

WHAT THE HEART WANTS



BY: LESANDA MOORE

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Chapter 1: Cheers to Summer Break



Cirilla

June 2018

Sweat dripped down my forehead as the afternoon announcements blared through the loudspeaker. It was the last day of school before summer break, the last day in hell, both literally and physically. The air conditioning system conked out a week ago and the whole school was riddled with fans to combat the Virginia heat.

“Boys and girls, make sure to grab all of your belongings or else they’ll be going in the trash,” I said, fanning myself with a piece of folded construction paper.

As I watched the fifth graders interact with each other, I counted down the seconds until the final bell rang, until I was a free woman.

“We’re gonna miss you, Miss Matthews.”

“I’m gonna miss you guys, too.”

They lined up against the wall and waited for the principal to dismiss the bus riders. I walked to the front of the line and handed each student a bag of treats. After the last rider left, I escorted the remaining students to the front of the building for parent pickup. While waiting, I made small talk with one of the other members of the fifth-grade team.

“Are you ready for some fun in the sun?” I asked.

“Yep. Me and somebody’s son,” said Maddie.

“Girl, you are too much.”

“I’m tryna get like you. I want to go to South Beach and get my booty rubbed by that fine ass boss of ours, too.”

“Shhh,” I said, looking around to see who else heard our conversation. “Are you tryna get me fired on the last day?”

“My bad,” she whispered.

As the last two students dashed across the grass to meet their parents, I headed back to the classroom to gather my belongings. Looking around the room, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I made it through another stressful, but successful school year and now it was time to go home and pack for my much needed vacation to Miami. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach just thinking about how much fun, and sex, I was about to have.

“See you later,” I said, turning off the lights and closing the door behind me.

I unlocked the front door and almost tripped over a pair of shoes lingering in the foyer. After my life flashed before my eyes, I regained my balance and laughed it off. Without fail, the house was a mess due to the extra hours that I put in during the last week of school. Cleaning, packing, and organizing the classroom always took precedence over the condo.

I added the ballet flats to the pile and headed straight for the kitchen, making a mental note to clean up before I went out of town.

In less than 24 hours, I would be sipping mojitos and dancing the night away without a care in the world. No more grading papers, calling parents, or creating lesson plans, now it was time to be the irresponsible one.

I poured a shot of Ciroc.

“Cheers to summer break,” I said before taking it to the head. Just as I was about to pour another shot, my phone rang. I rushed to answer the call before it went to voicemail. If my calculations were

correct, my mother was making her annual call to congratulate me on another year in the bag.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Dear. How are you?” she asked.

“Better now. I just got home.”

“Are you packed up and ready for your trip?”

“Not yet. I gotta clean up this mess of a house first, then I’ll get started.”

I poured another shot.

“Your father and I just want to congratulate you and wish you safe travels. We sent you a few dollars on CashApp. Let your hair down and have some fun, baby, you deserve it.”

“Thanks, Mom. Tell Dad I said hello and I’ll text you when I get to the airport in the morning. Love you.”

I took the second shot and slammed the glass down on the marble countertop that cost me an arm and a leg.

“Alexa, play some Cardi B.”

I danced around the house and cleaned up along the way, imagining myself in one of Miami’s hottest spots with my boo.

The alarm blared in my ear and interrupted my beauty sleep. I sat up on the edge of the bed and questioned my judgment for booking a red-eye flight until I remembered the sexy, caramel man that would be waiting to greet me.

I hopped out of bed, took a shower, made a cup of coffee, and waited for Antoine to call.

When my phone did ring, it was my Lyft driver. I locked up the house and carried my bags downstairs.

“Cirilla?” asked the young man with an Indian accent.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said, handing him my luggage.

“Going on a girl’s trip?”

“Nope. My first baecation.”

“Sounds nice. Let’s get you to the airport so you can have some fun,” he said, opening the back door.

I inserted my AirPods and listened to Pandora on the short ride from my house to the airport. I glossed my lips and took a few selfies to post on Instagram. After updating my status, I scrolled through my newsfeed and stumbled upon Zyana’s page.

We were roommates in college. Thanks to social media, we still managed to keep in touch.

I clicked on her page and marveled at all of the beautiful places she had been. Bali, Tanzania, Paris, and Belize were just a few.

I admired her fearlessness.

As the driver approached the terminal, I unfastened my seatbelt. “Thanks for the ride,” I said, draping my *Ready for Summer* tote bag over my shoulder.

“My pleasure. Enjoy your trip, ma’am.” He parked the car and retrieved my suitcase from the trunk.

Ready for my adventure, I strolled into Norfolk International Airport and disappeared into the sea of travelers. After checking my bag and going through security, I ventured to one of the overpriced airport shops and picked up a banana, a bottle of water, and a book. I had another hour and a half to kill before boarding the plane.

An hour later and still no Antoine. Worried that he might miss the flight, I dialed his number to check on him. The phone rang several times before going to voicemail. After three attempts to reach him, I left a message and sent a text.

Nervous that something might have happened, I called the phone again. It went straight to voicemail.

The excitement that fluttered throughout my body all morning was replaced with fear. Fear of being stood up again by the man to whom I had dedicated the past two years of my life. I walked to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on my face, taking several deep breaths along the way.

Ring, ring.

“Hello, Antoine. Where are you?”

“Hey, Babe. Did you make it to the airport yet?” he asked.

“Yes. The flight leaves in forty-five minutes. You’re cutting it close.”

“I’m so sorry. Something came up. Can I get a raincheck?”

“Excuse me?” I yelled, looking around at the other women in the bathroom. “A raincheck? We’ve been planning this trip for months.”

“I know, but my buddy came into town and we’re gonna link up with some of our fraternity brothers. Promise I’ll make it up to you. We can go to Jamaica for two weeks.”

Fed up with his lack of empathy, I hung up the phone. Even if I wanted to cancel the trip, my luggage was already on the plane. I switched my phone to airplane mode and returned to my seat, awaiting the boarding call.

As the plane ascended from the runway, tears rolled down my face. I sat back in my seat, staring out the window as the buildings beneath me became smaller with each second. Being that every seat on the plane was booked, including the one next to me that had been reserved for Antoine, I had to muffle my cry. The last thing I needed was a bunch of strangers feeling sorry for me.

Once the plane reached the right altitude, I unbuckled my seat belt and headed to the bathroom. I paced back and forth in front of the door until it was vacant, thinking about all the red flags leading up to that day. We hadn’t laid eyes on each other outside of work since the weekend prior, which was unusual since he spent the night at my place quite often. Attempting to give him the benefit of the doubt, I charged his absence to the heaping amount of work that he had to do at the closing of the school year.

After ten minutes and several knocks on the bathroom door, I managed to pull myself together. When I mustered up the dignity to face the public again, there was a woman standing on the other side of the tiny door with a little bottle of vodka and a cup of ice.

“Been there more times than I care to admit. This one’s on me,” she said, handing me the relaxation in a bottle.

“Thanks.”

I walked back to my seat with my head held low.

When the plane landed in Miami, I switched my phone from airplane mode and texted my parents to let them know that I made it to my destination. As much as I wanted to call Antoine and rip him a new asshole, I decided to make the best of my trip. After all, it was my summer break and I deserved to blow off some steam. I picked up my luggage from the baggage claim and headed outside to meet my driver.

The muggy Miami heat greeted me way before the driver could. Thankfully, I wore a sundress and a pair of sandals because that sun was very disrespectful, even more so than the hotbox of a school that I endured earlier in the week. As I approached the shuttle, I removed my jean jacket and stuffed it into my tote.

“Good morning,” I said, greeting the young man.

“Morning. Cirilla Matthews?”

“Yes, that would be me.”

“Are we still waiting for the rest of the party?”

“It’s just me, unfortunately.”

“No problem. I’ll take your suitcase and you just relax and enjoy the ride,” he said, grabbing my luggage off the curb and placing it inside the trunk.

The ride from the airport to the hotel was rejuvenating. The crisp air blew through the vents and the scent of lavender permeated throughout the car. I took a few deep breaths and watched the palm trees off in the distance.

“First time in Miami?” he asked, interrupting my gaze.

“Yes and no. I took my first cruise from here a couple of years back, but I never officially stayed in the city,” I said.

“Nice. Are you meeting up with friends or your lover, perhaps?”

“Neither. To make a long story short, I got stood up at the airport and decided not to waste the trip.”

“Well, that’s his loss. Take my card and hit me up if you need someone to show you around.”

“Thanks.” I took the business card and stuffed it in my tote.

Five minutes later, we arrived at the Marriott on Biscayne Bay. I made the reservations online, however, the pictures on the website didn’t do it much justice. It was even better in person. The driver pulled up in front of the lobby and retrieved the luggage from the trunk. As I stepped out of the car, I did a 360 to take in the beautiful surroundings. After a minute of admiration, I tipped the driver and headed inside the hotel.

As I approached the guest registration counter, my phone vibrated. Anxious to get my room key, I ignored the call and proceeded to check in to my temporary home for the next couple of days. I figured the only people crazy enough to call me this early during vacation were my parents anyway.

“Good morning and welcome to Marriot. How can I help you today?” asked the woman with a Spanish accent.

“Good morning. I have a reservation for Matthews, Cirilla Matthews.”

“Okay. Let’s get you squared away. I have a few rooms left on the upper floor overlooking the bay. Would you like to upgrade to one of them, free of charge?”

“Well, if you insist,” I laughed, grateful for the small win.

The lady behind the counter diddled her fingers away on the keyboard and worked her magic. When she was finally done, she handed me a set of room keys and a list of the services and amenities available at the hotel.

“Have a great day and enjoy yourself. You deserve it,” she said.

My smile quickly transformed into a frown. Was it that obvious that I got stood up? “Thanks,” I mumbled, stepping away from the counter.

“Teachers are so underrated and deserve to be appreciated.”

My smile resumed the moment I realized that the woman was trying to show me gratitude, not sympathy.

With my luggage in tow, I made my way to the elevators, passing quite a few people along the way. As I waited for a car to reach the lobby, I glanced around and ingested my surroundings, including the Catch Bar and Grill sign advertising fish tacos and mojitos, which I planned to try later that evening.

When the elevator door opened, a family of six rushed out and I took their place. I pressed the button for the 31st floor and backed into the corner. I closed my eyes and imagined Antoine kissing my forehead and rubbing my back, which he did often.

“Damn him,” I shouted, thankful nobody was around to hear my outburst.

I practiced the breathing technique that I used in the classroom whenever the kids decided to work my nerves, inhaling slowly and holding it in for a few seconds before releasing my anxiety. Between that and the hunger pangs, I couldn’t wait to get to my room, hop in the bed, and eat away my sorrows.

I sauntered down the long hallway in search of my room, passing a young couple on the way. The carpet, the light fixtures, and the mirrors that adorned the space were exquisite, giving off rich people vibes. Although I made a habit of staying in nice places when I traveled, this was the first time I could afford to stay on the top floor, of course, that was due to the woman in the lobby. Or was it the universe’s way of making me feel better after the morning I had?

Finally reaching the room, I placed the keycard against the door and entered. The view was nothing short of spectacular, so much so that I dropped my stuff and raced to take it all in. The sunshine bounced off the water causing a natural glow to permeate through the window. The clouds looked nice and fluffy like cotton balls. From up that high, I had a bird’s eye view of the cruise port and downtown Miami. For a minute or two, I marveled at the boats

breezing through the bay, wishing I was on one of them with the wind blowing through my hair. My cell phone vibrated again and I raced to retrieve it from my trusty tote bag.

“Hello.”

“Good morning. How was the ride from the airport?”

“It was great, Mom. My driver was cool. He got me here in one piece.”

“How’s Antoine? Tell him I said hello.”

“I wouldn’t know. Something came up at the last minute and he couldn’t make the flight.”

“Oh no. Are you gonna be safe out there by yourself? I heard they get wild down there.”

“I’m good, Mom, don’t worry. Can I call you back after I get settled?”

“Of course, Love you.”

I put the phone on the dresser, turned on the AC., and plopped down on the king-sized bed. Although the flight was only an hour and ten minutes, I still suffered from travel exhaustion. The process of walking through the airports, checking and collecting luggage, and boarding the plane was tiring. I figured if I laid down for twenty to thirty minutes, I could muster up some energy to venture out and find a good breakfast spot. After all, I was running on fumes, well vodka to be exact.

Pulling back the soft white comforter, I slid into the bed and dozed off within minutes.

Chapter 2: Just Try to Have Fun, Dad



Matteo

The stack of invoices on the desk seemed to be growing bigger by the minute. I shook my head at how much my company had grown in the past couple of years, thanks to my son Caprice, who was a social media wiz. I was grateful for the revenue, but when I initially started the trucking company, it was just a side hustle that didn't require much of my time. Now I found myself governing dozens of employees and having weekly meetings.

Knock. Knock.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Mr. Cappelletti. Your conference call starts in about five minutes and your brother is on line one. He says it's urgent." She placed a cup of coffee down on the desk. "I'll be out front if you need anything else."

"Thank you, Tressa. That'll be all for now. Pull the door closed behind you." I sipped my coffee before I clicked on line one. "Brother."

"Hey, are we still on for dinner tonight? Holly's got a friend she wants you to meet."

"Here we go with the hookups. Tell Holly I'll be there because I love her, not because my brother can't seem to wrap his head around the fact that I don't need to get laid."

"Whatever. We'll see you later."

I sipped my coffee again and moved the invoices to the window sill behind me. I cleared my throat and instructed my assistant to set up the conference call. After twenty minutes of business talk, I was ready to run to the nearest bar, too bad it was only a few minutes past nine. I sipped the coffee again, wishing it was something stronger, and closed out the call. Lately, a lot of big corporations were interested in doing business with me, however, it wasn't my desire to get that deep into the trucking industry. I started out with one truck and a few contracting jobs delivering bread and pastries that grew into a fleet of trucks and six-figure contracting jobs delivering everything under the sun.

After hanging up with the potential client, I retrieved the invoices from the window sill and went through each one to verify that everything was correct. Caprice volunteered to handle the paperwork because he knew it was my least favorite thing to do, however, I always checked behind him out of habit. As usual, everything was on point so I stored the papers away in the file cabinet.

It was Friday, which meant a short day at the office. I promised Cadence that I would bring home some cookie dough ice cream.

I checked the time on my watch and grabbed my cell phone and car keys from the desk drawer. As I stood to leave, I glanced around the office to make sure everything was tidy before locking up.

"Have a great weekend, Tressa. I'll see you next week."

"Same to you, Mr. Cappelletti."

I stopped at the store around the corner from the office and picked up the ice cream and some more sugary snacks that were sure to have Cadence bouncing off the wall. Because school had been out for almost a month, I hired one of the neighborhood teens to look after her while I worked. The occasional junk food was my way of making up for my absence.

As I pulled into the driveway, I barely missed the hoverboard that one of my children neglected to put away. After slamming on

the brakes, I put the car in park and got out to move the obstacle blocking my path into the garage. “Cadence,” I yelled.

“Yesss,” she said, coming out the front door with the babysitter fast on her heels.

“Did you forget something?”

“Oh sorry, Dad. I was just riding it. Did you bring the ice cream?” She smiled.

Even when I should’ve been angry with her, she managed to tug on my heartstrings.

“Of course. Cookie dough for my little princess.”

“I’m not little anymore,” she said, leaning over the railing.

“Whatever. You’ll always be my little girl.”

I pulled the car into the garage and retrieved the grocery bags from the trunk. Cadence met me at the side door and followed me into the kitchen. When I entered the room, there were two bowls and two spoons waiting on the island. Reading her body language, I knew she had been anticipating the treat since I mentioned it the night before.

“I’ll just let myself out,” said the sitter.

I nodded.

After placing two scoops of ice cream in each bowl, I slid one across the island to Cadence. “Here you go.” She smiled as wide as she possibly could due to the bands her orthodontist attached to both sides of her braces. “So, do you want to watch a movie or something?”

“On one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

“I pick the movie,” she said, raising her spoon.

“Cool.”

We finished up the ice cream and migrated to the living room. Cadence grabbed the remote control and plopped down on the sofa. “Alexa, play *Soul* on Netflix,” she said into the remote. “You’re gonna love this one.”

Although Cadence was only ten years old, she had a tendency to act like she was my parent and not the other way around. I let her have some leeway as long as she didn't overstep her boundaries.

As the opening credits rolled, I got comfortable and propped my feet up on the ottoman. My big baby scooted closer to me and rested her head on my shoulder. My little girl was growing up and I wanted to capture these moments as long as I could.

When the movie ended, Cadence reminded me about the sleepover at her best friend's house. It was the hundredth time that she brought it up over the past few days and it was already drilled into my mental calendar.

"Way ahead of you. I already packed your stuff up last night and put it in my trunk. I'll drop you off on my way over to your uncle Dante's house."

"Another blind date, huh?" she asked.

"Unfortunately." I laughed. "You are too smart for your own good."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Just try to have fun, Dad. You need a girlfriend to watch movies with 'cause I'm not gonna be around forever," she said, kissing my cheek and walking down the hall and up the steps to her bedroom.

Cadence and Dante were correct, however, I didn't have time nor the energy to entertain the modern woman, run a company, and raise kids.

With several hours to spare before dinner, I decided to go for a run around the neighborhood and clear my head. I went to my bedroom and changed from my work clothes into something a bit more comfortable; a pair of basketball shorts, a t-shirt, and a pair of running shoes. Sitting down on the bed, I bent over and tied my shoes making sure to double the knot to prevent from tripping over the strings. I stood up and stretched my limbs before heading out the door.

“I’m about to take a quick run. Be back in twenty,” I said, knocking twice on Cadence’s bedroom door.

“K.”

As I stepped off the porch, Caprice pulled up in the driveway. I waved, set the timer on my Apple watch, and hit the pavement. Running had been an important part of my life, seeing that I was adamant about my health. I was pushing forty and I didn’t plan on sitting around with a beer belly watching the game at the bar with my other overweight friends. The plan was to age gracefully and still be able to move around and travel well into my latter days.

Sweat dripped down my brows as I sprinted down the street of my suburban neighborhood. The Charlotte heat hit my body from every direction. Every time my foot hit the pavement, my heartbeat increased.

Usher’s *Let It Burn* blared through my earbuds and memories of her tall, slim frame and shiny black hair resting against the small of her back flooded my thoughts. The scent of her perfume filled my nose and something clicked in my brain.

Resting against the tree, I took several deep breaths and removed my t-shirt to wipe the sweat from my face. My six pack drew some attention from two women walking across the street. To avoid the flirting session that almost always came next, I waved and resumed my run. After clocking in two and a half miles, I made my way back to the house and into a hot shower.

I checked my reflection in the mirror one last time before heading to my brother’s house for dinner. I sprayed some cologne on my wrists and ran my fingers through my hair. My beard and mustache were freshly trimmed from the visit to the barbershop the day before. Exiting the bathroom, I called out for Cadence to get the show on the road.

When I pulled up in front of the ranch-style brick home, Cadence hopped out and ran onto the porch where her best friend Ashley and

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her mother were waiting. I grabbed the sleeping bag and backpack from the trunk and joined them on the porch.

“Thanks for having Cadence over. She really loves it here.” I said, placing her belongings down on the steps.

“It’s my pleasure. She’s a great kid and we love spending time with her,” said Ashley’s mother.

“Try to enjoy yourself tonight, Dad. And tell Uncle Dante I said hi.”

“Will do, Princess.” I walked back to the car. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Chapter 3: Last-minute Cruise Deals



Cirilla

I rolled over in bed and searched for my phone until I remembered that it was on the nightstand. Apparently, I slept through the alarm and had been asleep for more than four hours. Unlocking the screen, I checked the call log to see if Antoine reached out. There wasn't a single call, nor text message for that matter. His true colors were coming to the surface and they weren't pretty. If only I could've recognized them sooner, then so much heartbreak could've been avoided.

The sound of an empty stomach put things back in perspective, so I googled breakfast places near me and found another restaurant located inside the hotel. Dragging myself out of bed, I adjusted my sundress and went downstairs in search of some sustenance. On the way to the restaurant, I bypassed at least a dozen different shops, a salon, and an eyeglass place. The hotel was getting better by the minute.

"Welcome to Charlie's. Will you be dining in or to-go?" asked the short stocky gentleman behind the podium.

"Dining in please."

"Right this way, ma'am."

Following the host through the restaurant, I glanced around and ingested the decor. Although the restaurant was small, it was decorated very well. There were several pieces of art adorning the

walls with gold accents that coordinated with the black and gold tablecloths. The tables and chairs appeared to be sturdy and built to last.

