

A close-up, low-angle photograph of a woman's face, tilted slightly. She has bright pink, glossy lipstick on her lips, which are slightly parted. Her eyes are closed, and she has dark, dramatic eye makeup. A multi-strand pearl necklace is visible around her neck. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white fabric.

Take One For the Team

Jessica Terry



Van is a single mother of twins who can just never seem to get ahead. Her boyfriend Joe is ideal in every way except financially, and Van's frustration grows as her patience starts to run out. When she meets Grant, a nice-guy millionaire who is immediately drawn to her and feels she's what he's been waiting for, Van begins dreaming about a better life for her and her children...the life that Grant can give her.

Take One for the Team

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Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

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Jessica L. Terry

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First Edition

Dedication

Book number six! :)

As I always do and always will, I thank God for the talent and desire to be creative and write...I love this outlet. My family, whom I love and cherish more than I can say, deserve a boatload of love and credit from me for all of the support they've given me over the years. My mother Barbara, sister and brother-in-law Jennifer and Antonio, gorgeous and hilarious nieces Lace and Alex, and my absolutely awesome son Langston, I love you all SO much. Thank you for everything you do.

To my father and hero, Alton, I miss you no less now than I did when you went home to be with the Lord in 2008. Rest in peace. :)

Much love as always to my church family at Mount Zion Church; you all have no idea how much you mean to me. To my pastor, especially, Pastor Danny Nance, I just love you so much. You've been guiding me spiritually since I was two years old and I appreciate you always being there for me.

To my extended family, friends, co-workers, book club readers, social media followers, and anyone else in whatever category you should fall into, thank you so incredibly much for the support, feedback, and love through all of this. Thank you for bugging me (in a good way) about when my next book is coming out. lol

A special shout-out to someone who has grown to be an invaluable friend of mine, Antonio McDonald...what you have done and tried to do on my behalf for me and my career does not in any way go unnoticed. I am blessed to have you as a friend and supporter.

I had so much fun writing this book (I know I say that about all my books :)) and I hope you enjoy reading it. As I always say, I hope to make you think as well as entertain you. Put yourself in these character's places and consider what you would do in the same situation; I was doing that the entire time I was writing it.

Feel free to reach out to me on any of my social media outlets; I love hearing from you!

Jessica Terry

Twitter: @JessicaLTerry

Facebook: facebook.com/authorjessicaterry

Instagram: @JLTerry32

Website: www.jessicaterry.com

Chapter 1

Van Roseland gripped the steering wheel and briefly closed her eyes before turning them back to the road ahead of her. She could feel a headache coming on and she knew she didn't have any more store-brand aspirin in her purse. And her kids arguing back and forth wasn't helping any at all.

"I'm going to be on the cover of *Vogue*, *Ebony*, *Vanity Fair*, and every other major magazine there is," Cassie announced loudly from the backseat. She popped her gum and twirled some of her long hair around her fingers. "I'm telling you, I'm gonna be bigger than Tyra and Vanessa Williams. Watch."

"Yeah, right," Canton, her twin brother, scoffed from the front seat. He didn't even bother turning around when he said, "You're not going to get anywhere with the kind of grades you're getting."

"You don't need to be worryin' about my grades," Cassie said with an attitude, rolling her neck. "I don't need to be a straight-A student to be famous. With all my talent, nobody is going to care what my GPA was."

"That's a good thing, because it sucks."

"Canton!" Van scolded, glaring at him briefly.

"Sorry, Ma."

"Anyway," Cassie continued, rolling her eyes at her brother, "I'm a quadruple-threat. Acting, modeling, singing, *and* dancing. Ain't *nobody* gonna be able to touch me! And when I make my first million, I'm gonna buy you a house, Mama. The biggest one in the neighborhood."

"Not if I buy her one first," Canton countered, flipping through the History book that lay open in his lap. "My career path is a lot more certain than going into the entertainment industry. Once I establish myself in law, then I'm going into politics. And I'll be buying Ma a summer home in addition to the house I've *already* bought her long before you are even able to *afford* to get her anything."

“You trippin’! I can be a model and actress when I’m a teenager. Heck, I could be doing all that *now*, if Mama would let me. I don’t see no nine-year-old lawyers running around anywhere.”

“It’s about longevity, Cassie, if you even know what that means. Look at all the child actors and entertainers that started out hot and now you don’t hear anything else about them. Nothing positive, anyway. But if that’s the class you want to be in...”

“For your information, there are plenty of child actors that are doing just *fine* now! Ain’t that right, Mama?”

Van hated getting in the middle of their arguments. She usually just stayed quiet and let them ride it out until they got tired of talking to each other. And with the kind of day she had today, she especially didn’t feel like getting involved in their ongoing debate about who was going into the most popular and profitable career. All she knew was that the underwire had come out of her bra again and was continuously sticking her in her left breast, and her stomach was growling something serious. She hoped Joe had remembered to take that ground beef out like she had asked him to do earlier that day.

