

LANDING

ON

MARS

LANDING

ON

MARS

a novel

ASHLEY HOWARD

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Dedicated to

to all who have an infinite passion to be desired, recognized, and valued in this life.

Author's Note

As I penned Mars and Nyla's story, I knew something crucial needed to happen. I wanted to take readers on an adventure that feels real—one that mirrors our shared desires to be seen, recognized, and valued.

I can only hope I achieved this for my readers.

“Landing on Mars” is gripping, raw, and real; it has depth filled with immense heart and veracity. Most of all, Mars and Nyla's story is filled with vulnerability and intimacy.

In a world melded with differences, this is

Something we all desire

landing on mars

“To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest
punishment we can bring on ourselves.”

—**Blood Wedding and Yerma, Federico Garcia L**

Playlist

Ann Marie - Unlove You, Handle it
CJ Fam - Love Me for the Both of Us
Coco Jones - Love Is War
Eli Derby - Not the same
Ella Mai - DFMU
Emyrson Flora - Air
Future - Love You Better
Good Boy Noah - Attitude, Love you down
H.E.R. - Focus, Every Kind of Way
Janine - Broke Me Down, Loving Me, Never the Right Time
Justin Bieber - Get Me (feat. Kehlani)
Layton Green - I Choose You
Lewis Capaldi - Bruises
Marco McKinnis - Energy, Give It Up, Deep, Learn
Mariah the Scientist - Only Human, Spread Thin, From a Woman
Mariella - Disconnect
Mila J - No More Complaining
Mimmi Bangoura - So I Changed, Impressive
Muni Long - Time Machine
Sabrina Claudio - Problem With You
Sam Smith - How Do You Sleep?
Samaria - Still Got 4ever
Sinéad Harnett - If You Let Me (feat. GRADES)
Snoh Aalegra - I Want You Around (Remix)
Sofia Camara - Without You
Summer Walker - Session 32, No Love (feat. SZA)
Terica Marie - Simple Things
Tink & Janine - Lows & Highs
The Weeknd - Wasted Times
Ziva - Potions

Part One

Chapter 1

“Ready”

Nyla

THE WALLS SEEM to close in around me, suffocating me with silent judgement as I shift back and forth under the security of my blanket. I'm lying in the darkness of my room, waiting for sleep to claim me. Another night where I am a hostage of my own restless mind. As has happened for the past few nights, it eludes me. I get up from the security of my bed and walk to my kitchen.

My eyes dart to the digital clock on my oven; the white numbers shine through the eerie darkness of the night. It reads two in the morning, a time of silence and solitude. Yet my mind is loud with rapid thoughts, pulling me further from the peace I desperately want to claim. I stand in my living room, quickly shuffling ideas on what I can do to set my mind at ease.

An unappeasable desire for distraction pulls me toward my bookshelf. Scanning my collection, my fingers run over spines of all shapes and colors. I pause when my gaze lands on my latest novel. Smoothly extracting the book from its place on the shelf, I carry it with me to the kitchen. Slowly opening the stained gray oak cabinet, I retrieve an unfinished bottle of red wine. After slipping a wine glass from the metallic rack, I shut the cabinet door and walk back to my

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bedroom. Once there, I carelessly toss the book onto the pillow and plop my exhausted body onto the bed.

In my haste, I grab the bottle and uncork it impatiently, ready to unwind and dive into its comforting depths. Filling the wine glass three-quarters of the way up, I set the bottle on my nightstand. Retrieving from the drawer a small reading light with a metallic clip on one end, I adjust the clip onto my book. I lean my back against the headboard, eyes alight with the expectation of escape. I delicately wrap my fingers around the cool stem of the wine glass. The aroma of rich, lush wine fills my nostrils as I gently bring the glass to my lips and let the velvety liquid caress my tongue.

Like every other night since I've started the book, I wait patiently for the red wine to weigh my body down. I get lost in the pages, oblivious to the passing time, until I am finally overtaken by darkness and a flickering candle's gentle glow.



The alarm blares, jarring me awake. The numbers on the clock read six in the morning. I can't believe it's time to get up already. The book I read last night to distract my nomadic mind is lolled across my chest. With slothful movement, I close the book and place it beside me. I breathe in deeply and out tenderly to fuel my energy levels—or maybe to stop myself from screaming out loud because I'm still tired.

These sleepless nights have been killing me. Lately, I can't seem to fall asleep at a decent time. When I finally do fall asleep, it's around the cusp of four. Last week, the alarm on my phone was unsuccessful at waking me up in the morning. I overslept four times, causing me to be late for work, which is record-breaking because I never sleep past six, even on weekends, and I'm always on time. I purchased the alarm clock in hopes it would be much more successful than my phone.

It's proven to be because I'm wide awake, and the alarm is still pounding against my head and eardrums. "I'm so tired," I whimper. My eyes float to my book. I want to throw the thing at the ringing alarm clock and watch it fall theatrically from my nightstand. I decide

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against the theatrics, primarily because my favorite wine glass is sitting next to a lit candle placed inside an elegant three-wick holder with gold finishes.

The wax is melted entirely, and I'd rather not have a morning that involves me on my knees, scraping candle wax and shards of glass out of my rug. It's dangerous, but a burning candle in the darkness of the night creates a certain ambiance in my bedroom I'm drawn to. There's something I love about the smell of vanilla and patchouli when I'm winding down. Instead of plunging the book into the alarm clock, I sit up and reach to turn it off. I throw myself back onto my pillows and continue to lounge in bed.

I always wake up thirty minutes early to take a moment to myself before getting ready for work. I'm gently stretching my legs and back when my phone dings, indicating a text. I search my king-sized bed for my iPhone and can't help noticing my crinkly white sheets need to be changed soon. There's something about white sheets that calms me, makes me feel like I'm sleeping in a pool of fluffy marshmallows or bouncing around on clouds in the icy blue sky. My fingers brush the cool metal of my cell phone.

I retrieve it and bring the phone to my face. An all-too-familiar name is displayed across my screen.

Ryan. He's texted:

Ryan: Call me when you wake.

He knows very well what time I get up in the morning. He spent countless nights here with me. He strategically wants to get my attention during a time he knows he can. I won't give it to him. He has another thing coming. I'm not in the mood to hear anything he has to say. There are many things I despise, one of them being the audacity of a person. He has no right to disrupt my morning, not this early, and not after doing what he chose to do to me.

I sit up. My phone has six percent battery. Stepping out of my cozy bed, I plug my phone into the charger near the terrace. I stroll to my bathroom to rinse my mouth and splash water on my face, then make my way to the kitchen to quickly make a cinnamon-infused iced latte. Back in my bedroom, I open the light gray curtains covering my floor-to-ceiling windows and step out onto the balcony. Immediately,

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I raise my hand to shade my eyes. The sun is beaming bright and alarmingly hot against my face. I spend twenty minutes sitting outside indulging in one of my unhealthy habits: spending time on my phone before I start my day. Stretching my phone cord as far as it'll go, I pull out one of the chairs on the patio, plop right down, and begin sipping my latte. It's cool and refreshing—just what I need to combat this heat on my skin and the fatigue in my body.

I take in my surroundings. I love the view from my unit. The emerald-shaded trees swaying serenely with the wind and the bubbling water fountain in the communal area below, accompanied by the habitual quiet first thing in the morning, are peaceful and refreshing. As much as I love New York City, I also enjoy a reprieve from the fast-paced living I've been accustomed to, which centers my thoughts. I scroll through my emails and begin answering text messages. Ryan is the last person I message, and I keep it simple and short.

Me: *Call you later.*

I don't plan on calling him at all. Sending this false text will keep him off my back for a few hours.

After a few minutes, I stand and head to the bathroom. I jump right into my full morning routine. Self-care is an important aspect of my life. As a child, I learned the steps I took to care for myself in the mornings had a profound influence on my attitude, which reflected on how I tackled my day. One day, I woke up and was responsible for my own well-being—that is, right after my mother left. I remember the day like it was yesterday. What I remember most is how I spent my days after she left us. I felt sad, gloomy, devoid of blissful emotions—a feeling I wasn't frequently acquainted with. I went from having a full home to a broken one. I was young and confused. I spent days yearning to hear my mother's heels clank against the hollow wooden floors of our house, or the sound of her keys clattering against one another as she placed them on the console table after coming in from work.