When we reached my table, the host left me with a menu. Grateful that I didn't have anywhere to rush off to, I took my time and read over the menu. They served omelets, platters, skilletts, and much more. After ten minutes of indecisiveness, I ordered french toast with a side of cheese eggs, and turkey bacon. The server poured me a cold glass of water and scurried away.

After I placed my order, the restaurant had a rush and the tables filled up pretty quickly. I was happy that I got there before things got hectic. As I scarfed down my first meal of the day, I shifted around in my seat several times. Most of the other customers were coupled up or with their families and I was all alone, which made me feel uneasy. I signaled the server to bring my check and a to-go box.

While waiting, I scrolled down my Instagram newsfeed and commented on a dozen posts from other teachers celebrating summer break. My college roommate was live, so I clicked on her video.

Ever since graduation, Zyana had been living abroad and teaching English online. I admired her for jumping out there and following her dreams, unlike me, still playing it safe working the traditional nine-to-five, and still stuck in the same state I was born in.

"Hey to all of my beautiful people out there, wherever you are in the world. I'm currently in Montenegro and it's such an amazing country. You have to visit someday. Type your location in the chat, so I can see where y'all checking in from," she said.

I tapped the heart button numerous times and typed my location in the chat.

"Okay, I see y'all tuning in from all across the globe. Tennessee, New York, South Africa, and the UK. Jamaica, Belize, Mexico City,

South Beach. Hey, CiCi. I miss you so much. When are you coming to join me?" she asked, moving her braids out of her face.

Me: Wish I was there now. Currently, stood up on South Beach.

"Oh no. Sorry to hear that. I'm going on a cruise to Bermuda next week, leaving Jersey. You should come so we can hang out like the old days."

Me: It's such short notice. I don't know.

"You only live once. That's why I do these videos. So y'all can get out of your comfort zone and see what the world has to offer. You deserve it CiCi."

I tapped the heart button a few more times and closed out the app. The rest of my food was packed and ready to go, so I settled the check and exited the restaurant.

Sulking through the lobby, I pulled out my phone and pulled up Antoine's number. Contemplating on whether to call him, I thought about the consequences of my actions. What if he didn't pick up? What if he did? Was I ready to have that conversation? To tell him how I was planning a future with him and now it was ruined because something came up that was more important than a weekend getaway with me.

The trip back to the room seemed like I was stuck in a time loop. Everything moved in slow motion and the voices around me were drawn out and distant. Surrounded by a bunch of people, yet still so alone. I pressed the button in the elevator and headed back to the room.

Back in my suite, I paced back and forth across the floor, biting away at my fingernails. Two years of my life had been wasted with Antoine. He knew how important the trip was to me and yet he bailed at the last minute. It was a cowardly way to break off the relationship, which had been rocky lately, hence the baecation. It was his way of saying I'm done, without saying the words.

"I'm just gonna call and see what he has to say."

I paced back and forth.

“No. Fuck that. I’m not calling him. He should be calling me.”

I tossed the phone on the bed and walked over to the window to admire the spectacular view of the bay, the bridges, and the other highrise buildings. I glanced at the cruise port and Zyana’s face popped into my head.

“I should go on that cruise. Ain’t shit to go home to. No work. No man. No plans. I could get a massage and some good drinks.” I shook my head. “But what if he changes his mind and comes to meet me? I need to be here.”

I took a few deep breaths and called Antoine. After a few rings, the call went to voicemail. Tempted to leave a message, I decided against it. If he wanted to ignore me, then two could play that game. A new plan was needed, so I took out my Ipad and started checking flight prices and last-minute cruise deals. Before I made things official with Zyana, I needed to be sure my pockets could afford it.

Chapter 4: A Vacation is Long Overdue



Matteo

I sat in the car for five minutes before walking up to Dante's house. The door was unlocked as they were expecting my arrival. I walked through the living room and found the party outside on the back patio.

"Brother, you made it," he said, reaching for a hug.

"Dante," I said, hugging him and making my way around the table to greet my sister-in-law. "Holly, you look beautiful as usual."

"Thanks, Matteo. I want you to meet a good friend of mine, Christina. Christina, this is my brother that I've been telling you about, Matteo."

"It's nice to meet you." I extended my hand.

"Um. Holly neglected to tell me how handsome you were," Christina said, looking over at Holly.

I blushed.

"Let's eat," Dante interrupted.

The fairy lights adorned the patio and complimented the candles on the table. The sounds of nature and laughter filled the air as we exchanged stories about our childhood. I was having a better time than I expected.

Holly's friend was drop-dead gorgeous and could've passed for a model. She was laid back, just how I liked my women. A pediatrician by trade, Christina had relocated to Charlotte three months prior to open her own practice. Due to her hectic schedule, it was the first time she was able to meet new people outside of the workplace.

“Maybe Matteo can show you around,” said Dante, giving me the look.

“I’d like that if he’s up for it. No pressure though,” said Christina.

“Sure. I’m off on weekends. We can set something up soon.”

I sipped my wine and laughed at my brother’s shenanigans, however, for the first time he picked a potential mate. During our conversation over dinner, I discovered that she had quite the sense of humor.

After we finished our food, I walked Christina to her car where we exchanged numbers and a quick embrace. As our bodies intertwined, the scent of her perfume bombarded my nose and reminded me of something familiar. It reminded me of what I’d been missing for the past few years, a real woman.

“It was nice to finally put a face to the name. Holly’s been trying to get me to come to dinner for a couple of weeks, but let’s just say I’ve had my share of blind dates and they haven’t ended well. This was fun though,” she said.

“I know exactly what you mean. This dating world is a complete joke.”

“Tell me about it.”

I checked my watch. “How much time do you have?”

She laughed. “Well, I hope to hear from you soon, Matteo. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“You do the same.”

I stood on the lawn and watched her black Range Rover drive off into the night. After Christina’s headlights disappeared, I turned around and walked back into the house, where Holly and Dante were cleaning up the mess from dinner.

“So, did we get it right this time?” asked Dante, smiling at me.

“Yeah, she’s pretty cool. Seems like a really nice person. I’ll hit her up sometime next week, maybe take her out to eat and to a movie or something, show her around the city. That’s if time permits.”

“What do you mean? You're the boss. You can take off whenever you want and Caprice can run the place. You need a break anyway.”

“He's right, you know,” said Holly, tapping me on the shoulder. “You've done an amazing job with the kids. I mean look at Caprice, he's following right in your footsteps and Cadence is such a kind-hearted young lady. It's time to get back out there.”

They made a good point. I had been on a ton of dates over the years and hadn't connected with anyone, until now. Christina did seem like a good fit for my family.

“I'm not ready to walk down the aisle again just yet, but I'll give her a shot if that'll get you guys off of my back. I'm not making any promises though.”

Holly and Dante gave each other a high-five followed by a passionate teenage kiss.

“Enough of that you guys. You can at least wait till I'm gone.” I shook my head.

“You're right. We could wait until you leave, but we don't have to cause it's our house,” Dante said before kissing Holly again.

I grabbed my keys off the kitchen counter and headed towards the front door. “Holly, it was great seeing you as always. Dante, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Love you guys and thanks for dinner.”

On the ride home, I thought about the conversation back at my brother's place. After being thrust into single parenthood, I didn't put much effort into finding another mate. A few hookups here and there, but I couldn't remember the last time I felt a woman's touch. I may as well have been a virgin, except I had the kids to show for it.

When I got home, Caprice was stretched out across the couch watching a movie on Netflix.

“Hey, Son. How was your day? Missed you at the office earlier.”

“Hey, Pops.” He turned the volume down on the tv. “I had a few errands to run, nothing serious. I needed to renew the tags on my

car, so I spent a couple of hours in the DMV. You know how that goes. How was the date?"

"News travels fast around here I see."

"Of course. Cadence tells me everything. Stop stalling and tell me how the date went."

"It was actually nice. She's a pediatrician and she just relocated to Charlotte to open her own practice. Gorgeous, slim with long, flowy hair down her back, a beautiful smile, and she's down to earth."

"So what's the problem?" he asked.

"What? I didn't say it was a problem."

"Come on, Pops. It's me, your son. I hear you listing off her good qualities, but I know you. There's something you're not telling me."

"She reminds me of someone I used to know, that's all."

"Okay. Is that a good or bad thing?" Caprice sat up on the couch.

"I'm not sure."

"You know what you need?"

"What?"

"A change of scenery and a chance to meet people. A vacation is long overdue."

"I don't know. Who's gonna take care of the business? Who's gonna take care of you and Cadence?"

"I'm an adult. I can hold it down while you're gone. Between Holly, Uncle Dante, and the babysitter, Cadence will be in good hands until I get home from work. She practically runs this house anyway."

"I don't know. I haven't had time to plan."

"Don't worry. How about you leave the planning to me."

"I don't know."

"Come on, Pops. You've run out of reasons to say no."

"Okay, okay. We'll discuss it further in the morning."

"Deal." He reached for his computer and I headed upstairs to bed.

Chapter 5: Just Book the Damn Flight



Cirilla

After checking the flights from Florida to New Jersey and last-minute cruise prices, I weighed my options. Should I stay in Miami and sulk or go to Bermuda and turn up?

I picked up my phone and searched through my contact list until I found Zyana's number. For a brief moment I hesitated about making the call. But I figured catching up with an old friend would be better than moping around Miami alone, so I hit the green phone icon on the screen.

"What's up, CiCi?" she asked in her normal upbeat voice. "Have you changed your mind?"

"Girl, I've been sitting in this room looking for cheap flights that match my bank account. I wanna come, but the way my account is set up..."

"Do you have enough money for the flight?"

"Yes, but I don't know about the cruise."

"As long as you can get to Jersey, I got the rest. It's a gift for your pain and suffering."

"Stop playing," I said, sitting up in bed. "Are you serious?"

"I'm dead serious. Just book the damn flight and send me your email address."

“Okay. See you soon.”

Before we ended the call, we laughed and reminisced for a few minutes on some of the good memories from our days at Norfolk State. Grateful for the free cruise, I rolled around on the bed, kicked my feet, and slapped my arms up and down in excitement, however, I still couldn't help but think about Antoine's sorry ass and what he was doing at that present moment.

I pulled up his Instagram profile and scrolled through his most recent uploads, discovering that his ‘frat brother’ had been in town for several days and that they had been hanging out all week.

Why hadn't he introduced me to his brother? Because he didn't give a damn about me and now it was crystal clear. I closed the app and sat the phone down on the bed. The last thing I should've been worried about was somebody who wanted to keep me a secret in the first place.

He wanted it to be a secret at work and it was apparently a secret to the people that meant the most to him. If only I could've figured that part out sooner.

I picked the phone up and did what needed to be done twenty-four hours ago. I blocked Antoine's number and unfollowed him on all social media platforms.

Fresh out of the shower, I put on another sundress with bright neon colors and a pair of gold sandals. I grabbed a wristlet out of my suitcase and stuffed some essentials inside. Checking my reflection in the full-length mirror, I pulled my hair into a high ponytail and double-checked to make sure there were no leftovers stuck in my teeth. Once I was satisfied with my appearance, I headed out to explore the city of Miami.

The first place on the list was Wynwood Walls. After watching a ton of videos on YouTube, I had to see the artwork in person. I googled the location to find out how far away I had to travel and what form of transportation would be the most reasonable.

After comparing prices and the time it would take me to get there, I decided to share an Uber with another passenger, which was only a dollar more than the public bus fare.

Waiting in front of the Marriot, the humidity almost took my breath away. I fanned myself with a brochure I picked up in the lobby on the way out. While checking my phone to see how far away the ride was, I received an email notification with the details of the cruise. I smiled despite the fact that I was melting away.

“Thank you, Lord,” I said, looking up at the sky. I was grateful to Him for sending Zyana to the rescue.

When the black Acura pulled in front of the hotel, I checked the license plate before climbing into the backseat.

“How’s your day going?” asked the driver, adjusting his mirror.

“Better now that you’re here. This Miami heat is so disrespectful. How do you get used to this?”

“It becomes second nature. Where are you visiting from?”

“Virginia. Norfolk, Virginia. It gets hot there too, but nothing like this.” I fanned myself with my wristlet.

We talked for a couple of minutes until he picked up the other two passengers, who didn’t speak a word of English. Because I only knew a handful of words in Spanish, I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about.

I searched through the wristlet, retrieved my earbuds, and listened to Selena Gomez the rest of the way there.

“All right, ma’am. I’ll let you out here to avoid the traffic. Walk up to the corner and make a right. You’ll see the sign out front. Enjoy the rest of your day,” he said.

“*Gracias.*”

I walked up the block and to the right, just as he had instructed. Following the sign, I entered through a gate and joined the rest of the tourists visiting the outdoor art museum. There were so many incredible murals that I had to get some pictures for my scrapbook.

I snapped one too many selfies and recorded a short video to send to my parents.

After about thirty minutes, I finished the self-guided tour just in time to catch the famous Florida rain.

What started as a little drizzle, soon turned into a downpour. I, along with several other tourists, hid underneath a bus shelter until the rain let up. Within minutes, the sky was clear again and the humidity amplified. It reminded me of the twilight zone. One minute everything was chaotic and the next minute it was as if nothing ever happened.

Since I was already posted up at the bus stop, I googled the schedule to find out when the next one arrived. With ten minutes to spare, I rewatched the video I filmed and uploaded it to my social media pages.

Ring, ring.

An unknown number popped up on the screen and I ignored the call, assuming it was a telemarketer trying to sell me something. Before I could put the phone away, another call came through, again from an unknown number. Out of curiosity, I answered on the third ring ready to decline whatever the caller was selling. "Hello."

"Hey, beautiful. How's the trip going?" he asked in a deep tone.

"Who is this?" I asked, pretending not to recognize the sound I anticipated hearing every night for the last two trips around the sun.

"So it's like that, huh?"

"You made it that way, not me," I snapped.

"How? I told you something came up at the last minute and I'd make it up to you for missing the trip. I saw your video and decided to call and check on you, but the phone rang once and went straight to voicemail. I called back numerous times before I realized you blocked my number."

"Isn't that what you wanted, Antoine? To be free of me so you can do whatever you please. I mean let's keep it real. You've always kept me a secret and it took me until now to realize it. I've never

stayed the night at your place, we always got takeout instead of dining inside the restaurants, and I've never met any of your close friends and family."

"You're overthinking. You know how I feel about you, Cirilla. Things are just complicated in my life right now," he said.

"Yeah, yeah. It's the same old song. How about I uncomplicate things for you and forget that we ever met?"

"That's right, sis. Tell him," added a lady waiting at the bus stop.

I couldn't help but laugh at her commentary. After all, I was standing in a public place airing out my relationship problems.

"If that's all, I have a vacation to enjoy."

"I'll call you later when you're in a better mood."

"Don't." I hung up the phone and a sense of relief washed over me.

Chapter 6: I Think You Have My Bag



Matteo

I spent the rest of the weekend tidying up the house and shopping for the trip. Caprice managed to convince me to take a vacation and backing out was not in the equation. Cadence, Dante, and Holly were all on board, so whether I liked it or not, in less than twenty-four hours, I would be on a ship to Bermuda.

“I wrote down all the important numbers I thought you might need. There’s cash inside the jar on top of the fridge for pizza and your aunt Holly is going to bring some food over while I’m gone. Cadence, please be on your best behavior and listen to your brother. He’s in charge till I get back,” I said.

“Ok, Dad. You’ve gone over this speech a hundred times. We’re gonna be alright. You need to calm down before you have a heart attack,” she replied.

“See, I told you she’s too smart for her own good. Don’t worry about us. If we need anything, Uncle Dante is only a phone call away,” added Caprice.

“Well, if you insist. My flight leaves early in the morning, so I’ll get a Lyft to the airport. Come on Cadence, let’s get you ready for bed so I can finish packing.”

When the alarm clock went off, I was already awake. After tossing and turning all night, I didn’t fall asleep until after one,

which lent me four measly hours of rest. I sat up on the California king and wiped the sleep from my eyes. My bags were packed and my gray sweatpants and New Jersey Nets t-shirt were folded on the dresser.

After a quick, hot shower, I got dressed and gathered a few last minute items, like my charger, some chapstick, and a pair of shades. I waited on the porch for my ride to come. While waiting, I checked to make sure the plane was taking off on time.

Ten minutes later, I was on my way to the airport.

When the car arrived at Charlotte Douglas International Airport, I retrieved my luggage from the trunk and tipped the driver. After checking my bags and going through security, I located the nearest Starbucks and ordered an egg white sandwich and a cup of black coffee. I settled in the corner of the restaurant and removed my food from the bag.

As I delved into my first meal of the day, I sat and thought about how I let a 20-year-old convince me to drop everything and leave the country. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. Thoughts of bailing on the trip filled my mind and then I remembered that my luggage was already on the plane.

"You deserve this," I repeated numerous times to myself.

"You most certainly do," said an older woman sitting at the next table.

"Sorry. I didn't realize how loud I was."

"No worries. Everybody deserves to get away sometimes to rest and refresh."

"Thanks."

I downed the rest of my coffee and walked to my flight terminal.

"We will begin boarding flight 111 to Newark, New Jersey in ten minutes. The weather's clear for takeoff, so we are scheduled to depart on time. If you need wheelchair assistance or boarding with children, please line up now so we can get this show on the road," said the flight attendant.

I switched my phone to airplane mode and joined the rest of the passengers.

When the plane landed in Newark, I unbuckled my seatbelt. I waited patiently for the people around me to grab their carry-on suitcases from the overhead bin before I stood up to exit the plane.

Shortly after deboarding, I found myself fighting through a crowd of people to get my luggage. I decided to step back and let them clear out before I tried again. In the meantime, I pulled out my phone and called to check on the kids.

“Hello,” said Caprice, picking up on the second ring.

“Hey, Son. My flight just landed,” I said, reaching for one of my suitcases. As soon as I picked up the bag, I felt a light tap on my shoulder.

“I think you have my bag,” she said, in a sweet, heavenly voice.

“Are you sure?” I gripped the handle tighter.

“Check the card in the back slot.”

I turned the suitcase around and surely the initials CM were written on the card. “My apologies. Here you go.”

“No worries.” She flashed a quick smile before walking away.

“Pops? Are you still there?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m here. Just got distracted for a minute.”

“I bet. I heard you stuttering. She must be really hot.”

“Smoking hot,” I said.

We chatted for several minutes until both of my bags came. This time, I double-checked the back for my initials, MC. Afterward, I made my way outside of the airport to hail a cab. While awaiting my ride, I canvassed the area, hoping to spot the young woman again.

Chapter 7: Tell Me More



Cirilla

After a twenty minute ride, I arrived at the cruise port in Bayonne. I collected my belongings and entered the building along with hundreds of other people. Happy for the first time in days, I refused to let the registration process defeat me. If there were men on the ship that looked like the guy in the airport, it was well worth the wait.

While in line, I took a couple of selfies and posted them on my social media pages just to get under Antoine's skin. A minute later I got a text notification.

Zyana: Hey. I see you made it in one piece.

Me: Yes. Almost at the security checkpoint.

Zyana: Yay!!! Meet me at the bar as soon as you board. Can't wait to see you.

Me: Smooches!!!

I placed my bags on the belt and watched them go through the security checkpoint. The guard waved me through the metal detector and after a brief search, I was one step closer to my destination.

Within ten minutes, I was face to face with Zyana and two shots of vodka. "BOO," I said, sneaking up behind her.

"OMG, CiCi. You scared the crap outta me. I still can't believe you're here." She squealed.

“How could I say no to a free trip? Besides, we haven’t hung out in years. The last time I saw you was at homecoming in 2015. When you came to town to see you know who.”

“Don’t even mention his name. I almost gave up my nomadic lifestyle for him and all he wanted to do was gamble.”

“Really? How come you never said anything?”

“I was embarrassed. I just counted my losses and kept it moving. Now I pay attention to all the red flags.” She handed me a shot glass and raised hers. “Cheers to our new adventure.”

We took the shots of vodka to the head and slammed the empty glasses on the bar.

“Enough about me. How are you, considering everything that happened?”

“Better now. The trip to Miami turned out to be good for me. I feel somewhat refreshed, like some of the weight has been lifted off my shoulders.”

“Good. We’re gonna have so much fun this week. It’ll be a while before the luggage is delivered to our cabin, so let’s walk around and explore our floating resort.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

The ship was enormous, filled with restaurants and retail shops at every turn. We strolled past a pizza spot and a small cafe. Across the walkway, there was an art gallery, a liquor store, and a jewelry store. We window-shopped and admired the decor around the common areas. The exquisite artwork adorning the walls combined with the perfect lighting gave the ship a magical feel. I stretched out my arms and twirled around in a circle.

“I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Everything’s so big and grand. I’ve been on a Carnival Cruise before, but it’s nothing compared to the Royal Caribbean,” I said.