“Mama? Did you hear what I said?” Cassie asked loudly, leaning forward and peering around the driver’s seat to look at her mother.

“Yeah, baby, I heard you,” Van replied, trying to keep the weariness out of her voice.

“Well what do you think? I’ve been trying to tell this boy-”

“Y’all, I really, really appreciate all the love and everything, but let’s chill out for a while, huh?” Van said, resisting the urge to reach up and rub her throbbing temples.

“See there? You done made Ma’s head hurt,” Canton mumbled under his breath.

“Canton.”

“Sorry, Ma.”

Canton and Cassie were Van’s nine-year-old fraternal twins. They were extremely competitive in just about everything they did and had been ever since they each tried to be the first to stand up in their playpen. Canton was the more serious one while Cassie has always been more about having fun, but they were both very driven. Even though they were just nine years old, they each knew exactly

what they wanted to do and were trying to make steps towards it, and Van couldn't do anything but admire that.

Their father Calvin had died when they were three from complications with diabetes that no one even knew he had until it was too late to do anything about it. He was a stubborn man who refused to go to the doctor, and he paid for it with his life. Van was a little bitter about that, because his death could have been prevented. But now she was left alone to raise two kids by herself and she really had to try hard not to think ill of the dead because of it.

Van worked as an executive assistant to the president of an engineering company, and she didn't seem to ever really be able to make any progress financially. They did all right, but splurges were rare and Van had to be very disciplined in order for them to stay afloat. Most of the things they bought were store brand or generic, and Cassie especially wasn't always thrilled about having to get her clothes from Wal-Mart or the thrift store except the mall like some of her friends. But Van was doing the best that she could, and especially since Calvin didn't leave them much of anything, she had to make do with what she had.

A little while later, they pulled up to their small white starter home. Van peered at it and sighed as the kids piled out of her station wagon, mentally noting all the repairs that it needed. She tried not to remember that there was no telling when she would be able to get them done as she slowly climbed out of the car and trudged up to the front door, digging in her large purse for her key. Just as she fished it out, the front door swung open.

"Hey guys," her boyfriend Joe Miller, greeted the kids with a smile. The wife-beater he was wearing clung to his muscular chest and he was still wearing his blue work pants. On his feet were slightly dingy white socks.

"Hey Joe!" Canton and Cassie chorused, as Cassie ran into the kitchen and Canton sauntered to the back of the house to their bedroom.

"Hey baby," Joe greeted Van, reaching out to take her bag from her shoulder and kissing her cheek.

Van gave him a tired smile as she affectionately squeezed his tattooed bicep, continuing on towards the couch. “Joe, I am so glad to be home, you just don’t know.”

“Yeah?” Joe said, placing her bag on the scratched coffee table and sitting down next to where she had collapsed on the couch, reaching down for her foot. “You look exhausted.”

“Oh, I am.” Van moaned as Joe slipped off her shoe and started slowly massaging her tired foot. She rested her head on the arm of the couch and gazed lovingly at her man. “That feels *sooo* good.”

Joe just winked at her as he continued with the foot massage.

Cassie poked her head out of the kitchen. “Joe, do you want me to take this stuff out of the oven for you? It’s bubbling.”

Joe peeked at his watch and shook his head. “Nah, it still needs a couple more minutes. I just turned the broiler on to finish it off. Thanks for checking on it, though.”

“No sweat. Its smells really good,” Cassie complimented, ducking back into the kitchen.

“No snacks!” Van yelled over her shoulder at her daughter.

Joe chuckled.

Van sniffed the air. “What did you cook?”

“Just a casserole. Nothing special.”

“Oh Joe...when I asked you to take the meat out this morning, I didn’t expect you to cook it, too.”

Joe waved off her comment. “Baby, stop. I made it home a little early so there was no reason for me to not go ahead and get it started. I knew you’d probably be tired.”

Van’s lingering smile widened. She wanted to sit up and kiss the hell out of him, but she was just too tired to do it. “Baby, you are so good to me, thank you.”

Joe just winked at her again as he put her other foot on his lap. “Hey, we’re in this together, right?”

Van grinned. She loved it when he said things like that.

After a while, everybody got washed up and ready to eat. Van’s headache had minimized to a thread as she listened to Canton and Cassie battle to each tell Joe about how their day went. She chewed the delicious beef and potato casserole her man made as she peered at

him underneath her long lashes. He was trying to give equal attention to both kids, something he was slightly better at than Van, and the twins loved talking to him because he was genuinely interested, and they could tell. Van loved him for loving her kids as his own like he did, especially since he had a couple of his own, as well.

Van had met Joe a few years earlier, when the twins were about five years old. She was with her best friend and cousin Raven at the time and there was something that just drew Van to him immediately. Raven didn't understand it (and really, still didn't), because Joe wasn't conventionally handsome, if you could say he was handsome at all. He certainly wasn't ugly, but he had the kind of face that had to grow on you. But his body was ridiculous; there were muscles everywhere and Van always found her hands reaching to touch it in some kind of way. She had always loved muscles and Joe's were up there with just about anybody you could name.

Joe was your typical blue collar, dirt-under-the-fingernails kind of guy. There was nothing pretentious or phony about him at all. He was a simple man who liked simple things, and this was a big part of the reason Van loved him so much. It was a very common thing for him to fix something around the house or on the car when he saw it needed to be done, or replace her umbrella when he saw it was broken, or even a simple bunch of flowers that he had picked himself. These kinds of things were invaluable to Van, because he paid attention to her needs and did things without being asked. And he did things that he knew she would like or that would make her smile; he just wanted to make things as easy on her as he could, since he knew how much she had to struggle and he wasn't as able to help out financially as he would like to. He had two children of his own and a greedy, spiteful baby mama who demanded more of his checks than necessary or required by the court. And since Joe was such a nice guy who just wanted to keep the peace for the sake of his kids, he gave in to her demands most of the time. Van wanted to wring her neck for treating him this way but Joe insisted his kids were worth it, even though Van would bet anything that all the money he was giving wasn't being used for the kids as he intended.

After dinner, everyone helped to clean up the kitchen before the kids retreated to their room and Joe drew a bath for Van. She absolutely loved how he doted on her. As he ran the washcloth over her long neck, she tried to enjoy the feeling of what he was doing to her and not the stack of bills that was sitting in the basket on her end table in the living room. Only some of them were going to be getting paid this month; she just had to decide which ones took precedence. She was so sick of thinking about bills and money all the time; she felt like she couldn't really enjoy life because of it.

"How's your head feeling?" Joe asked her softly a while later, when they were in bed.

"It's a lot better, thanks," Van answered, looking up and smiling at him before returning her head to its spot on his chest. She lightly raked her fingernails up and down his rippled abdomen.

Joe's right hand was lightly stroking her brown hair while his left hand held the newspaper he was reading. "I might work a double shift tomorrow; try to get some extra hours. You gonna be okay with the kids?"

"Mmm-hmm. We'll be fine."

"You need some more air in your tires, too. I'll get that taken care of for you this weekend."

Van smiled again, especially since she hadn't even noticed the air in her tires and probably never would've thought to look until one of them had gone flat. "I appreciate that, baby. But if you just tell me where to go, I can get it done tomorrow."

"It's no problem. Plus remember the last time you put air in the tires you put in way too much."

Van chuckled. "Yeah...one of them popped the very next day. Maybe I better leave that alone."

"Yep."

Van rubbed the underside of her left breast.

"You tryin' to tell me something, baby?" Joe asked, looking down at her with a smirk.

Van giggled, blushing slightly. "My damn underwire was poking me all day. That's the third bra I've had to throw out in the past two months."

“Awww,” Joe cooed, tossing his newspaper onto the floor next to the bed and slid down onto his back, his arms encircling Van. He nuzzled her neck and Van closed her eyes as she felt his thick moist lips slide up and down her soft skin. “You want me to kiss it and make it better?”

Van gasped and then moaned as Joe’s hand came up to tenderly caress her breast as he slowly tongue-kissed her neck. He turned her on so much and she knew a round or two of his premier lovemaking was just what she needed after the day she had.

“Mmm,” she moaned slightly louder, grabbing his firm waist and pulling him closer to her. Her hand caressed the back of his head as he started to slowly grind his groin into her. She whispered naughty things into his ear, becoming wetter and wetter as she felt his manly deliciousness getting harder by the second between her legs.

Joe grunted as he slowly unbuttoned her nightshirt, kissing the exposed skin with wet lips as he went along. “You know I’m not gonna stop until you feel better, right?” he murmured, looking up into her eyes.

Van smiled and then bit her lip, digging her head back into the pillow. “Well then I hope you took your vitamins, because it’s been a *long* day.”

Chapter 2

“Mama, this is really messing up my nails,” Cassie complained, throwing down the rag she was using to dust the furniture and peering at her hands.

Van and the twins were doing their weekly Saturday morning housecleaning, and as usual, Cassie was complaining and trying to find ways to get out of doing her chores while Canton worked diligently until he was done, hardly saying anything at all along the way.

Van sighed. “Cassie, just cut out all the whining and get it done,” she commanded before ducking her head back into the refrigerator to finish cleaning it. Truth was, she didn’t like doing housecleaning on Saturday mornings either, but she also didn’t like having a dirty house. And with all the other stuff that was wrong with it, she at least wanted it to be clean. So she just got up early and got it on over with.

A couple of hours later, the house was clean and neat and Van was reclining on the couch with her feet up, watching television. Canton was in his room studying and Cassie was sitting on the floor in front of her mother, reading an old copy of *Essence*.

“Mama, do you think I’m as pretty as Rhianna?” she asked suddenly, looking up from the magazine.

“Of course, baby. You’re beautiful, just like she is.”

