pump into her, either not minding or noticing that except for some pants and groans, he was practically mute.

Flipping him onto his back, Courtney began to ride Jerome, facing him and then swiveling around and treating him to some reverse cowgirl action. Jerome hissed at the sight of her ample bottom bouncing up and down on him, and grabbed her hips with his rough fingers. He was just glad she was being quiet.

But of course, that only lasted so long.

“Oooh,” she moaned, grinding her hips in way that Jerome knew would be replayed in future fantasies. “Oh god, Clint, you are *so* good...”

Jerome stopped moving. Did she just call him Clint?

*Oh, hell no*, he thought.

Courtney didn't seem to notice her slip-up, and Jerome considered that the final nail in the coffin of whatever this was they were doing. He'd just get his, get out, and chalk this one up as another failure.

When they finished, Jerome laid there with Courtney strewn across him, half-asleep. He checked his watch, then gently eased her arm from his chest and slid off the bed, picking up his clothes.

She stirred, easing her eyes open briefly. “You leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“You want some water or something before you go?”

“I'm good, thanks.”

“Call me tomorrow, okay?”

Jerome didn't want to commit to something he knew he wouldn't do, so he just finished getting dressed and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “Get some sleep.”

“M'kay.” Courtney turned to her side and curled into a ball. She sighed contently and smiled, her eyes still closed. “Talk to you soon, Clint.”

Jerome just glared at her and shook his head.

*Well*, he thought. *At least the sex was good.*

Jerome tried to put Courtney and their wack date out of his mind as he went about work the next day. The clothing store he managed, Iced Denim, was rather full, which was

nothing new for a Saturday afternoon. As much as he usually enjoyed his job, he would have liked to be home watching the string of football games that were on instead of just getting score updates on his phone or quick stop-ins to look at the small television in the back office.

His store was really popular with the young crowd and while they often brought a lot of business, they often brought a lot of headache, too. Jerome had to constantly keep an eye on them to make sure that nothing walked out of the store, even with the visible security cameras and ink security tags that most of the merchandise was affixed with. Some people just didn't care and tried to make a run for it anyway, rarely getting very far. Then Jerome had to deal with the aftermath and the paperwork, sometimes the police, and he just hoped he'd get a break from all of that today.

If only people just did what they knew they were supposed to do. And *not* do what they knew they *weren't* supposed to do.

The day was about halfway over when Jerome's brother Dodge came by. Dodge was the product of an affair Jerome's father Gibson had when Jerome was a baby, and despite the turmoil and drama that it caused between Gibson and his wife Goldie, Jerome and Dodge had always been close.

"What's up, brother?" Dodge greeted Jerome along with a brief hug.

"Hey, man. What you doing over here?"

"Wanted to come get that hat I had my eye on the other day. The blue one with the silver trim?"

"Oh yeah, I put one behind the counter for you. Draya will get it for you when you go up there. Those things have been selling out ever since we got them."

"Good looking out on that. Do I get a hookup on the price, too?"

“No.”

“Damn.” Dodge looked around the store. “Y’all are busy up in here today. Oh yeah, how did that date of yours go last night? What was her name? Mya?”

“Courtney.”

“Whatever. How was it?”

“It was a waste of time, that’s what it was. She was nice and everything, but she’s not over her ex. Kept bringing him up and comparing everything to something they did together.”

“Oh hell no. I hate that. I would’ve left her sitting there and had her call her ex to come get her.”

“I actually believe you would do that, too. But I just figured I wouldn’t call her anymore after that. Especially after she called me by his name while I was at her spot.”

“I was hoping you’d say you at least got the draws. So the night wasn’t a *total* waste. But she called you the wrong name, too?”

“Yep. Twice.”

“Oooh-wee. I can’t front like I’ve never done that, though. There’s been a few times when I said *Brianna* instead of *Beretta* or something like that and had to try to play it off.”

“Who the hell is named Beretta?”

“It’s just an example, man. The point is I know how that can go. The ladies don’t care for that at all so I *know* it pissed you off.”

“It annoyed me but it’s not like I’m in a relationship with her; if she was my woman, I would’ve been majorly pissed off. After we finished I just got my shit and left.”

“Has she tried to call you today?”

“Yeah. And she sent a bunch of texts. I haven’t responded to any of it.”

“Man, if you want *my* opinion—“

“When do I ever ask for your opinion?”

“—I’d say just keep her around for when you want to get broke off,” Dodge continued, ignoring Jerome’s statement. “You know, put her in the booty call rotation.”

“I don’t have a *booty call rotation*, Dodge. That’s your shit, not mine.”

“I bet you wish you had one some nights. You haven’t had a woman since Holyfield was champ.”

“That’s real funny. But keeping Courtney around just on the casual tip might not be a bad idea. As long as we both stay on the same page as far as what the real deal is, it could work.”

“It could, as long as she doesn’t start catching feelings, like a lot of ‘em do. They *say* they can handle just being a cut buddy but it’s only a matter of time before they start talking about how they’re ‘feeling differently’ and ‘want to see where it can go.’ That’s why I don’t do relationships at all.”

“You have a girlfriend, Dodge.”

“And as far as she knows, I’m totally faithful to her. No need in ruining that.”

Jerome shook his head. Dodge was just like everyone else in his family; they seemed to be allergic to monogamy. They might get into a relationship with someone, but forget about them being faithful. Jerome’s parents had been cheating on each other ever since he could remember. Every cousin he had was a player. And Dodge couldn’t seem to resist indulging in whatever pretty thing batted their eyelashes at him.

“I don’t get how a brotha as educated as yourself has such a warped mindset when it comes to women,” Jerome stated, waving to a couple who entered the store. He noted how they were hand-in-hand and looked completely comfortable with each other. He couldn’t help but wonder

how long they'd been together, and if either of them had stepped out on the other. "When did everyone get so jaded?"

Dodge scoffed. "I'm not jaded. I just think monogamy is bullshit."

"How is it bullshit for two people to commit to each other?"

"Okay, maybe it's not *bullshit*, but it's unrealistic. I just don't believe it's healthy to put so much faith and trust in one person like that. People are always gonna disappoint you. So why even go there?"

"So why are you with Yolonda, then? 'Cause I bet she doesn't share this philosophy of yours."

"Yolonda is good people. I care about her. I'm just not tryin' to marry her or anything."

"And I hope to high heaven she doesn't wanna marry *you*."

"Hell, I hope she doesn't, too. Marriage is a whole 'nother subject. Nobody *really* wants to be bound to somebody else for life. Look at Dad and Goldie. How many times have they cheated on each other just this *week*?"

"I think Dad has Mama by one right now."

"See there? Why even bother with all that?"

"I guess they have their reasons. I just know it *would* be nice to have a steady woman but it's hard to trust folks nowadays. Everybody seems to have some baggage or drama or issues."

"Hmph, well if you're waiting on somebody who doesn't have any of that, then you might as well get ready to die alone." Dodge checked his phone. "I'm gonna head out in a second; I have to go meet somebody later. And don't forget that Yolonda wants us to meet up for dinner with her after you close."

"I didn't forget."

“Good. Now I won’t have to hear her whine about it.”

“Uh-huh. Meeting another one of your students looking for extra credit?”

Dodge grinned, not being able to help it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. And anyway, the good thing about being a college professor is that all of my students are grown.”

“You’re still not supposed to be fraternizing with them, though, and you know that. Sometimes I think you *wanna* get fired.”

“It’s all about the thrill, my brother,” Dodge claimed, giving Jerome some dap.

Jerome shook his head but couldn’t resist smiling. His brother would never change.

“Hey, stop!”

Jerome and Dodge whipped their heads around to see two kids racing towards the exit. The brothers instinctively separated and each managed to catch one of the kids before they darted out the door.

“Hey, let us go!”

Draya, Jerome’s employee who had yelled at them, rushed over.

“I saw her take the backs off the earrings and put them in her pockets,” she informed, pointing to the girl in Jerome’s grasp. She turned her eyes to the boy that was trying to get away from Dodge. “And this one rolled up some socks and stuffed them down his crotch.”

If this was a television show, Jerome would have thought that was funny. It was anything but, now. The kids couldn’t have been more than nine or ten years old. And when he peered closer at the boy Dodge was holding, he realized he knew him.

“Brandon?”

The boy looked away. Dodge looked back and forth between them, surprised.

“You know who this is?”

“Yeah, man. It’s our cousin.”

“It is?” Dodge asked incredulously, taking another look at the boy.

“Yeah. He’s like our third cousin on Dad’s side. His mama is Donita, the one that’s always posting her cupcakes on Instagram.”

“What? She shows that kind of stuff and you still follow her?”

Jerome cut his eyes at him. “*Actual* cupcakes, professor.”

“Oh.”

“Brandon, who brought you over here? And who is this girl you got with you?”

Brandon stayed defiantly silent.

“Boy, don’t think I won’t jack you up. If you’re bold enough to come in here trying to steal, you can answer for it when you get caught. Now start talking ‘cause I’m not gonna ask you again.”

Knowing Jerome meant business, Brandon sucked his teeth and replied, “Donita dropped us off. And this is my girlfriend, Kira.”

Jerome didn’t know which to address first; the fact that his little cousin called himself having a girlfriend or that he called his mother by her first name.

Shaking his head, he jerked his head towards the back of the store, and said to Dodge, “Let’s get them back to the office. Thanks, Draya.”

After the two would-be thieves were seated in his office, Dodge went back to the sales floor while Jerome tracked down Donita’s number. He was going to just have

her come get the kids, get his merchandise back, and call it a draw.

What he *didn't* expect, though, was Donita to turn the tables on him.

“Are you seriously keeping my boy over some damn socks?” she barked at him. “We’re supposed to be family!”

Jerome gaped. He didn’t know Donita all *that* well but he didn’t expect this reaction. “Family or not, they don’t need to be in here stealing.”

“You should just give them that stuff. It’s not like they tried to steal some shoes or something major. You wouldn’t even miss that tiny stuff they took.”

“Did you tell them to take this stuff?”

“No!”

“So you don’t see *anything* wrong with them taking what doesn’t belong to them, huh? Is that what I’m hearing?”

“I didn’t say all that. I just said you shouldn’t be making it such a big deal.”

“You’re sitting up here fussing at me ‘cause I stopped them from stealing, so don’t say that’s not what you meant. And anyway, I didn’t throw them in the back of a damn cop car. I called their parents, like we usually do with minors who steal.”

“And *I’m* saying you could’ve just let them go. Maybe they needed that stuff. Did you consider that?”

His patience gone, Jerome stood from his desk. “Maybe if you were more worried about your boy instead of what color frosting you’re gonna come up with next and what filter you’re gonna use on Instagram, he might not feel the need to do this kind of stuff. But don’t try to make me the bad guy for doing my job just because you clearly haven’t been doing yours.”

Donita gasped. “How dare you, Jerome!”

“How dare I, nothing. Now I suggest you come on and get this boy from my store. And know that I’m not gonna be as lenient if it happens again. Post *that*.”

He hung up and made a call to the girl’s parents, who were thankfully more mature about the situation and thanked him for letting them know what happened. They immediately came to retrieve their daughter, made her apologize to Jerome and return the stolen earrings, and insisted it wouldn’t happen again. Donita eventually showed up to get Brandon, but she clearly had an attitude and stomped out of the store with nothing but a suck of her teeth and a roll of her eyes.

“Whatever,” Jerome muttered, heading back out to the sales floor.

He was surprised to see Dodge still there, but he quickly saw the reason. Dodge was putting the moves on a cute woman with long braids and ridiculously thick false eyelashes. They each pulled out their phones, no doubt getting each other’s numbers. Not surprised at all, Jerome just went on about his business.

A little after closing time, Jerome got a call from his father, Gibson. He almost didn’t want to answer, since he had a feeling he knew what the call was for.

“I need you to cover for me tonight,” Gibson requested, his voice rushed.

Jerome sighed. “I really wish y’all would stop calling me for this.”

“You might not even need to say anything. But just in case Goldie *does* call you asking where I am, just tell her I had to go see about my aunt. Goldie hates her so I know she won’t go over there after me.”

“Aren’t y’all a little old for his? It’s not like y’all stepping out on each other is some kind of secret. Why are all the lies and stuff necessary?”

“I don’t have time to go into all that right now, Jerome. Just tell her that if she calls.”

“Whatever, Dad.”

Hanging up the phone, Jerome tried hard to think of *one* person he was close to that wasn’t a cheater. Besides maybe his grandfather, he couldn’t.

## TWO

“So what do you think, Tarin?” Sabrina asked. “Does that sound like he’s gonna leave me?”

Tarin was glad they were on the phone so her friend couldn’t see her strong eye roll. Sabrina was her best friend and she loved her like a sister, but Tarin was a little over the paranoia Sabrina had about her boyfriend. For whatever reason, Sabrina had it in her head that it was just a matter of time before her man, Johnny, was on his way out the door. Just about every day she anticipated finding a Dear John letter as much as kids anticipated finding gifts under the tree on Christmas morning.

“I really don’t think you have anything to worry about, Sabrina,” Tarin dutifully replied. “Johnny buying a new pair of shoes doesn’t mean anything.”

“What if it’s a metaphor for him getting ready to walk out of my life?”

“Oh my god...”

“I’m serious!”

“Sabrina, girl, I love you but please...get a grip.”

“I’m not just trying to freak myself out for fun. Haven’t you heard that saying about if a man buys shoes, he’ll leave you?”

“No, I have not.”

“It’s a real saying.”

“I believe the saying is if *you* buy your man shoes, he’ll walk out of your life. But that’s stupid just like the one about stepping on a crack and breaking your mama’s back. I’ve stepped on a bunch of those and my mama is still walking upright.”

“I just love him so much,” Sabrina gushed. “I really believe he’s the one. So forgive me if the thought of losing him makes me a little nuts.”

“And *I’m* saying you’ll drive yourself crazy if you keep over-analyzing every little thing he does. If you *really* believe he’s the one, then have some faith in your relationship.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.”

Tarin might have been preaching faith to her friend, but she actually *wouldn’t* have been that surprised if Johnny ended up leaving Sabrina. When it came to relationships, Tarin believed it was only a matter of time before they crashed and burned. The only examples of successful relationships or marriages she knew of were the ones she saw on television; everyone around her always ended up divorced or splitting up after significant amounts of time. Regardless of how in love people said they were, it never lasted. She figured Sabrina’s relationship would be no different, even though she would never tell her that.

“Have you heard from Cain lately?” Sabrina asked, referring to Tarin’s ex.

“I talked to him yesterday. He might be coming over later.”

“I don’t know why you two don’t just get back together. Clearly, the feelings are still there.”

“It’s just sex with us, Sabrina, you know that. I’m not interested in a relationship with him again.”

“Why not, though? If he’s good enough to sleep with...”

“We didn’t work as a couple. Cain doesn’t know how to act once commitment comes into play. We’re better just keeping it casual.”

“I just think that’s a waste of time. Life is too short for meaningless relationships.”

“Not everybody wants the same things, Sabrina. And anyway, I have too much going on to worry about a relationship, anyway.”

“If you say so. Are you gonna bring him to Lovita’s wedding with you, though?”

“Ugh, I almost forgot about that...”

“That’s why I keep reminding you. I don’t want you trying to say you scheduled something else and can’t go.”

“I’ll go. Though I can’t say I’m looking forward to it. Why do I need to be there, anyway? She’s *your* sorority sister, not mine.”

“Because she invited you. And we all know how you feel about weddings. If you can just check your cynicism at the door, though, I’d appreciate it.”

“I promise nothing.”

They ended their call a few minutes later, with Tarin sighing. She wished she *did* have a valid excuse to get out of going to this wedding, but she already promised Sabrina. She knew that short of a death in the family, there wouldn’t be a good excuse to get out of it.

“Well,” she muttered to herself, “At least there’ll be an open bar.”

Tarin usually didn’t mind her job of being a waitress but on this day, she was not feeling it.

Her feet hurt, her cycle started a day early, and she was bloated beyond belief. The last thing she felt like dealing with was customers, but this was how she paid the bills. It was a means to an end; she was working towards getting her own food truck. The more hours she worked, the closer she got to that goal, so she knew she just had to suck it up.

She approached a booth with some customers she hadn't seen before, so she figured they were new to the area or visiting. The men were cute, and she couldn't help but be curious about which one the woman sitting between them was with. Not that it mattered.

"Hey, y'all. Welcome to Soul Pot. My name is Tarin and I'll be serving you today. I see you're all set on drinks. Do you have any questions about the menu?"

"Yeah, I think I need another one," the man with the sexy sleepy eyes said, holding his up.

"Oh, is there a stain on this one or something?" Tarin immediately asked, reaching for it.

"Nah, no stains. I just need one that has your phone number."

Sucking her teeth before she could stop herself, she forced a good-natured smile onto her face. "Good one. But our seafood philly is way better than anything my number could get you. I'd definitely recommend that."

"Yeah, real smooth, Dodge," the other gentleman said wryly. He was bald, chocolate, and hotter than Tarin wanted to acknowledge. "You really need to put that weak rap game up, especially right now." He turned his attention to Tarin. "That seafood philly sounds good. I'll take that, with the Cajun fries."

"Whatever," Dodge waved his friend off. "I'll have the philly too, then. Gimme the sweet potato salad on the side."

Tarin noted their selections and looked at the woman. "And you, ma'am? And can I just say, I am *loving* that ponytail."

The woman beamed. "Thank you!" She playfully swung the long ponytail from side to side. "I was hoping it looked all right. That short haircut you have is fierce, too, girl. If I had the nerve to cut my hair—"

"*Damn*, can you just order, please?" Dodge interrupted, exasperated. "Nobody asked you all that."

"Hey, man, you don't need to talk to her like that," the other man quickly defended, his brow furrowed. "Learn some damn respect."

The woman looked at him gratefully, and Tarin's eyebrow raised slightly at the lovesick gaze she was giving him.

*I guess she's with Mr. Philly and Fries, then*, she mused to herself.

"I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I'm just sure our fine waitress here doesn't have time to be going back and forth about hair. It's packed as shit in here."

"No more than she has time to keep standing here listening to this nonsense. Go ahead, Yolonda," the guy said, shaking his head.

"Thanks, Jerome." The woman looked at Tarin with slightly flushed cheeks. "Is the chicken that comes with the red velvet waffles white meat or dark?"

"White. It comes with four really big wings. You'll love it."

"Ooh, yum. I'll have that. No butter, please."

"You got it. I'll go put these in for y'all right now. Again, my name is Tarin; just holler if you need anything." Tarin took their menus and headed to the back.

“Man, I’m gonna start coming in here every *day*,” Dodge exclaimed, eyeing Tarin as she walked off. “Especially if the food is as tasty as the waitress.”

“Wow, really?” Jerome marveled. “You’re just gonna keep disrespecting your girl right in her face, huh?”

“It’s okay, Jerome,” Yolonda shrugged, trying to look unbothered. “I know Dodge is a flirt.”

“Please. He’s supposed to be a grown man, too. He could control himself if he wanted to.”

Dodge sucked his teeth. “Man, chill out. How do you know I wasn’t checking the waitress out for you? What was her name, again? Did she even tell us?”

“Two times.”

“It’s Tarin,” Yolonda informed Dodge.

“Oh. Well, yeah. You need to see what’s up with her, Jerome.”

“I’m good.”

“What? Don’t tell me you don’t think she’s fire.”

“I wasn’t really paying attention, to be honest. I’ve got other stuff to worry about besides another woman. Courtney is already blowing my damn phone up.”

“Oh yeah? What name did she call you on the messages?” Dodge chuckled as he sipped his beer.

“That’s not funny.”

“I think it’s funny. She wants her body here with you while her mind is on the other side of town. Just messin’ you around...”

“Shut up, Dodge.”

A while later, Tarin brought their food, asking them if they needed anything else. The three of them wasted no time diving into their meals, each raving about how good it was. Jerome had never eaten a sandwich so fast, and was seriously considering ordering another to take home. He noticed how close Yolonda was sitting to him; much closer

than when they first arrived, and didn't know how to tell her to give him some space without embarrassing her. Dodge didn't seem to notice or care, and Jerome chose not to make a big deal out of it. He just subtly scooted a little away from her when she was talking to Dodge.

When they were done, Jerome signaled Tarin for the check. She quickly brought the leather envelope and placed it on the table, and when Jerome saw his ticket, he immediately frowned.

"Excuse me," he called out to Tarin.

"Yes?"

"Remember when I changed my Sprite to a water? You still have the Sprite on here."

"You sure did; I'm so sorry about that," Tarin immediately replied. She took the ticket and gave him an apologetic glance. "I'll get this taken care of and be right back."

"Okay, thanks."

Jerome eyed her as she scurried off, pleasantly surprised at how contrite she was about it. Part of him expected to get some kind of attitude. He loved Black women and hated to generalize, but from his experience, most of them didn't appreciate being corrected, regardless of how warranted it was.

A few minutes later, Tarin returned with the corrected bill and a small to-go container.

"Here you go," she said to him. "I apologize again. And here's a small order of Cajun fries for the trouble."

"Wow, that's really cool of you but it wasn't that big a deal. It was just a simple mistake."

"It was a mistake that I shouldn't have made. And when you constantly deal with people who want to go off about every little thing, it's much appreciated when someone is actually nice about it."

“No problem. We’re all human, right?”

She smiled at him, and for the first time Jerome noticed her looks. She really *was* cute. He liked her short black hair that was simply styled yet still looked like she’d just gone to the salon yesterday. Her dark skin that almost matched his, envy-worthy lips, thick lashes...and he didn’t have to look down to notice her body. Even under her work uniform, he could tell she was a stone-cold brick house.

“Hey, Teresa, how tall are you?” Dodge asked.

Tarin tore her eyes from Jerome to look at Dodge amusingly. “It’s Tarin.”

“What?”

“My name is Tarin. And I’m 5’11.”

“*Umph*. A big ol’ drink of water, huh? Speaking of water, can I get a little cup of that for the road?”

“Sure,” Tarin replied, holding back a laugh. She took Jerome’s offered bill and payment before heading towards the back. Her co-worker Melani sidled up next to her as she entered Jerome’s payment into the system.

“Girl, I see it’s your turn to deal with Dodge,” Melani said in a hushed tone. “He’s a trip, isn’t he?”

“To put it mildly,” Tarin chuckled. “I’ve never seen him in here before, though.”

“I’m a need you to open your eyes more, ‘cause he’s in here all the time. Oftentimes with different women, even though he has a girlfriend.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out. It’s not like he’s very discreet about it. All of us have served him at some point or another and we hear things.”

“I guess I never pay attention to people’s conversations like that.”

“Hey, if we’ve gotta be here, we might as well be entertained.”

“What about the guy that’s with them?” Tarin couldn’t resist asking.

“Oh, Jerome? Jerome’s cool. He’s not as transparent as Dodge is so we don’t know a whole lot about him. I think he works around here somewhere; he comes in occasionally, but not as much as Dodge does.”

“Ahh.” Tarin closed out Jerome’s bill and moved over to get Dodge’s water. If Dodge was a player, at least he was a player out loud; there was no hiding it. Jerome seemed to be more on the sly side; appearing as a good guy but one of the main ones that would rip your heart out if you let him have access to it. He was hanging with Dodge, after all, and Tarin could tell from their conversation that they were closer than mere acquaintances. So if Dodge was a dog, Jerome probably was, too. Birds of a feather, and all that.

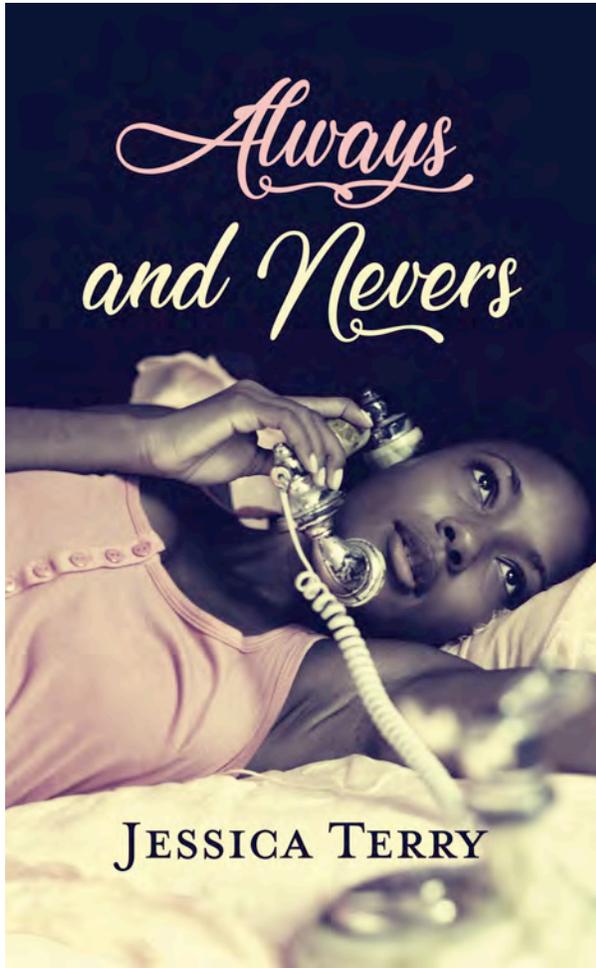
*Not that it matters*, Tarin quickly reminded herself.

Jerome fought to keep his eyes from straying to where Tarin was huddled with one of the other waitresses, putting way more focus into sipping his water than necessary. It didn’t matter how fine she was. He was sure she probably came with a cargo load of baggage like all the women he found attractive usually did. It was best to steer clear.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he groaned when he saw it was his mother, Goldie. Without even opening it, he knew what it was about.

### **Where is your daddy??**

Jerome shook his head and jammed his phone back into his pocket, ignoring the text. He’d had enough of their mess today.



*Tarin and Jerome are both jaded on love. She believes relationships never last. He believes someone always cheats. Can they be each other's exception?*

## **Always and Nevers**

By Jessica Terry

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