“Wait till you try the food. It’s so bomb, even in the cafeteria.”

“Can’t wait. You know I love to eat.”

“Let’s get some air and see who else is on this ship,” she said, pulling my arm.

We headed to the elevator like two little school girls with our arms intertwined, stopping along the way to check out a map on the wall. Once Zyana found the place she was searching for, she led the way.

As soon as the door slid open, the heat crept in. I braced myself for the blaring sun that beamed down on the deck. People were already occupying a third of the lounge chairs with towels, books, and other miscellaneous items. Meanwhile, others were standing around with beers and other alcoholic drinks in hand, ready to get the party started. The DJ played a mixture of music to get the crowd hyped. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the transitioning process from land to sea, especially Zyana. She was already snapping her fingers and dancing to the beat.

Staring out across the Hudson River at the New York City skyline, we stood in silence and enjoyed the view. We took some photos and shot a quick video to update our social media. Zyana had an insane amount of followers on Instagram waiting for her to disclose her whereabouts, meanwhile, I had my lame ass ex to stunt on.

“I hope his eyes pop out of his head when he sees these pics,” I said.

“Oh, they will. He’ll be calling soon.”

“Too late. I blocked him and he called from another number, tryna make it seem like I was overreacting. I’m tired of being treated like a side chick, like I’m not good enough to meet his family and friends. I’m hot, right?”

“Damn right. It’s his loss. Truth be told, he wasn’t good enough for you anyway.”

“You’ve never even met him, Zyana.”

“If he stood you up in Miami, he’s definitely a lame. What else do I need to know?” She looked me in the eyes. “CiCi, you don’t

give yourself enough credit. You're gorgeous and any man would be happy to have you. That smile and those adorable freckles are enough to drive any man insane."

"Thanks," I said. "It's funny you said that 'cause I had a mix-up with this cutie at the airport and he was stuttering and everything."

"Tell me more," she said.

"Well, he picked up my suitcase by accident and I tapped him on the shoulder to stop him from walking off with my stuff. He was really sexy. And he smelled amazing."

"Tell me you got his number."

"No, Zy. He was on the phone with God knows who, maybe his wife or one of his girlfriends, so I didn't stick around to find out. Besides, I'm a bit of a loose cannon right now. Remember?"

"What better time to get loose and unwind? You're officially a free woman. I bought you on this cruise to have a good time and do whatever you please without any judgment."

"And I can't thank you enough," I said, hugging her again.

"Also, I wanted to try and persuade you to leave that wack ass job and travel the world like you've always wanted, not just on spring break and summer vacation."

"Of course you did. You wouldn't be you if you didn't have a few tricks up your sleeve."

As the breeze blew in off the river and the passengers moved around the deck interacting with each other, I leaned back against the railing and glanced around to check out some of the guys on the ship. Zyana was right. It was the perfect time to meet new people without any strings attached.

The DJ switched over to reggae music and we swayed to the tunes of Beenie Man permeating from the speakers. Zyana grabbed us two tall ass drinks from a server passing through.

"You tryna get me drunk early?" I asked.

"It's five o'clock somewhere, now drink up. We got the unlimited drink package and we're gonna take full advantage."

Besides, it's the only way I can get you to loosen up." She held the mixed drink in the air and waited for me to toast. I rolled my eyes and raised my glass.

As we hung out on the deck, we made conversation with a group of guys who happened to be in a fraternity. Just hearing the word fraternity gave me a nasty taste in my mouth, but I smiled and pretended to enjoy their company anyway.

"Well, it was nice meeting you. Hopefully we'll see you around the ship," Zyana said.

"Of course, y'all both sexy," one of the guys blurted out.

"We will definitely be linking up again," said the taller one.

Walking around the deck, I pointed out all of the different rides and activities on the upper level. There was a rock climbing wall and a walking trail outside and a skating/bumper car rink inside.

After checking out more of the retail shops, we stopped by the casino. My favorite game was the slot machine. I ran my fingers across the machines as we reminisced about our graduation trip to Vegas, where I won my first thousand bucks. It was as if the sky cracked open and rained money down on me.

"Yeah, I remember you rolling around on the damn floor like you hit the jackpot. I was so embarrassed."

"Girl, it was free money. What did you expect? We ate good that night, though. Hopefully, the angels will smile down on me again and we can go on a shopping spree on this ship."

"Bet. For now, let's bounce before the smell of stale cigars attaches itself to my hair. I haven't had these braids for a whole week yet." She tossed her butt-length box braids from side to side.

"Where to next?" I asked.

"I'm hungry. There's so much to choose from, I don't know where to start."

"We can go to the pizza parlor we passed by earlier or the buffet," I suggested.

“It’s too early for pizza, CiCi. Let’s go check out the buffet. I can get a salad and some fruit.”

We walked to the nearest elevator and went up to the cafeteria, which was foodie heaven. The aromas coming from the different stations filled the air and my stomach did a couple of flips. I grabbed a croissant and a cup of coffee to go from the hotel in Miami, but that was hours ago. It was time to get a proper meal in my body because according to Zyana, we would be drinking into the wee hours of the night.

Our first stop was the fruit station. It was filled with tons of seasonal fruit, some cut into cute little shapes. Everything looked fresh. Zyana grabbed a plate and piled it up with enough for the both of us. Then, we moved on to the next station.

“Do you want an omelet?” she asked.

“Naw, I’m good. Me and eggs don’t always agree. I think I’m gonna get some hash browns, bacon, and roasted tomatoes.”

“Eww. Roasted tomatoes?”

“Don’t knock it till you try it. It’s so good and juicy. It really completes the breakfast dish,” I said.

“Look at you, sounding like a chef. It really completes the breakfast dish. I guess I’ll try one.”

As Zyana ventured off to order her omelet, I walked around to other stations and checked out the inventory.

Chapter 8: If You Want Love



Matteo

As soon as I boarded the ship, I walked to the nearest bar and ordered a beer.

“You’re on vacation. Are you sure you don’t want something stronger?” asked the bartender.

I laughed. “Not yet. I need to eat first.”

“Totally understandable. Are you meeting up with your girlfriend?” She blushed, placing the beer down in front of me.

“Nope. I’m solo. My son thought it was a good idea to send me on a cruise by myself, hoping it would get me out of my shell.”

“Well, look at the bright side, you get to drink as much as you want and meet new people.”

We continued to make small talk until I had to take a leak. “Thanks for the company,” I said, leaving a tip on the bar.

“My pleasure. Don’t be a stranger.”

I gulped down the last swig of beer and then made my way around the large foyer. In search of the bathroom, I passed several groups of women, both young and old, whispering about my print. I instantly regretted the gray sweatpants I picked out for the trip. Slightly embarrassed, I scurried off to the nearest bathroom to relieve myself and check-in with Dante.

After I used the bathroom and washed my hands, I dialed my brother's number and he answered on the second ring. "Hey. Just calling to let you know I made it on the ship safely."

"Great. Now it's time to have some fun, if you know what I mean," he said.

"There you go again, tryna tell me what to do with my life. I could've sworn I was the oldest."

"So what. I'm not a kid anymore. I know a thing or two about women. Trust me."

"Yes, he does." Holly laughed in the background.

"Y'all would throw me to the wolves if it were possible. I just want to relax and have a good time, not orchestrate my own private spring break."

"Loosen up a little, Matteo," Holly interrupted. "And promise me you'll do something irresponsible every day that you're away."

"And don't let another one slip through your fingertips like the girl at the airport," Dante added.

"Whatever. Talk to you guys later."

I hung up the phone and walked out of the bathroom to face the rest of society. After briefly exploring several floors of the ship, I retired to my room for a nap.

A short while later, I awoke and the ship was already in motion. We were officially on our way to Bermuda. I walked to the balcony door and pulled back the curtains. The sun had set and the moon had taken its place. I opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony.

As I stood with my hands anchored to the railing, I admired God's creation. "If only I had someone to share it with," I whispered into the atmosphere.

After reciting my morning affirmations, I decided to go for a run on the trail. I set a twenty-minute timer, opened the Pandora app, and did a few stretches to loosen up.

With NF's *If You Want Love* impregnating my eardrums, I ran my first lap. As I made my way around the track, I thought about my ex-wife and how she ripped my heart out of my chest.

Although it had been years, I still remembered the look on my son's face when I told him his mother went to go find herself. It took everything in me not to break down.

"It's okay, Pops," he said. "We'll be okay."

And he was right. About everything.

As I ran another lap, I recalled the excuses I'd conjured up over the years. She's too skinny, she's too needy, she's too materialistic, she's too hot, all of which were rationalizations to trick me into believing that my better half didn't exist.

And that's when it hit me. I was stuck in the past, secretly hoping she would walk back through the door and apologize for leaving me.

My alarm beeped, interrupting my thoughts, so I stopped running and walked the rest of the lap.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I marveled at the different shades of blue in the ocean and the tiny buildings off in the distance. The ship had arrived in Bermuda without me even realizing it.

At that moment, I vowed to stop playing it safe and see what the world had to offer, at least for the next four days anyway.

After a nice, hot shower, I wrapped a towel around my waist and grabbed my brush off the bathroom counter. Staring at my reflection, I noticed the gray that was slowly invading my mane and my facial hair. I wasn't a young man anymore and my fortieth birthday was right around the corner.

I got dressed, left the cabin, and headed to the cafeteria to grab a quick breakfast.

While seated at a table near the window, I scarfed down some oatmeal and admired the view of the port. The fort reminded me of an old war movie and I couldn't wait to get off the ship and learn more about its history.

As I finished up my food, an announcement came over the loudspeaker. I took a few sips of orange juice and left the rest on the table. Within fifteen minutes, the line to disembark the ship was clear and my journey of exploration had begun.

I inhaled the salty air and marveled at the turquoise water. The humidity was enough to steal my breath away. However, a woman in a bright yellow sundress did it first.

I pinched myself to be sure it wasn't a dream, that I wasn't imagining things. The beauty from the airport was in Bermuda, and on the same ship.

After a minute of contemplating whether to properly introduce myself, I mustered up the courage to approach her and her friend.

"Would you like me to take the picture?" I asked, removing my sunglasses.

"Uh...sure. I guess," she said, handing me her phone.

They took several pictures in front of the cruise ship, whispering to each other between poses.

"Beautiful," I said before walking over and handing the mystery girl her phone back. In the natural light, I noticed her freckles for the first time, each one strategically placed on her caramel skin.

"Thanks for your help," said the brown-skinned woman, breaking the silence. "My name is Zyana, and this is my friend, Cirilla."

"Nice to meet you both. I'm Matteo," I said.

"I hear you and my girl had a little mixup at the airport yesterday."

"I may have tried to claim her luggage, but it was no big deal."

"Tell me more," she said.

I gave her the quick version of our encounter while Cirilla followed closely. I turned around mid-sentence and caught her staring at me.

"So, Matteo. What are you getting into today?" Zyana asked.

"I don't have any plans, seeing as though my trip was a last-minute decision. Maybe get some local food and check out one of the beaches."

"Sounds good. Would you mind if we tagged along?"

"Not at all. I could use the company. On one condition though, she has to talk or this day is gonna be awkward."

"She will. I promise." She glanced at Cirilla.

We strolled around King's Wharf, passing restaurants, vendor booths, and retail stores. After comparing prices at several places, we stopped in a more reasonably-priced souvenir shop and purchased some goodies. Cirilla picked up several trinkets, a keychain, a bottle opener, and a homemade candle. Zyana shuffled through the Bermuda-themed t-shirts and picked out the most colorful one. Meanwhile, I bought a bracelet and a ball cap for the kids.

"Y'all ready to explore the dockyard?" I asked.

"Sure. It looks like a magnificent spot for some IG pictures," Cirilla said, finally breaking her silence.

"Ahh. She speaks. Well, let's go." I waved for them to follow.

Cirilla and Zyana followed me through the historic grounds, nudging each other periodically. Every couple of minutes, they stopped and posed for a picture.

"This used to be an outpost for the British Royal Navy, until they lost it in the American War of Independence," Cirilla stated. "It was built on the backs of convicts and slaves, just like the United States."

"Wow. It's a privilege to see such beauty," I added, referring to the surroundings and her. The last thing I wanted to do was make things awkward between us, but I couldn't help sliding in a compliment.

She flashed a quick smile. "Yeah, it is."

"Enough of the history lesson, teacher. Let's take a ride on the ferry," Zyana declared.

"And go where?" Cirilla asked.

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

“Over to St. George’s. I heard some people talking about it in the store. There’s more historical stuff on that side and a place called Tobacco Bay, where we can get some drinks and food. You down, Matteo?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Yep.”

We walked back towards the ship, passing vibrant palm trees and lush greenery along the way. The ancient buildings, riddled with watchtowers and old clocks, added to the whole Caribbean vibe. There were people offering jet ski rentals and other activities all along the waterfront.

I darted to the ticket booth and purchased passes for everybody, while the ladies found a spot to hide from the piercing sun.

According to the guide, the ferry was due to arrive any minute to take us on a scenic ride to another part of the island.

Cirilla fanned herself with one of the brochures she picked up along the way. “I need some water before we get on this boat. I thought Miami was hot. Sheesh.” She walked to a nearby booth and purchased three bottles of water for the journey.

When she returned, she handed both of us a bottle. “We gotta stay hydrated or we won’t be making it anywhere.”

Chapter 9: Full Disclosure



Cirilla

The ferry was a cheap, yet efficient way to get a glimpse of the island. Within every nook and cranny, there was another hidden piece of paradise. While Zyana filmed a video for her YouTube channel, I captured a ton of photos.

“Have you ever seen anything this stunning?” Matteo asked, walking up behind me.

“Nope. It’s something magical about the way the sun bounces off the water. It’s surreal. I mean, look at the different shades of blue. God really worked his magic in this place.”

“You have to see the water in Italy. It’ll blow you away.” He flashed a smile.

“Italy, huh? I’ve always wanted to see the Colosseum and the Roman architecture up close. Were you born there?”

“No. Born in the states and visited as a kid. What about you?”

“I’m from a little town that you’ve probably never heard of called Martinsville. It’s in Virginia.”

“Still living there?” he asked.

“No way. I moved to Norfolk for college and accepted a job in the city a few weeks before graduation. The only time I go back is to visit my parents.”

“I see y’all are getting along. I told you she would talk. CiCi just has to get a feel for you before she opens up,” Zyana interrupted.

“And now that y’all are better acquainted, let’s get a picture of you two.”

I hesitated.

He didn’t.

The smell of his cologne, so inviting and invigorating, filled my nose once again and sent chills down my spine. When he placed his arm across my shoulder, the fluttering sensation in my stomach resurfaced.

"Scoot in closer and act like you want to take the picture, CiCi. Right now you're giving off trafficking vibes. Lots of women would love to be that close to Matteo."

"Oh, you got jokes?" I wrapped my arm around his waist and smiled at the camera.

"Much better."

Matteo smiled, showing off his dimples.

"And you're getting a kick out of this, huh?" I looked up into his opal-green eyes and he shrugged his shoulders.

As we finished up the photo session, the ferry arrived at the port. We waited at the top of the boat until the bottom level was clear of passengers.

“What do you do for a living, Matteo?” Zyana asked.

“I’m in the trucking business.”

“Nice. We’re both teachers. And I’m a travel influencer. I have a YouTube channel and a poppin’ IG page. You should check it out. Follow me on all social platforms @ZyanaTravelsTheWorld.”

“Maybe I will. So, it’s safe to say that we all needed a break.”

“Yeah. Especially CiCi. She got stood...”

“TMI,” I interrupted.

Matteo got the hint and didn’t press the issue anymore. Whatever bought the three of us together was irrelevant at that point.

As I stepped foot onto the soil of St. George’s Parish, an antique anchor greeted me. To appease my inner nerd, I stopped and read the description.

"I know you love all this history, but we're on vacay. Can we get some drinks, please?" Zyana asked.

"I second that," Matteo added.

"Okay, okay. Lead the way."

Zyana followed a crowd of young people, assuming they knew where to find the alcohol. Matteo and I dragged along, trusting her judgment. As we strolled through the parish, the locals welcomed us with smiles. Between the tranquil breeze flowing through the palm trees and the live Caribbean music, I was falling in love with the place.

Zyana walked ahead of us and conversed with a group of people. After gathering some intel, she returned with the directions to Tobacco Bay. "We're fifteen minutes away from our destination. Does anyone have to go to the bathroom?"

Matteo and I looked at each other and shook our heads simultaneously.

"Good. Now let's find those booze."

On our way to the beach, we passed by the famous Unfinished Church and I took more photos. Before I got carried away in explaining its history, Zyana changed the subject. "So Matteo, my next question may seem intrusive, but I have to ask. What's a fine man like you doing in paradise alone?"

"Zyana," I said, cutting her off. "Stop interrogating him."

"It's all good. As I mentioned before, it was a last-minute trip. My son convinced me to take a break, so here I am."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

"Okay. Full disclosure. I've been single for a while and my son thought it would be good for me to go on a cruise and meet some new people."

"Your son sounds pretty cool," I said.

"He is. He's my best friend, but I'd never admit it to his face."

We walked and talked until we saw water glistening under the sun. By the time we reached the bay, I was exhausted. The journey

was longer than we expected and it included an uphill climb. After stopping numerous times to catch our breath and rehydrate, it took twenty-five minutes to get there.

“How are you not tired, Matteo? We’re barely hanging on here.”
I rested my hand on my chest.

“I run, so I’m used to activities that require stamina.”

“Is that right?” Zyana asked.

Matteo laughed at her antics. I could tell he was growing used to her already.

“Yeah, that’s right. I run every day. Been doing it for years.”

“Well, at least someone here exercises,” I said.

As we approached the hidden gem, everyone stopped and marveled at the beauty. Natural rock formations and tons of greenery surrounded the blue lagoon. I snapped a few pictures. “Wow. You did good, Zyana. This place is amazing. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any better.”

“Yeah. This is breathtaking,” he chimed in.

After several minutes of walking downhill, we reached the entrance of Tobacco Bay Bar and Grill, and were greeted by smiling faces and good music.

“Welcome, welcome,” said an older gentleman with an accent.

Zyana and I headed straight to the bar. Meanwhile Matteo found us a table. After looking over the selection of drinks and flirting with the man behind the bar, Zyana ordered three beers and some appetizers. Matteo came up just in time to cover the bill. “Allow me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, reaching into my bag.

“I insist,” he said, showing off one of his dimples.

“Yeah, CiCi. Let him be a gentleman.”

Matteo was starting to grow on me with every passing minute. I realized that Antoine hadn’t crossed my mind one time since leaving the ship, which was a good thing.

“Well, thank you. But you gotta let us pay you back.”

“Just hanging out with you guys is more than enough.”

Buju Banton’s *Wanna Be Loved* blasted through the speakers on the patio and Zyana jumped up from her seat and started dancing in the middle of the floor. Matteo and I sat back and watched her slow-wine with a complete stranger.

I loved my friend’s outgoing personality. I wished I had the courage to live my life so freely. To travel the world whenever. To meet new people at the drop of a dime. And most of all, to be present in the moment and without always knowing the next step.

“You’re lucky to have a friend like her,” he said.

“Yeah. She’s the reason I’m here. I got stood up in Miami and she paid for me to come on this cruise with her at the last minute,” I admitted.

“Wow. He must be a real jerk for standing up someone as gorgeous as you.”

I blushed. “Thanks.”

The song ended and Zyana dismissed her boy toy. Then, she joined us at the table. “Whew. What y’all over here smiling about?”

“Nothing. Just making small talk,” he replied.

“I see.”

Matteo laughed.

“Please don’t encourage her.”

“Okay, okay,” he replied, lifting his hands up in defeat.

The server brought over the appetizers, and we demolished the food before finding a spot on the sand. I watched Matteo remove his shirt and it reminded me of the show *Baywatch*, or better yet, one of those Calvin Klein commercials.

His chest.

His abs.

OMG.

I glanced over at Zyana, who had removed her sunglasses to get a better view. We gave each other the look, the one that females exchanged when they approved of a hot guy.

After he finished putting on a show for us, Matteo folded the shirt, laid it down on his backpack, and headed into the clear blue water.

“He is so fine. You betta stop playing with that man.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to act clueless.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. He likes you, CiCi. It’s so obvious.”

“Girl, whatever. That man ain’t pressed about me. He’s just being polite.”

“Polite my ass. He’s feeling you. Why do you think he asked to take our picture in the first place?”

“I just got out of some mess, Zyana. I just want to chill and heal.”

“Whateva. You only get one life,” she said before taking off her jean shorts and getting in the water.

I waved her off and spread my towel on the sand. After taking off my sundress, I adjusted my thong before laying down. I popped in my earbuds and grabbed my journal from my tote bag. As the classical music filled my eardrums, I poured my heart out on the page. Five stanzas later, the poem was complete, so I put the journal away and picked up my phone.

Besides the pictures I’d taken in recent days, my gallery was full of old photos with Antoine. Swiping through the pictures, a knot formed in my belly. Yeah, I hated his guts, but I had spent so much time loving the ground he walked on.

A shadow formed, stealing my attention from the phone. When I looked up, Matteo was standing in front of me with beads of water dripping down his chiseled frame. I removed one of my earbuds.

“You coming in? The water feels amazing. It’s nice and warm,” he said.

“I guess so. Let me tie my hair up.”

He sat back and watched as I pulled my hair into a high bun. I brushed the sand off my legs and stood up.

“Can you swim, Cirilla?”

“Yeah. I took lessons when I was younger.”

“Let’s go jump off the rocks with the kids.”

“Huh. You know that I’m Black, right?”

“And? That has nothing to do with cliff jumping.”

I paused for a second. “Okay, but you gotta do it first.”

“Bet. Now let’s go.”

We walked into the shallow water as far as we could before the ocean floor disappeared beneath our feet.

“You good?” he asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t expect it to get so deep, so fast.”

“When the shade of blue changes in the water, the depth changes as well.”

I took off and swam in the direction of the rock formations and left Matteo behind. The waves crashed onto the rocks and splashed in my face. The warm, salty water glided against my skin and several drops found their way into my mouth.

I pulled myself up onto the rocks and waited for Matteo. Using my hand to shield the sun from my eyes, I cheered him on. “You can do it!”

When he finally reached the rocks, I tried to help him out of the water. Instead of getting out, he pulled me back in. “Oh, so we got ourselves a prankster,” I said, spitting out the saltwater I swallowed on the way down.

“You left me.”

“Aww, poor baby. You have a lot of stamina, remember?” I laughed. “Now help me out before I change my mind.”

He pulled me out of the water and we joined the kids on the other side of the rock. Five minutes into watching them do different tumbling moves into the ocean, Matteo was ready to give it a go. “Are you nervous?” he asked.

“A little,” I admitted.

“You want to jump together?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

When he grabbed ahold of my hand the second time, chills ran down my spine. “Here goes nothing.” We leaped off the cliff, hand in hand, with the cheers of complete strangers in the background.

Our bodies catapulted into the water at lightning speed.

I held my breath for about five seconds until I reached the surface.

“That was so fun,” he said, wading around in the water.

“Yes. I can’t believe I let you talk me into it.” I wiped the water from my eyes. “Let’s do it again.”

We swam over to the rock formation and waited in line again. After jumping for a second, then a third time, I was exhausted.

“You ready to head back to the shore?” he asked.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

One the way back, Matteo swam behind me to make sure the waves didn’t take me under. Even though I could swim, I was no match for the ocean.

“Y’all living on the edge, I see,” Zyana said.

“It was fun. You should try it.” I grabbed my towel and wiped my face.

“No thank you, CiCi. I’m good right here.”

“But I thought you were a travel influencer. Don’t you do crazy stuff all the time?” he asked.

“I do, but drowning in paradise is not one of them.”

“She can’t swim,” I said.

“Oh. We can change that today. After we get another drink, of course.”

“Agreed.”

After a couple of shots, Matteo gave Zyana her first official lesson. Meanwhile, I stayed back on the shore and admired him from a distance.

Chapter 10: Are You Tryna Hit On Me?



Matteo

On the bus ride back to the cruise ship, I couldn't keep my eyes off her. As we sat across from each other at the back of the bus, her yellow sundress complimented her skin and one stray piece of hair hung down around her neck. I bit down on my bottom lip, thinking about how her lips would taste, both sets. When Cirilla caught me staring, I turned and looked away.

"I had a great time today," she said before yawning several times.

"Me too. I haven't had this much fun since...never mind."

"Same."

We rode in silence, stealing quick glances at one another and exchanging smiles along the way. Meanwhile, Zyana had dozed off after her introductory swimming lesson and was curled up in the seat with her head resting against Cirilla's shoulder. I pulled out my phone and snuck some photos.

"Oh, no. I look a mess right now," she said, covering her face.

"Cirilla, you're perfect. Better than half the women I've seen with a full face of makeup."

She blushed and my heart skipped a beat.

The next morning, I woke up early to get a good run in before sunrise. I laced up my sneakers, grabbed a bottle of water, and hit the trail. After several laps, I couldn't stop thinking about the day I

spent with my newfound friends. It wasn't like me to gravitate towards people so easily, especially women, but it was something about those two that felt right.

I replayed the cliff-jumping experience with Cirilla over and over again in my head. The last time I let go and just had fun without any limitations was with my ex-wife.

Although she caused a bunch of drama and heartache in the past decade, it wasn't always that way. She was the adventurous one in the relationship and she always pushed me outside of my comfort zone, ultimately forcing me into single parenthood.

As the wind blew through my hair, the music permeated through my earbuds. Lap after lap, I thought about Caprice and Cadence and how they would react if I brought home a strange woman I met on a cruise. I shook my head.

Tighten up, Matteo. Remember the last time you fell for someone too fast?

I did another lap and ran smack into her. Dressed in a pair of leggings and a sports bra with her phone and a bottle of water in tow, Cirilla was walking on the trail.

"Good morning," she said, waving at me.

I waved and stood in place long enough to catch my breath. Then, I changed directions and jogged up beside her. "Up early I see."

"Yeah. I wanted to catch the sunrise and get in a bit of exercise."

"Same. Where's my buddy?" I asked, wiping the sweat from my forehead.

"Who, Zyana? Her crazy butt is still asleep. She had a late night at the club. It was a 70s-themed party. She didn't get it till after 3."

"Wow."

We walked about three more laps before the sun arose over the water. Cirilla caught a few shots on her phone.

"I see you enjoy taking pictures."

"Yeah. Ever since I was a kid, my mom always said I had a good eye, which meant I was the family photographer."

“Have you had any formal training?” I asked.

“Nope.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?” I asked. “Just the two of us.”

“Are you tryna hit on me, Matteo?”

“Only if you say yes to my invitation.”

“Look, we had a lot of fun yesterday, but I don’t want to drag you into my mess. I just got out of a two-year relationship. A week ago.”

“I’m a grown man. I think I can handle whatever comes my way.”

She looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes. “Okay, Matteo. I’ll have dinner with you, but that’s it.”

My stomach fluttered, and I felt like a teenager again. “So, what time did you want me to pick you up?”

“Actually, we can meet in the foyer at seven. Zyana has some last-minute shopping planned for today, so we won’t be back on the ship till five.”

“Cool. Y’all are cutting it pretty close, huh? The ship leaves the port at six.”

“I know. That’s Zyana for you. Always living on the edge,” she said, taking a sip of her water.

I spent the early part of the day hanging out around the port eating food, drinking beer, and riding jet skis. After picking up last-minute souvenirs for Dante, Holly, and Tressa, I headed back to the ship, humming along the way. I had one more thing standing between me and my dinner date. My attire.

I laid my suitcase across the bed and emptied its contents. I didn’t have a clue what to wear. Deciding not to waste any more precious time, I showered and washed my hair first. Then, I tried on a couple

of different shirts, ultimately going with a classic white button-down, some white linen shorts, and a pair of Gucci loafers.

On the way out the door, I sprayed on some cologne and checked my reflection in the mirror. Ready or not, I had a beautiful woman meeting me in less than ten minutes.

I made it to the meeting spot with a few minutes to spare, so I sat down at one of the tables. After ten minutes and no sight of Cirilla, my mind went into overdrive.

What if she didn't make it back on the ship in time? What if she decided not to come on the date?

As I stood up to leave, I heard her voice call out from behind. "Matteo."

When I turned around to face her, the cherry-red lipstick she wore almost took my breath away. Not to mention the white dress with spaghetti straps that stopped slightly above the knee and her hair flowing and resting upon her sweet breasts.

"Umm. Hey." I placed my hand over my chest. "You made it."

"Barely. Were you about to leave?" she asked.

"I thought you stood me up."

"Why would I do that? I know how much that sucks. Besides, Zyana wouldn't let me if I tried."

I cleared my throat and inhaled her scent, the scent of honeydew. "You look amazing, Cirilla."

"Well, thank you. You look rather handsome yourself."

We both smiled.

"Shall we?" I asked.

Within minutes, we were in the dining hall and seated at a table by the window. The server came over and took our orders and there was a period of silence while we waited for the appetizers to be served.

I cleared my throat again. "So, you said you grew up in Martinsville?"

“Yeah. I’m a small-town girl. My parents still live there. Where did you grow up?”

“In the suburbs of Jersey, not too far from Manhattan.”

“How did you end up in Charlotte?”

I shifted in my seat. “My ex-wife.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I don’t mean to be curt. I just don’t like to talk about...”

She interrupted. “It’s all good. We don’t have to talk about our exes tonight. We’re on vacation, right?”

“Right. Let’s talk about anything else.”

“Okay. Favorite movie of all time? Mine is *Pretty Woman*.”

“Um, *Goodfellas*. And not because I’m Italian.”

“Good one. If you could only listen to one song for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

I sipped my glass of water and contemplated for a minute before I responded. “I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“Well, my favorite song is *Diamonds* by Rihanna.”

“Nice. I gotta admit, I don’t have a favorite song, but one of my favorite groups is Maroon 5.”

“I love Adam. He is too fine,” she blurted out.

“Ouch. Way to bruise a man’s ego.” I placed my hand over my chest.

“I mean, he’s a celebrity crush, so it really doesn’t count. Everybody has one. Don’t you?”

Before I could answer, the server brought out the shrimp cocktail. Cirilla opened her napkin and placed it across her lap. “Thank you.” She picked up a shrimp and dipped it into the sauce.

“Eva Mendes.”

“Oh yeah. She is beautiful.”

We carried on for the rest of dinner, asking each other random questions to break the ice. During the conversation, I discovered we had a lot in common. We both loved eating, traveling, and listening

to old-school music. The more we talked, the more comfortable I felt.

After dessert, we walked around the ship and stopped at the club to see what activities were scheduled for the evening. Karaoke was about to start and Cirilla suggested we enter the festivities.

"It's gonna be so much fun," she said, touching my hand for the first time.

The hairs on my arm raised from the friction. I couldn't help but smile. "Can't wait. Let's get a drink." I needed something to calm my nerves, some liquid courage.

"Lead the way," she said, clutching her white purse.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

"Yes, but thanks again."

"What can I get for you two?" asked the bartender, interrupting our conversation.

"I don't know. I think I want something fruity. What kind of mixed drinks do you have?" she asked, smiling at him and making me jealous.

"Rum Runner, Shirley Temple, Island Breeze, or Sex on the Beach." He winked at Cirilla.

"Okay. I'll have a Sex on the Beach."

"Great choice. And what can I get for you, sir?"

"A shot of Patron. Thanks."

I handed the bartender my sailing card.

"Oh, somebody's tryna get lit tonight. I see you, Matteo," she said.

"I may as well take full advantage of this vacation. I probably won't take another one for years. Besides, I need to loosen up a bit before I hit the stage. I'm a little rusty."

The bartender made our drinks, and we hung out at the bar until it was time for Cirilla to take the stage. She gulped down the rest of her Sex on the Beach and left me at the bar with her purse in my lap.

“Let’s welcome Cirilla to the stage. She came all the way from Virginia to rock the mic. Let’s give her a big round of applause,” said the host.

The crowd clapped and cheered as Cirilla took the mic. When the beat dropped, she got into character.

“Lost in a dream. I don’t know which way to go. You aren’t all that you seem...” she sang, pointing in my direction.

The crowd hooped and hollered as she moved across the stage like Paula Abdul herself. “Straight up now tell me do you really wanna love me forever? Oh, oh, oh. Or are you just having fun?”

I watched in awe as she performed her heart out for the audience. Although her pitch was off, she still lit up the room with her energy. When the song was over, she got tons of applause.

“You’re up next.” She grabbed her purse off my lap. “Are you nervous?”

“Nope. I’m ready.”

“Ok. I’m gonna order us another round of drinks. Do you want more Patron or would you prefer Sex on the Beach?” she asked seductively.

I bit down on my bottom lip. “Patron, please.”

“All right, folks. Let’s give Matteo a round of applause and welcome him to the stage.”

The crowd of tipsy people clapped and whistled as I walked onto the stage and whispered my song of choice to the DJ. “I want to dedicate this throwback to the gorgeous lady in white at the bar. I’m happy I came on this trip and met you.”

When the beat dropped, the crowd fell silent.

“It’s seven o’clock on the dot. I’m in my drop top cruisin’ the streets. Ah yeah. I got a real pretty, pretty little thang that’s waiting for me.”

I hadn’t touched a microphone in so long that I surprised myself with the performance. After the first few lines, I zoned out and sang my heart out as if there were thousands of people in the crowd.

When I opened my eyes, everybody was swaying back and forth and Cirilla was smiling from ear to ear.

Mission accomplished.

“Well, well. Mr. Matteo has officially brought down the house. I don’t know if anyone here can top that. Give him another round of applause. Damn that, he deserves a standing ovation.”

I bowed to the audience as they screamed, clapped, and whistled. Then, I exited the stage and joined Cirilla at the bar.

“And when were you gonna tell me you could sing like that?” she asked, passing me my drink.

“You’re not the only one with tricks up their sleeve.”

“Touché. You have an amazing voice, Matteo. Why aren’t you in the entertainment business? You should be performing on stages all over the world.”

“Because I never wanted to be famous. It’s always been a hobby of mine. My ex and I always sang karaoke. After she left, I stopped singing and haven’t given it much thought since.”

“Interesting. If you don’t mind me asking, how long have you been apart?”

“She left two years after our daughter, Cadence, was born.”

“And how old is she now?” She sipped her drink.

“Ten going on thirty. She swears she’s the boss,” I said, attempting to bring some humor into the conversation.

“Oh. I know all too well how bossy ten-year-olds can be. Try having a classroom full of them.”

“I wouldn’t last a day. One is more than enough.”

“Well, I’m happy you finally opened up some. I can tell it’s a sore subject for you.”

I nodded and took the shot to the head. “Now that you know about my drama, let’s hit the dance floor.”

“Okay. I hope you can keep up,” she said.

We danced until sweat dripped down our foreheads. The DJ played everything from the Village People to Destiny’s Child.

Cirilla and I let loose and enjoyed each other's company. When the reggae music came on, she scooted in closer, close enough for me to grind against her curves.

She whispered in my ear and motioned for me to follow her off the dance floor. I placed my hand on the small of her back and followed her through the crowd. "I need some water," she said, fanning herself.

"Sit down over here. I'll go grab a couple of bottles."

I disappeared into the crowd in search of hydration. During my quest, I replayed the touchy-feely moments we shared on the dance floor. All I wanted was to wrap her in my arms and keep her there forever.

After retrieving the water from the bar, I raced back to her. "Here you go, beautiful."

"Thanks, Matteo." She opened the bottle and gulped down half of its contents.

"You're welcome. That dance floor is a hotbox."

"Yes. I sweated my dress out."

"I see. You want to get out of here?"

Her eyes lit up. "And get some pizza?"

"Whatever you want. After you."

Chapter 11: Now's Your Chance



Cirilla

The line at the pizza place was long, but it moved swiftly. The Sex on the Beach had me tipsy, so I parked my behind at one of the outside tables. Meanwhile, Matteo ran off to grab us some food. He returned a few minutes later with two plates, one topped with slices of pepperoni and the other with plain cheese.

He sat them down on the table in front of me. "I wasn't sure which one you liked, so I brought both."

I smiled. "How thoughtful of you."

"So, did you have a good time tonight?" he asked, biting into his first slice of pizza.

"Actually, I had a great time."

"Well, I'm happy to hear that. I really appreciate you coming out with me, Cirilla."

My first thought was to leap across the table and kiss him, but I restrained myself. "It was my pleasure. This trip is turning out to be better than I could've imagined. I haven't thought about that bastard all day."

I rolled my eyes.

He took another bite of his pizza and sat back in the chair. "That was the whole point. To have some fun and forget about everything else. It's been a long time since I hung out with anyone other than

my immediate family. I just bury myself in work and my responsibilities at home. I'm ashamed to say I have no social life."

I sat up in my chair and stared into his mesmerizing eyes. It was hard to believe that he didn't have a contact list full of women ready to wait on him hand and foot. "So that's what we're doing, just hanging out?"

He blushed. "I didn't mean it like that. Of course I want nothing more than to kiss you right now," he said, his eyes piercing my soul.

I licked my lips and leaned in closer. "Then what are you waiting for? Now's your chance."

He whispered something in Italian in my ear and left a trail of kisses down my neck that made my body come alive. When his lips touched mine, I felt a tingle between my thighs. "Let's go somewhere a little more private," he suggested, gently grabbing ahold of my hand.

Within minutes, we were in the elevator on our way to his stateroom. As we stood on opposite sides of the elevator, we sized each other up. "Are you sure you wanna do this? I'm just coming out of a toxic situation and I..."

Before I could finish my sentence, Matteo's lips met mine for the second time. He tilted my chin up and looked into my eyes. Whatever worries I had vanished, and I became like putty in his arms.

The elevator stopped, causing a fluttering sensation in my stomach. I pushed him away, adjusted my dress, and waited for the door to open. He had a grin on his face that I hadn't seen before. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Like what? I was just thinking about how good your lips taste."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked seductively.

"Yeah. I can't wait to taste the rest of you." His words sent quivers down my spine. His lips were soft and moist and sure to bring me all kinds of pleasure. And he was packing in the meat department, which I learned earlier out on the dance floor.

What did I get myself into?

When we finally reached his stateroom, Matteo unlocked the door to a humongous suite. It had two floors and a damn balcony. "Welcome to my temporary home."

"Wow. Is this even the same ship?" I asked. "Your room is freaking amazing."

"Thanks. My son went a little overboard, but I'm not complaining. Make yourself comfortable."

I slipped off my shoes and sat my wristlet down on the coffee table. Matteo disappeared into the bathroom and I gave myself a quick tour, which led me outside to the massive balcony.

The ocean breeze blew through my hair and across my skin. As I leaned over the balcony and stared into the abyss, I thought about the stuff that had transpired over the past week. My toxic relationship had run its course and here I was on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with a complete stranger.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, startling me.

"Mesmerizing."

He walked up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. I inhaled his scent, the scent that I was starting to love. "Before we go any further, Matteo, I want to be clear on some things. We're just two adults having fun."

"Okay." He kissed my neck.

"I'm serious."

"Okay." He kissed my right ear.

"For real, Matteo."

He kissed my left ear and then my neck again. "I heard you. We're just two adults having fun."

"Good. Now that we have that established, help me get out of this dress."

"I thought you'd never ask." Grabbing my hand, Matteo led me back inside the suite, leaving the balcony door cracked a bit.

Once inside, he unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it on the floor. I ran my fingers up and down his six-pack. I had been waiting to touch it since we went cliff-jumping. "How is it possible to be so sexy?"

He laughed, pulling down his pants and kicking them over to the side.

As my fingertips skated across his magnificent arousal, he moaned softly and closed his eyes. He was more endowed than I thought. "Wow," I said, taking two steps back and admired his full frame.

"It's been a while for me," he said. "But I still know how to please a woman."

"I bet you do." I turned around and moved my hair to one side, allowing him to access my zipper. When the air hit my bare skin, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and let my dress fall to the floor.

Eager to get the show on the road, Matteo put me across his shoulder and carried me up the stairs. He laid me down on the bed and ran back downstairs. When he returned to my side, he had his phone in hand with *Sade* playing through a Bluetooth speaker.

"This is your last chance to back out, Matteo," I said.

He placed a finger over my mouth and gently pushed me down onto the pillows. His warm, soft lips landed on my breast, then down to my stomach. My heart rate increased every time his lips made contact with my flesh. I moaned softly.

"You like that?" he asked, rubbing his fingers between my legs.

"Um, hmm."

"You'll love this." He slipped my panties to the side and buried his face between my thighs. As soon as I felt the warmth of his tongue, I pulled back.

"No running." He spread my knees further apart and locked his arms around my thighs. I had no other choice but to lay back and enjoy it. He did things with his tongue that should've been illegal,

things I had never experienced before. Maybe it was the ten-year head start, or maybe he was just that good in bed.

After squeezing my thighs around his head one too many times, he came up for some air. "You taste like honey. I just want to devour every drop of you," he said before planting a trail of kisses on the inside of both of my thighs.

"Now it's my turn to return the favor."

He laid down on his back and removed his boxers. I took a minute to admire his perfection.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's perfect. You're perfect." I caressed it a few times before inserting the tip into my mouth. He rubbed his hands through my hair and gently pushed my head down, wanting me to take in all of him. I happily obliged, pleasuring him until his body couldn't hold out anymore.

"Cirilla," he called out. "I'm about to come."

I released him from the depths of my mouth and massaged his erection until he exploded. He pulled me onto his chest and kissed me passionately. "What are you tryna do to me?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

The next morning, I awoke to an empty bed. I sat up and wrapped the sheet around my naked body. The scent of Matteo's cologne saturated my skin, amongst other things. I got out of bed and made my way downstairs in search of my dress, dragging the sheet behind me.

"Good morning," he said with a big smile on his face.

"Morning."

"I ordered room service if you're hungry."

"Thanks. You got anything for a headache?" I asked, massaging my temple with my free hand.

"Yeah. Let me grab it from my bag. You get cleaned up and I'll meet you on the patio," he said, kissing my forehead.

I scanned the room for my dress, but it was nowhere to be found, so I went to the bathroom and took a hot shower. When I returned, Matteo had a t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts waiting for me on the bed.

“Exactly how much did I have to drink last night?” I asked, walking out onto the patio.

“About three or four Sex On The Beaches.”

“Wow.”

“I had quite a few shots of Patron myself, but I’m good, though. How’d you sleep?”

“Great, besides the headache. I didn’t want to get out of bed,” I admitted.

“You can lie back down and have your breakfast in bed,” he offered.

“No. I gotta get back to my room. I know Zyana is looking for me.”

“Okay. Well, at least have a piece of toast with these pills,” he suggested, handing me two tablets.

I swallowed the pills and washed them down with some water. After placing the glass down on the table, I checked the time on my phone. Not really interested in the time, I attempted to use it as a distraction from Matteo’s piercing glare. “So, what do you have planned for the last day at sea?” I asked.

“Maybe hit the casino and go to a comedy show. There’s so much I haven’t done yet. What about you?”

“Probably sleep the day away. Between last night’s events and the rocking of this ship, I’m not feeling too well.” I lied.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay here and let me take care of you?”

The look on his face made me want to say yes, but I needed to make a clean getaway, so I had to say no. “I’m good. Thanks for the offer, though.”

After several minutes of awkward silence, Matteo walked back inside of the room and when he came back, he had my dress in tow. "I know you said you wanted to keep things simple, but I had a really great time last night. The best night I've had in years."

I looked out at the ocean, dodging his stares once more. "Me too."

"Then what's the problem, Cirilla?"

I thought long and hard before I responded. "Did you ever think that whatever this is between us is so strong because we're on vacation? That maybe it's just a high that will come down the minute we step off of this ship?"

"No, because I knew from the moment I saw you at the airport that I wanted to get to know you. My entire world stopped when you tapped me on the shoulder. I've only felt that way twice in my life."

He was making things harder.

"I have a lot going on right now and I shouldn't have stayed the night. Whatever this was, was amazing. Let's just keep it like that."

"As you wish," he said, lightly pecking my cheek. "I'm going for a run. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

As bad as I wanted to run after him, my butt remained planted in the chair until I heard the front door close. I waited for a minute or two before grabbing my belongings and making my great escape.

Once I made my way back to my room, I barricaded myself in the bathroom until I heard Zyana come in. I splashed some water on my face and dried it off with a hand towel.

She tapped on the door. "Hey girl."

"I'll be right out," I said. Before joining Zyana on the other side of the door, I wrapped my hair into a high bun and stared at the huge red mark on my neck. I couldn't help but smile at the childish marking reminiscent of my high school days. I turned off the light and exited the bathroom.

"Good morning."

"Good morning to you. How was your night?" she asked.

“Eventful.”

“I’ll say. Look at that big ass hickey. Somebody was getting sucked on real good.” She laughed.

“Stop. It’s too early.”

“Early? CiCi, it’s almost noon. Matteo must’ve really put it on you for you to lose track of time.”

I shook my head.

“Give me all the details. How was it? I never slept with a white boy before.”

“Are you serious right now?” I asked. “We’re not in college anymore.”

Zyana gave me the puppy dog eyes, and I gave in immediately. “Okay, okay. The night was perfect. We had an amazing time at dinner. Then, we stopped by the club and sang karaoke. After many drinks and some bumping and grinding on the dance floor, we went for pizza.”

“Continue.” She bopped in place.

I sighed. “We ended up back at his suite and the rest is history. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Hell naw. I wanna hear the juicy stuff, too. All the tea. Was he good in bed?”

I rolled my eyes. “It was the best night of my life. He did things to me that I can’t even explain.”

“I knew it. I could tell by the way he looked at you. So, what’s next for you two?”

“Nothing. I told him things are complicated for me right now.”

“Complicated? Antoine’s wack ass stood you up. I know you’re not still thinking about him.”

“Not in the way you think. I just don’t want to dive into anything. And besides, we live in two different states and he has kids to think about. You know how needy I can be.”

Zyana put her hand up. “Stop tryna sabotage it before it even gets started. Matteo is a grown-ass man and I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. Also, Charlotte is only a quick plane ride away.”

“I know, but it’s too late now. I told him it was just that one time.”

“Suit yourself. We both know that good guys like Matteo don’t come around often.”

I knew Zyana was telling the truth. I had only been in two actual relationships, one with my college sweetheart and the other with Antoine. And neither one ended in marriage.

“I need some time to think. Since the break-up, I haven’t been home, let alone had time to process this whole mess. I feel like everything is moving at warp speed and I’m standing still.”

“It’s all good, CiCi. Take your time. I’m here whenever you need me,” Zyana said, reaching out for a hug. “He smells so good.”

“Huh?”

“His scent is still in your hair.”

I laughed and laid out across my twin-sized bed. “That’s the least of my worries.”

Chapter 12: You Know That's Fate, Right?



Matteo

My breathing increased as I made my way around the trail for the tenth time. The music blasted in my ears and the wind played touchy-feely with my skin. I tried to take my mind off Cirilla, but it was impossible at that point. How did I go from the guy that wasn't even interested in a date to the guy obsessing about someone I just met?

As I tore into the trail, I passed several women trying to get my attention, but all I wanted was her. To touch her caramel skin and run my fingers through her hair. Although she said that she wanted nothing else to do with me, her body told a different story. The way she responded to my touch convinced me that we were made for each other. If only I could convince her.

My alarm went off, momentarily stealing my attention. I switched it off and walked the rest of the lap.

Later that evening, I went to the comedy show. Despite being alone, I had an amazing time. I manned up and faced reality. The purpose of the trip was to let my hair down and have some fun, not bring home a replacement mother for my kids.

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

Even though I would never admit it, Caprice was right. The cruise was exactly what I needed. A week away from work obligations and daddy duties shifted my perspective a lot.

Cadence and Caprice were big enough to help around the house and the company. Dante and Holly were always a phone call away. I had some great people in my corner and wasn't doing life alone.

It was the perfect reset.

As the ship pulled into Cape Liberty Cruise Port, I stood on the upper deck and glared at the Statue of Liberty. I took a mental picture of my surroundings to remember where I was that day in time.

My cell phone rang, summoning me away from the view and back to reality. "Hello," I said.

"What's up, Pops? How was the trip?" asked Caprice.

"It was better than I could've imagined. Thanks for setting everything up."

"That's what I'm here for. What time does your flight get in?"

"I wanna talk. Let me talk, Caprice," Cadence called from the background.

I smiled. As much as I enjoyed the vacation, I was ready to get back to my life. "Put her on the phone."

"Hey, Dad. I missed you. When are you coming home? Caprice thinks he's the boss of me," she whined.

"Well, technically he is while I'm away. I'll be home in a few hours. Please behave until then."

After disembarking the ship in Jersey, I flew back home to Charlotte. By the time my flight landed, I was exhausted and needed to decompress. And unpack everything, both my clothes and my feelings.

During the ride home, I scrolled through the gallery on my phone. It was filled with photos and videos of our day trip to St. George's. As I swiped through the pictures, Cirilla's beautiful smile

radiated through the phone. I stared at her image for way too long before tucking it away in my pocket.

It was no use torturing myself.

When the car pulled up in front of my house, the kids were waiting on the porch. Caprice came down and grabbed my bags out of the trunk, while Cadence stayed behind. "Thanks for the ride," I said, exiting the car.

The driver nodded. "You're welcome. Be sure to leave a review."

"Will do."

"Hey, Dad. Did you bring something back for me?" Cadence blurted out before I made it onto the porch.

"Wow. No hug or kiss, just looking for gifts, huh? Shame on you."

She giggled. "You know I love you, but you also know I like when you bring home gifts," she said.

We hugged and walked inside the house with Caprice trailing behind. My mouth flew open as I scanned the room. When I stepped into the kitchen, it shocked me to see the sink was clear. Not a dirty dish in sight. "What did you do with my kids?" I asked.

"Oh, you got jokes?" Caprice asked, walking up behind me.

"No. I'm serious. Since when do you two clean up after yourselves?"

"Since you weren't here to do it," he replied.

I played catch-up with the kids before retreating to my bedroom to shower and unpack. After tossing my dirty clothes into the washing machine, I put my suitcases away, took a quick shower, and called Dante.

"How was the trip, Matteo?" he asked.

"Great. Thanks again for looking after the kids."

"No problem. Holly wouldn't have it any other way. Tell me you met someone."

"Here we go. Not even five minutes into the phone call and you're already interrogating me."

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

He laughed. "Sorry. Did you practice self-care?"

"I did, and I met somebody, but before you get your hopes up, she wants to keep things cordial," I stated.

"And what do you want?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter. She lives in a different state anyway."

"What happened, Matteo?"

"I don't want to get into it right now. Just wanted to let you know I got home safely. Talk to you later, Dante."

As soon as possible, I ended the call. I wasn't ready to face that rejection just yet, so I crawled into my bed and took a much-needed nap.

When I awoke several hours later, Cadence was fast asleep in her bed and Caprice was in the living room watching a movie. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and joined him on the couch.

"There's something different about you," he said.

"Huh?" I tried to play it off.

"Come on. You've been glued to your phone since you got back. Are you texting somebody?"

"Nope." I took a drink of water.

"Then what is it?"

"I met someone," I said, showing him the picture I took of Cirilla on the bus.

"Is this--"

"The woman from the airport? Yep, she was on my ship."

"You know that's fate, right?" He tapped me on the shoulder as if I was his son.

I shook my head. I hadn't even thought of it that way. Maybe it was destiny. "I don't know. I stopped believing in that stuff a long time ago. We had a good time and that's that."

"Well, for what it's worth, I haven't seen you smile like that in a long time. Hopefully, you can link up with her."

“I don’t have her number. All I know is her name is Cirilla Matthews and she’s a fifth-grade teacher that loves taking pictures. And that she’s an amazing person.”

“That’s a start.”

“How?”

“You can look her up on social media. Everybody has Instagram and Facebook.”

A lightbulb went off in my head and my eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Her friend is a travel influencer on Instagram and I think she mentioned a YouTube channel. Uh, Zyana Travels or something like that.”

“Let me see your phone.” I passed it over to him and watched him work his magic. “I think I found her. Is this her?”

I smiled when I saw the photo of Zyana on a camel in the middle of the desert. “Yep, that’s her.”

“Here. Send her a DM and see if she’ll give up the info.”

“I don’t know. And then what? I’m supposed to just show up at her doorstep.”

“You haven’t been out of the loop that long. Women still love presents.” He sighed. “She likes taking pictures, right? Then send her a camera, duh.”

“Where did you learn all of this?”

“Uncle Dante. He always gives me pointers with the ladies.”

I dramatically placed my hand over my chest. “I’m offended. Why don’t you come to me?”

“Right. And be single forever. No thanks.”

We laughed for a few minutes and bonded as two grown men instead of father and son. I had become so accustomed to carrying the weight of two parents that I forgot to be his friend. It felt good to just hang out and kick it for a while.

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

After Caprice retreated to his bedroom, I scrolled through Zyana's posts until I found pictures of the Bermuda trip. When I stumbled upon the picture of Cirilla and me on the ferry, I marveled at how good we looked together. The dilemma was no longer whether to contact her, but how to reach out without being too thirsty, as Caprice would say.

I decided to call it a night and figure out my next move in the morning.

Chapter 13: I Should've Gotten His Number



Cirilla

Walking into my condo for the first time in two weeks was like a dream come true. It was clean, thanks to me being a responsible adult before setting out for my epic baccation. The only mess was the mail that had accumulated at the entrance.

What a relief.

I kicked off my shoes, dropped my luggage, and headed straight for the thermostat. Along the way, I noticed an envelope sitting off to the side. It must've slid further back because of the sales papers that were stuffed through the mail slot.

I switched on the AC, scooped up the envelope, and plopped down on the sofa. In search of a return address, I turned it over, only to see a heart written in red ink. Without hesitation, I tore open the envelope and removed the card. As I read the message on the front, it almost brought me to tears.

"Life without you isn't a life at all."

I opened the card and read the message aloud.

"Your love is like magic and you got me hypnotized. I never meant to hurt you, and for that, I apologize. I know I may not show how much you mean to me, but not hearing your voice has been truly killing me. If you give me another chance, I will make things

right. I want to be the man you come home to every night. Love, Antoine. P.S. I really am sorry!!”

My heartbeat sounded like a set of drums at the homecoming game, as if it was about to pop out of my chest. The words that I waited so long to hear had been signed, sealed, and delivered.

I paced back and forth across the living room floor, wondering what to do next. “People make mistakes. Nobody’s perfect,” I said, removing the phone from my back pocket and sitting back down on the sofa. “I’ll just call him and hear him out.”

After removing his name from the block list, I took a deep breath and called Antoine.

“Hello,” I said, borderline regretting my decision.

“Hey, Cirilla. How are you?” he asked.

I didn’t know what else to say, so I kept the conversation brief. “Relaxed and refreshed. You?”

“Better now that I hear your voice. I guess you must’ve read the card.”

“I did. It’s beautiful,” I said. “I just don’t know if it’s enough, though.”

“It’s just a start. If you let me, I’ll prove how much you mean to me,” he insisted.

I took a deep breath.

“Cirilla, are you still there?”

“I’m here.”

“I know I fucked up and I sincerely apologize. I should’ve come clean with you about my fears.”

“What fears?” I stood up and paced the floor again.

“When you first mentioned the bacation a few months back it sounded fun, but as the trip got closer, I started feeling the pressure,” Antoine admitted.

“I don’t understand.”

“I felt like there were some expectations that went along with it. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true.”

“Look, Antoine. It was never my intention to pressure you into anything. It was just an opportunity for us to get out of this town and spend some time together. That’s it. I wasn’t expecting a ring.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. I should’ve been a man and communicated my feelings sooner. Is it too soon to come over?”

“I don’t know,” I said, glancing around the living room. “It’s been a long day. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting for your call. Get some rest.”

After the call ended, I sat and dwelled on the conversation. According to Antoine, the whole Miami fiasco was just a misunderstanding. He didn’t show up because he was afraid of moving to the next level. And now, all of a sudden, he was ready to take the leap.

I rubbed both of my temples in a circular motion to relieve the tension that had formed in a matter of minutes. I laid down on the couch and stared at the ceiling. Before the phone call, I was smiling from ear to ear and afterward; I was right back in the same position, lost and confused.

I tossed the card on the side table and laid down for a nap.

When I awoke, it was dark outside. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took it to the head. Of course, that meant a trip to the bathroom was in order.

While on the toilet, I heard my phone ringing, so I finished my business and returned to the living room to a missed call from my parents.

The phone rang several times before Mom picked up. “Hey, baby. How was your vacation?” she asked.

“Hey, Mom. I got back a little while ago and crashed. How’s Dad?”

“I’m good. Your mom has you on speakerphone. Did you have fun in MIA?” he asked, giggling.

“Dad, where did you pick up that slang?”

“One of those reality shows. Don’t pay him no mind,” Mom said.

I laughed at their shenanigans. My parents were old-school, but they kept up with the times, sometimes more than me. “I had a good time touring the city solo. It was better than I thought.”

“Sounds nice. And the cruise to Bermuda?” she asked.

I hesitated before answering. “How did you know about that?”

“Your IG page. Your father is learning how to use social media now.”

“I can’t hide anything from y’all.”

“Just cause we’re small-town folks don’t mean a thing,” my mother added. “Now tell us about the handsome man in the photos.”

Oh shit. I had completely forgotten about all the pictures I uploaded while waiting at the airport.

“His name is Matteo. Me and Zyana met him on the cruise. That’s it.”

“I think it’s more than that. You were glowing in those pictures, honey.”

A flashback of the night Matteo and I spent together popped into my head. It was the best night of my life and I wasn’t able to enjoy the aftermath because of the drama with Antoine. Matteo was perfect in every way. He was attentive and gentle, which made perfect sense, seeing as though he was a single parent.

“He’s just a friend. Things are complicated right now and I don’t want to drag him into my mess.”

“Well, uncomplicate it, Dear. You deserve to be happy,” she said.

“I know,” I said, as my stomach growled. “Let me call you tomorrow. I haven’t eaten since I got off the ship.”

“Okay. Talk to you later. Love you,” my parents said in unison.

I opened the refrigerator and searched for something quick to eat. The only choices were eggs and leftovers that expired days ago. I tossed them in the trash and checked my account balance. With everything happening so fast, I forgot about the money my parents

sent me through Cash App. I used some to order dinner and I planned to put the rest in my gas tank.

After my shrimp fried rice was delivered, I grabbed a throw blanket from the hall closet and got comfortable on the couch. I pulled up Zyana's YouTube channel and binge-watched some of her travel videos.

Saving the most recent videos for last, I watched a few older ones. Secretly, I wanted to see Matteo's sexy ass again, although I was too proud to admit it. After torturing myself for half an hour, I clicked on the Bermuda playlist.

"I'm out here in sunny Bermuda with my girl and our new friend, Matteo. Ain't he fine y'all?" Zyana said.

I blushed. Matteo did look scrumptious, even better than I remembered.

Guilt washed over me as I thought about how harshly I treated him after having such a memorable evening. I couldn't even look him in the eyes afterward.

Pissed that I let my chaos impede what could've been a beautiful thing, I closed the YouTube app and turned on Netflix. Instead of tormenting myself over what could've been, I decided to have an all-night movie marathon and feed my face with Chinese food.

The next morning my plan was to sleep in, however, my cell phone didn't get the memo. On the third ring, I peered at Antoine's photo on the screen and cleared my throat before answering. "Hello," I said, trying to sound more tired than I actually was.

"Good morning, beautiful. I'm out running some errands and I was wondering if you wanted some breakfast."

I yawned. "Sure, Antoine. Just give me a few minutes. I need to jump in the shower and freshen up first." Even though I wasn't trying to impress him, I still wanted to look presentable.

"Take your time, Cirilla. I'll be there shortly," he replied.

After yawning several more times, I got up, put the blanket away, and started the coffeemaker. Then I headed to the bathroom for a nice, hot shower.

Twenty minutes later, Antoine was at the door with a bag of food from IHOP and a sappy-ass grin on his face.

“Hey,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

My first reaction was to wipe it off, but I didn't want to be rude, so I put on a fake smile and stepped aside for him to enter the house. “Come in and have a seat. I'll be right back. I just need to finish getting dressed.” I wrapped the towel tighter around my body, accentuating my curves.

As I turned to walk down the hall, Antoine grabbed my arm gently. When I whirled around to face him, he stole a kiss on the lips.

“Woah,” I said, pushing him back. “We need to take things slow. After all that's happened, we can't just pick up where we left off.”

He caressed my arm and bit down on his bottom lip before speaking, “Understood. We'll take it as slow as you like.”

Within minutes, I returned to the kitchen in a pair of leggings and a t-shirt, with my hair in a high bun. Antoine had already unpacked the food and spread it across the table.

“So, how was your trip?” he asked.

“Which one?”

“Bermuda. We don't need to bring up Miami anymore.”

I shifted in my seat. “It was amazing. I met some great people and got to hang out with Zyana, which I hadn't done in ages.”

“I bet. I see you made a new friend too. You look really happy in the pictures with ole boy,” he said.

“Excuse me?” I asked, making sure I heard him correctly.

“You were smiling from ear to ear.”

“Is that what this is about?” I asked, pointing at the food. “You see me with another man and now you have time for me?”

He sat in silence like he didn't just attempt to initiate WW3.

“You know what? I’m sick of whatever this is. I can’t keep creeping around the workplace and only seeing you after dark. You never want to take me around your family, and I’ve never met any of your friends.”

“I said I was gonna change, Cirilla. Just give me some time.”

“That’s only because you think someone else is in the race. I can’t believe I fell for your shit again. Your *time* is up. Now leave.”

“Wait. You don’t mean that.” A look of confusion washed across his face.

“I do. And I never want to see your selfish ass again.”

I walked out of the kitchen and barricaded myself in the bedroom, leaving him at the table with his mouth wide open. I figured my absence would show him I meant business. And it worked.

A minute passed before I heard the sounds of ruffling plastic. I opened the door and stepped into the hallway. “So you’re taking the food, Antoine?”

“You told me to leave,” he said.

“You’re even lamer than I thought. That’s why I slept with Matteo,” I said, going back into the bedroom. This time, I slammed the door behind me.

After the conversation with my parents, I realized that if they saw the photos, then so did Antoine. The only reason I let him come over was to prove my suspicions right. The only person he loved was himself. He didn’t write the poem as an apology; he wrote it to clean up his mess and get back into my bed.

I paced back and forth across the floor until I heard the front door close. Normally, I was a cool, laid-back person, but lately, the fear of doing jail time was the only thing stopping me from knocking him over the head.

“Damn him.” I pounded my fist into my hand as the tears rolled down my face. Instead of wiping them away, I let them fall. I wasn’t

sad. I was more pissed than anything. Pissed that, I let a gem like Matteo slip through my fingers.

Truth be told, I never planned to reconcile with Antoine, only to put him in his place. The time I spent with Matteo put things into perspective for me. His intimacy was on a whole different level. The way my body responded to his touch was mind-boggling.

I licked my lips just thinking about the multiple orgasms I experienced that night. Even if I wanted to, Antoine wouldn't be able to satisfy me anymore. He was an amateur compared to Matteo.

"I should've gotten his number. What was I thinking?" I shook my head. "It's too late to cry over spilled milk now."

Chapter 14: Still Fantasizing About Your Dream Girl?



Matteo

Several days went by before I decided to send Cirilla a gift, hoping it would change her mind about us. I found the perfect one on Amazon. “Tressa, can you order this for me and have it delivered to this address, please?”

“Sure thing, boss. Anything else?” she asked, with a notepad and a pen in hand.

“Include this message,” I said, handing her a sticky note.

“I’ll have it taken care of right away.” She scurried out of my office and closed the door behind her.

I leaned back in my chair, sipped my coffee, and shuffled through some paperwork, pretending to be busy. Since returning from the cruise, I hardly got any work done in the office and even less sleep at home. Although I was used to sleeping alone, having a beauty like Cirilla in my bed had shaken things up for me. The extra space in my California king annoyed me so much that I had to retreat to the couch.

From the moment I laid eyes on her in the airport, I was a goner. Her smile and the adorable freckles on her face caught my attention and held on tight. As I replayed our first conversation in my head, a knock at the door interrupted my thoughts.

“Hey. Are you busy?” Caprice asked, peeking his head into the room.

"I wish. Come in."

"Still fantasizing about your dream girl, huh?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

I smiled. "Can't really concentrate on anything else. Hopefully, my present will get her attention. Are you sure I'm not being too thirsty?"

"What do you know about being thirsty? You need to stay off social media, Pops." He laughed.

"If it wasn't for social media, I wouldn't have found her. It's good for something." I shrugged.

"Yeah, for young people."

"I may have a grown son, but I'm still young. I haven't even turned forty yet."

"By my calendar." He looked at his watch. "You got a month left to go."

"Don't remind me. You better pray that you look as good as I do when you get my age," I joked.

"Huh? I'll be much more handsome."

"Whatever."

Caprice ragged on me for several minutes until Tressa interrupted our conversation. "Mr. Cappelletti, I emailed you the order confirmation. Let me know if you need anything else."

"Thank you, Tressa. That'll be all."

I sat back in my seat and observed my son's behavior. When Tressa entered the room, his posture changed completely. He went from sitting on the edge of my desk to standing at attention like he was back in ROTC. I laughed at him.

"So, what advice did your uncle give you about her?" I asked sarcastically.

"I see you got jokes," Caprice said, waving me off and walking out of the room.

I shook my head. "That boy thinks he knows everything about women. Just wait till he falls in love for the first time."

Chapter 15: I Owe You An Apology



Cirilla

Immediately after my self-care session, which included journaling and reflecting, I went on a cleaning spree. I wanted to rid my space of any remnants of Antoine's sorry behind. I cleaned out every closet in the house and even rearranged the living room furniture. While vacuuming the floor, I heard a faint knock at the door.

"I know this dude did not come back again. He must've thought I was joking."

I flung the door open without asking who was on the other side, and an Amazon package fell at my feet. "I didn't order anything," I said, bending over to pick up the box. Anxious to see what was inside, I closed the door and walked into the kitchen to grab a knife. "If he thinks buying me something is gonna change my mind, he has another thing coming."

I slid the knife down the length of the box, cutting through the packing tape. Once I removed the packing material, there was a really nice camera inside. I pulled it out of the box and set it down on the table. At the bottom of the box, there was a gift receipt that read:

Cirilla, I hope you can find this useful. Yours Truly, Matteo (704-555-1111).

I was speechless.

A thousand questions ran through my mind, starting with how he got my address. I raced to the bedroom to retrieve my phone because there were only two ways he could've acquired it: either he hired a

private detective to find me or he reached out to Zyana. Either way, I would soon find out.

The phone rang a few times before Zyana picked up on the other end. "Hey, CiCi. How's everything?" she asked.

"Great. Now that I got rid of Antoine's ass for good."

"That's what's up. Now you can get your groove on for real."

We laughed.

"All jokes aside, did you speak with Matteo recently?"

"Don't be mad. He slid in my DM on Instagram. And it's a good thing he did. I gave him your address because he said he wanted to send you something. Gifts are always nice, right?" she asked.

"I guess, but I can't accept this. It's too expensive," I said.

"Too expensive? There's no such thing. What did he send?"

"A camera and a note with his phone number attached. I'm gonna send it back, though."

"Girl, you better keep it. You already hurt his feelings once. Please don't do it again. Matteo is perfect for you."

I sighed. "I don't know about all that, but I guess I could keep the camera."

"Damn right you will. Now call him so y'all can kiss and make up."

"Do you think it's that easy? I messed up pretty bad," I said, glancing at the gift receipt again.

"Not bad enough. He really wants to talk to you. Hell, he found me online just to get in touch with you, CiCi. Matteo could've hit it and quit it. Instead, he bought you a thoughtful gift, not some jewelry or an expensive bag. It means he's really feeling you."

I looked at the gift receipt for a third time before rushing Zyana off the phone.

Matteo

On the ride home from the office, I tuned in to the *Social Proof* podcast. A phone notification blared through the speaker,

interrupting the broadcast. I assumed it was Cadence asking what time I would be home, but since I was in the middle of traffic, I ignored it until I came to a red light.

As I read the message, a smile formed on my face instantly. Cirilla had received the camera and sent a thank-you text. Excited to have her phone number, I completely forgot I was sitting in the middle of traffic, until a loud horn forced me out of Lala land and back into reality.

“Okay, okay,” I said, raising my hand to signal the other driver.

After cruising for several blocks, I pulled over on the side of the road and put the car in park. I stared at the phone for a good five minutes, mulling over my next move. It was the moment I had been waiting for, yet I couldn’t bring myself to make the call.

What if she was just being polite?

To test the waters, I sent a simple you’re-welcome text and waited for her response. Instead of texting back, she called the phone and I let it ring four times before answering. I had to get my nerves under control.

“Hello, beautiful,” I said.

“Hey, Matteo.”

Just hearing her say my name ignited a flame inside of me. “How do you like your present?”

“It’s really thoughtful, but you didn’t have to get me anything,” she replied.

“I know. I wanted to. You love taking pictures, so I figured you could use a starter camera.”

“Stop being so nice. Especially since I was rude the last time we were together.”

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean it.”

She giggled into the phone. “I owe you an apology.”

“Well, hopefully, you can make it up to me one day,” I said, hoping she would agree.

“Sounds like a plan.”

"So, when can I see you again?"

"I don't know. We live in two different states and..."

"Cirilla, before you start overthinking it, we live in neighboring states and it's only a six-hour drive or an hour plane ride."

"You're right. And I'm off for the rest of the summer. You, on the other hand, have a company to run, Mr. Boss Man."

I laughed. "Exactly. I make the schedule. How about I call you back when I get to the house and we can go from there?"

"Okay," she agreed.

After I disconnected the call, the podcast resumed and David Shand's voice filled the airwaves once again. The hard part was over, and now I had to plan another trip out of town.

Later that evening, I put some feelers out to see if the kids were okay with me leaving town again so soon. The last thing I wanted was to make them feel neglected for a woman, which wasn't the case. However, a parent could never be sure.

"I might have to go out of town again," I announced at the dinner table.

"Where are you going this time?" Cadence asked with a mouth full of food.

"I have some business to take care of in Virginia."

"You got in touch with her, Pops?"

I gave Caprice the look.

"I mean, the lady that wants us to deliver her stuff," he said, attempting to avert a disaster.

"Yeah, Son. " I was glad he cleared things up before Cadence could further interrogate me. She had a tendency of getting attached to people, which could be a double-edged sword. Until the relationship between me and Cirilla was official, it was better to keep her in the dark.

Chapter 16: What Did I Just Agree To?



Cirilla

I plopped down on the bed and rolled back and forth, kicking my feet up and down like a kid. After hearing his sexy voice, I could hardly contain myself. I stared up at the ceiling and took a few deep breaths.

Get yourself together, CiCi. Just take things slow and see where it goes.

Although I tried my best to bottle up the excitement, the butterflies in my stomach didn't get the memo.

Flashbacks of that night flooded my thoughts. I was tipsy, but I remembered everything in great detail. Matteo put it on me. The entire experience blew my mind. I licked my lips as I recalled the magic he worked with his tongue. And I couldn't wait to feel it again.

As I scrolled through my camera roll, his number popped up on the screen. I cleared my throat and answered the phone. "Hey."

"Hey to you. How was your day?" he asked.

"Uh, kinda boring. I have no life," I replied, with a kool-aid smile plastered across my face.

"I wish I could say that. There's always something for me to do around here. Apparently, my kids only clean up when I'm out of town."

I laughed. "And how old are they again?"

“Caprice is twenty and Cadence is ten going on thirty.”

“Oh. I know all too well about those ten-year-old girls. They will give you a run for your money. I love ‘em though.”

I sat on the edge of my bed and listened to Matteo talk about his responsibilities as a single father.

Twenty minutes into the conversation, I walked to the bathroom, plugged the tub, and turned on the water. After putting the phone on speaker mode, I wrapped my hair up, got undressed, and submerged myself in the hot, soapy bath.

After two hours of flirting and chatting, I yawned, louder than I realized. Not that I was bored, but because I was more relaxed than I had been in a long time.

“Somebody’s getting sleepy,” he said.

“Yeah. I think I’m ‘bout to call it a night.” I glanced at my hands, and my fingers were shriveled up like raisins.

“Ok. Well, sweet dreams, Cirilla.”

“Same to you, Matteo.”

His voice was so soothing that I could’ve fallen asleep listening to him talk, but I promised myself that I would take things slowly.

The next morning, I awoke to a good morning text from Antoine. My guess is that he assumed that by giving me time to cool off, he could shoot his shot again. Boy, was he wrong.

Over the course of our situationship, I jumped through one too many hoops to please him and it got me nowhere except stood up in Miami.

I replied to his message with a picture of my middle finger. Then, I rolled over and pulled the blanket over my head. A minute later, another notification came through. This time, it transformed my frown into a smile.

Matteo: Good morning sleepyhead.

Me: Good morning to you Boss Man.

He sent a picture of himself dressed to impress, and I wanted to devour him.

Me: You look nice. On your way to the office?

Matteo: Unfortunately. I got a few things to take care of and then I'm off.

Me: It must be nice to call the shots.

I waited patiently for him to respond. Thirty long seconds after watching the dots go crazy in the thread, another message came through.

Matteo: It'll be nice to see you again.

Me: Maybe in a couple of weeks.

Matteo: I was thinking more like a couple of days.

Me: You're joking, right?

Matteo: Nope.

I sat up in bed and looked at the phone, unsure of what to say next.

Matteo: Don't overthink it. Just say yes.

Me: YES!!!

We exchanged a few more texts before Matteo had to get off the phone and handle his business.

The excitement I felt forced me out of bed. I paced back and forth across the room, attempting to process what just happened.

What did I just agree to?

I envisioned myself back on the cruise ship with the heat radiating off his skin and the scent of his cologne permeating the air. Shivers ran down my spine as I recalled the sensation of his lips pressing against my skin.

Snapping back to reality, I sat on the bed and called Zyana to tell her the news. The phone rang twice before she picked up.

"Hey, hey," she said, jolly as ever.

"Good morning, Zyana. Are you busy?" I asked.

She popped her bubblegum in my ear. "Never too busy for you. What's up?"

"I agreed to let Matteo come visit."

"Finally."

"But I don't know if I should have," I admitted.

"Why do you keep second-guessing yourself? I thought we were past this."

"I don't want to mess this up. You know my track record."

"Yeah, I do. Those other two lames weren't right for you," she said. "Especially my stupid ass cousin, Bone."

"Girl, please don't remind me."

"Sorry to bring up the past, but I told you not to fall for his bullshit. He had chicks all over the city and still does."

"I know. I'm tryna do better and take your advice this time around."

"Then what's the problem, CiCi? You do want to see him again, right?"

"Yeah. I just don't want Antoine popping up while he's here."

"Girl, please. You know how I feel about that. I would let Matteo's fine ass answer the door butt-naked."

"That's because you're the queen of petty. I'm being serious right now."

"So am I. Let that man come eat all your sorrows away."

"He did have me climbing up the wall," I joked.

"Exactly. I say let him come through and have some fun. It's not like he asked you to tie the knot." She popped the gum again. "And forget about Antoine's wack ass. Matteo looks like he can handle his own."

The more Zyana talked, the better I felt about my decision. After ten minutes of cracking up on her jokes, I ended the call and headed to the kitchen for a fresh cup of coffee.

Chapter 17: Slow Down



Matteo

Friday came around fast, probably because I was anxious to get to Virginia. I paid the sitter to stay over for the weekend to make sure Cadence didn't take advantage of her brother. Also, I stocked the kitchen with their favorite snacks and left money for takeout.

"Can I get a hug, Princess?" I stood at the bottom of the stairs and waited for her to appear.

"Coming," she yelled.

Before she made her way down the steps, the babysitter walked through the door. "All packed and ready to go?" She asked, taking off her shoes by the door.

"Yep. I left money for pizza, Chinese food, or whatever y'all want for dinner," I replied.

"Sounds cool. Don't worry about Cadence. I'll keep her entertained."

"Thank you. I appreciate you taking the job at the last minute."

"No problem, Mr. Cappelletti."

Cadence came down the stairs, dragging her feet the entire time. She hugged me tightly and stood beside the babysitter.

"Bye, Dad. See you soon," she said.

I loaded my weekend bag into the car along with a pair of running shoes. After finding some music to listen to, I adjusted the mirrors and entered the hotel's address into the GPS.

Six hours later, I checked into my room and took a quick shower. I texted Cirilla to let her know I was in town and to invite her to dinner. Within the hour, she met me in the lobby of my hotel and we headed upstairs to the rooftop bar.

"This is really nice. How did I not know about this place?" she asked, after taking in her surroundings.

"I found it online. It looks better than the pictures," I replied.

"Let me snap a picture right quick." Cirilla pulled out her cell phone and took a selfie.

"Would you like me to take it?" I asked, reaching for her phone. "That's how we first met, remember?"

"Actually, we first met at the airport when you tried to take my luggage."

"Right." I nodded in agreement. "Have you used your new camera yet?"

Cirilla shook her head. "Good way to change the subject."

"It wasn't intentional. I was just curious."

"I experimented with it a bit. Took a few pictures around the house. That's about it. Thanks again, Matteo."

I leaned forward, cupped her chin, and whispered in her ear. "You're more than welcome." Before I let go, I kissed her cheek.

The server walked over to our table with her handheld device, ready to take our order. "What can I get you to drink this evening?"

"Order whatever you want," I said, picking up the menu.

"I'll have a glass of wine, please."

"Red or white?"

"White, thank you," Cirilla said.

"And you, sir?"

"I'll have some tequila on the rocks. Patron, if you have it."

The server scurried away, and we sat in silence and glanced over the menu. While deciding what to order, I heard her camera click.

"I wasn't even ready," I said.

She laughed. "You look good, even off guard. Don't worry. I owed you from the photos you took of me on the bus."

"Oh. Forgot about those," I said, lying through my teeth. Ever since she agreed to see me again, I had been obsessing over those pictures.

Over dinner, we discussed our careers and how we ended up in our present positions. It was obvious that she loved children by the way her eyes lit up when she talked about her students. I knew in my heart that she'd make an exceptional mother one day.

After a couple of drinks and a ton of food, we decided to wrap things up.

"Let's take a walk and burn off some of this food," I suggested.

"Okay. God knows I can use the exercise," she said, flashing her beautiful smile.

We strolled through the streets of Downtown Norfolk until we ended up at the waterfront. I walked up behind Cirilla and wrapped my arms around her waist. The scent of her perfume taunted me.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and inhaled her sweet aroma. Just weeks ago, I was avoiding women like the plague and now I didn't want to let her out of my sight.

As we stood in silence and enjoyed the breeze coming in off the water, I planted kisses down the side of her neck. Every time my lips touched her skin, she moaned.

"Oh, I know what you're tryna do. And it's not gonna work this time," she said, turning around to face me.

Before she could say another word, I kissed her lips and invited her into my world. Cirilla wrapped her arms around my neck and slipped her tongue into my mouth. I ran my fingers through her hair and then down the small of her back. "I never want to let you go," I whispered.

Cirilla backed away and held up her hand. "Woah."

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"If we want this to work, we gotta take things slow, Matteo."

“How slow?”

“We need to get to know each other better, for starters.”

“I think we’re way past that. I know your body inside and out.” I stepped closer and grabbed hold of her hand. “I’m crazy about you and I know you feel the same. Why are you trying so hard to fight it?”

“I just...”

I lifted her chin and forced her to make eye contact with me. “Tell me you don’t want this,” I said.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “I just don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?”

“Yes, Matteo. You’ve been through so much already.” She placed one of her hands on my chest.

“Exactly. And I refuse to let the past determine my future any longer. For years, I pushed people away, until I met you. I don’t have it all figured out, but I know I want you in my life.”

I kissed her lips softly.

“Now I understand what my brother and his wife have been trying to get into my thick skull. That I deserve another shot at love. And I want it with you.”

Cirilla smiled. “My heart is still fragile. I don’t know if I can take any more heartbreaks.”

“And have Zyana try to kill me? I wouldn’t dare.” I kissed her again. “I want to give you the world if you’ll let me.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hold off on all of that for right now. I just want you to do that thing you did on the ship.”

I licked my lips and gently sucked on her bottom lip. “You mean this?”

She nodded her head. “Something like that.”

We burst into laughter like two teenagers and walked in the direction of my hotel.

Chapter 18: Where Have You Been All My Life?



Cirilla

As I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, the scent of Matteo's cologne lingered on my skin.

So much for taking things slow.

Who was I fooling, anyway? The moment I laid eyes on him in the parking garage at the hotel, I wanted to jump his bones.

"Is everything okay in there?" Matteo asked, tapping on the door.

"I'm good. I'll be out in a minute." Good was an understatement. The feeling that lingered over me was like heaven on earth. I splashed some water on my face, opened the door, and stood in the doorway, admiring the parts of him not covered by the hotel sheets.

"Are you sleeping over?" he asked.

"No. I think I better be heading to the house. It's getting pretty late." I wasn't going anywhere. I just wanted to see how he would react.

"Well, good night then." Matteo rolled over on the bed and turned his back towards me.

"Really?" I ran over and jumped on the bed. "I was just joking. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

He turned over and pulled me into his muscular arms. "I wasn't gonna let you leave anyway," he said, dangling my keys in front of me.

As we lay across the king-sized bed and gazed into each other's eyes, Matteo ran his fingers down my cheek. I swear he had the magic touch.

"Cirilla, you make me feel alive again," he whispered.

I kissed the palm of his hand a few times before running my fingers through his beard and across his lips. "And you make me forget about the chaos that is going on in my life."

"Ouch. So you're just using me, huh?"

"Of course not. I didn't mean it like that."

"Well, it would be okay if you did," he said, rolling onto his back. I climbed on top of his six-foot frame and ran my fingernails along his midsection, causing him to squirm. When I replaced my nails with my lips, Matteo moaned softly. "Where have you been all my life?"

"Kissing frogs. My boyfriend in college was ten times worse than Antoine," I admitted.

"Wow. At least you got to go to college."

"Wait." I looked up at him. "You didn't go to college?"

"Nope. I enlisted in the military instead. I had a family to feed and sitting in a classroom wasn't gonna cut it."

I imitated the soldiers I saw on TV and saluted him. Matteo laughed and pulled my hand down. "I wish I would've never gone in," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it caused problems in my marriage. At first, it was okay to be away for months at a time, but after Caprice was born, Devin couldn't handle him by herself. So when it was time to re-enlist, I didn't sign up for another term."

"Well, that's understandable. You had to do what was best for your family, Matteo."

"Somehow it still wasn't enough. She was never satisfied."

"But you ended up with another kid?"

He sighed. "I did. That's because we were tryna hold the marriage together with sex."

"Do you still love her?" I asked, looking into his eyes.

Matteo looked away before responding to the question. "I haven't seen or heard from her in years. She left me with two kids and a broken heart."

His warm smile disappeared and the energy in the room shifted.

I ran my fingers through his hair and kissed his beautiful lips. After planting soft kisses all over his face, I got him to smile again. He wrapped his arms around me and we drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I awoke before dawn and watched Matteo sleep. I admired his olive skin and dark hair with the perfect amount of gray. I traced my finger across one of his eyebrows and he opened his eyes.

"Good morning, beautiful. You're up early," he said.

"Morning. I couldn't sleep," I replied.

"Would you like to go for a run?"

"What? I don't have the right clothes, sir. Thanks anyway."

"Oh no. You're not getting off that easily. I got extra clothes in my bag." Matteo leaped out of bed and retrieved his duffel bag from the closet. He laid out two white t-shirts and two pairs of basketball shorts.

"Matteo," I said, sitting up on the edge of the bed. "Are you serious? I don't run, remember?"

"Well, at least walk with me. I need you to stay in shape." He grinned.

I slipped on the clothes. "And what about shoes? I can't fit your sneakers."

"It's not gonna kill you to walk in your sandals."

He disappeared into the bathroom and the sound of the running water filled the room. I got my toothbrush out of my wristlet and joined him at the sink.

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

A month ago, I was standing in front of the mirror performing my morning routine with Antoine by my side. Never in a million years did I think he would be replaced with someone else.

I'm not complaining though, because Matteo is definitely an upgrade.

After Matteo finished rinsing his mouth and washing his face, he kissed my cheek softly and went to get dressed. Several minutes passed before he appeared in the doorway again. "You're not tryna stall, are you?" He asked, popping his head back into the bathroom.

"Nope. I'm coming."

"I love when you say that."

"I bet you do."

Chapter 19: What's On the Menu?



Matteo

After Cirilla left the hotel, I took a long, hot shower and washed my hair. Then, I called to check on the kids. Cadence answered the phone on the second ring and bombarded me with a ton of questions, starting with my whereabouts. I shook my head.

"I told you I was going to Virginia," I said.

"Well, I forgot. Are you having fun?" she asked.

"I guess so. Have you been on your best behavior?"

She paused for a few seconds before responding to my question. "Of course. I even cleaned up my room and put away the dishes after dinner. And my reward was a scary movie."

"What did I tell you about watching that stuff right before bed? Where's your brother?"

"He's still asleep. I'll go wake him up," she suggested.

"No, no. Let him sleep. I just wanted to check in and make sure the house was still in one piece."

We talked for five more minutes before Cadence rushed me off the phone. It was time for her Saturday morning ritual to group chat and play Roblox with her friends from the neighborhood. I looked at the phone and laughed. My baby girl was no longer a baby.

I hung up the phone and texted Caprice. After that, I called to chat with Dante, but Holly answered the phone instead.

"Good afternoon, sister. How are you on this fine day?"

“Hey, Matteo. What’s up?” she asked.

“Nothing much. I was calling to see if Dante could give me a few pointers.”

“For?”

I cleared my throat. “The woman I met on the cruise. I want to cook her an authentic Italian meal.”

“Aww. Sounds like someone’s hooked already.”

“Maybe.” The sound of Dante’s voice grew louder in the background. “I’ll let you know how it goes. Love you, Holly.”

“I love you, too. Babe, it’s your brother.”

After bringing Dante up to speed, he gave me a quick recipe that was sure to wow Cirilla. I googled the closest grocery store on the way to her house and bookmarked it on my phone. A feeling of accomplishment washed over me now that I had dinner out of the way.

Since I had some time to kill, I dressed and went window shopping at the mall a few blocks from the hotel. I grabbed some lunch at the food court and even caught a movie. I couldn’t remember the last time I sat in the cinema alone.

After the movie ended, I headed back to the hotel to pick up my car from the garage. I entered the grocery store’s address into the GPS and started my journey.

I swept through the store like a contestant from that old show Supermarket Sweep. Within ten minutes, I gathered all the ingredients needed for dinner. While in the self-checkout line, my phone vibrated in my pocket, but I ignored it until I finished the transaction.

After loading the bags inside the trunk, I retrieved my phone to check the missed call, which was from an unknown number. I dismissed it and slid the phone back into my pocket. Whomever it was didn’t leave a message, so it must not have been important.

I started the car and entered Cirilla’s address into the GPS. According to the directions, I was less than ten minutes away from

her house. I turned on some music and drove out into traffic. With Maroon 5 playing on the radio, I cruised through the city of Norfolk.

At the last minute, the automated voice informed me I was close to my destination. When I arrived, it surprised me how much she could afford on a teacher's salary. Cirilla lived in a beautiful condo on the beach, which I'm sure cost a pretty penny.

I turned into the complex and sent her a text message announcing my arrival.

Instead of texting back, she came outside on the porch.

"Pull up right here. I would hate for them to tow your car," she said, pointing to her parking spot.

I switched off the ignition and got out of the car. Before grabbing the bags from the trunk, I met her at the bottom of the stairs and kissed her, gently biting down on her bottom lip. "I missed you."

She smiled. "It's only been a few hours, Matteo."

"Too long, if you ask me."

I walked off and grabbed the groceries from the trunk. Meanwhile, Cirilla waited at the bottom of the steps for me to join her. Once I had everything, we went upstairs. On the way up, I couldn't help but watch her ass jiggle with every step. I wanted to have her right there on the steps, but the plan was to feed her first.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she said, opening the door. "You can put your shoes over there."

I glanced around the room and took in all the African paintings and sculptures that adorned the space. The living room was a decent size. It was perfect for the brown suede sectional she had. There were three tables, one on each side of the couch, and a coffee table in the front. The TV was the biggest thing in the room. It had to be about seventy inches, at least.

"Nice place," I said, placing the bags down on the kitchen counter. "Really nice."

"Thanks. I got a pretty good deal on it," she said.

"How can you afford all of this on a teacher's salary?"

"I lived off noodles for a year, my parents chipped in, and I went through a special lending program for teachers."

"Well, it was definitely worth the sacrifice," I said, removing my shoes and placing them by the door. "So, are you ready to have the best meal of your life?"

"I am. What's on the menu?" she asked, peeking inside the bags.

"Shrimp and asparagus risotto."

"Sounds good. Do you need any help?"

"Well, I was tryna impress you. But if you want to help, I won't stop you."

Cirilla rinsed the asparagus and the shrimp while I gathered all the other ingredients and set up the cookware. The energy between us was electric. She glanced at me with a playful look on her face and flickered water in my direction. I had forgotten how good it felt to be in the kitchen with a woman again.

After she peeled and cleaned the shrimp, I sent her on her way and moved through the kitchen as if I'd cooked a hundred meals there.

Being a single father had its perks. It was through trial and error that I learned how to make a decent meal.

Twenty minutes later, the smooth sounds of Sade blared through the TV. I hummed to the tune and worked my culinary magic, while Cirilla read her book in the living room until the scent of saffron lured her back into the kitchen.

"That smells great. I think I may have underestimated your cooking skills, Matteo."

"I told you to get ready to be wowed. Italian men are excellent cooks. It's one of our best-kept secrets," I said, winking at her.

"Okay. I'll set the table right quick and then we can eat."

While she fetched the dishes from the cabinet and set the table for two, I ran back to the car for the bouquet I picked up at the store.

After stuffing our faces with risotto and drinking several glasses of wine, we retired to the living room to watch a movie. I sat down on the couch and Cirilla cuddled up beside me, resting her head on my shoulder. When she passed me the remote, I laughed at the irony, as I reminisced on the conversation between me and Cadence a few weeks prior.

She practically spoke things into existence. She reminded me that it was time to find happiness outside of my parental responsibilities.

I kissed Cirilla's forehead and wrapped my arms around her. My daughter's manifestation had landed right in my lap and I wanted to hold on to her for as long as I could.

"What are you in the mood for?" I asked.

"I don't know. It's up to you."

"NCIS it is. That show never gets old."

After binge-watching several episodes of *NCIS*, we both dozed off. When I awoke, Cirilla was turning off the TV.

"Come on. Let's go to bed," she said, reaching for my hand.

Chapter 20: Breakfast Fit For a Queen



Cirilla

The piercing sun invaded the room, forcing me out of my sleep. I glanced at the clock on the nightstand and it was a little past nine. I rolled over to cuddle up to Matteo, but the bed was empty. After wiping the cold from my eyes, I got up and headed to the bathroom. When I opened the bedroom door, the scent of cinnamon filled the air.

That man is something else.

Instead of feeding into my curiosity, I went to the bathroom and relieved myself first. Afterward, I followed the aroma to the kitchen and when I walked in, there was a nice spread on the counter. He had created a mini buffet for the two of us.

“Good morning, beautiful. I hope you’re hungry,” he said, with a smile plastered across his face.

“Good morning, Matteo. And for the record, I’m always hungry. Why didn’t you wake me up? I would’ve helped you cook.”

“Because I didn’t want to interrupt your sleep. You looked so peaceful.” Matteo walked over and kissed my cheek, which sent a chill through my entire body. Then, he ushered me to the table and pulled out my chair before rushing off to make my plate.

I could really get used to this type of treatment.

I smiled for what seemed like the thousandth time since he got into town.

“Breakfast fit for a queen,” he said, placing the plate down in front of me.

“Wait. Am I being punked?”

“What do you mean?” He looked confused.

“I didn’t put out last night and you made a full spread.” I giggled.

“I like to see you smile. And now that I know food is the way to your heart, I’m going all in.”

After making his plate, Matteo joined me at the table. We joined hands, prayed over the food, and dug in.

“So, my 40th birthday is coming up and every year my brother and his wife throw a dinner party. I would love for you to come and meet my family,” he said.

“Are you sure, Matteo? We just met, I mean. I could be a crazy person for all you know.”

I thought I had more time to prepare.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I want you to meet my kids. They’re gonna love you.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, before stuffing my mouth with french toast. I was grateful that he wanted me to meet his family. But after all the mess with Antoine, I just wanted to ease into things.

Once breakfast was over, I cleared the dishes and put away the leftovers. As I stood, waiting for the sink to fill up, Matteo walked up behind me, wrapped his hands around my waist, and pulled me closer. His erection pressed against my butt as he nibbled on my ear. My body quivered with a burning desire, and when I reached my breaking point, I turned to face him.

Standing on my tiptoes, I draped my arms around his neck and claimed his lips. He moaned softly and lifted me onto the kitchen counter.

“What kind of spell have you put on me?” he asked between kisses.

“I should be asking you the same thing.”

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

My nipples hardened underneath my shirt, and Matteo noticed it right away. He removed my shirt and cupped both of my breasts in his warm hands. As he sucked each one with precision, I moaned.

“That feels so good.”

“I wish we had more time together, Cirilla. There are so many things I want to...”

“Shhh. Let’s not waste the time we do have.” I said, jumping down off the counter and reversing our positions.

I pushed him against the counter and got down on my knees. After rubbing his erection a few times, I pulled his boxers down around his ankles and gripped his manhood. I swirled my tongue around the tip until he begged me to take him into my mouth.

And I did.

Chapter 21: Happy Birthday, My Love



Matteo

A few weeks later

The phone vibrated on the dresser and I glanced down at the screen. When I saw Cirilla's name, a wave of excitement washed over me, sending a vibration throughout my body. I put the brush down and answered the call.

"Hello."

"Hey, Matteo. I'm about forty-five minutes away. I gotta check into the hotel and get freshened up. Then, I'm on my way to you," she said.

"You didn't have to get a room. There's plenty of space in this house."

"I know. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. It is my first time meeting your kids."

"The only person who's uncomfortable is me," I said.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll text you when I'm on my way."

I hung up the phone and continued to get ready for my party. As the 90s R&B station on Pandora played in the background, I brushed my hair and checked my reflection in the mirror. Considering the hell that I had been through, I looked damn good.

A knock on the door interrupted my vibe. "Come in," I said, turning to see who it was.

“Hey, Dad. Should I wear the pink sandals or the ones with all the sparkly colors?” Cadence asked, holding up the two options.

“The sparkly colors, of course. You look beautiful, princess.”

“Thanks. And you need to get a move on before you’re late to your own party. We can’t keep Aunt Holly and Uncle Dante waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah. Send your brother in, please.”

After being rushed by a ten-year-old, I put some pep in my step. I sprayed on a bit of cologne and buttoned up my white shirt, leaving the top two buttons open. Before I finished dressing, Caprice walked in.

“What’s up, Pops?” he asked.

“Close the door behind you.” I pulled the little black box out of my pocket and tossed it to him. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful. I know she’s gonna love it.” He closed the box and placed it on the dresser. “I’m so happy that you found someone.”

“Do you think it’s too soon?”

“I think it’s right on time,” he added, fixing the collar on my shirt. “Now let’s get going.”

After Caprice left the room, my phone vibrated again. If I wanted to be on time for my party, I had to ignore the call. Fed up with being rushed by the kids, I slipped it in my pocket. Whomever it was would have to wait until my hands were free.

As I stood in front of the mirror and admired my outfit, I hoped it would be enough to have Cirilla running into my arms. I turned off my bedroom light and headed downstairs.

“Y’all ready to head out?” I asked, grabbing my keys off the table.

“We’ve been waiting for you. I got shotgun,” Cadence yelled.

“Whatever,” Caprice added.

While they headed to the car, I locked up the house and set the alarm. As soon as I stepped off the porch, I heard the house phone ringing. I waved it off and kept it moving. It was time to celebrate.

When we arrived at Donte and Holly's place, there were cars parked all along the street and some were on the grass. Every year there was a great turnout. Since I rarely let my hair down, my birthday party was the only opportunity they got to show me a good time.

Caprice volunteered to park the car, so Cadence and I got out of the car and proceeded to the party.

"Happy Birthday!" they shouted as we entered the backyard.

There were balloons and flower arrangements everywhere, including a photo booth and one too many *Happy 40th Birthday* banners plastered throughout.

"Thank you. This looks amazing. You really outdid yourself this year, Holly," I said, kissing her cheek and giving her a hug.

"Hey, I helped too," Dante said, tapping me on the shoulder.

"If you say so."

We shared a warm embrace and walked away from the tables.

"So, are you nervous about the kids meeting Cirilla?" he asked.

"Not Caprice, but Cadence is another story. We've talked about it, but I don't know how she's going to react," I admitted.

"It'll be okay. If you love her, so will she."

"Are you sure, Dante?"

"Positive. She's gotta be something special if she got you to come out of your shell."

My phone pulsed in my pocket, cutting our conversation short. I retrieved it and checked the screen. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach when I saw Cirilla's name. I walked back towards the house, cleared my throat, and answered the phone. "Tell me you're here already."

"Yeah. I just pulled up, but there's nowhere to park," she said.

“Just stay put. I’ll be right there.” I walked through the house, stopping in the kitchen to grab a mini sandwich off the table. Then, I headed out the front door.

By the time I made it to the front lawn, Cirilla was leaning against her car wearing a dress that almost took my breath away. The bright colors and the way it hugged her curves sent me into overdrive. I stopped in my tracks and placed my hand over my chest.

How did I get so lucky?

“Good evening, beautiful. I’m happy you made it in one piece.” I held out my arms and Cirilla walked in closer, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Thanks again for inviting me,” she said.

Her perfume was more intoxicating than usual. “I just want to eat you up right now,” I whispered in her ear.

“Matteo, at least let me meet the family first.”

“Okay, Can I at least get a kiss to hold me over?”

She pressed her soft lips against mine, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I moaned as our lips parted.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

She smiled and nodded. “Lead the way.”

When we entered the backyard, Holly was the first one to greet Cirilla and introduce herself. She stole her away from me and took the liberty of introducing her to everyone else. Holly always had my back and helped with the kids. At first, I thought it was out of guilt for how things ended between me and her cousin, but it was because she truly loved us.

I chatted with a few people from work about the upcoming week, keeping my eyes on Cirilla the entire time. As I watched her interact with the people I loved the most, I smiled on the inside. She fit perfectly into our world.

“She is really, really hot. How did you bag her again?” Caprice asked, stealing my attention.

"I don't know. God was smiling down on me that day. Are you ready to meet her?"

"Definitely. I've been dying to see who got you back on the horse," he joked, lightly punching my arm.

"Enough. I'm still your father. Now let's go."

We walked over and joined the rest of the family. Cirilla, Holly, and Cadence were playing a game of sack toss while Dante was busy messing around at the DJ booth.

"Cirilla, I want you to meet my son, Caprice. Son, this is the woman I've been telling you about."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, extending his hand.

Cirilla hugged him and said, "Likewise. You're the spitting image of your father."

Caprice blushed.

"Hey everybody. I want to thank y'all for coming out to celebrate this special occasion with us. As you know, my brother is a workaholic and a single father that rarely lets his hair down. Until recently," Dante said into the microphone.

I glanced over at Cirilla, grabbed her hand, and pulled her closer. As our fingers intertwined, electricity flowed through my body.

"Everybody grab a glass, juice for the kids of course, and help me wish Matteo a Happy Birthday."

The crowd sang the *Happy Birthday* song and Dante added his own little twist. I was grateful to have all the people I cared about in one place. My kids, my brother and sister, my colleagues, and now my newfound love.

After the singing stopped, the DJ took over again and everybody scattered throughout the yard. Cirilla and I danced to a few songs before I stole her away from the crowd and led her to the other side of the yard.

"This is amazing. OMG. And it has actual fish in it," she said, admiring the artificial pond.

"You're amazing. I had to steal you away for a few minutes."

“Oh, yeah.”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling her closer and running my fingers through her hair. As our lips touched, my heart rate increased and I wanted the feeling to last forever.

“What am I gonna do with you, Matteo?”

“I can think of some things.” I propped her up against the stone wall and lifted her dress, just enough to bury my face between her thighs. Pulling her panties to the side, I replaced them with my tongue. Cirilla moaned and gripped my hair as I sucked gently on her sweet spot.

“We’re supposed to be at the party,” she said in between shallow breaths.

I flicked my tongue and inserted one of my fingers inside of her. “You want me to stop?” I asked.

She continued to run her fingers through my hair, and I kept pleasuring her until she released her nectar. “You are such a naughty boy,” she said, adjusting her dress.

“I had to taste you. I couldn’t help myself.”

We cleaned up with the freshwater spitting out of the fountain and headed back to the party. As I scanned the yard for my children, I spotted Caprice tucked away by the DJ booth with Tressa. Meanwhile Cadence was running around and filling up on sweets.

“Looks like someone is preoccupied,” Cirilla said, pointing at Caprice.

“I see.”

“Matteo,” Dante called out from the backdoor.

“I’ll be right back. Grab some food or another drink,” I said, kissing the side of Cirilla’s forehead. “I won’t be long.”

When I stepped into the house, my heart dropped into my stomach. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead and I was at a loss for words. Her long, black hair flowed down to her stomach and her olive skin was as smooth as I had remembered. The smile plastered across her face almost made my knees buckle.

“Did you miss me?” she asked, walking closer.

I didn’t budge. I didn’t say a word. I just stood there with my mouth open wide enough to catch a fly.

“Happy birthday, my love.”

“What is she doing here?” Caprice asked, walking in from the party.

“Careful, I’m still your mother,” she scolded.

“Yeah, right. You gave up on me a long time ago,” he said, before storming out of the house.

Every word after that was distorted. I felt like I was in another world until someone touched my shoulder and jolted me out of my hypnotic state. “Hey, birthday boy. I made you a plate,” Cirilla said.

“And you are?” Devin asked.

“Oh. Where are my manners? I’m Cirilla.” She extended her hand.

“Well, I’m Devin, Matteo’s wife. It’s nice to meet you, Cirilla,” she said, looking her up and down.

Cirilla pulled her hand away and turned to face me. “Your wife?” she asked.

“Ex-wife,” added Holly. “What are you doing here, Devin? I told you it wasn’t a good idea.” She grabbed her by the arm and escorted her towards the front door.

“I knew I shouldn’t have come,” Cirilla said, placing the plate of food down on the kitchen table and storming out of the house.

Meanwhile I was still in a state of shock.

Chapter 22: Not Gone Cry



Cirilla

I walked swiftly through the front yard and down the street until I reached my car. When I got to the driver's side, I glanced back at the house, hoping Matteo had run after me. There was no sign of the man who dragged me across state lines to attend his birthday party. Not a trace of the man who was just on his knees devouring me.

I knew it was too good to be true.

I hurried into the car, turned the key in the ignition, and maneuvered my way through the crowded street with tears streaming down my face.

Normally, I would blast the music and sing off-key, but this time, I rode in silence.

How in the hell did things go south so fast?

It usually took awhile before the shit hit the fan and I had to end my toxic relationships. But whatever this was with Matteo came through like a wrecking ball, swift and hard. Earth-shattering, to say the least.

I drove around town without a destination in sight. The last thing I wanted to do was go back to the hotel and sulk, so I cruised through the streets of Charlotte. Eventually, I'd stop somewhere and grab some food to take back to the room, but for now, the silence was my nourishment.

As I drove through the city, I thought about the first time he touched my hand at the airport. If only I could've seen into the future. If I would've listened to my gut and not Zyana's crazy ass, I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

Stop blaming everybody else, CiCi. You wanted to see him again.

My phone rang, interrupting my self-scolding session. It was Matteo. His photo popped up on the screen, which I just updated on the way to North Carolina. Without hesitation, I sent the call to voicemail.

He called a second time and as bad as I wanted to ignore him, something inside forced me to answer the phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Cirilla." He paused. "Why did you leave? Where are you?"

"Riding around tryna clear my head."

Rain poured on the front windshield, slightly obstructing my view. For my safety, I pulled over at a gas station and parked my car.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know Devin was coming. I would never put you in that kind of predicament. Please believe me," he pleaded.

"I know, Matteo. But that still doesn't change the fact that you two have a lot of unfinished business. You practically froze up when you saw her."

"Again, I apologize for how I reacted. It wasn't what it looked like. I haven't seen or heard from her since she left. It was devastation more than anything. Trust me."

"I do, but you owe it to yourself and those precious kids to at least try to work things out."

"No. What we need is someone that brings joy into our lives, not pain. And that's you. Can't you see that? Cadence lit up around you. Although she's too stubborn to admit it, she's more ecstatic about having another female around than me having a girlfriend."

As much as I wanted to race back to Dante's house and fall into his arms, I was fed up with coming in second place. First in college with Zyana's cousin, then with Antoine, and now with Matteo.

Even though he wanted to pursue a relationship with me, he had an obligation to the mother of his children.

"I know you mean well, but I gotta do what's best for me. Have a nice life, Matteo."

Before he could respond, I hung up the phone and drove in the direction of the hotel.

By the time the sun came up, I had at least twenty missed calls on my phone, fifteen from Matteo and five from Zyana. There were several text messages and an insane amount of voicemails. If I returned his call, it would only make things worse, so I called Zyana instead.

"Girl, what is going on down there in Carolina? Matteo hit me in the DM. I thought y'all were supposed to be spending time together," she said.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Yeah, yeah. Talk to me, CiCi."

"Everything was going so well until—"

"Until what?" she interrupted.

"His wife showed up."

"But I thought Matteo was single."

"He was. Until she decided to be the surprise at his birthday party," I said, trying to hold back my tears. "He never mentioned how beautiful she was. How am I supposed to compete with that?"

"There is no competition. I saw the way he looked at you. He jumped in my DM just to find you."

"None of that matters anymore, Zyana. She's back in the picture and he owes it to his family to at least try to make it work."

“With all due respect, CiCi, you sound silly as hell. He doesn’t owe her anything, except the opportunity to make up for lost time with her kids.”

“Look, I appreciate you tryna be the peacemaker, but it’s settled. After the breakup with Antoine, I made a promise to put myself first.”

“Okay. Just make sure you know what you’re doing. Matteo is one-of-a-kind and in the back of your mind, you know it’s true.” She sighed. “Call me back when you get yourself together.”

After Zyana hung up, I scrolled through my text messages. There were several from Matteo that looked like paragraphs. To save myself from making a foolish decision, I closed out the thread and went back to sleep.

A knock on the door broke my slumber. I sat up and scratched my head until the knocking started again. “Okay, okay. I’m coming.” I flung the door open and the housekeeper was waiting on the other side with her utility cart.

“Good morning, ma’am. Do you need me to come in and clean for you?” she asked in a cheerful voice.

“No, thank you. I’ll just take some clean washcloths and towels. Oh, and some more coffee, please.”

“Very well,” said the housekeeper, handing me the items.

“Thanks.” I placed the stuff down on the dresser and went to the bathroom. My bags were already packed from the late-night pity party and all I needed was a hot shower, a quick breakfast, and a cup of coffee for the road.

I turned on the water and waited for the steam to fill the room. While waiting, I slipped off the t-shirt I slept in and tossed it on the floor. Just as I was about to get in the shower, there was another knock on the door.

I told her I didn’t need any cleaning service.

When I looked through the peephole, my heart rate increased and my palms became sweaty. The smile that he wore most of the time was nonexistent.

“What are you doing here, Matteo?” I asked through the door.

“I just needed to hear your voice. I understand if you never want to see me again,” he said. “But I had to try.”

Of course I wanted to see him again. I wanted to run into his arms and kiss him and tell him how much I loved him. But life had other plans when his past merged with our future.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“I have a trucking company, remember? The owner of this hotel is one of my clients.”

“So much for privacy,” I mumbled.

I grabbed a towel, wrapped it around my body, and opened the door. By that time, the steam had escaped the bathroom, filling up the room.

“Matteo, I already told you—”

Before I could finish my statement, he grabbed me and kissed me with the passion of a movie star. For a minute or two, I fell under his spell. However, it was short-lived. I quickly came to my senses and pushed him towards the door.

“If that’s what you really want, then I’ll leave. But for the record, I love you and I would never do anything to hurt you.” He opened the door and walked out of the room.

After his footsteps faded, I took a quick shower and gathered my belongings. I needed to get out of there before he showed up again. Within twenty minutes, I was on the road to Virginia.

Heartbroken once again.

Since I had a long drive ahead of me, I played Mary J. Blige and sang at the top of my lungs. When *Not Gone Cry* came on, I thought about Antoine and how I had to hide my feelings at the job and watch my coworkers flirt with him. And how he would come up

with every excuse in the book for not inviting me to family functions.

I wiped away the tears that were heating up my face. A minute into the song and I was already balling my eyes out. I pulled over on the side of the road and turned the volume down on the radio.

“Why does this shit keep happening to me?” I yelled.

I slammed my fist against the steering wheel until the sound of the horn was the only thing ringing in my ears. As the cars whizzed by, some slowed down to glance at the show and others raced towards their destination without a care in the world.

I shook my head.

That relationship carried on way too long, which was the reason I refused to put up with Matteo and the return of his ex.

Matteo.

Just the thought of his beautiful smile and warm embrace made me smile. As bad as I wanted to bust a u-turn and show up at his doorstep, my heart couldn't take any more pain. He had some serious stuff to work out and I, Cirilla Matthews, would not stand back and let life happen to me anymore.

I searched the glove box for random fast food napkins to clean the frustration off my face. After a minute, I changed the music to something more upbeat and got back on the road.

By the time I reached Norfolk, the only thing on my mind was binging on snacks, so I stopped by the grocery store closest to my house to pick up a few things. While browsing the cookie aisle, a familiar voice called out to me. I turned around slowly to avoid contact for as long as I could.

"What do you want, Antoine? This is not the time," I said.

"I want you to meet my mother. Mom, this is Cirilla," he said to the older lady.

I extended my hand only because I wanted to show her some respect. I couldn't care less about him. "It's nice to meet you, ma'am."

She glanced at Antoine with a confused look on her face. "And who is this, Son?" she asked.

"She's one of my coworkers."

"Actually, I'm the ex-girlfriend of two years that he conveniently forgot to mention."

I threw the cookies into my cart and left him standing with his mouth wide open. After picking up some ice cream and several other sugary snacks, I raced to the express line. I wanted out of the store before I ran into Antoine again.

On the way to my car, I thought about Matteo. And how he introduced me to his family in such a short time. I didn't have to pressure him into anything. He was more than willing to show me off.

And that's when it hit me.

I stopped in my tracks in the middle of the parking lot and pulled out my phone to call Zyanna.

"Hello."

"Hey. I messed up big time, and I need your help," I pleaded.

"I knew you would come to your senses. What did you have in mind, CiCi?" she asked.

Chapter 23: Don't Talk, Just Listen



Matteo

Before pulling out of the hotel garage, I sat for a minute and contemplated my next move. After professing my love to Cirilla, she still turned me away and my heart was in a million pieces.

Again.

I did the next best thing and called Dante. After several rings, he answered the phone.

“Hey, Matteo. Did you find her?” he asked.

“Yeah, and unfortunately she hasn’t changed her mind,” I admitted.

“For what it’s worth, you tried, brother. You let your guard down and opened yourself up to love again. That’s gotta mean something.”

“And just when I did, Devin decided to show up. That woman always had the worst timing.”

“Matteo, I know this may sound harsh, but I think the timing is perfect. It’s about time you got some closure. Forgive her so you can move on with your life. You deserve to be loved the right way.”

“You’re right. Is she still there?” I asked, ready to deal with my past once and for all.

“Yeah. She’s on the porch talking to Holly.”

“I’ll see you in twenty minutes.” I hung up the phone and headed back to Holly and Dante’s place.

When I pulled in front of the house, Holly and Devin were sitting on the porch talking. I killed the ignition and sat in the car for a minute. After years of wondering what I did wrong, I finally came face to face with the only person who could give me answers.

I took a deep breath and exited the car. Holly waved in my direction and went inside the house, giving us some much-needed privacy.

“So, what brought you back to this part of town?” I asked.

She folded her arms. “Because I wanted to see you.”

“Really, Devin? After all these years? No calls, texts, letters, nothing. Not even a birthday card for either one of your children. And you expect me to believe that?”

After leaving me to raise two kids on my own, I thought she would have come up with a better answer than that.

“Matteo, you have to believe me. There wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think of you and the kids. I wanted to pick up the phone and call so many times, but I couldn’t. Until recently.”

“Then why did you leave in the first place, huh?” I paced back and forth across the porch.

“I wasn’t ready to be a mother. And deep down I knew that, but I wanted you to be happy. The way your face lit up when you talked about being a dad, I didn’t want to stand in the way of that,” she admitted.

“But you could’ve said something. I mean, the idea of being a dad infatuated me, but I was more in love with you. Why wait until Cadence was born to leave?”

Tears rolled down her face, and I was angry at myself for caring.

“I thought once she was born things would change, but it only got worse. I felt like I was falling deeper into a hole with no way out,” she said.

I rubbed the back of my neck and shook my head. “And what’s changed?”

“I’ve been seeing a therapist and making peace with my past is a big part of my mental wellness journey. If you’ll let me, I want to build a relationship with my family.”

“You mean Cadence, cause Caprice is a man now. He makes his own decisions.” I took a deep breath before finishing my sentence. “And as for me, I’m with someone. Well, I was until you popped up like the ghost of girlfriends past.”

“I’ll take whatever I can get, Matteo,” she said.

I stopped pacing and sat down beside her. “Just give me some time and I’ll talk to them.”

“Thank you. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy.”

“Well, it’s too late now. Cirilla wants nothing to do with me and my baby momma drama.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. She loves you,” she said.

“And how do you know that?”

She placed her hand on my arm. “A woman can tell these things. She’ll be back.”

“I hope you’re right.”

As I stared out the window and watched the drivers perform the inspections on their trucks, so many things were going through my head. Over the past couple of days, I didn’t even want to step foot in the office, let alone get out of bed.

After talking with Devin, I caved in and let her spend the week with Cadence. Of course, she had to stay at Holly and Dante’s house. The last thing I wanted her to witness was me sulking around all day. Besides, they had a lot of catching up to do.

I checked my cell phone for the thousandth time. No calls, no messages, nothing. It was as if we’d never met, like she erased me from her life. I threw the phone across the room, bouncing it off the wall. For my sanity, I couldn’t stand to look at it anymore.

“Hey, Pops.” Caprice walked into my office and closed the door behind him. “Is everything okay?”

"I don't know. I've been through this before, but this time it's different. Can't really explain it."

"Try. Maybe I can help you make sense of it," he said.

"When your mother left, my heart felt like someone had ripped it out of my chest. But I had you two to think about, so I buried my pain. I focused on the business and being a good father. Eventually, I got over it. I got used to being alone. Then, I met Cirilla, and from the moment I laid eyes on her, I haven't stopped thinking about her," I admitted.

"So, why haven't you called her?"

I rubbed my chin and rocked back in my chair. "I don't know what to say."

"Tell her the truth. Tell her you love her," he suggested.

"I did. At the hotel. But it wasn't enough. She still ended things."

Caprice walked closer and rested his hand on my shoulder. "Girls always say things they don't mean in the heat of the moment. You know that. Just give her some time."

"Your mother said the same thing."

"Woah. You mean Devin," he said matter-of-factly.

"Yes. Your mother, Devin. You gotta forgive her too, Caprice. I know it's hard."

"Look at what she did to you. I don't know if I can."

"I'm a big boy. Don't worry about me. But you, on the other hand, may never forgive yourself if you don't try." He smiled. That same smile I remembered from his first day of school. "Now get outta here and let me wallow in peace."

Caprice disappeared, and before I could get comfortable, Tressa knocked on the door. "Come in." I sighed.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. But you have a package," she said.

"Who's it from?"

"A Cirilla Matthews."

When I heard the name, newfound energy surged throughout my body. I leaped out of my chair and met Tressa at the door. "Thank you. Hold all of my calls, please."

"Sure thing, Mr. Cappelletti."

As soon as the door closed, I turned over the large envelope and looked at the return address. It was definitely from Cirilla. I retrieved the letter opener from my desk and cut along the edge. I took a deep breath before emptying the contents.

There were many black and white photos of me asleep in her bed, and the last one was of her kissing my lips. I held the picture in the air and rubbed my fingers down her cheek. My heart ached because I wanted to touch her in person.

I gathered the photos and stuffed them back into the envelope. No matter what she said, the pictures were proof that she still cared for me.

As I rummaged around for my cell phone, I remembered I had launched it across the room. It was lying on the floor in the corner. Cracked screen and all, it would have to do. I slipped it into my pocket and headed out of the office and into the parking lot. When I reached my car, there was another surprise waiting for me.

"Don't talk, just listen," she said, moving closer. "The time we spent together was the happiest time of my life. You cooked for me and introduced me to your family. You included me in your life, although we only knew each other for a short time. I owe you an apology, Matteo."

I moved in closer. "No. I owe you an apology, Cirilla."

"For what? You did everything right. It was my emotional baggage that got in the way."

I pulled the box out of my pocket and got down on one knee. "For not doing this sooner. I've been carrying it around since the party."

"Wait. I just came to tell you I love you, not pressure you into marriage," she said.

WHAT THE HEART WANTS

“Pressure me? No dear, it would be an honor.” I took her hand. “Now, will you marry me or not?”

“Say yes. Say yes.” I turned to see Caprice and Tressa yelling from across the lot. I waved in their direction.

“This is the absolute craziest thing I’ve ever done, but yes, I’ll marry you, Matteo.”

After slipping the ring on her finger, I took her into my arms and planted kisses all down her neck. I felt alive again.

Epilogue



Matteo

Three months later

As I did the final inspection of the bedroom, I grabbed my cell phone off the dresser and put it in my pocket. The bed was made and there wasn't a piece of clothing in sight because Cirilla cleaned up before rushing out of the door. I grabbed our luggage, closed the door, and headed downstairs to meet the kids.

"Alright. Is everybody packed up and ready to go?" I asked, rolling two suitcases into the foyer.

"We've been waiting for you, as usual," Cadence said, walking out of the living room with her butterfly suitcase in tow. "Caprice is already outside on the porch."

"Okay. Let's load up the car and get to the airport then. Cirilla and Tressa had to pick up some last-minute things and they'll meet us there."

Caprice helped me with the bags and Cadence plopped herself into the front seat like the princess that she was. When we got in the car, she already had her earbuds in and her feet propped up on the dashboard.

"We're gonna have so much fun on this trip. I'll take you to all the places I visited as a kid," I said.

She nodded her head and continued to listen to her music. Before starting the car, I moved her feet and took one of her earbuds out.

“Dad, why’d you do that?”

“For one, your feet belong on the ground and for two, you’re not gonna get lost in technology. We’re gonna do some family-centered activities this week.” I started the car and backed out of the driveway with her earbud in my hand.

“Okay, fine. Can I have my earbud back now?”

I kissed the side of her forehead and handed it over. “Sure, Princess.”

After arriving at the airport, I parked the car and unloaded the trunk. Caprice and I pushed the suitcases through the raggedy parking lot, while Cadence played on her phone. I shook my head and continued towards the entrance.

Once we got inside, we met up with Cirilla and Tressa on the ground floor. “Did you get everything you needed?” I asked.

“Yeah. I had to get something for nausea. My stomach has been feeling queasy all morning,” Cirilla said.

“Well, let’s get these bags checked and find you something quick to eat. We don’t have much time before the flight leaves.”

After checking all the bags and going through security, we went to a restaurant and grabbed some sandwiches. The service was fast, but the food lacked quality. Cirilla bit her burger a few times and threw it into the trash.

“Don’t worry. You’ll have the best food you ever tasted at your disposal very soon. All you can eat.” I reassured her.

“We can’t wait,” she said, rubbing her belly.

“Wait. What do you mean we?” I stopped chewing my food and placed the sandwich on the table.

“Me and the baby.”

I placed my hand on her belly. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, Matteo. I just found out about thirty minutes ago.”

Cadence got out of her chair, ran over, and hugged Cirilla. “Finally. I’m gonna be a big sister,” she said.

“Aren’t you a little too old to be making babies?” Caprice asked.
“Just kidding. Congrats.”

We shared a manly hug.

Tressa checked her watch and warned us that it was almost time to board the flight. Everyone finished up their food and disposed of the wrappers. I grabbed a hold of Cirilla’s hand and kissed the top of it softly.

“I’ll be here for you every step of the way. You’re gonna be a great mother,” I said.

“With you by my side, anything is possible, Matteo. Now let’s get a move on before we miss the flight. Zyana is already there waiting for us.”

“Andiamo!”

The End

Other books by the author:

One Foot Out the Door

Jasmine Brown, a young woman in her early twenties, is in search of true love. The only problem is her long-term boyfriend, Tyrone Johnson, who is always out running the streets and entertaining other females. When she reaches her breaking point, Jasmine calls off the relationship.

In pursuit of happiness, she meets the perfect gentleman and he exposes her to a life she could only dream of. But when Tyrone learns that she is dating again, he shows up at her doorstep and attempts to sabotage her mission.

If Jasmine wants to experience true love, then she has some serious decisions to make concerning her life. Will she allow her past to hold her hostage or will she step boldly into the future?

Find out in this story about heartbreak, betrayal, and second chances.

<https://www.amazon.com/B0926V5RSL>

LESANDA MOORE

Karma's Chaos

After accepting Polo's proposal on New Year's Eve and going on a trip to Paris, Karma feels like things are moving a bit too fast between them. She loves him, but after the wool was pulled over her eyes in her previous relationship, she wants nothing more than to take things slow. When her ex-boyfriend E reaches out to her again, it stirs up many buried emotions.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Karma has no clue what to do at this point. Does she move forward into the unknown with Polo or fall back into her comfort zone with E?

Find out in this roller-coaster romance.

<https://www.amazon.com/B09C6G1N3M>

Tyrone's Trials and Tribulations

After Jasmine kicks him to the curb for good, Tyrone soon realizes that his life isn't as glamorous as he thought. Running the streets, selling drugs, and sleeping around causes him to lose the only stability he has and lands him behind bars.

During his stint in the penitentiary, he discovers that he has a baby on the way with one of his side chicks, Ebony.

Due to his broken past with a drug addict for a mother and a jailbird for a father, Tyrone doesn't know how to be a good role model, however, he's willing to try for his child.

Faced with many trials and tribulations, will he learn the error of his ways and grow up? Or will he self-destruct and let his grief get in the way?

Find out in this story of rebirth and second chances.

<https://www.amazon.com/B09PV8129L>

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Love,
Lesanda

About the Author



Lesanda Moore is a native of Norfolk, Virginia, and a mother of three. She developed a love for writing at an early age, however, it took decades to gain the courage to share her art with the world. Currently, she holds a degree in Social Science and a degree in Psychology with an endorsement in Elementary Education. In her free time, she enjoys reading, traveling, and binge-watching shows on Netflix.

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