“But I’m not *more* beautiful?” Cassie pressed.

Van turned down the volume on the television. “You know I think you’re the most gorgeous girl ever. I just don’t want you to get into this competitive way of thinking where you’re always comparing yourself to other people. You don’t have to do that. There is room for all kinds of people, especially in the entertainment industry.”

“Hmm,” Cassie said, looking at her mother thoughtfully before turning her eyes back to the magazine. Van knew more questions were probably coming, whenever she came up with something else to ask. Which she always did.

It amazed Van how her children were so vastly different. Cassie was so loud and dramatic and just in-your-face, with all of her bright colors that she liked to wear and her big dreams of having her name in lights. Canton was way more understated, in regards to clothing and personality. He was pretty straight laced, wearing basic colors and with his wire-rimmed glasses that he was constantly pushing up onto his nose. The only thing that tied them together was that they were twins and they looked so much alike. They had the same golden brown skin, the same sparkling light brown eyes, the same thick, dark hair...and it was clear they were both going to be tall, like their father was. Van, of course, thought they were both gorgeous, but Cassie was the only one who ever got excited when she said it.

“Mama, where’s your ring?” Cassie asked all of a sudden, looking at Van’s bare left ring finger.

Van wanted to curse herself. How was she going to explain that she had to pawn the engagement ring their father had given her to get caught up on some bills?

“Umm, well, there were some things I had to get done so...I had to sacrifice my ring.”

“Sacrifice it?”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means she pawned it, oh thou slow one,” Canton answered, coming down the hallway.

“Canton...” Van warned, shooting him a look.

“Sorry, ma.”

“You pawned the ring to get money? Can we do that with our stuff? There are the cutest shoes I want to get and-”

“You have to have something of value or they won’t take it. And you don’t have anything,” Canton interrupted, going into the kitchen to get an apple out of the bowl on the counter.

“I have valuable stuff! What about that necklace Joe gave me?”

“No, Cassie, you can’t pawn that! Joe gave that to you for your birthday!” Van exclaimed.

“But Mama-”

“Forget it! You’ll just have to find another way to earn money for what you want.”

“Where *is* Joe today?” Canton asked, as Cassie pouted.

“He’s spending the day with his kids, and he said he had a couple of other things to do.”

“Oh,” Canton grunted, taking a bite out of his apple. “I’m going back to finish studying. Got a big test on Monday.”

“Okay, baby.”

“Whatever,” Cassie mumbled under her breath, sucking her teeth.

Van just looked at her but didn’t say anything.

A little while later, Van’s cousin Raven came by. She was all decked out in her trademark tight jeans and a blousy floral top, with pointy black heels. She was just coming from the hair salon, a weekly thing for her.

“Wassup mami?” she greeted Van, leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek. She towered over her by about three inches. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, girl. Come on in.”

“Where’s Joe? Where are the kids?” Raven asked, putting her leather hobo bag onto the couch and removing her jacket.

“Joe isn’t here; the kids are in the back. Cassie! Canton! Raven is here!” Van yelled towards the back of the house.

After Raven visited with the kids for a little while, (and Cassie begging Raven to take her shopping with her one day) Van sent them back to their rooms. Raven could get a little, well, *raunchy* in her conversation and Van didn’t want the kids, especially Cassie, to hear that.

“So girrrrl, let me tell you about this date I had last *night!*” Raven dished, crossing her long legs and leaning forward eagerly. “I met this guy named Travis at the gym and he is fine as *hell*. We met up last night at the Olive Garden before going back to his place and, Van, he ate me out like he was tryin’ to win an award or something. I’m tellin’ you, his tongue needs to be coated in bronze.”

Van chuckled, glancing back to make sure Cassie wasn’t hovering in the hallway listening, as she had been known to do before. “He had it like that, huh?”

“He had it like *that*. I actually get a little chill when I think about it.”

“So are you seeing him again?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll definitely keep him in the rotation. You know, for when I want some tongue action. Because that was the only thing he was exceptional at. The actual intercourse was...well, it was okay but nothing that rocked my world or anything.”

Van’s mind wandered back a few nights before when Joe had rocked *her* world. He had her body trembling and vibrating and convulsing and everything else. There was no doubt that he was the best lover she had ever had.

Raven Flank was Van’s first cousin and they were the best of friends, and had been since they were little kids. They used to go out all the time, run men...they were just alike. Then Van fell in love with Calvin and had the twins, and she put all that aside. She had to grow up quickly. Raven continued right on with their old lifestyle, partying enough for the both of them.

Raven was a chef at a local restaurant, and every night after she got off she went straight out to the clubs or on some date. She was always regaling Van with tales of her exploits, and only occasionally did Van get jealous of her carefree lifestyle. She had a career she loved, she lived alone and didn’t have to be responsible for anyone but herself, and Van would never again know what that was like.

“So,” Raven said, taking a deep breath and resting her elbow on the back of the couch, “how are things going with you and Joe?”