I was hopeless and wished my mother would somehow have a change of heart and come back home. She never did. One summer morning, my sister, Ryelyn, dragged me out of bed. She encouraged me to brush my teeth, wash my face, do my hair, and put on a pretty

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dress. She sat me down between her legs and styled my hair—something my mother used to do. When she finished, I stared into the mirror and smiled. It was the first genuine smile that surfaced on my face since my mother left.

At that moment, I felt my soul come back into my body again. I felt charged and a little less lifeless. That's when I understood the significance of morning routines and how the steps I take in the morning can engender positive feelings and a better attitude than the one I'd been carrying. Everything changed after my mother left. That sudden demise initiated my mission to find a replacement for my misbelief about the world being perfect and harmless. I watched many movies as a child that permitted my emotions to cloud that misbelief.

How can anyone blame me? Cinderella ended up with her prince, and Tiana fell in love with Naveen. Me? Well, I fell in love with the rush and the high that came with fulfillment and happiness. Somehow, I missed the fact that Cinderella was abused by her step-mother and Tiana was poor and lost her father. What mattered most—what made little me happy—was that both princesses got the chance to wear beautiful dresses and they both kissed a prince.

When my mother left, her absence sent my father diving deep into work to avoid the hurt he was experiencing. He concealed his depression from us as much as he could until he dug himself deep into a hole that left him detached from the world, from us. I learned the hard way that the real world is coupled with pain and neglect.

I've attached and detached myself to many things growing up in hopes of finding that gratifying feeling again. I never found it in the ways one would consider healthy. I simply found it in ways I needed. I found it in control.

I unlace my satin pink baby doll nightgown and place it on the back of my door before crossing to the shower and turning on the hot water. I place a shower towel over my head and open the cabinet to grab my essentials. The shower feels divine this morning. It feels better than the thoughts I try to escape at night. The steam and hot water penetrate my skin, relieving my muscles and my mind—which runs relentlessly. I can't get a grip on the pace it runs on either. Trying to catch up to my mind is like trying to grip the string of a balloon as it sails away into the sky—probable yet sometimes impossible.

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I spend a few minutes letting the water run down my body. After handling my routine, I step out of the shower to begin my oral and skincare rituals. I stand in front of my mirror with my towel wrapped around my breast. Despite getting little to no sleep, the skin under my eyes is still tight.

Halfway prepared for my day, I stroll to my walk-in closet to choose an outfit. It's usually organized by color, with a wall devoted to shelves of shoes. Only thirty percent of my shoes are scattered on the closet floor, and my clothes have accumulated into a pile on top of a creamy round ottoman in the center.

When I was a young girl living in Texas, I always dreamed of living in New York City. I visited the city once while on a school trip in high school. The tall buildings that stood before me were mind-blowing—intimidating yet dazzling. The glass windows aligned a multitude of stories high were fascinating to me. The fast-paced environment sent a thrill through me—a rush, an intense feeling I hadn't felt since my misbelief about the world being faultless. A feeling I never thought I could get back until my feet hit the grounds of New York City.

At the time, I thought I'd fallen instantly in love with New York. I can now correlate those feelings with how I felt being there: capable, strong, daring, happy, and, most of all, free—free from the reality of the destruction of my family.

I want to wear something light, so I scan my options and settle on a ruffled dress. Plucking it from the closet, I lay it out across the bed before selecting an all-black lace set from my lingerie drawer.

I sit at my vanity to apply a light layer of makeup. Spring is thriving today, and I don't plan on melting in the sun like an ice cream cone slowly tilting from heat exposure.

Loosening the top of my mascara, I raise the mini wand and begin to swipe several thick coats on my lashes until they are full. I unravel a claw clip from my hair and watch as my silky dark tresses fall to my shoulders. I'm a natural, but I take care of my hair enough to maintain its strength and length whenever I have it pressed at the salon. I part my hair in the middle and shape my face with a few curls.

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Fifteen minutes before it's time to leave for work, I study the shoe wall in my closet and choose a pair of nude heels that'll go suitably with the shade of my dress, ecru.

I grab a clear bottle filled with orange-red liquid and spray my favorite perfume, with notes of Neroli and Grapefruit, on both sides of my neck and on my wrist. I unplug my cell phone from its charger, walk to my nightstand, and blow my candle out. I grab my purse and head toward the front door. Grabbing my keys from my console table with one hand, turning off the lights with the other, I close and lock my apartment door and head to the elevator. Pressing the down button, I enter when the doors slide open and descend four flights to the foyer of my twenty-four-story luxury apartment building.

It feels like a perfect morning. I take in a few breaths and revel in the fact I feel better than I did when I woke up.

The elevator doors slide open, and I greet the doorman with a bright smile. "Good morning."

"Hello, Ms. Porter. How are you this morning?"

"I'm well. How's your morning? Heavy traffic, per usual?"

"You know it!" he says as he opens the lobby door for me. "Your driver is waiting for you out front. Have a wonderful day."

I throw a smile over my shoulder as I walk through the double doors. "Thank you!" When I'm outside, I check the license plate of the black Honda waiting for me before hopping in and greeting my usual driver. He smiles and nods his head. He never says much, and I like it this way. In the morning, I genuinely appreciate solitude. Because in these quiet moments of the morning, I'm free from the worries keeping me up at night.

Chapter 2

“Intrigued”

Mars

MY PULSE QUICKENS with raw anticipation as I wait anxiously for the black car to make its appearance. Never would I have guessed that a woman I’ve never met before would consume my every thought. Yet here I am. She’s an unforeseen mystery, and I can’t resist her allure.

I moved my company headquarters to this side of town a few months ago. Two weeks after moving in, I spotted her. I know nothing about her except that she works across the street. She’s beautiful, not only in appearance but also in the way she carries herself—with complete confidence and an open smile, as if she owns the building she walks into every morning. I’m intrigued.

Every time she steps out of that sleek black car and disappears into the building across the street, my hunger to know more about her deepens. I never thought I’d become so fixated on a stranger. Something about her demeanor, her beauty, and her air of mystery captivates me entirely.

I admire her ruffled ivory dress and the way it flows beautifully with her bouncy curled hair. I put my foot up on my desk and lean back as I watch her intently until she disappears into the building, leaving me to wonder more about her.

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My morning distraction gone, I turn my attention away from the window and press enter on my keyboard to wake my computer. No sooner do I log on than a batch of emails pops up. I lose myself in my first order of business: returning emails. An hour passes before I lean back from my keyboard for a breather.

A knock sounds at my office door. My face grows curious. I arrive earlier than everyone else, so I'm wondering who's here at this time. I stand and cross my office. Opening the heavy matte black door, I find my best friend, Parker Lucas, standing in the hallway with a huge smile plastered on his face. He's dressed in a three-piece ash gray suit with a black tie.

"Mars, my brother!" he greets me with a dab.

"What's up, Park? You look sharp. What brings you to my office this early?"

Parker and I have been friends since high school, both born and raised in New York. He's also one of my biggest supporters, having been by my side through it all. He has supported me since before I made the investment of a lifetime establishing my real estate firm, now one of the top firms in the states.

When I opened a gym, I asked Parker to be co-owner. He also works independently as a trainer and an accountant. Parker is ambitious. If he shows up at my office this early, it has something to do with business.

"Nothing, man," he answers, crossing his arms. A glare from the window bounces off his forehead. "I have extra time this morning and decided to stop by and check on my brother. Is that a crime?"

"Your acting skills should be a crime, Park. I know you." I take a seat at the edge of my desk. "What's on your mind?"

His hand runs over his jaw. "Our numbers are remarkable, Mars. I've been mapping out our finances and concluded we should open another gym."

Parker is clever, speaks my language, and understands business. It's yet another reason I respect him.

I lean over my desk and pull out a manila folder. "You'll have to look over the numbers." I hand him the folder and wait while he reads the contents.

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He looks at me with a big grin. “Always aligned. This is why we’re brothers—partners, in fact,” he says. “When did you develop this?”

“Last month. I’ve been researching the market for CrossFit gyms, and the demand is high. It must be the right time to expand LP Fitness if you’ve been thinking the same.”

“I’m proud of you, brother,” he replies, a warm look on his face.

“I’m proud of you, too.”

We’ve come a long way as friends. We stay in our areas of expertise and work together as a team when we need to. Parker is my brother, one of the closest people in my life.

We met under unexpected circumstances that bonded us at thirteen. I was seated on my couch watching a movie with my sister when I heard someone kicking and urgently banging on the front door for help. I jumped up without hesitation and opened the door when a boy, a few inches shorter than me, barged straight into my house, seeking shelter from a dog chasing him.

He threw his body against the door, closing it just as a Rottweiler slammed right into the glass.

We took one look at each other and laughed. A connection was immediately forged between us. It was as if fate had coordinated that moment to bring light and companionship into my life at a time I needed it most.

Stephanie, my sister, witnessed the bond forming between Parker and me and understood the significance of his presence in my life. Over the years, Parker and I faced challenges together and celebrated victories together. Our bond transcends friendship. He is the brother my mother never birthed.

“That’s your copy,” I tell him. “Keep it. Feel free to make any changes you think are necessary for the business. I’ll send you an electronic copy as well.”

“Appreciate you, my brother.”

After Parker leaves my office, my desk phone rings. I answer and immediately end the call. “Fucking telemarketers.”

It’s soon midmorning, which means everyone’s in the office, and the business is running.

My father retired, leaving me to run his investment firm three years ago. I was twenty-nine years old then. I merged my residential

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real estate firm with my father's commercial investment firm, making business smoother for me. Though my father is retired, he still works hard to maintain business relationships with our long-term partners.

Many would probe why my father, and I had separate firms to begin with. It's simple: my father never handed us a dollar. Despite the money and access, if my sister and I wanted something, we needed to work hard and prove to him we deserved it through dedication and a willingness to go after it on our own.

If I wanted to take over his million-dollar company, I had to show him I was able to establish my own. At the age of twenty-six, I started Price Investments. I've been in business six years now, and the success has surpassed my father's expectations immeasurably.

My father demonstrated his love to my sister and me by providing for us while also insisting we earn our places in life. He has never coddled or spoiled Stephanie and me.

As a young boy, I was always on a mission to prove to myself I could be as great as him—if not better. Through hard work, a huge personality, and a brilliant mind, my father, Marshon Price, has been my inspiration. He has built the foundation for the success I've experienced. My father's dedication to us and the absence of my mother made me who I am today: a man who values those around him but also seeks to be valued and recognized.

An hour later, I walk a lap around the outer office to drop off a file to one of my employees. My eyes feel as heavy as my mind. It's not even lunchtime, and I'm already feeling tired. I was up for hours in the middle of the night thinking about my relationship with Cianna, the woman I've been with for six years. It's time for us to figure out where our relationship is heading, or it's time to wrap it all up. Cianna is sharp and as beautiful as earthlight. She's a tenacious real estate agent who's handled some of the transactions for commercial investment properties my firm has purchased. Our personal and business lives are intertwined.

She's been acting strange lately. For too long now, we've felt like roommates sharing common areas in our home.

We have different interests, she'd say, to explain her distance, but I believe our differences shouldn't keep us apart. I always take an interest in the things she loves doing because I value all that comes with her. At some point, she stopped stepping into my world.

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I love Cianna, but I need more from her. The trajectory of our relationship has taken a turn for what feels like the worst, and I can't seem to figure out why. I find myself yearning for her participation and affection. Our relationship was once filled with trust. That doesn't exist anymore. Unfortunately, what does exist is my puzzled curiosity and Cianna's unexpected negligence toward our relationship.

I return to my office to retrieve my phone and wallet before walking out. As I head toward the elevator, Stephanie stops me.

"Hey, Mars. Are you going to the Masquerade Business Dinner this Friday? I need to write down a list of people who will be attending from our office."

Stephanie is the office manager. She's also my younger sister and shares my father's wit and smile.

"Hey, Steph. You can put my name down on the list. Should I change my mind about attending, I will inform you."

She gives me an incredulous look. "Remember, you're the owner. It's mandatory for you to be there."

"You asked me if I'm going as if I have a choice, Steph. Put my name on the list," I reply, chuckling at my sister.

"Will do. Have you spoken to Dad yet?"

"No. Should I have? Is everything okay?"

"Should be. He hasn't mentioned anything out of the ordinary. Give him a call when you can. He probably just wants to hear from you."

"I agree," I say with a nod.



When I step outside, the sky is clear, and the air is warm against my face. I walk to the nearest coffee shop. The way I'm feeling, it'll be an early day for me. To my luck, the morning coffee rush has already cleared out, so I step up to the counter and order a triple shot Americano over light ice with ease. I swipe my card, step to the side, and wait for my drink.

"Mars!" the barista calls out a moment later. I thank her and sit down at the window.

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People in business attire walk past. I don't pay any attention to them. My thoughts are heavy this morning. My phone catches my attention as the screen lights up—an email. I make a note to respond when I get back to the office. Before locking my phone, Cianna's photo on my home screen catches my attention.

Cascading locks of luscious mahogany brown hair complement the warmth of her ivory complexion. Full pink lips spread into a smile that warms me. I miss Cianna's smile—not the one she forces across her face to conceal what might be really going on with us. I miss the smile that skates across her face when she's dancing around the house, wearing something entrancing, jamming to one of her favorite playlists. I don't understand where I could have gone wrong with her. I hate when we catch each other's eyes these days because they don't lock or linger. It's quick and impassive. She smiles and turns away quickly, as if smiling for too long will give me hope or a green light to get close to her.

I'm uncertain if this shift in our relationship is my fault. I've given my best to Cianna.

The space we are in now is desolate, and the awkwardness between us is jarring. The closer I try to get with her, the further she pulls away from me. The more I try to talk to her, the more she finds ways to avoid me. The silence between us has grown sharper than a scalpel. The sting of her absence doesn't feel any better.

Sitting here thinking about us fills me with anguish. I take a sip of my Americano. In need of a distraction to relieve my mind and escape the reality of what's going on in my relationship, my attention drifts to the building across from mine.

I shift my thoughts to the mysterious woman I've grown accustomed to seeing each morning. I wonder what time she usually has lunch. This is the first time I've been curious about a woman who isn't Cianna. It feels wrong. *It is* wrong. But is it entirely wrong if Cianna makes me feel as though I'm the only one participating in our relationship? I'm not one to justify disloyalty; however, Cianna has been pushing me away. It feels intentional and awfully familiar. It feels like the bane of my existence.

Rejection.

Chapter 3

“Selfish”

Nyla

ACCORDING TO MY best friend, Samia, I turn into a cranky, mean bitch if I don't eat breakfast, and today, I didn't eat breakfast.

I glance at the bottom right of my computer to check the time. It's lunchtime. I sent Samia a text asking if she wants to get lunch. She texts me back to meet her in the lobby in ten minutes.

I grab my phone and purse and head toward the bathroom to freshen up. My curls are still intact, though my dress is a little wrinkly from sitting in the chair for so long. Fortunately, the ruffles hide most of the wrinkles. I run my hands down my dress before leaving to meet Samia downstairs.

When I reach the lobby, she is nowhere to be found. I wait for two minutes, irritated and hungry, then step outside. She's standing in front of the building holding two bags and a familiar box.

Instead of stating the difference between meeting *inside* the lobby and outside, I pause, and a smile emerges on my face. I give her *the look*. “Is that a Cinnamon roll from Cinnaholic?”

“Yes, it is.”

I clap my hands in excitement and take the box. “I haven't had my favorite in weeks.” I give her a kiss on the cheek.

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"I picked them up before work this morning. Let me guess," she says, raising her eyebrows with a knowing look, "you skipped breakfast, didn't you?"

"Yes," I answered grumpily. "And I didn't get much sleep."

"Yeah, well you made it to work on time. I'm guessing the alarm clock worked." She hands me a brown bag. "Veggie wrap. I won't allow you to live off cinnamon rolls." I giggle and we start walking. She's always one step ahead. I appreciate her and how well she knows me.

"Yes, the alarm clock worked. *Too well*. It's disturbing." I raise the blue box to my nose and inhale. Notes of vanilla, cinnamon and brown sugar pervades my nose. "You look sophisticatedly cute," I compliment Samia, roaming my eyes over her outfit.

She's wearing a deep red pencil skirt, paired with a white button down and black pumps. Red always compliments Samia, who is five feet, nine inches, bobbed haircut, fawn skin, full eyes, and heart-shaped lips.

"Thanks," she winks with a smile. Mia loves receiving compliments and doesn't hesitate to offer one. "You're looking beautiful yourself." She eyes my dress. "I love this. Your pieces are always stylish."

We turn a corner. "Thank you. You can borrow anything, anytime you'd like."

"Your offer is bullshit. You know I'll never return any of your stuff." She laughs.

"Agreed. You were never good at returning any of my things. I still can't wrap my head around how you wore some of my clothes before I ripped the tags off."

"You've always appreciated seeing me in your clothes."

I put a finger up. "*Only* because you know how to put an outfit together." I stop walking and turn around. "Let's head to the garden to eat our lunch. It's nice out," I suggest.

We walk toward the garden one block away. Halfway across the street, I stumble in an attempt to avoid a biker who clearly has no intention of stopping to save me from being ran over.

"What the hell!" I yell. I almost dropped my bag *and* my cinnamon roll. "Is it me or are bikers supposed to stop with cars at ALL red lights?"

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“This is one of several reasons why I hate New York. Everyone is always rushing to go nowhere,” says Samia, who is a California girl at heart. We enter the garden and take a seat by the waterfall.

It’s our usual spot. She starts to discuss work, but I’m not in the mood. Samia and I co-own an events business and space. We’ve been successful in the three years we’ve been here, but we’ve been working on a deal to sell it. We both want to venture out and get involved in things that speak to our creative souls. What does that mean for me? I’m not sure. As usual, I know I am ready for something more, something different.

“Honestly, Samia, I don’t want to get into work right now. We just left the office,” I tell her firmly. “I need to speak to you about Ryan.”

Her round face raises concern. “What’s going on with Ryan?”

“We got into a huge argument two nights ago. I was noticeably clear about my decision not to move forward with our relationship two weeks ago. He’s still calling me. Asking for another chance. He cheated on me and disrespected our entire relationship.” My brows arch. “The audacity of him to ask for another chance.”

“Unbelievable. We are not in the realm of giving out chances like charity. How often is he calling you? Once? Twice? Three times a day?”

“Doesn’t matter how many times. Why is he calling at all? He’s texting me all hours of the morning, leaving voicemails. It’s becoming too much.” I open my lunch bag.

“Block him from calling you.” She pauses before continuing. “I’m going to keep it real with you, okay?”

“Wait. I never thought I’d see the day that you’d ask for the green light to speak her thoughts.” I chuckle.

She rolls her eyes and smirks. “I think you’re relieved he cheated on you. Offered you the perfect cause to leave him. You’ve been over him for a while, Nyla.”

Samia, my best friend, and the only person other than my sister, Ryelyn, who knows me better than anyone in this world. Sometimes I think Samia knows me better than Ryelyn. I think about producing a lie about how she is wholly inaccurate but decide against it. There’s no point in lying. Samia smells bullshit from a mile away. Sometimes

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I think she has some sort of magical ability to read my mind and predict my future. In college, she called things out before the events happened. Always warned me of things I never saw coming.

Samia and I met Ryan in college. Ryan was like a guy best friend to me. That is until he kissed me in between two shelves in a library. I've always felt like Samia disliked my friendship with Ryan because meeting him forced me to split my time between the two of them. Now I know, her senses and judgment about Ryan weren't irrationally working overtime. I should've listened to her when she told me to watch out for him. She'd say she can see through all the shininess everyone was blind to. Ryan's intentions were to be a good person, but he had a radiant exterior and deep down he was a deceitful human being. I never saw that in him. Ryan has always been good to me. Until now. Until he decided to cheat.

"Honestly ..." I pause, toying with my veggie wrap. "You're right. I was never head over heels for him in the first place." I draw a deep breath and release with satisfaction having disclosed my true feelings. "This is exactly why I despise dating. You know me, Mia. There are things about me that run deep. I have yet to meet someone who can run that far or keep up. Ryan was never the right person for me."

Her eyes widen as she wipes her mouth and nods her head. "Good. I thought you were going to give me some pathetic lie about how you aren't relieved."

"Ha-ha. I don't need to lie to you, Mia. Plus, if I do, you'd see right through me."

"You're right. You were never able to hide your true emotions. At least not from me." She winks her right eye at me and stabs her fork into a cluster of green kale. "Do you feel like you need closure in a way? There must be some part of you that feels something. I mean, you and Ryan did spend a few years dating," she says, stuffing her mouth with kale.

"That's the thing. Depending on the situation, connections can break as easily as they are formed. I wouldn't necessarily say I don't have love for Ryan, because I do. But I only have love for him because he's been a good friend. A good person. Romantically, he's not *good enough* for me. I don't have the kind of love that desires him at all."

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"I'm proud of you for finally admitting this to me. Collectively, men *and* women sometimes lie about being satisfied with the ones we choose to be with."

"I agree. It's like sometimes we forbid ourselves of the things we truly want and need from a person. I don't understand why we do this."

She raises her eyebrows. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Heard about why we do this to ourselves ..."

"No, did I miss something?"

"Because there's a shortage."

"Shortage of what? I lean forward and cross my arms on the surface of the table, anxious to understand where she's going with this. "Samia, why are you dragging this? Just say it."

Since we've become best friends, she dragged pauses between sentences to dramatize her stories.

"The reason we settle is because we believe there is a shortage of good people available. We cling to the first person that's good to us, and ultimately settle even after we realize we aren't entirely satisfied. And if they're attractive ..." She sips her drink. "Despite my hot and cold relationship with him, Ryan is a *fine* ass cheater."

I laugh. "Took you a while to get there, but you're right." And that's what I did. I attached myself to Ryan because he was the first thing that felt good to me after leaving Texas for college. He was kind and he *showed* me he wanted me. He wasn't a prick like most men in our school. When he kissed me in between those bookshelves back in college, I'd regret pushing him away from me. I told him we were *just friends* and remained friends with him.

When I bumped into Ryan shortly after college, I fell victim to his wit and confidence. Remembering how regretful I was when I dismissed his advances toward me. I committed myself to making what could have been into reality. I wanted to get rid of my fears and allow myself to feel something good again. Allow myself to be human like every other girl seemed to be doing. That said, Ryan and I dated. While most of our relationship has been long distance because he traveled a lot for work, the time we did spend together always felt borrowed.

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“I’m going to give him a call to let him know I forgive him for cheating on me, but I can no longer be with him the way he wants to be with me,” I say thoughtfully.

“If that makes you feel better, great. I wouldn’t need to do all of that—but I respect your decision.”

Though Samia and I are quiet, my mind keeps running a mile a minute. Ryan is the first person I dated exclusively as an adult.

He’s handsome, creative, and has pretty good business smarts. Except it was never enough. I knew it then and I know it now. Samia is right. Ryan cheating on me expedited our breakup. Makes it easier for me to part ways with him. Although I wasn’t completely satisfied in our relationship, I remained faithful to him because it’s what he deserved. I deserve that from the man who fiercely chooses me too.

Chapter 4

“Doubts and Distractions”

Mars

I'M BACK AT the office. The strong coffee led me to believe I could make it through the entire day. Two hours later, it's worn off, and I'm back to my initial decision to leave early, at three-thirty instead of my usual seven in the evening. I scan through tons of emails and dutifully respond to the ones that need immediate attention. I filter out emails that need to be referred to respective specialists in the office.

It's time for my afternoon check-in with Cianna.

Scrolling through my recent calls, I tap her number. The phone rings three times before I'm directed to her voicemail. The familiar words sends a wave of disappointment in my stomach. She used to be so eager to speak to me, hear my voice, she'd pick up on the first ring. Lately, she hasn't answered when I call to check in. Two minutes later, a text message from her pops up on my phone.

*Cianna: Mars, I'm in a meeting.
I'll call you when I'm finished.*

*Me: No need. Just checking in on you.
I'll see you at home.*

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The receipt indicates she's read my message. I lock my phone and place it back on my desk. Resting my back against my chair, I spin to gaze out the window. I'm so caught up in my thoughts I don't realize my assistant is standing in my doorway until I hear a flutter of papers and her voice.

"I'm sorry to disturb you."

I turn to face her. "No need to apologize. How can I help you?"

"Here are the contracts you asked for yesterday," she says, walking closer to my desk. "I read them twice for any inconsistencies. They look good. If you have any questions, please let me know."

"Thank you. I'll review them. I'm sure I won't have questions, should I, I'll contact you."

"No problem," she says, placing the contracts on my desk.

"I'll be leaving early today. If there's anything you need, Stephanie will be here."

Her green eyes expand in surprise as it is unusual for me to leave early. "Enjoy your day off, Mister Price." She walks out.

I stand up, grab my belongings, and drop by Stephanie's office to inform her I'm leaving early today.

As I stand in her doorway, she's diligently working. Her fingers are dancing across the keyboard, sending a sound of clicking through the air. I smile at the determination in her face expression as the light on her computer screen bounces off her chocolate skin. Her eyes are squinted, and her face is lightly scrunched, creating wrinkles along the arch of her nose. She looks like our mother right now.

"Steph," I grab her attention, and she stops typing, "I'm out of here early today. My calls are being transferred to Jennifer. If she needs assistance, she will forward the calls to you."

"Sure, no problem. Is everything okay? You don't usually leave this early."

"Yes, everything is okay, little sis," I tease.

"Stop calling me that. You're only two years older than I am."

"Doesn't that make you my little sister?" I laugh. Her eyes roll in agreement.

"I'm excited about the Masquerade Business Dinner this Friday. It should be fun," she says, smiling.

"I'm sure it will be. I'll see you tomorrow, Steph. Get home safe."

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“See you later, *big head*,” she teases, knowing I detest when she calls me that.



I return to my apartment located in Manhattan on Eighty-Sixth Street. I moved here to be close to Central Park. I love having access to open spaces where I can run and escape the busy streets of New York City. Staying active is a priority for me. I change into workout gear and run for forty-five minutes, which equates to a few laps.

I return to my apartment building and head to the top floor. I lean against the elevator wall; the cold metal feels nice against my back. I'm sweating and ready for a shower. I step out the elevator and spot Cianna in a form fitting black dress. She's at the door putting the key into the lock.

She looks up. My lips curl into a smile. Cianna's doesn't. She looks down at the lock.

Still, I walk up to her and hold her from behind.

Jasmine and vanilla.

I close my eyes as both scents penetrate my senses.

I miss being close to her like this.

I need her to embrace me.

Spark excitement since I'm home early.

She doesn't.

Instead, she faces me. I kiss her forehead, make my way to her lips. She lifts her hands and places her palms against my chest. Part of me wishes her next move is to grip my shirt and kiss me back with need. The way things have been between us ...

She pushes me away.

Rejection. I can always feel it coming.

“You're sweaty, Mars.”

Dissatisfaction tugs at me. Instead of displaying frustration, I rub my hands down her exposed arm and speak. “How was your day?” I ask, gazing down at her.

“I'll tell you if you let me open the door,” she replies, annoyed. No warmth in her voice.

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Disappointed, I release my hold on her as she unlocks and opens the door. I wish she would have let us be, let us live in a brief moment of intimacy. I follow her inside.

“My day was good. It was busy but overall smooth. I’m sorry I didn’t reach out to you today.”

I met Cianna in my last year of college. After basketball practice, I usually stayed in the gym a few hours later to practice. *To be the best you must go above what is required of you*—that’s what my father always said. Staying later than the rest of my team was yet another way I proved to the team, to my father and to myself, I was worth it.

I walked out of the school sweaty and exhausted. Heading toward my dorm room, I spotted Cianna sitting in the grass reading. Something about her was striking, different. I’m uncertain if it was the pink highlights in her curly hair, her colorful socks rolled up to her knees or the fact she was reading a book about the fundamentals of real estate.

I approached her, we conversed for about an hour and made plans to meet up the next day for lunch.

We spent our entire semester together studying, partying with Parker, and getting to know one another. During Christmas break, she invited me to go with her to visit her parents in California. When it was time for us to leave, I noticed Cianna’s style changed. Her pink hair was dyed back to its original color, a reddish brown. Her usual funky, unconventional style converted to chic and modish.

She completely transformed before my eyes. Numerous questions scattered my mind. I was curious to understand the sudden change. I buried the urge to question her and allowed my observations to answer.

After spending time with her family—who I learned lived by Christian faith—I realized college allowed Cianna to be her true self. She was rebelling against her parents behind their backs and living a more defined version tailored to who they preferred her to be when she was at home.

She always talked about starting a career in real estate but obtained her degree in Business Management. I learned so much about Cianna during our visit, most importantly, I learned her degree in Business was to satisfy the goals her parents set for her, and not the ones she set for herself. Despite her parents’ disapproval, Cianna took

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all the necessary steps to become a qualified real estate agent. I was proud of her when she decided to chase her dreams.

I'm enormously proud of how far she has come. Watching her grow in a field she has always wanted to be in makes me happy, and I'm even happier knowing I aided in the growth of her protentional by offering her an opportunity to build her portfolio by using her to acquire a few commercial properties for Price Investments. I merely gave her an opportunity and she did the work all on her own.

"It's fine, Cianna," I reply, entering reality. But it isn't *fine*. As the months go by, I'm not sure if I'm becoming numb to her detachment, or gradually convincing myself her detachment is okay just to hold on to what is left of us.

As of lately, I'm desperate to know what is going on in her head when she wanders off and her mind goes into the deep end.

Far away from me.

I've only felt desperate this deeply once in my entire life, which was when I had no choice to grow up without my mother. Lately I'm desperate for Cianna's approval of me. Lately, I'm desperate for Cianna's attention. Desperate to hold her small frame between my arms without feeling like she's trying to escape from me. I'm desperate for her to want me like she used to. Desperate for her to make love to me. To ride me with need as waves of sensation flush through our bodies simultaneously. I don't receive any of that anymore. And I'm human enough to admit ... I'm desperate to have it all back.

I don't expect her to *reach out*. Cianna stopped checking in on me a long time ago. It doesn't stop me from checking in on her. I genuinely want to know how she's feeling throughout her day. If she's having a bitter day, I want to be the one to make it sweeter for her.

Sensing displeasure in my voice, she walks over to me and pulls me closer to her.

I'm six foot four, and Cianna is only five foot seven. I look down at her as she stares up at me. We're holding hands.

"I said I'm sorry, Mars."

"I heard you the first time you said it."

"Babe ... don't do that," she says. "The tone in your voice tells me all I need to know. You're upset." She puts space between us, but our hands are still locked. "I was busy at work today. I'm sorry I didn't

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call you. I had meetings all afternoon.” She lifts her eyebrow. “You always call me at the wrong time.”

At the wrong time? I never called at the wrong time before the unexpected appearance of her unusual behavior. Now? I guess I need a scheduled time to call my own woman.

“No big deal, Ci.” I release her and head toward our master bedroom. “I just finished running laps and need to shower. Are we ordering out tonight or would you like me to whip us up something?” Cianna takes too long to answer. I turn to see why. Already absorbed in her phone, she doesn’t acknowledge me until I’ve stripped out of my sweaty clothes and dropped them into the hamper.

“What did you say, babe?” she yells out.

I ignore her the same way she has been ignoring me and all the simple things I need from her.

I enter the bathroom and look around. I love our bathroom. The dark gray and white marble tiles give it a masculine touch. I let Cianna do the decorating to her liking. She’s a minimalist so she didn’t do much. I appreciate her understated feminine style: black terracotta vases filled with soft, pink flowers and white and gray coordinated linens and rugs.

If she’s happy, I’m happy.

I’m not sure she feels the same.

I slide the glass shower door open and turn the water on. I love taking hot showers.

The steam immediately detoxifies me.

Calms me.

Relaxes my soul.

My mind.

Momentarily releases me of any pain and worry festering inside of me.

I wait until the water is at my preferred temperature. Staring into the mirror, I’m not pleased with my reflection. I work hard to stay in shape and take immense pride in being well-groomed and dressed. It’s not my body that is the issue. It’s the tightness around my eyes, the frown that’s been glued to my face. Lately, my thoughts have been getting the better part of me. I’m questioning myself again.

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The truth can no longer be ignored. I am not happy in my relationship. I'm content enough not to want to leave, and there are a lot of things I value about my relationship with Cianna.

Must count for something, right? However, I'm restless. I am in dire need of a much deeper connection than the one I share with her. I need more from Cianna, yet I don't know what that entails exactly.

There's a part of me that feels like if I share this with her again, she'll be dismissive.

I step into the shower and let the water fall over my head and cascade down my body. I wash with a bar of soap and rinse off. A few minutes into my shower, I hear the bathroom door open. I wipe water away from my eyes. Cianna stands nearly naked in front of the sink. I watch as she starts to brush her teeth in the mirror. Her movements make her breast jiggle. She's wearing a white robe so thin I can see the arch of her back.

I adore her naked body through the thin material, but the heavy thoughts break through. Is love enough? Can we fill all the parts missing between us? It's been years—shouldn't I know the answer to that? What we've become and who we used to be are two very different figures. Sometimes I feel like I'm holding on to how happy we used to be.

As Cianna bends over to rinse her mouth, I'm instantly aroused. All my doubts disappear when I feel myself becoming all that I wish Cianna would take advantage of.

Our sex is simple, lackluster, undemanding. Nearly boring. I know I might sound crazy, but for me, it should never be so simple. My desires run deeper, but I'll take vanilla sex over no sex. It's been weeks since Cianna and I have been sexually intimate. Fostering intimacy with Cianna feels like pulling a horse across sand.

Tonight, I'm taking my chances.

With hope budding in my chest, I demand. "Cianna, come here."

She looks at me through the glass, and her gaze drops to my hand stroking my dick. She knows what time it is, and for the life of me, I wish she were on the same timing.

At another time in our relationship, willingly, Cianna would open the shower door, step in, and allow me to dive deep into her senselessly. Instead, she shakes her head and mumbles something about not feeling well and going to bed soon. I turn around feeling a

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surge of emotion, a harsh blizzard developing inside me. I let the water glide down my head again. I hear the door shut. Part of me wished to turn around to see she changed her mind. Or perhaps I wished for her to step into the shower and alert me with her presence by placing her soft hands against my back. I shouldn't be this disappointed when I already know what to expect.

All I know is that each time she pushes me away, a part of me rebels, aches for something more. The question is, can we find a way to bridge this divide between us before it destroys what's left of what we have?

I need her.

This isn't about sex.

It's about fulfillment in our relationship.

Desiring one another. Connecting with my woman on various levels. This is about our relationship feeling empty. There's no way Cianna desires me anymore. Because if she did, I wouldn't be feeling this way.

I'm lonely in our relationship.

Imprisoned in uncertainty.

For what?

I'm lost in the unknown with no indication as to why.

I miss what we used to have. I miss what we used to be. When Cianna leaves, she not only leaves the bathroom, leaving me frustrated in more ways than one. I desire more from her. And if she can't give me more, or at least an explanation as to why we are suddenly distant partners, then it is time for us to go our separate ways.

I think that now, but as soon as I look in her brown eyes, I entertain hope we can work through things. Every relationship goes through storms, right? At what point do I acknowledge her neglect is too much?

I finish my shower as all sexual arousal leaves my body. I hop out, quickly moisturize my skin, and walk from the bathroom into our bedroom.

Instantly, I notice Cianna didn't make the bed this morning, even though she gets out of bed after I do. This is new. She used to make the bed all the time. She's serious about it too. Says it's a symbol of navigating the day with clarity and intention. It seems like as time

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goes by, her efforts are declining. The care deteriorating along with my patience.

Agitated by yet another example of how she seems detached, I open my underwear drawer and grab a pair of boxer briefs and a t-shirt. I walk into the living room and Cianna's making dinner. I appreciate her taking the initiative.

Despite my disappointment with her rejection in the bathroom, I don't let said disappointment get in the way of my desire to spend time with her. I sit at one of the barstools at the island separating the kitchen and the living room and watch as she flips chicken and stir fry's veggies. We make eye contact. She looks away.

I can't go on like this, like we're roommates, not partners.

"Cianna, look at me." She's been ignoring me too frequently lately, and I need her to acknowledge me now. "I never come home this early. Aren't you curious to know why?"

"I didn't really notice. I'm sorry."

"That says a lot, Cianna."

I'm sick of her indifference. She attempts to say something more as I walk toward her. I cut her off before she can speak.

"I'm not finished," I say firmly.

I pick her up and sit her on the kitchen countertop. Opening her legs, I settle my body in between. Gently, I lay my hands on both sides of her cheeks and lift her face to look me in the eyes.

"Do you still love me, Cianna?"

"Of course, I do, Mars." Her eyes begin to gloss.

"Do you want me?"

"Yyess, I do," she stutters.

Why is her eyes watering? If she still wants this with me, then why is there a tremor in her voice?

"Well, Cianna, it doesn't feel like you want me."

She looks down at her fingers. "I don't mean to make you feel that way."

I tip her chin up with my finger. Scanning her face for certainty, searching her eyes for some sort of evidence of truth behind her words. I don't know what I see. *Or maybe I do.* Maybe my mind hasn't caught up to what my heart already knows.

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“Have we outgrown each other?” I ask. “Why did you reject me in the bathroom? Better yet why are you avoiding having sex with me at all? What’s going on with you? With us?”

“I’m not rejecting you, Mars. Work has been kicking my ass and I guess I’m overwhelmed.” She leans in and kisses my lips between words like, I’m sorry. I always want you. I will make it up to you. I leaned into each kiss realizing how much I needed to hear those words from her. She hops off the counter, places the food on a plate. I turn the grill off and follow her as she retreats into our living room, draped in her white robe. She takes a seat on our white couch and shifts her body to face me.

Our gazes lock, and a sense of calm washes over Cianna. Her eyes remain fixed on mine, a silent invitation that stirs something deep inside of me. A fierce longing.

With deliberate movements, she eases her robe off her shoulders, unveiling soft rosebud nipples. The white fabric slips down her back to reveal the fine curves of her body and the soft expanse of her skin. She reclines on the couch, with her legs gently parting. I’m taken aback by this sudden display from Cianna. A mix of arousal and confusion cloud turbulent thoughts in my head.

Why is she so willing right now?

Her fingers trail from her navel to her breast unhurriedly. “I’m yours, Mars. You have my attention,” she declares, her voice sounding seductive.

Faced with two choices, I’m torn between embracing this rare opportunity to connect with Cianna or confront the unspoken truths lingering between us. Despite the swell of my desire, frustration with and for her, I give in to the primal urge to be close to her in the most intimate way possible.

The conversation she seems to be avoiding will eventually happen, for now, I’m consumed by the need to feel Cianna’s skin against mine as I’m buried deep inside of her.

Locking eyes with My Cianna, I speak in a low, deep whisper, “Show me.”

Chapter 5

“One More Time”

Nyla

MY DOORBELL RINGS. With blearily eyes, I lift my head and check the alarm clock. Who’s at my door at five-thirty-five in the morning? I have no idea. I push my blanket off and slowly get out of bed. Leaving my bedroom, I walk through my living room and approach the front door.

“Who is it?” I called out.

“Ryan.”

I squint to see through the peephole. It is indeed Ryan standing outside my door half an hour before my alarm goes off. I already know what he wants. *Me*. What he won’t accept is that I don’t want him.

“Nyla, please, let me in,” he begs. “We need to talk.”

“Give me a second, Ryan.” I hurry to my bathroom, remove my hair net, splash water over my face and brush my teeth before returning to open the door.

“Baby,” he says.

I *hate* when he calls me that. I planned on speaking with him in the hallway, but Ryan enters my apartment uninvited, holding my cheeks between his hands and kisses me. A moan forms in the back of my throat as I get lost in the familiarity of the act.

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He shuts the door with his leg.

Going against what my brain is communicating. *Don't do it. Back away.* I tug his shirt over his head, his blue HU cap falls. He slips my nightgown off. I may lust for Ryan, but there's nothing else between us. I've always known that.

Ryan was convenient.

Reason hits me and I stop. I pull away. "Ryan, we can't. We are done. We *have* to be done," I tell him, as frustrated with him as I am my own hormones.

He takes a step back, smearing his hands over his face. "I'm sorry," he says, "let's talk."

I slip my gown on, taking a deep breath, conflicted between ending this for good and fucking him. The latter will further complicate our situation, and I *don't* want to lead him to a dead end. I stand in front of Ryan with raised brows. "Okay, let's talk."

He's pacing back and forth, then stops to lift his hat from the floor. "I don't know why I'm here, Nyla. I know cheating on you was wrong. I ... I needed to see you," he says, slipping the cap over his head. "Part of me wants to keep fighting for our relationship." He wipes his hands over his face again. "I also feel like this is the start of something good for you, as if our relationship ending is what you needed."

Guilt spills into me. I'm guilty for feeling pleased about how our relationship ended. I prolonged the inevitable. Like Samia said, Ryan cheating on me gave me the push I needed to leave him. We were college friends who should have remained that. *Friends.*

As Ryan speaks, I remind myself that I shouldn't feel guilty for wanting more.

Moving to New York after college offered me a chance to mask embittered fragments of myself. It signified a fresh start for me, an opportunity to redefine my narrative. The idea of beginning my career in my hometown held no appeal to me. Why confine myself to a place saturated with memories of my mother? For years, I grappled with grief, surrounded by memories that only deepened my sorrow and confusion of her absence.

When we associate ourselves with bad people or maintain sub-standard relationships, we are told to separate from them. Why not

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use this same concept if you're stuck in an environment that's detrimental to your healing process?

New York provided me with an undeniable exhilaration I'm drawn to. An exhilaration that eased my pain. I nestled my grief and thoughts in this city. It was an escape for me. An escape I so desperately craved. New York was thrilling. Amusing. It provided entertainment anywhere I went. And with the sadness that still consumes me, enjoyment was what I needed.

In college, I buried my concentration in studying, reading books and volunteering in numerous events. I made a rule to protect myself from getting hurt: *If I can remain guarded, I can retain control. Never open myself up so much I'd become someone who can potentially get their heart broken, again.*

I kept myself active in college because for someone like me, a distraction is vital to keep from self-annihilation. From showing the world how obscure and inadequate my heart truly feels.

When Samia and I first moved to New York, I got a taste of the city's nightlife. The experience was sickly-sweet. Until those experiences became repetitious and tart.

I met numerous men. Never exchanging numbers with any of them. I never made commitments.

Commitments meant expectations I didn't want. Didn't trust. Expectations meant giving a person the opportunity to disappoint me so, I stayed away from building relationships with anyone who wasn't Samia. She was my person. I had her. She was all I needed. Then and now. I was afraid of getting close to anyone else because my own mother left me with a tainted heart. And then, I bumped into Ryan.

I always knew I was holding back from Ryan. I didn't give him all of me. Only pieces. And none of my heart. I've learned if you give a person every portion of you, they have the power to control you entirely. That's what made our relationship last this long. I built a wall he could never penetrate, and he traveled frequently.

"Listen, Ryan," I say as I take his hand, "despite cheating on me, you have been kind. We have always been great friends. As romantic partners, we weren't right." I pause and draw in a deep breath. I release. "I'm not upset with you for cheating on me anymore. I think this is what we needed to fall into something better than what we were holding on to."

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Ryan is silent. The silence is so heavy I hear my pulse beating faster than an Amtrak train.

He squeezes my hand, and the gesture feels like goodbye. “I understand,” he says, releasing his hold. “You’re right. I guess I’m fixated on the fact we were close friends before we started dating. I don’t want to lose that. Seeing you in New York after college made me feel like it was my chance again, Nyla. I guess somewhere down the line our relationship became a connection we did not want to break for the sake of our *initial* friendship. I’m sorry I stepped out on you.” The corner of his lips curl into a smile. His nutmeg skin looks warm and vibrant. Not pale and sorrowful, like losing me isn’t tearing him apart right now. “I wish you all the best, Nyla. You deserve it. If you need anything, please, don’t hesitate to call me.”

He strolls toward the door, leaving me standing still, fisting the hem of my gown. I feel like Derek Jeter swung his bat and struck me in the face with a baseball.

Too formal, too easy. Never mind the fact I handed him the axe to sever our ties entirely ... my brain screams, *Oh Nyla, you’re so easy to let go*, and starts working energetically. Why is this so easy for him? He’s been hounding me for weeks, and now he shrugs and walks away. No fight. No pushback. No plead to reconcile. *Nothing.*

Thunderstruck, I follow him to the door, squeezing my fist and biting my bottom lip. *Hard.*

I don’t know if it’s my hormones or my need to prove to myself I meant something to him. Maybe I’m triggered by the thought of anyone leaving me so willingly that encourages my next move. When Ryan turns around to say goodbye for the last time, I press my mouth against his and kiss him.

It’s wrong, but I take his hand and lead him to my living room area. Ryan never gave me an excuse as to *why* he cheated. He owned it and apologized. Isn’t that what I wanted? An easy breakup. No residue, no heart ache. Then why am I doing this? My conscious rings loud in my head. *Your need to feel coveted. Your need to chase the high of bliss.*

He tilts his head back, searches my face for certainty. He catches the urgency in my eyes, and slowly moves his face closer to mine. When the tip of our noses touch, he plants a hungry kiss on my lips. I unfasten the buckle on his pants.

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“Are you sure?” he whispers against my mouth.

“Yes. One more time won’t hurt.”

I slip the straps of my gown over my shoulder blades as I hope like hell, he makes me feel the crassness of my actions worth it.

Chapter 6

“It’s Not About the Sushi”

Mars

UNEXPLAINED DISTANCE IN a relationship is lethal. It forces you to over-analyze every action made by the person causing the rift.

Last night was various shades of strange. After Cianna and I had sex, we showered separately, as she wished. Together we ate dinner and watched a movie. When I placed my arm around her to usher her closer to me, I couldn’t shake the sense she was uncomfortable with our proximity.

I brushed the feeling off and enjoyed the movie with her. We shared our thoughts on certain scenes but didn’t talk much.

When she dozed off, I scooped her up and carried her to our room. I pulled the sheets over her body, gazing down at what once felt like *My Cianna* with wishful thinking.

As I placed a kiss on her lips before leaving our bedroom, I was unusually overwhelmed with an unfamiliar emotion, guilt. It seemed as though touching my woman somehow broke a boundary and kissing her without permission felt wrong. I felt wrong for touching her lips again without her approval. Wrong for admiring how the thin material of her night gown covered her nipples but not enough to disguise its firm shape.

LANDING ON MARS

Has it become this bad between us that I felt as if I was supposed to ask permission to kiss my own woman? Permission to admire her?

Hour's prior I was deep inside of her, yet I walked out of our bedroom feeling as though I betrayed her. I headed toward the minibar and grabbed a scotch glass Cianna surprised me with this past Christmas.

Lifting the glass bottle, I poured a little over an ounce of scotch and knocked the liquid back. I cleaned the living room, fluffing the pillows, and clearing the coffee table. All in the ways Cianna likes. I completed work in my office for about an hour and called it a night.

First thing this morning, Cianna asked if I'd take the day off to spend some time with her. This is unusual for her, so I quickly agree and call Stephanie to let her know I won't be coming in today.

"What's going on, big head," my sister asks. "You left work early yesterday, and now you're calling to tell me you're not coming in today. Whatever it is, I hope you're okay. You'll talk to me when you're ready."

I love how supportive Stephanie is and I respect how much she never pushes her curiosity.

"Nothing is wrong. Cianna needs me today. I want to make sure I'm there for her."

"Is she okay?"

"Yes, she is. I appreciate your concern."

Stephanie and Cianna have never been as close as I wished they were. It's nice to hear Stephanie's concern.

"Of course. Enjoy your day off. I'll give you a call if you're needed." She ends the call.

Cianna is standing in her closet when I finish my call with Stephanie. I remember when I first asked her to move in with me. Despite all the dazzling reasons to fall in love with the penthouse, Cianna was elated about the closet. She had a vision of how she wanted to use the space. I listened to every detail as she discussed the changes she planned to make in the next few months. The light in her eyes made me want to bring her vision to life sooner than later. I hired a company specialized in closet design and surprised her with the changes within three weeks.

Witnessing her reaction was priceless. She wrapped her arms around me tightly. Didn't let me go for what felt like forever.

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Explicitly, I remember feeling wanted, appreciated. Seeing Cianna happy gives me purpose. Being the one to add to her happiness still drives me. Which is why standing in this closet right now, knowing there's a distance between us pains me.

"What would you like to do today?" I ask, snapping back into reality.

"Well, first, let's grab a bite to eat," she responds. "I'm in the mood for sushi." I nod and wait for her to ask me what I'm in the mood for. She doesn't. Nor does she realize the suggestion she made. Anything Cianna wants, I'm happy to make happen for her. At some point, she stopped reciprocating. I'm more than a little annoyed this time. After all, I hate sushi, and she knows this.

I'm dressed and ready to go. I carefully apply an oil-based cologne to the inside of my wrists and neck. Stepping in front of the floor-length mirror, I check out my appearance. I'm dressed in a crisp white lapel shirt with taupe pants, paired with simple white leather lace-up sneakers.

"Are you ready?" I shout.

"Almost. Can you pull the car around? I'll meet you downstairs," she yells from the closet.

"I'd rather wait and walk down with you."

"Okay! Five minutes!"

I gave her five minutes, ten minutes ago. I'm a patient man, so I give her all the time she needs to get ready. When Cianna is finished, she walks into the living room. Her hair is pushed back into a ponytail exposing her face. She's donning a white haltered blouse with jeans that hug her curves, paired with silver Chanel sandals. I notice her face and body is much fuller—which she considers happy weight. When Cianna is experiencing a season of melancholy, her weight drops tremendously. So how could it be that her body is full in all the right places, yet our relationship feels like it's swimming in a pool next to exposed wires.

I'm not saying I prefer for Cianna to drop weight and look like what we are going through. I'm wondering what else is keeping her happy when she seems unhappy with me? I'm not expecting to be the source and center of Cianna's happiness, but I'd appreciate being an element.

"You look beautiful," I compliment.

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“Thanks. Let’s go,” she says, with her eyes on her phone screen, as she walks toward the door.

She leaves me feeling as if nothing I say really matters. Perhaps I’m the only one who’s feeling what we’re going through.

The car ride is quiet. She spends most of her time with her head down, focusing on her phone. I want to say something to her but decide against it. Does any part of her understand or care about how her behavior affects our relationship?

We park in the lot at the sushi spot and exit the car.

“Welcome to Beyond Sushi,” a hostess greets us as soon as we open the glass door. “Do you have reservations?”

“Yes, we do,” Cianna says. “For two.”

We do?

We’ve been together all morning and not once did I hear her on the phone making reservations for us.

It’s rare when I feel lost in my own life.

We wait for ten minutes before the hostess voices our table is ready. We follow the hostess through the dimly lit restaurant. Our table is in the back near large windows with a breathtaking view of a waterfall.

The waitress introduces herself and hands us our menus. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Cianna flat out disregards her and looks at the menu.

“Cianna.” I’m surprised by her rudeness.

“We just sat down. I don’t know what I want yet,” she answers, eyeing me with an unpleasant stare.

The waitress assures us she’ll be back to get our orders shortly.

As soon as the waiter leaves, I speak up. “Cianna, what was that about? Why were you rude to her?”

“I hate being rushed. We haven’t sat down for two minutes and she’s already rushing us to order.”

“She only asked us if we knew what we wanted to drink. If you weren’t sure, you could’ve said that Ci. She’s only doing her job.”

It bothers me knowing Cianna thinks it’s okay to be rude to our waitress.

Cianna drops the menu and stares at me with more fire in her eyes “Why are you defending her, Mars?”

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Fed up with her recent behavior, I place the menu on the table too and look directly into her eyes. Giving her no room to question me again, I question her. “What’s wrong with you, Cianna? When did you become so wrapped up in your own world? When did everything become about you?” Fed up, my eyebrows tighten.

I’m on a roll.

My voice is low but firm.

Where is the person I met in college? I don’t know who this person is in front of me.

A short time after we graduated, Cianna and I went our separate ways—to lead different lives—until we bumped into each other three years ago. Cianna moved to New York, away from her parents and in with me. We established there are various pillars that contribute to the success of a relationship. Love being one. We bonded ourselves with assurances on the back of a photo we’d taken and hung the film on our refrigerator with a magnet. I signed my initials and Cianna signed hers. From day one, I’ve honored my signature as I’ve chosen Cianna, but for too long now, Cianna hasn’t chosen me.

Has she always been this self-absorbed? If so, what galaxy have I been living in?

“Where is all of this coming from?” she asks, taken aback.

“Cianna.” I lean closer to her, studying her features. “Have you forgotten I don’t eat sushi?”

“Then let’s leave, Mars. Let’s go somewhere else.” She ducks her head, refusing to look at me. Guilt? “We don’t have to eat here.” Her phone rings. She lifts her hand. To what? Turn it around and answer while we’re discussing *this*? I’m not even sure what *this* is because, we’re not us anymore. I don’t know what we are. And I don’t know who Cianna is either.

Anger surges inside of my chest. I tighten my fist, and it meets the surface of the wooden table, loud and disturbing. Her hand jumps back. I didn’t mean to scare her. The way I’m feeling—sometimes even the most patient men break from pressure.

“Look, Cianna.” My fury drives unwanted attention to us. Attention I don’t want. “I don’t understand how you don’t see it’s not about the sushi.”

Clueless. She sits back in her chair. Blows air through her nose, like she’s the one fed up. “Then what is it about, Mars?”

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I turn my head toward the window. *Scenery. Water.* I stare at the waterfall, feeling like all my hopes of her realizing she has neglected me, and my wish of receiving more from her, are fading away.

Can we save our relationship?

The truth is, I can't save our relationship by myself, and Cianna seems to have already checked out. I've known this for a while, refusing to admit the extent of the truth.

The sun glimmers off the waterfall outside. Usually, I find the soft gurgle calming. Not today. I snap out of my thoughts only to see Cianna staring into her phone.

Exasperated, I say, "Let me take you home."

I can't wait for Cianna to love me the way I need her to, and I can't make us work if she won't participate. As we stand up, our waiter asks if something is wrong. I tell her we are fine, grab a fifty-dollar bill out of my wallet and hand it to her.

"For the inconvenience." I want to make up for the disrespect Cianna thought was okay to emit, so, I manage to smile through my hurt, even though it differs against what I truly feel. We leave, hop into my car, and begin to drive back home.

Disrupting the uncomfortable silence, Cianna decides to speak.

"Mars, if this isn't about the sushi, can you tell me what this is about?"

I have one hand on the wheel and the other on my chin. Lightly playing with my beard.

As we approach a red light, I'm in deep thought, tapping my thumb against the wheel.

"Please," Cianna pleads, wrapping a curly strand from her ponytail around her finger.

Am I the one who's changed? Grown, maybe, when she and our relationship haven't? If she doesn't understand anything I said to her in the restaurant, then she has so much to figure out on her own. The light turns green. We pull off and proceed to drive up Seventy-Second Street toward our home. I turn the corner on Seventy-Fourth and stop at another red light.

We wait as an elderly woman walks across the street. When my mother left, I began analyzing others—wondering what kind of hurt

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they've experienced or caused. Or if they feel as sad as I feel sometimes. I wonder if the women crossing the street *has* or *is* currently experiencing a love greater than one could ever imagine.

The light turns green, and I continue to drive.

"Mars!" Cianna shouts. "Talk to me! Why does it suddenly feel like I've done something wrong?"

Her phone chimes, indicating a text message. She releases her curl and swiftly grabs it from her lap.

"Cianna, when did you book reservations for us at Beyond Sushi? I never saw you make a call, nor did I see you pick up your phone to inform your assistant of your absence."

I quickly look to my right and Cianna is typing, responding to a text.

Focus. On. Us.

I want to say the words but don't. I pull over, put the car in park. Cianna finally stops texting. Blowing air through her nose, her chest rise and falls. I turn slightly to observe her features.

"Answer me, Cianna," I say firmly. I'm exasperated and equivalently infuriated with her phone obsession. I'm a smart man, and despite Cianna's neglect, she knows I am too. So why is she playing with me? With us?

She shifts in her seat. Pulling on a curl again, she twirls a long lock around her finger. Which is her usual coping mechanism.

Why is she nervous? What is she hiding?

Last night was the first time Cianna made me feel like there might be someone else, when she evaded my questions by being sexually intimate with me. This moment spurs the second time my instincts are uneasy.

She finally speaks. "I never intended to go into work today. I had plans to go to Beyond Sushi with Sirah. She canceled last night to tend to an emergency session with a client this morning." It's my turn to be confused. Her reason makes sense. Why not mention her canceled plans with Sirah to me this morning? Why did she pretend her intention today was to spend time with me?

I don't get to ask Cianna these questions because a sudden honk draws my attention. My gaze instinctively darts to my side. To my amazement, the woman I often admire through my office window is parked beside me in a white car. I experience her captivating beauty

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closely for the first time, and mysteriously felt spellbound. I block out Cianna. I block out the world, as her unanticipated presence catches me off guard. I can't resist whispering to myself, "What is she doing here?"

Cianna hostilely shifts her body toward me and asks, "Excuse me? