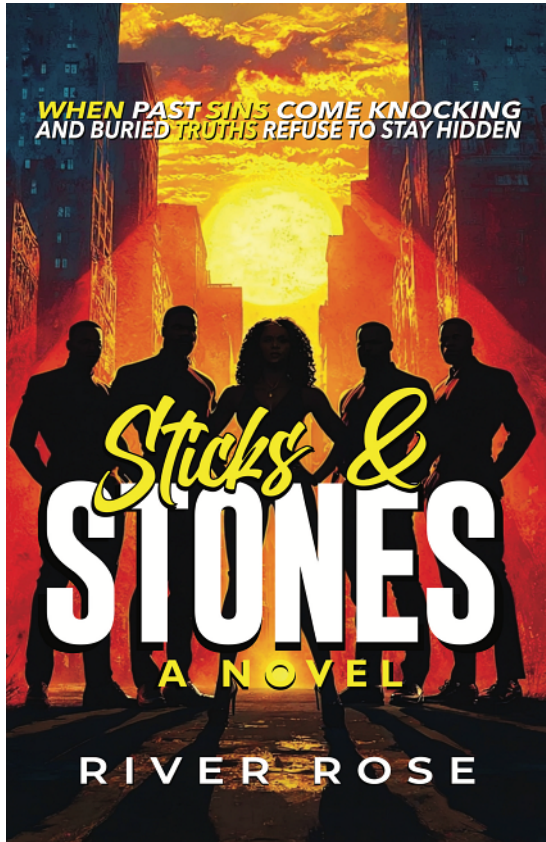




Sticks and Stones is a gripping high-stakes family drama packed with betrayal, obsession, and secrets that refuse to stay buried.

Sticks and Stones

By River Rose

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**WHEN PAST SINS COME KNOCKING
AND BURIED TRUTHS REFUSE TO STAY HIDDEN**

Sticks &
STONES

A NOVEL

RIVER ROSE

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Chapter 1

Since the divorce, life seemed to pull him apart in every direction. Nadine had taken the house and his dignity when she filed for a divorce.

The gossip in Silver Rock had been relentless, and he knew people were talking behind his back. His brother Tyrone had warned him not to marry Nadine Foster, claiming she was trouble from the start. But Marco's heart had overruled his brother's judgment. He had to have her, no matter what. She was everything he had dreamed of. Loving, caring, beautiful. He heard from his friends that the men in Silver Rock often flirted with Nadine while he was away on business. She never entertained it. Marco was sure he had found something rare and precious when Nadine entered his life. Their marriage was good, better than he ever imagined it could be, until that one night. As usual, Marco had been out of town on a business trip when JoAnn Burris made her move. Marco remembered that business trip all too well. JoAnn Burris had been his partner for the journey, and though he had initially been skeptical about being alone with her, he had tried to push those thoughts away. JoAnn was everything men in the office seemed to want: a beautiful, sexy, and confident woman. Her allure had many of

them bending over backward to please her, but it was clear who she had her eyes on. Marcus Marco Stone.

He noticed how she sneaked glances at him at the office, eyes lingering too long. He dismissed it, brushing it off as harmless. After all, he had Nadine waiting for him at home. Nadine, whom he believed was his everything. Even after she got pregnant and lost the baby, a pain that gutted them both, he stayed faithful. Nadine had withdrawn, understandably so, grieving the loss. For a year, she pulled away from him emotionally and physically. He had needs and desires that went unmet, but Marco remained steadfast and faithful to his wife and their fragile marriage.

But on that night, in that hotel room, everything changed.

He could remember it as if it were yesterday. The Holy Spirit had given him a way out, and verses from the Bible rushed through his mind, reminding him of his vows and faith. Marco had pushed those thoughts aside. His emotions and physical hunger overtook him, and JoAnn knocked on his door before he realized it.

She asked him to zip her dress, claiming she was going to the hotel bar. He hesitated but finally complied, keeping his thoughts in check. But then, without warning, she turned to face him, her eyes gleaming with intent. In one swift movement, she pushed the dress down below her ankles, stepping out of it with ease. She stood there, fully naked, her flawless body on full display. Marco gasped, his heart pounding so hard it felt like it might burst from his chest. She was the most beautiful thing he'd seen, aside from Nadine. And yet, in that moment, the line between faithfulness and betrayal blurred. He retreated a few

steps, gasping for breath, trying to hold on to the faith that had carried him through the dark year after the miscarriage. He thought of Nadine, of what they'd lost, but JoAnn's presence overwhelmed him. She had him under her spell, her naked beauty pushing him past the point of no return. He wanted to flee before it was too late, but his needs and the physical ache that had been suppressed for so long outweighed his faith. The scripture that had briefly flooded his mind faded, leaving only the raw pull of desire.

At that moment, Marco fell.

Later that night, Marco lay beside JoAnn, and the weight of what he had done came crashing down on him. Guilt clawed at his insides. How could he have allowed himself to fall so far? How could he return home and face Nadine, the woman who trusted him with all her heart? But it just wasn't Nadine he had betrayed. He had turned his back on God, violating the faith he held dear. The guilt gnawed at him, eating away at his soul as he replayed the night over and over in his mind. What had started as a weak moment of temptation had spiraled into something he could never undo.

And JoAnn, she wasn't finished with him. What he thought was a one-time mistake, a regretful fling, was only the beginning for her. After that night, she made every effort to get close to him again, to pull him back into her web. She became bolder and relentless until JoAnn suddenly appeared at their home, pretending to be a door-to-door salesperson. Nadine, unaware of the truth, welcomed her in, unsuspecting of the real reason for her visit. JoAnn, cunning and calculating, played her role perfectly, slipping into their lives as if it were the most

natural thing in the world. Slowly, she became friends with Nadine, securing her place in their home and life while inching closer to Marco, the tension between them simmering beneath the surface.

Each visit was torture for Marco, knowing the terrible secret they shared. He could feel her eyes on him every time she came over, her presence a constant reminder of his betrayal. And Nadine, oblivious to it all, had no idea she was welcoming the woman who had shattered her marriage right under her roof.

JoAnn thrived on the secret she shared with Marco. Whenever Nadine wasn't looking, she would give him subtle touches. A hand grazed his arm, and a knowing smirk appeared as their eyes met, reminding him of what they had done. Marco recoiled every time, but he was trapped. If he told Nadine the truth, he would destroy her. But he would be forced to endure JoAnn's manipulation if he didn't.

It was hell.

Every time JoAnn left, Marco collapsed into himself, haunted by the look in her eyes and how she had wormed her way into their lives. He wanted to escape her, confess everything, and beg Nadine for forgiveness, but the fear of breaking her heart paralyzed him. He had already done enough damage.

JoAnn's game was dangerous, and Marco knew it. She wasn't content with their one-night affair; she wanted more. And each day, she grew more comfortable in their home, becoming more deeply intertwined in their lives. Marco feared how far she would go. She had become a threat to everything he held dear: his marriage, his faith, his very soul.

Marco had no idea how to break free from her hold, but one thing was sure. JoAnn wouldn't let him go easily.

"What are you doing?" Marco finally mustered the courage to confront her, stepping into her office.

JoAnn glanced up, feigning innocence. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you doing this?" He asked, frustration simmering in his voice.

"Doing what?" she smiled slyly, casting him a glance from the corner of her eye while pretending to focus on her laptop.

"Why are you coming to my house and befriending my wife?" His tone grew sharper.

JoAnn leaned back in her chair, unbothered. "Oh, that? Why not?"

"Consider this a warning," he snapped. "Stay away from my wife."

"Without waiting for a response, he turned on his heel and stormed out of her office.

JoAnn chuckled, watching him leave. "So, it's like that, huh?" she murmured, amused.

The confrontation with Marco had only fueled JoAnn's anger. He thought he could warn her off, but she wasn't the type to back down. Instead, she pushed him even further, enjoying every moment of control she had over him.

The next day, JoAnn sent a bouquet to Marco's house. The note attached was written in looping, elegant handwriting: "*It was so lovely spending time with you! Let's do it again soon, XoXo, JoAnn.*" The gesture was innocuous enough, seemingly innocent

to Nadine, but Marco knew precisely what she was doing, playing a game that only the two of them understood.

Nadine gushed over the flowers, smiling as she read the note. “JoAnn is so sweet, isn’t she?” she asked Marco, holding the note out to him. He felt his stomach twist, but he forced a smile, knowing JoAnn was tightening her grip on his life, piece by piece.

But JoAnn didn’t stop there. She started showing up at social events where she knew Nadine would be. Always friendly, always charming, she ingratiated herself further into their world. At a dinner party, she hugged Nadine tightly, complimenting her dress in front of everyone. “You always have such great taste, Nadine! I wish I had a style advisor like you,” she said, her eyes flicking briefly toward Marco, who stood stiff and silent nearby.

And when she wasn’t subtly inserting herself into their lives in public, JoAnn was sending private messages to Marco – texts late at night, with just enough suggestive undertones to remind him of their affair. “Missing you...can’t wait to see you again,” followed by a winking emoji.

Marco felt the walls closing around him. Each day, JoAnn seemed more entrenched in his life, more entwined with Nadine. And she did it all with a smile as if entirely innocent. He knew, though, that this was only the beginning. She wouldn’t stop until everything crumbled around him, until Nadine saw the truth and their lives unraveled.

Marco sat silently, staring at the floor, the weight of his confession settling between them. His hands trembled slightly as he rubbed his palms together, a nervous habit from

childhood. He finally looked up at his brothers, who sat across from him.

"I messed up," Marco admitted, his voice strained. "I cheated on Nadine...with JoAnn."

"You what?" Both brothers said, their faces a mixture of disbelief and curiosity.

Tyrone leaned back in his chair, a slow grin spreading. "Man, that's a hell of a situation," he said, shaking his head, almost impressed. "Does Nadine know about this affair? Bro, I hope you ain't planning on telling her?"

"Man, no, she doesn't know," Marco shook his head.

"Tyrone, man, you're a trip. He should tell her." Rayshon said.

"Don't listen to Shon. He'd have you divorced, dead, and buried." Tyrone laughed at his antics.

"Your advice is for him to cheat and lie to his wife." Rayshon's tone was firm and to the point. "That's what you would do?"

"Hell, yeah," Tyrone shot back, "I'll keep them both. What Nadine doesn't know won't hurt her. You can have both, Marco. Keep JoAnn on the side and still hold things down at home."

Marco's eyes narrowed, unsure if Tyrone was joking or being serious. "You think that's a solution?"

Tyrone shrugged. "Look, life's too short to limit yourself. How long have you been faithful to Nadine? One mistake doesn't mean you gotta throw it all away. Keep JoAnn in your life. Just be smart about it."

Rayshon shook his head. He could not believe what he was hearing. He knew Tyrone was everything, but advising Marco to cheat on his wife was going a little too far. "You want to keep lying to Nadine like that, Marco? You need to come clean, man. Confess and try to fix your marriage. You know what our foster mom always said, 'You can't build trust on secrets.'"

Tyrone rolled his eyes and waved a dismissive hand. "Rayshon, you're still young. You don't understand how this works. It's not about lying. It's about balance. Marco can have JoAnn and still love Nadine."

Rayshon crossed his arms, his gaze unwavering. "It doesn't work that way, Ty. If he loves Nadine, he needs to come clean about his feelings. Marco, you know what you must do."

Marco felt the pressure from both sides. Tyrone's playful yet convincing voice urged him to indulge his desires and keep his double life intact. But Rayshon's words hit deeper, calling him to face the consequences of his actions. Taking a deep breath, Marco shook his head. "I've already messed things up enough. I can't keep this going. I have to make things right with Nadine."

Tyrone sighed dramatically. "Suit yourself, but you can have the best of both worlds. Nadine doesn't have to know."

Marco stood up, his face hardening with determination. "I'm throwing away a mistake," he said, his voice firmer now. "You see how that woman has wormed herself into our lives? She's always at my house, at our events. I cannot turn around in my home without being reminded of what I did. It's suffocating, Ty. Every time I see her, I'm staring at my mistake."

Tyrone smirked, but there was a glint of understanding in his eyes. "Mistake or not, JoAnn's not going anywhere unless you make her."

"Man, I tried that, and the 'b' well, you know, she went all psycho." Marco reflected on the day he had barged into her office and warned her to stay away from Nadine.

"Yeah, she's crazy. I thought they were old friends because of how she interacted with Nadine," Rayshon said.

"I can't keep living like this. It's time to clean up my mess before it destroys everything."

Rayshon nodded approvingly, his voice calm but firm. "You're making the right call, Marco. It's going to hurt, but you'll be better for it. You still have a chance to fix things with Nadine."

Tyrone let out a sigh, leaning back in his chair. "Just remember, bro. JoAnn won't let go easily. Women like that, they don't just walk away quietly."

Marco tightened his fists, feeling the weight of Tyrone's words, but he knew he couldn't let fear stop him. He had to face the storm head-on for the sake of his marriage, his faith, and his peace of mind.

Months of guilt and sleepless nights had worn Marco down. Each night, he lay awake, the weight of his betrayal pressing harder on his chest. JoAnn's unrelenting presence in his life, showing up at his house, smiling too easily around Nadine, and getting closer and closer, made his stomach turn. Every time he saw her near his wife, the guilt became unbearable. He couldn't live like this anymore.

Weeks after talking with his brothers, Marco found himself alone in his living room. The house was quiet, and the silence was heavy. He sank to his knees, pressing his hands together in prayer. The words flowed freely from his lips for the first time in months.

“God, I’ve failed. I have sinned. I broke my vows, betrayed the woman I love, and I didn’t take my marriage seriously. I’m ashamed, Lord. I’ve displeased You and grieved the Holy Spirit, and I can’t carry this guilt any longer. Please forgive me. Please help me fix what I’ve broken. Please help me save my marriage. In Jesus’s matchless Name, I pray. Amen.”

His voice cracked, and tears fell freely, but he kept praying, pouring out everything he had held inside. He begged for forgiveness, not just for his infidelity, but for the distance he had created between himself and God. He has allowed his desires to cloud his judgment, but now, he wants to make things right.

After what felt like hours, a strange calm washed over him. His heart was still heavy, but the burden of his secret lifted slightly. Marco rose to his feet and wiped his face, and he knew what he had to do.

That night, he sat down with Nadine, his hands trembling as he reached for hers. “I have to tell you something,” he began, his voice barely above a whisper. “I haven’t been honest with you, and I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes widened in confusion, then fear, as Marco confessed everything about his fall with JoAnn, including guilt and a plea for forgiveness. His voice faltered as he spoke, but he didn’t hold back. It was the most challenging conversation he

had ever had, but as the words spilled out, he knew it was the only way forward.

"You did what?" she screamed, pushing herself up from the couch. Her face was a mixture of shock and betrayal. Her voice trembled with disbelief, and the room seemed to vibrate with the weight of her words. Marco flinched at the sound, his heart sinking deeper into his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Nadine," Marco stammered, his voice cracking. He stood, reaching out to her, but she recoiled, taking a step back. "It was a mistake, one I regret every single day."

Nadine's eyes were more expansive, and her breathing was rapid as she struggled to process his words. "A mistake?" she echoed, her voice filled with hurt and anger. "How long have you been lying to me?"

Marco dropped his gaze to the floor, unable to meet her eyes. "It's been months," he admitted quietly. "But I swear, it's over. It only happened one time."

Tears filled Nadine's eyes, but they didn't fall. Her hands clenched into fists at her side, the fury radiating from her. "And now, now you expect me to just, what, forgive you? Pretend like you didn't break our vows? Break my heart?"

"No," Marco whispered, shaking his head. "I don't expect you to do anything. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. I couldn't keep lying anymore. I need you to know the truth and make it right."

Nadine let out a bitter laugh, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Make things right? You think that's even possible after what you've done?"

Marco's chest tightened as he saw the devastation in her eyes. "I'm going to try, Nadine. I'll do whatever it takes to fix this."

She shook her head, her voice quieter but still trembling with emotion. "You can't fix this, Marco."

"Please, baby, don't say that," Marco said sadly, his heart aching regretfully. "I messed up. I know I did. But I don't want to lose you, baby. I can't lose you." He pleaded, stepping closer, his hand reaching out, desperate to hold onto anything.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, thrusting her hand out in front of her, a barrier he knew he couldn't cross. "Do not touch me."

Marco froze, his outstretched hand falling to his side, powerless.

"I can't believe that woman came into our home," Nadine said, her voice breaking. "I trusted her. I let her get close to me, to our family." Her breathing grew more labored as the realization set in. "But you know what? It's not her I should have been trusting. It was you." She pointed at him, her hand trembling. "You put our marriage in danger, our lives. I've been faithful to you, Marco. Through everything. And this is what you do to me?" Her voice cracked as the anger bubbled over, transforming into something raw and wounded.

Marco swallowed hard, his throat tight. "I know I betrayed you," he said quietly, his eyes pleading for forgiveness. "I failed you in the worst way. I don't know how to fix this, Nadine, but I'll do anything to try."

Nadine took an unstable breath, her eyes full of pain and disbelief. "You should've thought about that before you let her

into our lives.” She shook her head again, backing away from him, the distance between them feeling more like a chasm. “I don’t know if I can ever trust you again.”

Marco’s heart clenched at those words that hung in the air. The reality of what he had done hit him harder than ever. He had broken the one thing that mattered most, and there was no easy way to repair it.

“I’m sorry, baby. It will never happen again,” Marco said, his voice shaky, his face etched with worry. He reached out toward her again, but Nadine stood firm, her expression cold and distant.

“It should never have happened in the first place,” she shot back, her tone sharp with anger. “And yes, you’re sorry. Sorry for not keeping your-” She hesitated, her eyes narrowing as she searched for the right words. “Keeping it in your pants.”

The bitterness in her voice stung, and Marco flinched. He watched helplessly as she turned on her heel and walked toward the bedroom door.

“Where are you going?” he asked, panic creeping into his voice as he watched her retreat.

Nadine didn’t turn around, her hand already on the doorknob. “Anywhere but here,” she said flatly, her tone distant, as though she had already checked out the conversation, out of the marriage.

Marco’s heart sank as he watched her disappear into the bedroom. The sound of the door slamming behind her was like the final punctuation of a mistake he could never take back.

Marco stood before the closed bedroom door, his heart pounding against his chest. Every beat felt heavier than the last

as he hesitated, his hand trembling before he turned the knob. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, his breath catching as he saw Nadine frantically grabbing clothes from the closet and tossing them into an open suitcase.

"You don't have to leave. I'll go," he said, his voice low, thick with regret.

Nadine's movement was sharp and determined. She paused only long enough to shoot him a hard, piercing look, her arms crossing tightly over her chest. "Matter of fact, you're right. You need to go," she spat, her voice seething with anger and betrayal. "Get out, Marco!"

His heart sank even lower. "Babe, please, let's talk about this," he pleaded, his voice cracking as he dropped to his knees, desperate now. His hands reached out, trembling as if falling to the floor would fix the mess he had created. "Please, let's not do this. Don't end us like this."

Nadine's jaw clenched, her eyes narrowing as she looked down at him. "End us?" She scoffed bitterly, her voice rising. "You ended us the moment you decided to betray me. The moment you brought her into our lives. Do you think getting on your knees is going to change that?"

Marco looked up at her, tears welling in his eyes. "I know I screwed up, Nadine. I know I broke your trust. But I'm begging you, please, give me a second chance to make this right."

She shook her head, her face filled with fury and pain. "How, Marco? How can you make this right when you've already shattered everything?" Her voice wavered, but she held firm, refusing to let him see the cracks beneath her anger. "You can't pray away what you've done, and you can't fix this by

begging." She emptied her clothes from the suitcase, grabbed Marco's clothes from the walk-in closet, and threw them in.

"Nadine, please. I love you."

But her silence was louder than his words.

"Why won't you give us a real chance?" Marco could still hear the frustration in JoAnn's voice, as if she couldn't understand why he wasn't rushing to be with her now that Nadine was gone. But JoAnn didn't get it, and maybe she never would. He ran a hand over his face, feeling the bulk of his decisions pressing down on him. The apartment was too quiet, and the loneliness gnawed at him, but the thought of JoAnn showing up uninvited again was unbearable. Her persistence was suffocating. No matter how often he told her, it wasn't anything between them, and there would never be anything between them. She refused to back off.

Looking at the want ads, Marco knew he needed to make a fresh start, not just with work but with his whole life. He couldn't keep living like this, trapped between his past and Nadine and JoAnn's relentless pursuit.

He circled a few job listings and stood up, determined to put one foot in front of the other. JoAnn could try all she wanted, but he wouldn't let her control his future. He wanted his life and wife back, even if he had to start over from scratch.

The doorbell rang, and his heart sank. He already knew who it was before he even approached the door. JoAnn. Her visit had become routine, uninvited, persistent, and draining. Marco hesitated momentarily, gripping the back of the chair, contemplating whether he should answer. He wasn't sure he could handle another confrontation with her, especially in his

state. His separation from Nadine had taken more out of him than he realized, and JoAnn's presence only made the emptiness more profound. With a deep breath, he finally opened the door, bracing himself. There she was, standing with that same determined look as if she thought today would be the day he gave in.

"Marco," JoAnn smiled, her voice overly sweet, "I was just in the neighborhood."

"JoAnn," he said flatly, gripping the doorframe to stop himself from slamming it in her face. "You need to stop."

"Stop what?" We're both free now. What about us? Why can't you see this is our chance?"

Her words felt like sharp nails digging into him, but he only felt exhaustion. "It was never us," he muttered. "There's no 'us.' I won't be with you, no matter what you think."

JoAnn's smile faded, her eyes narrowing as the reality of his words sank in. But instead of retreating, she stepped closer, her voice dropping to a low, dangerous whisper. "You can't just walk away from me, Marco. I've given you everything."

Marco shook his head, trying to stay calm, though a sense of dread crept in. "You need to leave, JoAnn. For good this time." But the look in her eyes told him she wasn't done yet.

"What's she doing here?" Nadine's voice cut through the tension like a knife as she rushed out of her car, slamming the door behind her. Her heels clicked sharply against the pavement as she approached Marco's apartment. JoAnn, who had been pressing in on Marco moments before, stood frozen in place, her eyes wide, caught off guard by Nadine's sudden appearance.

"Nadine?" Marco stepped forward, caught between relief and guilt. He hadn't expected her to show up, especially not now, with JoAnn standing on his doorstep.

JoAnn quickly recovered, straightening her posture and crossing her arms. "I'm just here to talk to Marco," she said, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "It's not what you think."

Nadine's eyes blazed with anger as she stood toe-to-toe with JoAnn, refusing to back down. "Oh, it's exactly what I think. You've been trying to worm your way into his life since you got between us, and I'm not having it anymore."

Marco moved to step between them, feeling the tension rise, "Nadine, it's not like that. JoAnn was leaving."

"Leaving?" Nadine's eyes flicked to him, hurt and angry, battling for dominance. "Why is she here, to begin with, Marco? After everything we've been through, you still let her come around?"

JoAnn's smile grew wider, a mocking glint in her eyes as she leaned against the doorframe. "Maybe because he's starting to realize who cares about him."

"Get out!" Nadine snapped, her voice sharp and steady, not giving JoAnn an inch. "Before I make you leave."

JoAnn hesitated for a second. Then her smile faltered as she saw the look in Nadine's eyes. There was no winning this one. With one final glance at Marco, she turned on her heel and walked away, her heels clicking sharply against the pavement as she disappeared down the steps.

Nadine watched her go before turning to Marco, her face a mixture of pain and fury. "I don't know what's worse, Marco, her showing up or you not telling her to stay away."

"Nadine, I tried to get rid of her. She won't take no for an answer. Believe me, baby. The woman is nuts," Marco pleaded, his voice filled with desperation.

"She's nuts now after you lay with her," Nadine shot back, her tone cutting like a blade. "You know what, Marco? It doesn't matter anymore." Her hands shook as she reached into her bag and pulled out a stack of papers. "I came here to give you these."

Marco's heart raced as she handed him the papers. His eyes scanned the top of the document, and his chest tightened. The words Petition for Divorce stared back at him, stark and final.

"I need you to sign it," Nadine said, her voice cold, detached.

"Nadine, wait," Marco stammered, panic rising. "Let's work it out. We can still fix this, please."

She shook her head, her eyes welling up with tears. She refused to cave in. "What's there to work out, Marco? Your woman left. You need to sign. I want a divorce."

"But baby, think about this," Marco pleaded, stepping toward her, his hands trembling as he held the papers.

"There's nothing to think about," she snapped, her voice rising. "You have been unfaithful, Marco! You broke us. I can't trust you anymore. You did that!" Her words were sharp and full of hurt, each syllable landing with the weight of all the pain she'd been carrying.

Marco stood there, staring at the papers in his hand, his mind racing, but he couldn't form the words to stop her. He had betrayed her, and he knew it. He had broken the one thing that

mattered most to him, and now he watched it slip through his fingers.

Nadine took a deep breath, wiping her eyes quickly before turning away from him. "I deserve better than this. I deserve better than you." She walked down the steps, pausing momentarily as if waiting for Marco to say anything that could change her mind. But there was nothing left to say. Nadine left Marco without another word, clutching the divorce papers in silence.

The citizens of Silver Rock once saw Marco and Nadine as the ideal couple, the epitome of love and commitment. Marco and Nadine were admired and envied even for the life they shared. For a while, it was true. They were happy, bound by love and promises of forever, until that one unfaithful night.

The good people of Silver Rock wasted no time turning on him after the truth came out. To them, Marco was nothing but slime, the man who had broken the heart of a good woman. His reputation was tarnished. His name was dragged through every conversation at the local diner and whispered gossip on the street corner. He was the bad guy, and no one cared to hear his side.

Let them think what they want, he thought bitterly. Their judgment wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't bring Nadine back. It wouldn't heal the wound that had been festering in his heart since the day she handed him those divorce papers. It wouldn't fix the fact that he was still divorced from the woman he had promised to love until death do them part.

As Marco sat quietly in his car, staring at the weathered brick facade of New Jerusalem Word of Faith Ministry, the

memories of all he'd lost weighed heavily on him. The church had once been a place of hope, a symbol of the life he and Nadine had built together. It now felt like a reminder of his failures, his broken vows, and his shattered trust.

A tear skimmed down his face, leaving a faint trail of sorrow behind. He quickly wiped it away as if denying the emotion would make the hurt disappear. But it didn't. The ache in his heart lingered, gnawing at him as he glanced toward the familiar cross that towered over the building.

With a deep breath, Marco opened the car door and stepped out, feeling heavy as he walked across the parking lot. His shoes scraping against the pavement were the only noise in the quiet afternoon air. He wasn't sure what had drawn him back to the church where he once felt a sense of peace.

He hesitated at the foot of the steps, staring up at the church's double doors, wondering if he had any right to be here after the sins he'd committed. But something inside urged him forward, as if he were searching for redemption he wasn't sure he deserved.

Slowly, Marco climbed the steps, each one feeling like a mountain. When he reached the top, he paused for a moment, gripping the handle of the door. For a brief second, he closed his eyes, silently hoping for strength. Then, with a quiet sigh, he pushed open the door and stepped inside, hoping that somehow, in the silence of the sanctuary, he might find a way to heal.

"He's late again," Rayshonda muttered, leaning slightly toward her twin brother, Rayshon, as he sat beside her and her husband, Hunter.

"This is the fifth time he's been late," Rayshon stated, shaking his head.

"Seventh," Hunter corrected, his voice calm but firm.

Rayshonda sighed, glancing toward the church entrance, hoping to see Marco's familiar figure walk through. "I hope he doesn't get sat down from his position," she said quietly, her voice betraying her worry.

Hunter looked at her with a gentle expression. "If he's got to sit down for a season, it's only fair," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Pastor has to do what's best for him and the church."

Rayshonda pressed her lips together, not liking the idea of her brother losing his role as head deacon. "I guess you're right," she said, though the thought didn't sit well with her.

As they continued to talk, Tyrone Stone slid into the seat next to them, catching the tail end of their conversation. "What y'all whispering about?" he asked, his voice low but curious.

"Your brother's late again," Hunter answered.

Tyrone frowned, a look of concern crossing his face. "Bro is going through a lot right now. Hopefully, Pastor Ray can relate to that."

Hunter leaned back slightly, giving Tyrone a thoughtful look. "Maybe so," he admitted, "But sometimes people need a wake-up call to help them get back on track. If stepping down helps him in the long run, that might be what's best."

Rayshonda remained quiet, her heart conflicted. She wanted to support her brother, but didn't want to see him slip further into this. The divorce had a profound effect, pulling him away from his responsibilities. "I'll be back," Rayshonda

whispered to Hunter, her voice barely audible above the murmur of the congregation.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his brow furrowed with concern as he noticed the worried look on her face.

"I'm going to call Marco to see where he is," she replied, gently squeezing past her brothers and the others seated. Her movements were quick but careful as she exited the sanctuary and entered the hallway.

Before she could reach for her phone inside her purse and turn it on, she stopped in her tracks, surprised. There, just a few steps ahead, Marco walked in, his expression difficult as he entered the church.

"You're late again," Rayshonda Stone Parker said, approaching her brother with a knowing look.

"You think I don't know that?" Marco shot back, leaning in to give his sister a quick peck on the cheek. "Good morning, and how are you?" he added, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"And don't get smart with me. I'm just trying to help," she retorted.

"I don't need your help, ma'am," Marco said defiantly.

"Yeah, right," she replied, rolling her eyes.

"Are the others here?" he asked, picking up his pace toward the sanctuary entrance. Rayshonda followed behind him.

"They're all here," she confirmed, keeping up with him.

Marco Stone whispered a quick prayer before stepping into the sanctuary. He carried a heavy responsibility as the deacon in charge of the tithes and offering counting room. It wasn't an easy job, with piles of money stacked on the table every week and the temptation to pocket a few bills lurking in the

background. He was in charge of the counting room and watched every deacon to ensure they were trustworthy and would not steal any money. Marco eased into his position under the watchful eye of Pastor Billy Ray. He could feel the pastor's disapproving glare, late again. Marco gave a slight nod, acknowledging the silent reprimand. He hated being late, hated the excuses that ran through his mind each time.

"Let's give the praise team a handclap for their faithfulness in God," Pastor Ray said, standing up from his chair and heading to the podium. His voice boomed with warmth and authority, instantly drawing the congregation's attention. As the applause faded, he continued. "Last but not least, let's give God a handclap of praise. All power, glory, and honor belong to You. There is no other God. There is no other Rock. You are who You say You are, and You can do all You say You can do."

He stepped closer to the edge of the altar stage, his eyes scanning the congregation, his presence commanding. The atmosphere in the sanctuary was charged with expectancy. Pastor Ray raised the microphone to his lips again, his voice growing louder and more dynamic. "C'mon, God's people, bless His holy name!" He shouted, his voice reverberating through the sanctuary.

The congregation responded, voices rising in unison, hands lifted high in worship. The energy in the room swelled as people praised, clapped, and lifted their voices. Pastor Ray, smiling, lifted his hands toward Heaven, encouraging the congregation to keep pressing into their worship.

"He's worthy!" Pastor Ray proclaimed, his voice echoing with conviction, filling the room with awe and reverence.

"C'mon, people, let's stand on our feet and give God the praise!" Pastor Ray encouraged, his voice filled with passion. The congregation responded, rising from their seats as one, hands clapping, voices lifting in praise to bless the name of the Lord. The sanctuary echoed with heartfelt worship, a sea of believers pouring their gratitude and reverence out in song and shout.

After a few moments, as the praise settled, Pastor Ray motioned for everyone to take their seats. The congregation quieted, the atmosphere now thick with anticipation for the word. Pastor Ray stepped back to the podium, his Bible open before him.

"Today," he began, his tone soft but sure, "we are diving into the love of God. His immeasurable, unshakable, everlasting love." He paused for emphasis, letting the weight of his words sink in before continuing. "Let's turn to Romans chapter eight, verses thirty-eight and thirty-nine."

He waited as the soft rustle of pages filled the room. When the congregation was ready, he began to read with reverence. "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Pastor Ray paused, looking out over the congregation, his eyes filled with compassion. "There is nothing that can separate you from His love. No sin is too great, no failure too deep, no circumstance too overwhelming. His love is eternal and unshakable, and it's for you. Always for you."

The words seemed to hang in the air, touching hearts, as he continued to break down the passage, leading the congregation deeper into the profound truth of God's unwavering love.

"Amen!" Rayshonda shouted from her seat, her voice echoing through the sanctuary with passion and conviction.

"Nothing can separate us from God's love," Hunter added, his voice strong and steady, feeling the power of God moving through him as he listened to the word. He wasn't the type to speak out in church often, but today, something stirred deep inside him. The message Pastor Ray was delivering hit home.

Pastor Ray nodded, his eyes lighting up as he heard the couple's heartfelt declarations. "That's right, Brother Hunter and Sister Rayshonda," he said, his voice filled with encouragement. "When we fully understand that nothing can separate us from the love of God, we can walk in peace, we can walk in victory, no matter what we face."

The atmosphere in the room continued to build as more voices joined in, affirming the truth being spoken. Rayshonda and Hunter exchanged glances, feeling a sense of unity with each other and the message they shared. In that moment, the worries they'd been carrying, the financial strain, and the challenges in their marriage seemed lighter, wrapped in the comfort of God's unfailing love.

Rayshon sat there, quietly observing as the congregation was swept up in the spirit, people raising their hands, shouting "Amen," moved by the power of God. He watched his sister, Rayshonda, and her husband, Hunter, as they were visibly touched by the message. But for him, it was different. He sat still, his heart and his mind clouded with doubt.

He wanted to feel what they felt — the conviction, the peace, the unwavering faith — but it eluded him. His thoughts churned, pulling him further from the moment. *Is God real?* The question gnawed at him, louder now than ever. He had heard many stories over the years, testimonies of people seeing miracles, lives being transformed, chains of addiction, and suffering broken by the power of God. They spoke with such certainty about the divine encounters they'd experienced, how the presence of God had set them free.

But they were just that: Stories he had never witnessed for himself.

He glanced around, seeing the joy and peace on the faces of the congregation, and felt a pang of envy mixed with a sense of frustration. *Why couldn't he believe that?* He wanted to, but something was holding him back. He was struggling, not just with doubt, but with the deeper question of whether faith was even possible for him. Could he ever experience the realness of God that everyone else seemed to be immersed in?

The more he thought about it, the further away it all seemed. And yet, beneath the doubt, there was a faint hope, a longing that perhaps he might see and feel like they did one day. But today, he sat quietly, uncertainly wrestling, unsure if he would honestly believe.

After the altar call and the final blessing, the congregation slowly exited the sanctuary. Church guests and new members gathered in a room off the main hall, where Pastor Ray and the ministers greeted them. The atmosphere was warm and inviting as people introduced themselves and exchanged pleasantries over light refreshments. As Rayshonda passed by, she could

hear Pastor Ray's voice echoing from the room, his laughter rich and booming, carrying easily down the hallway. The sound made her smile. His presence was always commanding and effortlessly drew people in.

Rayshonda admired Pastor Ray and his wife, First Lady Adrienna. They were a robust and respected couple in the church, and she couldn't help but be drawn to them. Pastor Ray's testimony was compelling. He often spoke of how God had delivered him from his womanizing ways, a story that resonated deeply with the congregation. Rayshonda, however, found herself hanging on to every word for different reasons.

Pastor Ray was undeniably attractive, and though she knew it was wrong, she couldn't help but think of him as more than just a spiritual leader. To her, he was eye candy; his charm, his look, and the way he carried himself made him irresistible. She could easily imagine how any woman would love to have him as more than just a pastor.

Still, instead of joining them, Rayshonda made her way toward the tithes and offerings counting room, where the deacons were handling the financials.

Standing at the counting room door, Rayshonda knocked once, and the door swung open suddenly. Deacon Cantrell stood in the doorway, his expression impassive.

"Yeah?" he asked, his tone abrupt.

"I want to see my brother," she replied, her eyes shifting past him into the room.

Cantrell turned slightly and said, "It's your sister."

From inside, Marco's voice responded, "Let her in."

Cantrell stepped aside, allowing her to enter. As Rayshonda walked in, she immediately noticed the piles of cash on the table. The men around it were focused, dividing the money into neat stacks. She closed the door behind her and took it all in momentarily, her gaze lingering on the sizable amount of cash.

"Woe," she said, her voice low with surprise, "that's a lot of bread." Her eyes flicked from the money to her brother, Marco, who barely glanced up as he continued sorting through the stacks.

"Yeah, we believe in paying our tithes if nothing else," Cantrell chuckled, leaning back in his chair before resuming counting the stacks of cash in front of him.

Marco glanced briefly at his sister, his eyes narrowing with curiosity. "What is it?" he asked, though his focus quickly shifted back to the task at hand, his gaze alternating between the money and the other men at the table. He was keeping an eye on them, making sure everything stayed honest.

Rayshonda hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Are you coming to dinner?" she asked, her voice hopeful. She had been asking him for the past four Sundays, and he had turned her down each time. But this time, she held onto a glimmer of hope that he might say yes.

Marco scrunched up his face, his expression unsure. "I don't know," he mumbled, not looking up as he continued counting. His answer was evasive, but Rayshonda could sense his tension, a familiar battle between his responsibilities and whatever was weighing on his mind. Nadine and the divorce, no doubt.

"Come on, please, pretty please," Rayshonda added, her eyes pleading as she leaned in just a little closer. She wasn't ready to give up so easily.

Marco sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I just want to go back to my apartment and get some rest," he said, trying to sound tired, hoping she'd take the hint and understand.

"You can rest after you eat," she persisted, refusing to let it drop. "I cooked your favorite dish today." She smiled, adding a little extra sweetness to her voice, hoping it would soften his determination.

"The way I like it?" he asked, thinking momentarily, his defenses dropping. The thought of a good meal tugged at him, but then he shook his head, pushing the temptation away. "Naw, I'm gonna pass."

Rayshonda sighed, her frustration bubbling over. "Marco, stop being so anti-social and come eat dinner with us," she urged in a playful and exasperated tone. "It's not just about the food. It's about family."

"Yeah, man, the girl is begging you to come for dinner. Shoot, I wish somebody would beg me," Cantrell chuckled, leaning back in his chair with a grin. "No, they wouldn't even have to beg. Just ask me, and I'm there." His booming laughter filled the room, and the other three deacons joined in, amused by the joke.

Marco gave a faint smile but stayed focused on the money before him. "I'll think about it," he finally said, his tone noncommittal but softer than before.

Rayshonda's face lit up with relief. "That's better than a no," she said quickly, not wanting to give him a chance to

backtrack. Before he could change his mind or offer any further excuses, she slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her and rushing down the hallway with a small smile. It wasn't a definite yes but more than she had hoped for.

"I didn't," Marco muttered to the closed door, shaking his head with an annoyed sigh. "That girl, I swear, she thinks she's my mama." He rolled his eyes, leaning back in his chair as if trying to shake off the weight of Rayshonda's persistence.

Cantrell chuckled, counting the bills with quick hands. "She loves you, man. I don't know why," he joked, flashing a grin. The other deacons grinned, but the room settled back into its task.

Marco grinned, too, though it was tinged with guilt. He knew Rayshonda cared, but the last thing he wanted was to sit through dinner pretending everything was fine. The thought of smiling, conversing, and pretending he was okay felt exhausting.



Hunter Wayne Parker pulled his economy truck into the driveway and killed the engine, sinking into the driver's seat with a heavy sigh. His hands tightened around the steering wheel as he glanced over at his wife, Rayshonda, frustration simmering beneath the surface. She'd done it again, invited her brothers over for Sunday dinner, even though she knew they were struggling financially, and bought Marco an expensive brisket. That was out of the question. It wasn't that he minded her brothers coming over. Tyrone, Marco, and Rayshon were good guys, but with his job slowing down and a noticeable cut

in his paycheck, he wasn't in the mood to play host, especially with everything they were trying to juggle. The last thing Hunter wanted was for them to catch wind of his financial troubles. His pride wouldn't allow it, and the thought of them knowing he couldn't provide the way he once did gnawed at him. Adding to the frustration, Rayshonda was now talking about getting a job. The last thing he wanted was for his wife to enter the workforce. He had always seen himself as the man of the house, the provider who ensured that both the home and his wife were well cared for. The idea of reversing those roles made him uneasy. He believed it was his duty to protect and support her, not the other way around.

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm the knot of stress tightening in his chest. "Shona," he began, his voice strained, "We didn't need this right now. Maybe we need to rethink some of these dinners. With things being tight right now." Hunter muttered under his breath, shooting Rayshonda a glance of irritation and concern. He knew she meant well, but the pressure was building, and he wasn't sure how long he could keep pretending everything was fine. "At least you should have consulted with me before asking your brothers to dinner," he growled, his voice low but edged with frustration. He clenched his jaw, trying to keep his irritation in check, but the stress was getting the better of him.

Rayshonda turned to him, her expression softening. "Please, Hunter," she pleaded, her tone gentle but firm. "I don't get to see my brothers much. I only see them at church and want to spend time with them."

Hunter's eyes narrowed slightly, but Rayshonda continued, undeterred. "A little dinner is not going to hurt us." Her words hung in the air, filled with an aching need for connection. She wasn't asking for extravagance, just a chance to feel close to her family, especially when so much felt uncertain.

"It's not just the dinner, Shona," Hunter sighed, running a hand over his face. "It's everything. The money, the pressure. I don't want them to know how bad things are. It's my job to take care of this, you, and our home."

Rayshonda leaned closer to him, her gaze soft but unyielding. "I know that, Hunter. And I appreciate everything you're doing. But we don't have to carry this burden alone. They're family. They're not going to judge you for struggling a little. They love you just like I do."

Her words struck a chord with him, and Hunter gradually lowered his defenses. He didn't want to admit it, but maybe she was right.

"And you know, I can get a job," Rayshonda said gently, trying to offer a solution.

Hunter's reaction was immediate. "No, no, no, no," he said, his voice rising in a firm, determined tone. "No wife of mine is going to work. You can forget it."

Rayshonda blinked, taken aback by his intensity. "I don't see why you're so against me working," she stated calmly, though inside, she was irritated.

"I'm head of the house," Hunter shot back, his voice unwavering. "And a man is the one who takes care of his wife. That's how it's supposed to be. That's my responsibility."

He stared at her, his pride as strong as the words he was saying, but she could sense the underlying insecurity. It wasn't just about tradition. It was about him feeling like he was losing control and failing as the provider.

"I don't see where it matters," Rayshonda said in one breath, her voice steady yet filled with a quiet determination. "It will help out. I don't particularly appreciate seeing you worrying about me and bills. I want to help my man. That's all."

Hunter's jaw tightened as her words sank in. "It matters," he snapped, his voice rising slightly, frustrated that she would think such a thing. "It matters to me." He opened his door, his movements sharp, then paused before stepping out. "Next time, I'd appreciate it if you just check with me first." Without waiting for a response, Hunter climbed out of the truck, leaving Rayshonda sitting silently, her heart heavy. She wanted to help ease his burden but knew this was more than just about money. It was about his pride.



Tyrone Stone pulled his sleek Lexus into the spacious three-car garage, cutting the engine before stepping out. A sense of satisfaction washed over him as he walked through the kitchen, garage door, and into his vast home. He admired everything about it: the high ceilings, the custom finishes, and every detail he had envisioned when designing the place himself. The blueprint had been his own, meticulously planned, and now every inch of the house stood as a testament to his hard work and vision.

He hung his keys on the hook by the door and paused, taking a moment to appreciate his surroundings. The house was everything he had dreamed of, impeccable, grand, and undeniably his. A smile crept across his face as pride swelled in his chest. "I did that," he murmured, his voice more excited. "Man, I did a damn good job."

With a grin still plastered, he went to the main bedroom and strolled into the oversized walk-in closet, feeling the weight of accomplishment settle comfortably on his shoulders.



Marco liked Hunter but couldn't shake the feeling that his sister could have done better. Sure, Hunter was a hard worker and provided for his family, but at one time, in Marco's eyes, Rayshonda had married the wrong man. There had been plenty of men who vied for her attention, including an insurance agent and even a doctor, but she followed her heart, and it led her to Hunter Wayne Parker.

"Hey, you made it," Rayshonda said, wrapping her arms around her brother in a warm hug. "You know, I was about to come and kidnap you if you didn't show up," she added with a laugh, pulling him inside the house.

"Did I even have a choice?" Marco chuckled as he closed the door behind him.

"Nope," she laughed again, her smile wide as she dragged him toward the family room. "Look who's here!" she announced, practically pulling him along.

Marco grinned as he stepped into the room. "What's up, man?" he greeted Hunter.

"Nothing much, man. Just trying to catch this game," Hunter replied, gesturing to the TV. "Have a seat," he pointed to the brown leather recliner across from him.

Maco nodded and dropped into the big, comfortable chair, already feeling the familiar ease of being around family. "Who's winning?" Marco asked as he settled into the recliner, sinking comfortably into the plush cushions.

Hunter glanced at the screen, his eyes glued to the action. "Man, it's been back and forth, but my team's holding it down right now," he said, never taking his eyes off the game.

Maco chuckled. "Hope they keep it up. You don't take losses well."

Hunter smirked. "No, I don't."

"Men and their sports," Rayshonda laughed, shaking her head.

"That's right, Lil' Sis," Marco grinned. "Give me football any day."

"Me too," Hunter chimed in with a laugh, glancing at his wife. "I wish my wife enjoyed it as much as I do." Rayshonda rolled her eyes playfully, and Hunter grinned, "But who needs sports when I get a thrill out of looking at my beautiful wife all day?"

"Yeah, you're only saying that 'cause she's right there," Marco grinned and teased. "She looks all right."

"Don't listen to my brother, babe. You know you have a beautiful and good wife," Rayshonda said, laughing as she reminded her husband how great she was.

"Don't get in the doghouse on my account, bro," Marco added, laughing at the slightly nervous look on Hunter's face.

Hunter chuckled and said, "Shonda knows she's beautiful and a good, good, good wife, and I'm crazy about her." he blew her a playful kiss.

"Yes, I know," Rayshonda replied, pretending to catch the kiss mid-air.

Marco raised an eyebrow with a mischievous grin. "Bro, did you notice she didn't say anything good about you?"

"Marco, don't start teasing my husband," Rayshonda laughed. "He knows I love him. I'm crazy about you, too, babe."

"All this love in the air is making me sick," Marco joked, clutching his stomach dramatically as he burst out laughing,

"Babe, never listen to Marco. He's full of it," Rayshonda said with a laugh, giving Marco a playful wink. "I'm going to finish up before the rest of the clowns arrive." She winked again, this time heading toward the kitchen. "If you need me, just holler," she added over her shoulder.

"You need me to do anything? I can run to the store and pick up something if you need it," Marco offered, glancing at his sister.

"Nah, you're good. Just relax and enjoy the game," Rayshonda called back. "I just need to finish the salad, and then I'll be all yours and the rest of the clan's," she joked as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Who do you think Tyrone will have on his shoulders today?" Hunter asked as the game went into halftime, glancing over at Marco.

Marco shrugged, I don't know, man. Ty's shoulders stay booked and busy."

Hunter laughed. "Shoot, at this point, he needs a chiropractor and a security deposit."

Marco burst out laughing. "For real, and a back brace just to get through the week."

Hunter laughed too, but as the moment settled, a flicker of memory crossed his mind. When he first started dating Rayshonda, her three brothers were openly against it. They didn't like the idea of their sister being with a white guy, and it took a long time before they even got used to having him around. There was still some reluctance, but it had improved significantly.

But Hunter couldn't help who he fell in love with. Rayshonda was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and thank God, she felt the same way about him. To him, they were a match made in heaven, despite what anyone else thought.

"I don't see how he does it," Marco said. "But you know how he rolls. I hope that stuff doesn't backfire on him."

"Right, I don't know how he doesn't get their names mixed up," Hunter laughed, rising from his seat. "You want a cold one?"

"Yeah, if you've got a lite," Marco replied.

"I've got a few," Hunter said as he left the room.

Marco stood up from the recliner and wandered over to the fireplace, his eyes drawn to the photos on the mantle. One picture, in particular, caught his attention. A snapshot of him and his siblings, all smiling. A familiar ache tugged at his heart. Those smiles had hidden so much.

They had all been placed in foster care when they were just kids. Their mom had remarried, and the new stepfather was no good. Things spiraled when both their mom and stepdad got hooked on drugs, leaving Marco and his siblings to fend for themselves. The memories stirred, and though the pain was distant, it never disappeared. Marco remembered it like it was yesterday, the day Child Protective Services came for them, early one cold morning. They had just learned that their mom had died from an overdose. Their stepdad didn't want anything to do with them, leaving Marco, the oldest, shaken to his core. The sudden loss of their mother and the abandonment by their stepfather left them completely uprooted. Being shuffled from one foster home to another took a toll on all of them, especially Marco. Marco and Tyrone knew their biological father. They were the only ones old enough to remember the man before he left, when life was a little brighter and their family felt whole. After their mom gave birth to the twins, their father walked out of their lives, leaving Marco with the kind of memories that are both a blessing and a burden. He missed his father, Jack Milton Stone, the gentle, quiet man who rarely raised his voice and always seemed to have a calm presence about him. Those early mornings when Marco would sit beside his father on the porch, watching the world wake up, were etched into his mind. His father didn't say much, but his steady silence was comforting. He'd listen intently when Marco talked, giving him his full attention, a quality few others seemed to have.

But with good memories came the difficult ones. He couldn't forget the toll his father's absence took on his mother, Helen Stone. She had been left to carry the load of their family

alone, and her strength in the face of betrayal often came with anger and exhaustion. Marco saw how she fought to keep them afloat and bore her frustration silently until she couldn't anymore. And Marco had been the one to feel the sharp edge of her disappointment, her sorrow, her loneliness, all simmering under the surface and spilling over in unexpected moments. Those were tough days for their mom, as she struggled to make ends meet and care for them all on her own. Things had started to improve, though, after the twins turned two. Their mom found a job as a cashier at the local thrift store, where she met their stepdad. It seemed like life might get better briefly before everything spiraled out of control. The memories of his father left Marco torn. He clung to the warmth of those rare, gentle moments, yet he couldn't ignore the hurt his father had left behind.

The Stone family had come a long way from their rough beginnings. Tyrone now owned a thriving new and used car dealership. Rayshon had defied the odds, becoming a Black pilot based in Atlanta. Rayshonda, for a time, owned an exotic pet store, which later went out of business. Marco had tried to warn her about the challenges of selling exotic animals in a small town. As for himself, he was now one of the top computer engineers in Silver Rock. Considering their turbulent past, life had treated them fairly well, especially for four siblings from a broken home.

The foster care system hadn't been all bad, but Marco disliked how it constantly uprooted them. Just when they'd get used to one family, they'd be told it was time to move again,

forcing them to learn the habits and rules of another household. That cycle became more difficult each time they had to leave.

Yet, there was one silver lining in all of it. The system had managed to keep them together. That was why they moved so frequently. Most families weren't willing to hold four siblings for an extended period. But no matter where they ended up, they always had each other. And that had made all the difference.

"Here you go," Hunter said, handing Marco a Lite beer.

"Thanks, man," Marco replied, taking the beer, cracking it open, and letting the cold liquid slide down his throat. He let out a laugh. "Man, I needed this." He shook his head, his thoughts shifting. "Yeah, man, Ty, that boy is sure enough playing with fire," Marco said, a bit more serious now. "He'd better watch out, or he's going to get burned."

"Yeah," Hunter agreed, watching Marco take another swig of beer and move away from the mantle and the memories that lingered there. Marco settled back into the chair across from Hunter, feeling an unexpected respect for the man.

It had taken Marco a few years to fully come to terms with the fact that his sister had married outside her race. All three brothers struggled with it. When Hunter arrived at their apartment looking for Rayshonda, all hell broke loose. At first, they thought he was in the wrong place. There was no way their sister was dating a white guy. And when they realized he was her date, things got tense fast. Marco chuckled inwardly, remembering the scene. Hunter, surrounded by the brothers, was bombarded with questions. The poor guy looked terrified. Yeah, those were the days, Marco thought. Things had changed,

but it hadn't been easy. Now, if nothing else, Marco could see why his sister had chosen Hunter. He respected the guy for sticking around through it all, given what he and his brothers had put him through initially. That alone earned Marco's respect in that department. Hunter had proven himself, enduring the skepticism and challenges that came his way.

"Hey, speak of the devil," Hunter said, rising to his feet.

"Huh?" Marco snapped out of his thoughts, still lost in remembering his first time meeting Hunter.

"Your brother's here," Hunter glanced at the doorbell camera monitor on the wall as he headed to the door and opened it.

"Dude, what took you so long to open the door?" Tyrone asked, practically all in one breath, as he stepped inside.

"Man, I just saw you. Don't start with me," Hunter laughed, pulling Tyrone in for a quick man-hug. "C'mon in. We were talking about you."

"Oh, I know it was all good," Tyrone replied with a grin.

"Always, always," Hunter chuckled, closing the door behind him.

"Right, right, hey, you beat me here," Tyrone said, greeting Marco as he entered the family room. He glanced around. "Where's that brat?" he laughed.

"That brat happens to be my wife," Hunter chuckled, shaking his head.

"Hey, watch your mouth when you're talking about a man's wife," Marco said with a playful grin, glancing over at Hunter.

Tyrone laughed and gave Hunter a hearty slap on the back. "He knows he's married to a brat. Ain't that right, white boy?" he teased as he slid down on the couch.

Before Hunter could respond, Rayshonda entered the room. "I'm right here," she said, giving Tyrone a hug and a peck on the cheek. As she glanced around the room, she raised an eyebrow.

"What are you looking for?" Tyrone asked, noticing her curious expression.

"I'm looking for one of your lady's friends," she replied with a frown. "I know you didn't show up without a today."

Tyrone laughed loudly, "I decided to give the ladies a break today. You know they can't handle too much of this good-looking thing," he said, gliding his fingers across his face as if to highlight his features. He burst into a full laugh at his own words.

Marco chuckled. "That's a fact?"

"Man, you know it's a fact!" Tyrone replied, grinning confidently as he leaned back into the couch.

"That's a first," Hunter said with a grin. "I thought I'd never see you without a lady friend."

"Yeah, no kidding," Marco laughed.

Tyrone laughed, shaking his head. "Man, y'all two old folks don't know a thing about dating anymore."

Hunter chuckled, but Tyrone wasn't finished. "Well, Marco, you're about to find out since your old lady has split."

Marco shot him a sideways glance but kept his tone light. "Yeah, thanks for the reminder, man."

"Whatever happened to her anyway?" Tyrone asked casually.

"Happened to who?" Marco replied, already knowing where this was headed.

"Man, don't play dumb. The woman who busted up your marriage," Tyrone said with a knowing smirk.

"JoAnn? I don't know and don't care as long as she's out of my life," Marco muttered, his tone tense.

Rayshonda shook her head. "I knew something was off about her, the way she hung around Nadine all the time. My foster mom used to say, 'Never let a woman hang around you and your husband too long.'"

"Yeah, well, she was fine," Tyrone laughed, a grin spreading across his face.

Marco's face hardened. "I don't want to talk about JoAnn. Find something else to talk about."

"Alright, brother, I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers," Tyrone said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "But you've got to learn something about women. If you're gonna cheat, never let her get close to your wife. Keep it on the down-low." Tyrone paused for dramatic effect, then laughed, "Man, I don't know who your mama was, but she sure didn't teach you nothing about affairs." He laughed so hard he nearly fell off the couch, clearly amused by his joke.

Marco shot him a glance but said nothing. He was not in the mood for Tyrone's teasing.

"Tyrone, I think you need to stop while you're still alive," Hunter said, trying to diffuse the tension from Tyrone's shady joke.

"Marco knows I'm just joking with him," Tyrone said, glancing over at Marco. "It's all a joke, baby," he added, still laughing.

"That's not funny," Rayshonda chimed in, playfully swatting Tyrone on his head.

Tyrone rubbed the spot where she hit him, still chuckling. "Alright, alright, I get it."

Rayshonda shook her head, then smiled. "We'll eat once Rayshon gets here," she informed them, squeezing between Hunter and Tyrone on the couch, shifting the mood back to something lighter.

"Hey, watch it, girl! Don't step on my fifteen-hundred-dollar shoes," Tyrone warned.

"You spent over a thousand on those?" she asked, looking at his shoes disgustingly.

"Don't act like you didn't know," Tyrone said, pulling out a cloth to give his shoes a quick wipe. "These beauties cost more than that junker parked in your driveway."

"Hey, leave my truck out of this!" Hunter shot back defensively.

"That was low, even for you," Marco said, leaning forward and looking at Tyrone, saying he might've crossed the line.

"Man, lighten up. The brat knows I'm just playing with her," Tyrone grinned, grabbing his sister around the shoulders and pulling her close. "Don't you know that, Brat?" he said, planting a playful kiss on her cheek.

"Ty, don't apologize to me. Apologize to my husband. It's his truck you're talking about," Rayshonda said, giving him a side-eye.

Tyrone shrugged and turned to Hunter. "What's up, white boy? You know I'm kidding, right?"

"Yeah, man, don't think anything of it," Hunter replied, though a flicker of embarrassment crossed his face. Tyrone's words had stung a little more than he let on. The guy seemed like he didn't care about people's feelings.

"You good? We're cool?" Tyrone asked, noticing the tension that lingered in the air. Perhaps he went a bit too far with the truck comment. But then again, marrying into their family meant Hunter had to know the teasing came with the territory.

"Yeah, man, we're cool," Hunter replied, trying to sound confident, but his voice wavered slightly.

"You sure?" Tyrone pressed, eyeing him.

"Yeah, man, forget it," Hunter laughed, though it was clear it wasn't entirely genuine.

"Okay," Tyrone replied, still grinning. Turning to Rayshonda, he asked, "You told Shon what time dinner starts?"

"Yeah, he said he was coming right after church," she answered, glancing at her watch. "He should've beaten you two here by now."

"Late? That's not like him," Tyrone said, a little surprised. He leaned closer to Rayshonda, grinning mischievously, "Girl, can't you use some of that psychic twin power and figure out where he's at?"

Rayshonda chuckled, "It doesn't work like that."

"It used to work like that. Both of you knew when the other one was in trouble," Tyrone said, glancing at Marco.

"Remember that time, Marco? When Shon got sick in college, Rayshonda knew something was wrong."

"Yeah, they had some strange, weird vibes going on," Marco replied, smiling.

"Weird. That's what you thought it was?" Rayshonda asked, shaking her head.

"Exactly. Y'all had some weird stuff going on. It was scary at times," Tyrone teased, not holding back. "After that, I started looking at you two like a couple of weirdos," he laughed, clearly enjoying himself.

Rayshonda rolled her eyes. "You're the one who's weird," she shot back, crossing her arms with a grin.

"I thought he had a flight later today?" Marco asked, glancing over at Rayshonda.

"No, he doesn't go back until Tuesday or Wednesday," she replied, thinking for a moment. "I forgot which day he told me, but it's one of those."

"Man, I still can't believe that dude is a pilot," Tyrone said, shaking his head slowly. "Wasn't he the one who was scared of heights when we were growing up?"

"Yeah," Marco laughed. "Now he's out here flying planes. It's crazy."

"Make it make sense to me," Tyrone said, still shaking his head in disbelief as he joined in the laughter.

"There he is now," Rayshonda said, jumping to her feet as the doorbell rang. She hurried to the door, beaming as she opened it. "Hey, come on in here. We were talking about you. Hope you're hungry."

"Starving," Rayshon replied, letting his sister pull him inside with a smile.

"Well, the whole clan's here now," she said happily, still holding onto him as they made their way to the family room.

"What's up, bro?" Marco greeted, giving Rayshon a nod.

"Nothing much," Rayshon nodded back, settling in.

"My main man!" Tyrone exclaimed, throwing an arm around Rayshon's shoulders. "Brat, move out of the way," he nudged Rayshonda, but she only giggled and tightened her grip on her brother.

"I hope y'all are ready to eat," she said, still laughing like a high school girl, not letting go of Rayshon.

"Just point me to the dining room," Tyrone said, releasing them.

"You know where it is," Rayshonda replied, leading the way with her brothers and Hunter in tow.

"Mmmmh, it smells good in here, sis," Marco said as they entered the dining room.

"It's about time," Tyrone teased with a grin.

"What does that mean?" Rayshonda asked, turning to him.

"It means it's about time you learned how to cook without burning everything," Tyrone laughed, pulling a chair from underneath the dining table, sitting, and leaning back in it.

"I never did that!" Rayshonda protested, though the grin on her face said otherwise.

"Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?" Tyrone teased her again.

"Boy, I ain't worried about you," she laughed, tossing a cloth napkin at him. He caught it midair with a smirk.

"Please don't put that on the table," Rayshon said, amused by their teasing.

"It's yours now," Tyrone said, handing the napkin to Rayshon with a mischievous smile.

"I don't want that thing after you've had your hands on it. Ain't no telling where your hands have been," Rayshon said, making everyone laugh.

"On your old lady---oops, can't say that. That's my mama, too!" He grinned, placing the napkin on Rayshon's head like a crown.

"Man, stop. You're always playing," Rayshon said, shaking the napkin off his head and handing it to Rayshonda.

"Same old Tyrone Michael Stone, always causing mischief and getting us into a mound of trouble," Marco chuckled. "Y'all remember when he tried to straighten Rayshon's hair with the hot comb?"

"Remember? Who could forget?" Rayshon laughed. "I had to go to school like that. He messed me up!" He shook his head at the memory.

"I gotta admit, baby brother, he had you looking like--" Marco started.

"A hot mess," Rayshonda finished, laughing.

"Y'all, when I stepped on that school bus, everybody died, laughed, including you, Marco! Man, I'll never forget how that made me feel," Rayshon said, smiling and glancing around the dining table.

"You said you wanted to be Super Fly," Tyrone laughed. "That's all you talked about after watching that old movie." He said, reaching over to give his head a playful rub.

"Man, you're still playing too much," Rayshon said, shaking him off with a grin as the laughter continued around the table.

"Hon, you all were treacherous back in the day," Hunter said, smiling from ear to ear as he looked at his wife. "Nothing you all say surprises me anymore," he added, glancing from one brother to the next.

"Well, I must tell you, you were a big surprise," Marco said, leaning back in his chair. "Man, we were ready to take you out to the woodshed and beat you back to wherever you came from. A white boy hittin' on our sister? Nah, we weren't about to play that."

"We were getting ready to whup some, you know what," Tyrone spoke up with a smirk.

"Yeah, you got that right," Rayshon agreed.

Hunter chuckled. "Y'all were some mean-looking cats when I first met you. I almost turned around and said, 'Forget it. I don't need these dudes jumping me over their sister.' But then, she caught my eye and my heart." He smiled at Rayshonda sitting beside him and gently kissed her hand. "And she still does."

"Man, don't nobody want to see all that," Tyrone mocked, rolling his eyes.

Marco smiled, "I'm glad you make my little sister happy."

"Ditto," Rayshon said.

"I am happy," Rayshonda said.

Hunter glanced at Marco gently, almost solemnly, as everyone settled around the table. "Marco," he said, his voice

steady and respectful, "would you do the honor and say grace for us?"

Marco paused, glancing around the table. He nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Of course," he replied quietly. He looked down, folding his hands together, and everyone else followed suit, bowing their heads.

Taking a deep breath, Marco spoke sincerely, his voice steady but warm. "Heavenly Father, we come to You this evening with gratitude for the blessing of this meal and the company of family and friends. Thank you for the hands that prepared this food and for bringing us together to share it." He paused, the room filled with the respectful silence of loved ones listening closely. "We ask that You continue to guide and protect us and help us to walk in Your light. Give strength to face the challenges ahead and wisdom to make choices that honor You. And may this meal nourish our bodies as Your love nourishes our souls." With another brief pause, he finished, "In Jesus' name, Amen."

Around the table, heads lifted, and a quiet, heartfelt "Amen" followed. Hunter met Marco's gaze, nodding his appreciation, and Marco returned it with a grateful smile.

"My favorite is brown gravy and brisket. Thanks, Sis," Marco said, pouring a big heaping of gravy over his brisket. "Everything's delicious," he complimented her, savoring the meal.

"Thanks," Rayshonda replied with a smile.

"Everything's good," the other men complimented her great dinner.

"Only the best for my crew," she replied with a smile.

"I'm proud of you," Marco said sincerely, his tone softening.

"Marco, you're not the only one proud of her. We all are," Tyrone added, frowning playfully and winking at Rayshonda.

"Well, y'all negros need to say it then!" Marco laughed. "Don't wait for me to say it; then you want to come behind me." Raising his glass of iced tea, Marco added, "I'm proud of all of you!" He smiled, holding his glass in the air. "Let's make a toast."

"Salute!" Everyone echoed, holding their glasses of tea high in the air.

"I love this family," Hunter said, a smile spreading across his face.

"We love you too, Bro," Marco replied, his voice warm.

"I like that," Hunter smiled, looking around the table.

"We love you, white boy," Tyrone shouted, grinning widely. "But we'll beat the white off you if you mistreat our sister!"

"Yeah, we sure will!" Marco and Rayshon responded, laughing along with Tyrone. But meant every word they said.

"You all are crazy," Rayshonda said, shaking her head but beaming with pride. Seeing her brothers and husband getting along so well warmed her heart. She couldn't ask for anything more.

"What's for dessert?" Tyrone asked, leaning back in his chair.

"I baked an apple pie," Rayshonda said, pushing back from her seat with a smile.

"I hope you've got some vanilla ice cream," Tyrone grinned, rubbing his hands together.

"I'm a Stone. What Stone do you know that doesn't have vanilla ice cream in their house?" Rayshonda replied, rising to her feet.

"I'm just making sure because this white boy likes chocolate," Tyrone laughed, then turned to Hunter. "Man, why do white folks love chocolate ice cream but seem to dislike chocolate people?"

Hunter's face tightened a bit. "Dude, I don't know about that racist stuff you're talking about."

"It isn't racist," Tyrone said with a grin. "Every time you see white folks with ice cream, it's chocolate!" He laughed and looked around the table. "Y'all know I'm telling the truth. Isn't that right, y'all?"

Marco chuckled, shaking his head, "You got a point, but you're still crazy, Ty."

"Yeah, you're always trying to stir up something," Rayshon added with a smirk.

"You need to stop," Rayshonda said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes, but she smiled as she walked into the kitchen.

"Why is that?" Tyrone pressed the question, leaning forward with a grin.

"I don't know," Hunter replied, shrugging, trying to stay out of Tyrone's mischievous trap.

"I don't want to agree with Ty," Rayshon finally admitted, "but I used to wonder that myself."

"Like I said, I don't know," Hunter said, surrendering with a sigh. "You'd have to ask them."

"You are them. That's why I'm asking you," Tyrone laughed, raising an eyebrow.

Hunter shook his head, finally cracking a smile. "Man, you're too much," he replied.

"I just pulled it out of the oven. It's still hot," Rayshonda said, walking back into the dining room and carefully setting the apple pie on the table, the warm aroma filling the room.

"Who made the pie?" Tyrone asked, eyeing the dessert as Rayshonda set it on the table.

"I did," Rayshonda said proudly, flashing a smile.

Tyrone raised an eyebrow and winked at his sister, "You? Rayshonda Michelle Stone. I meant Parker! Are you sure it's edible?"

"Boy, please," Rayshonda fired back, laughing. "You'll be asking for seconds. Just wait."

"Alright, we'll see," Tyrone grinned, grabbing a dessert plate and eagerly waiting for a slice. His eyes widened. "Even better! Hot pie with vanilla ice cream? Now we're talking."

Marco leaned forward, inhaling the scent. "Smells amazing, Sis. You outdid yourself."

Hunter smiled, looking at his wife. "I told you she knows her way around the kitchen. Beautiful and smart."

Rayshonda beamed with pride, grabbing a knife to cut the first slice. "Who's ready for pie?" she asked, glancing around the table.

"I've been ready!" Tyrone said, setting his dessert plate before her.

"Here you go," Rayshonda laughed as she served Tyrone the first slice, the steam rising from the apple filling the air.

Tyrone grinned. "Now that's what I'm talking about."

After serving everyone a slice of the pie, Rayshonda returned to the kitchen. A moment later, she returned with a tub of vanilla ice cream, scooping generous portions onto each slice of pie.

"Now we're in business," Marco said, digging in as the ice cream melted into the hot apple pie.

Tyrone took a bite and let out a satisfied groan. "Sis, I agreed with Marco. You outdid yourself this time. This is heaven."

"It's terrific," Rayshon said, nodding in approval as he took another forkful of pie and ice cream, savoring the warm, sweet combination.

"I told y'all she knows what she's doing," Hunter said, grinning proudly at his wife.

"Yeah, she knocked it out of the park," Marco agreed, halfway through his slice.

Tyrone leaned back in his chair, the pie almost gone. "This is why I always ensure I'm around when you cook, Sis."

Rayshonda smiled, clearly pleased. "I'm glad y'all are enjoying it. Anyone want seconds?" she asked, eyeing the nearly empty pie dish with a smile.

Tyrone raised his hand immediately. "You already know I do! That was too good to stop at one slice."

Marco chuckled. "I'll take another, too. Can't pass up on a chance for more."

Rayshon, patting his stomach, shook his head with a grin. "Nah, I'm good. But I won't stop you guys from going in for round two."

Hunter leaned back, satisfied. "I'll stick with one, but I'll want another piece later tonight."

Rayshonda laughed as she grabbed the knife, "Alright, seconds coming up!"

After dessert, the group lingered around the table, laughing and exchanging stories from the past. Tyrone, as usual, kept the energy light and humorous, recalling more of their childhood mischief, while Rayshon added his dry wit to the mix.

Marco eventually leaned back in his chair, looking content. "Man, that was good. I'm ready to hit the couch and watch the game again."

"Same here," Hunter nodded, standing up and stretching. "That pie might have knocked me out."

Rayshonda smiled as she began gathering the empty plates. "I'll clean up. Y'all, go ahead and get comfortable in the family room. I'll join you in a minute."

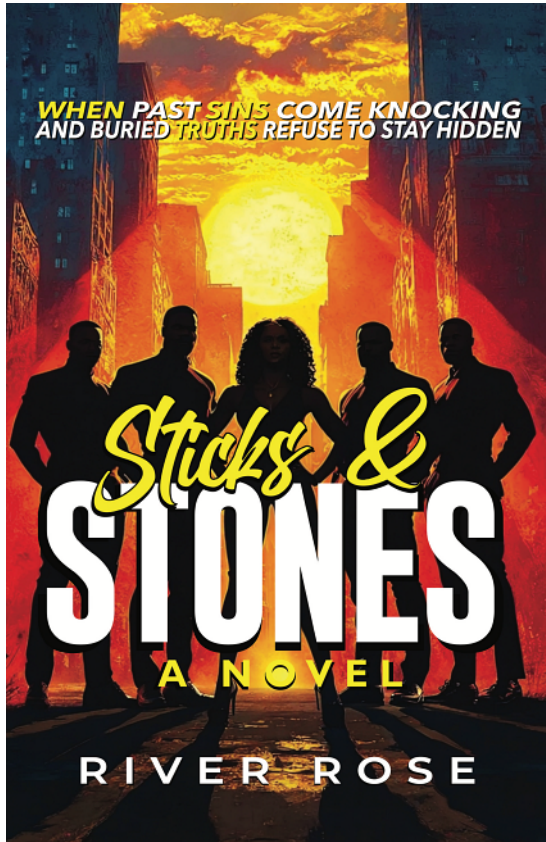
"Let me help you," Marco said, halfway out of his seat.

"I've got it," she waved him off. "Just go relax."

As the brothers and Hunter made their way to the family room, settling in front of the TV, Rayshonda tidied up, feeling a warm contentment. The house was filled with the laughter of her brothers and her husband and the smell of apple pie lingering in the air. Moments like these reminded her how blessed she was to have a family so close-knit and loving despite all the teasing and chaos.

After a few minutes, Rayshonda joined them on the couch, and they all settled in, the football game back on and the conversation flowing easily. It was a simple evening filled with

the comfort and warmth of family. A feeling none of them took for granted.



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