Van tried to maintain her smile as she looked down at her hands. “Things are...things are good,” she answered rather unconvincingly.

Raven looked at her cousin pointedly, trying to make some eye contact. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm. He’s a great guy, you know...treats me like a queen.”

Raven knew Joe was a good guy, but she also knew her cousin was holding something back. “But?”

“No buts,” Van said quickly, with a tight smile. “He’s great. Great guy.”

Raven pursed her lips together, deciding not to press the issue. Van obviously didn't want to say anymore about it and she didn't feel like dragging it out of her. When Van was ready, she would spill the beans on her own.

What Van wasn't saying was that while she loved Joe with all her heart, she was more than a little bummed that he wasn't able to help her out financially as much as she would like him to. He practically lived with her, and had been for the past couple of years, but his finances were as shaky as hers because of his spiteful baby mama and past debt. He was very helpful around the house and with the kids, and he tried to make things as easier on her as he could, but Van needed more money and that was something he just couldn't give her much of.

She tried not to focus on it much and just be thankful that she had a good man that loved her and her kids, but she and the twins needed things now. And love wasn't going to get the bills paid.

"So what's going on for today?" Raven asked after a few seconds, reaching down to pick up Cassie's magazine off the floor and flipping through it.

"Not too much of anything, really. We should be going to the food bank since we haven't been in a while but I just don't have the energy, I hate to say."

"Yeah, y'all used to go volunteer there every Saturday."

"I know, and I loved it. Plus I wanted the twins to get into the habit early of volunteering. Unfortunately I've let my fatigue get the best of me on that, though."

"Hey, it's understandable. You have a lot on you."

"Ehh. I kinda wanted to go see a movie but I don't think that's gonna happen today, either."

"Why not? What do you wanna see?" Raven asked, flipping through the magazine.

Van shrugged. "Anything. I just need to get out of this house for a while. It's been a while since I've gone out and enjoyed myself."

"I've been trying to get you to come out with me one night. Let Joe watch the kids and we can get out and party like we used to. You know he'd do it if you asked him."

“Yeah, he probably would.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I’m stressed, girl. When I got home all these bills would still be waiting for me,” Van answered, flicking the stack of bills on the end table next to her with her finger. “I don’t know if I would really be able to enjoy myself with that on my mind.”

“Are you still going to get a second job?” Raven asked, her eyes on the magazine.

“I need to but I already don’t have enough energy as it is. I’m just...” Van sighed, letting her head drop against the back of the couch, “I’m just tired.”

Raven looked up at her cousin and friend sympathetically, hating to see her like this. She reached over and rubbed her bare arm. “I’m sorry, cuz. I know it gets rough on you. Two growing kids who are always asking for stuff and a house that obviously needs some repairs...” her eyes roamed around the room. “What can I do to help you?”

Van placed her hand over Raven’s and smiled at her thankfully. “*That* helps, you asking. I’ll let you know. Thanks.” Van knew she couldn’t afford to be too proud to accept any help, though oftentimes she was.

Raven winked at her before picking up another magazine that was on the coffee table. After turning a few pages, she held it closer to her face, her eyes widening slightly. “Girl, have you seen this?”

“What?”

“This article on Grant McCallister. I had heard of him but I did *not* know he was this fine!”

“Oh. No, I hadn’t seen it.”

Grant McCallister was a self-made millionaire who had recently made Forbes’s list of people to watch. He was only thirty-five, four years older than Van, and already had three companies that were on the Fortune 500 list. Van had seen him on television one time and she knew how handsome (and fine) he was. Whoever he was with was some lucky woman; she certainly didn’t have to worry about any money, although she remembered him saying that he was single.

“This is who I need to meet,” Raven said, still staring lustfully at the picture. “I can just look at him and tell that he knows how to work it in bed.”

Van just chuckled, but glanced again towards the back of the house to make sure Cassie or Canton weren't in earshot.

“I'm getting horny just looking at him,” Raven breathed, her chest kind of heaving a little bit as she looked like she wanted to kiss the picture.

“Girl...”

At that moment, Cassie bounded down the hallway. “Raven, can you help me with my hair? School pictures are coming up and I want to look *fierce!*”

“*Fierce*, huh? And how do you want to wear your hair?” Raven asked, reluctantly putting the magazine to the side. Van picked it up.

“I don't know...I'm trying to decide if I want to wear it up or down because I have this shirt that has kind of a high collar. Wanna see it?”

“Yeah, I'll come back there and check it out. And if you want, I'll come and wash and press your hair the day before your pictures. It would look pretty curly, even if you do decide to wear it up,” Raven commented, reaching out to touch Cassie's thick hair.

“That would be cool! Right, Mama?” Cassie said excitedly, turning towards Van.

“Yeah, it would,” Van agreed. She knew Cassie would actually prefer to go to a salon but that was a once-in-a-blue moon luxury. Van just usually did Cassie's natural hair herself, as well as cutting Canton's hair. Raven's hairstyle was always changing and Cassie tended to envy that.

“So it's settled, then,” Raven said, crossing her legs.

“Mama, you gonna let me start wearing makeup when I turn ten?”

“No, Cassie,” Van answered without even looking up. Cassie asked her this at least once a week.

“Aww, how come?” Cassie whined.

“Because you're too young to be wearing makeup. You'll start wearing it when you turn fifteen and not a day before.”

“Fifteen?? That’s almost six years from now!”

“I’m glad to see your math classes are paying off.”

“But Mama, *all* models wear makeup. What model do you know that doesn’t have on any makeup?”

“You are not a model, Cassie.”

“But I *will* be. And I need to know how to put all that stuff on. Raven could teach me. She always wears it.”

“She can teach you when you’re fifteen.”

“I can’t even *practice* until then?? That’s not fair!”

“So many things aren’t.”

“But Mama-”

“Drop it, Cassie.”

Cassie folded her arms and stomped back to her room in a huff.

“Girl,” Raven chuckled, shaking her head, “you have something on your hands with that one.”

“Humph, don’t I know it,” Van replied. She continued to look at the picture of Grant McCallister in front of her, wishing she could know what it was like to not have the kinds of problems she had.

Chapter 3

“Can I help you with anything, sir?” the saleswoman asked Joe politely, her hands behind her back.

“I’m just looking right now, thanks,” Joe answered.

“No problem. My name is Karen; just let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

Joe slowly walked around the small jewelry store, peering into the glass cases. He wandered over to where the rings were. He wanted to get an engagement ring for Van, having grown tired of just calling her his woman. He wanted her to be his wife and he believed that’s what she wanted, too. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and he loved her kids as much as he loved his own. They were all just so good together.

But it was looking like the amount of money he had saved up to get Van’s engagement ring wasn’t going to be enough for anything he considered good enough. And he knew his credit wasn’t good enough to apply for a store card or anything.

“See anything you like?” Karen asked, appearing by his side.

“Uhh, can you show me this one right here?” Joe asked, pointing to a square-cut diamond ring that he knew he wouldn’t be able to afford.

“Certainly,” Karen said cheerfully, walking around to the back of the case and unlocking it to remove the ring. She held it out to him and Joe took it, looking at it closely. He knew Van would love it and he would love for her to have it, but it was a few thousand more than he was able to afford.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? It’s similar to the one my husband gave me,” Karen commented, holding up her hand to show him her glistening diamond.

“Yes, it is very beautiful,” Joe agreed. He reluctantly handed the ring back to her before he gave in to the urge to try to run out of the store with it.

“Do you know what your girlfriend’s ring size is?” Karen asked, returning the ring to its velvet cushion inside the glass case.

“I think she’s about a six. I’m not entirely sure, actually.”
“Well, that’s fine. We can always have it resized. Would you like to come in the back and I can tell you about the four C’s of diamonds?”

Joe looked at his watch. “I would love to, Karen, but I actually need to get going. I saw what I needed to see, though; I’ll come back another time.”

“Okay, no problem. Here’s my card. We’re going to be getting some new settings in soon, too...I’m sure you’d love them.”

Joe took her card and slipped it into his shirt pocket. “Great. Thank you for your help, Karen. Have a good day.”

“You too, sir.”

Joe walked out of the jewelry store and headed towards his truck, discouragement making his steps heavy. Once again he was back to square one. It seemed like the price of rings was going up every month. The money he had saved was enough to get a small dinky ring, but not one that he felt Van deserved or would be truly happy with. Sure, he knew it wasn’t supposed to be about the ring size and all of that, but he didn’t want to just get *anything*. Van deserved better than that. But he didn’t want to wait forever to propose to her, either. He wanted them to be a real family as soon as possible. Van wasn’t a materialistic woman but he didn’t want to embarrass her or himself by presenting her with a ring with a thin gold band and a tiny diamond you could hardly see.

He decided to just wait until he could afford to get something better. He could put in for extra hours at work, or even get a second job. Van was worth it.

As he drove home, he thought about the time he had spent with his kids earlier that day. He had two daughters, Jillian and Tara, and they really were the lights of his life. If he could change anything at all, it would be the woman that he had them with. He hated to think such a thing about the mother of his children, but there was no denying the fact that Tanisha, his ex, was a vengeful and spiteful woman. She never got over the fact that their relationship had ended, though it had been years, and she was determined to punish him for

it. Joe knew that he was being taken advantage of, but he didn't want to put his daughters through any more drama than necessary. He just wanted to keep the peace as much as possible. Of course in handling things this way, it was affecting Van and the amount of help he was able to give her, but he was thankful that she respected his decision and didn't stay on him about it, even though he knew it frustrated her. He hated upsetting her so he just worked harder so he could try to keep everybody happy.

He had a few errands to run before he headed back to Van's; getting her car washed and detailed, going by the bank, and a couple of other things. After his experience at the jewelry store he really didn't feel like it; he just wanted to go home to his woman, relax, and try to come up with another way to get her a ring.

His cell phone rang and he dug in the pocket of his slightly worn leather jacket to get it, keeping his eyes on the road. He groaned after glancing down at it and seeing his ex's name flash on the screen. This was the last thing he needed. He only briefly considered ignoring the call when he reluctantly flipped it open and put it to his ear, thinking it might be about one of his daughters.

"Hello?"

"I need you to come back over here," Tanisha barked without a hello.

"What for, Tanisha?" Joe asked, exhibiting more patience than he really felt. "Is something wrong with one of the girls?"

"Naw, nothing ain't wrong with the girls. I just need you to come back. *Now.*"

"For *what?*"

"Should it matter?"

"Yes, it matters. I just left from over there an hour ago."

"So?"

"So I do have other things to do today, Tanisha."

"Is that stuff more important than your kids?" she asked with much attitude.

Joe's lips curled under as he stopped the car at a red light. He knew Tanisha was probably bluffing and there was no reason for him to rush back over there, but there was also the very slim chance that

something *was* actually wrong and he would never forgive himself if he didn't go back when she had asked him to.

He sighed as he turned into the parking lot of a Chinese food place so he could turn around. "Fine. I'll be back in a little bit."

"Good." Tanisha hung up.

Joe tried to keep his frustration in check as he headed back to Tanisha's apartment complex. This was just yet another time when he wondered how in the world he could have been in a relationship with a woman like Tanisha for almost seven years. Not only that, he had laid down with a woman like Tanisha and made *two* kids with her. He loved his daughters more than anything on this earth, but he hated that he had them with such a childish, hateful woman. She had never forgiven him for ending their relationship, and had tried to make his life as difficult as she could ever since. For a while after their breakup, she chased after him, pleading with him to take her back, promising to straighten up and not have so much of an attitude. But Joe knew better; it had been the same as when they had broken up the other numerous times. She would do just fine for a few months, being all sweet and stuff, but it was only a matter of time before she would go back to her old self. And Joe just got tired of it. So he told her that while he would always and forever be there for his daughters, he just couldn't be with her anymore. She had cursed him out until his ears hurt and had been cold and bitter towards him ever since.

About fifteen minutes later, he pulled up to Shade Tree apartments and parked Van's car. He hoped this wasn't about some nonsense as he eased out of the car and headed up the stairs towards apartment 215. He knocked on the door and glanced at his watch, hoping whatever she needed him for didn't take too long.

The door flung open and there stood Tanisha with her arms folded. A faded, multicolored scarf covered her long black hair and a frown marred her face. She was actually very cute but her attitude soured everything about her looks. She glared at him for a second before sucking her teeth and taking a step back. "Well? You gonna come in or you gonna stand out there all day looking stupid?"

Joe just looked away from her and smiled, chuckling. He had long since gotten the hang of not letting Tanisha push his buttons, because he knew she would only keep doing it if she knew she was getting to him. He stepped inside the apartment and closed the door, his eyes sweeping around the small living room and kitchen for anything amiss.

“All right, I’m here. What was so important? Where are the girls?”

“They ain’t here. They next door at the neighbor’s. I let ‘em play over there sometimes.”

“Okay, so...”

“I need some money,” she spat out, folding her arms again.

Joe told himself not to get upset. “Didn’t you get the child support this month?”

“Yeah, I got it. And? I need some more.”

“For what?”

“What do you think?”

“Answer the question, Tanisha.”

Tanisha rolled her eyes and turned her back to him. Joe watched the milk chocolate bow legs that he used to love so much stalk towards the tiny kitchen and yank open her old refrigerator, taking out a can of Fanta orange soda. She bought that stuff by the case and had been drinking it ever since Joe could remember.

She popped open the can and gulped it down as Joe waited patiently for her to come up with an excuse as to why she needed more money than she had already gotten. ‘Cause he knew that’s all she was doing; stalling.

Finally, she finished off the soda and tossed the empty can into the sink. She burped as she walked back into the living room, wiping her hand on her gray cotton shorts. “There’s a camp I want to put the girls in and I need some more money for that. Plus they need some new clothes. So gimme a couple hundred more dollars,” she ordered with her hand out.

Joe shook his head. She was getting quicker on her feet with the explanations. There was a time when she wouldn’t even try to think of anything; she would just demand some more money. But she

apparently figured out that actually having a reason was better than her just asking for the heck of it. That way if he refused, he would look like the selfish, non-supportive dad as opposed to her coming off as the greedy ex.

“Let me see the paperwork,” Joe said, holding out his own hand.

Tanisha frowned. “What paperwork?”

“About the camp. I wanna see the details, if my little girls are gonna be going to it.”

“They’re not *little* girls, Joe. They’re ten and eleven. And I don’t have the brochures...I accidentally threw them away. You just gon’ have to take my word for it.”

“Hmm.”

“What, you don’t trust me or somethin’?”

Joe was proud of how he held his tongue. “I didn’t say that.”

“But you don’t. Right?”

“It’s not about me trusting you, Tanisha. I’m sure you know whatever I give you is not for you but for the kids.”

“So you keep reminding me,” she muttered under her breath, looking away.

“What was that?”

“I just don’t see why I have to get an interrogation every time I ask you for something. You ain’t gotta like me but we *do* still have two kids together. Its like ever since you got with that *chick* you’ve become a lot more suspicious of me.”

Joe’s temper flared. Tanisha knew her speaking negatively of Van was something he did not tolerate. “Her *name* is Van. And this has nothing to do with her.”

“Yeah, okay. I know she be puttin’ stuff in your ear, telling you not to do nothin’ for me. Its like it ain’t enough that she got you livin’ with her, she gotta bad-mouth me, too. But that’s aight.”

“That woman ain’t thinking about you, Tanisha. You’re always trying to bring her into it. This is about you being greedy, *again*. You called me back over here for what appears to be nothing, ‘cause I know full well there is no camp you want to send the girls to. Now tell me what you want some more money for so I can get on with my day.”

Tanisha glared at him for a few seconds before her eyes softened and she sighed, dropping her arms from their ever-folded position. “I just...need it, okay, Joe?”

Joe saw what actually looked like sincerity in her eyes and calmed down a little bit. This was the first time she had come even remotely close to being honest about the reasoning behind her asking for more money than he was required to give her. He knew she worked at a pretty much dead-end job, but his sympathy for her was limited because she could do better for herself if she wanted to. She was lazy, which is part of the reason he didn’t want to be with her anymore. She didn’t seem to have any ambition, no drive...he knew he couldn’t live with a woman like that. He wanted a better life for himself than that and that’s one of the reasons he was so attracted to Van. She wasn’t satisfied with her life the way it was and willing to just resign herself to mediocrity like Tanisha seemed to be.

“I sympathize, Tanisha, but I’m not your man or your daddy or anything else. I give you money for my kids and that’s it. If you need something for anything other than that, I don’t know what to tell you.”

Tanisha’s attitude came back as quickly as it has left. “My damn lights are gonna get cut off Monday if I don’t pay the overdue bill. And the stove is broke. My homegirl got a cousin that can fix it but he ain’t gon’ do it for free. Now it ain’t like I’m living up in here by myself; your kids are here, too. You want them to be sitting in here in the dark with their stomach growling ‘cause I can’t cook ‘em anything?”

Joe sighed. He was inclined to believe her because this wouldn’t be the first time the lights or water or something else had to be turned off because she couldn’t afford to pay the bill. He didn’t want his daughters living like that. And Tanisha *was* still the mother of his children. So he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, reluctantly taking out a couple hundred of the dollars he was saving to get Van’s engagement ring and handed it to her.

Tanisha snatched it and smirked, folding it and slipping it inside her bra. “Thank you,” she said, biting off her words like it was hurting her to thank him for helping her out.

“Yeah,” Joe said, placing his hand on the doorknob to leave. There was no longer a reason for him to be there now that she had gotten what she wanted. “Tell Jillian and Tara that I’ll call them before they go to bed.”

“Aight,” Tanisha said dismissively as she strode over to her hand-me-down couch and plopped down onto it, clicking on the television with the remote. She kicked her slippers off and stretched out, putting her hands behind her head and crossing her legs at the ankles like she no longer had a care in the world. Joe guessed that now that she had gotten her money, she could go back to chilling. He just shook his head and walked out, thanking God that he had left her when he did, as he did every time they parted company.

Joe tried not to think about how he had just put himself further in the hole, as far as getting Van’s engagement ring. At this rate it was going to be another year before he was able to get an acceptable ring. He was already working on how he was going to propose and the more plans he made, the more excited he became, and the more he wanted to make it happen and get on down to it. He couldn’t wait to make Van his wife so they could all live together as a family; and if he had his way, his kids would be with them, too. But he knew Tanisha would fight tooth and nail to prevent that. Not necessarily because she would miss them or didn’t think Joe was a good father, but because she didn’t want her kids living in the same house as Van, the woman who ‘stole’ her man from her (even though Joe had broken up with Tanisha before he had even met Van).

All he knew was, after dealing with Tanisha, he couldn’t wait to get home to his woman. But first he had to take care of Van’s car and put the money for her engagement ring back into his savings account. He would have to do some serious brainstorming to figure out how he was going to get the money he needed to get her that ring he saw in the jewelry store. He knew Van would love it.



Van is a single mother of twins who can just never seem to get ahead. Her boyfriend Joe is ideal in every way except financially, and Van's frustration grows as her patience starts to run out. When she meets Grant, a nice-guy millionaire who is immediately drawn to her and feels she's what he's been waiting for, Van begins dreaming about a better life for her and her children...the life that Grant can give her.

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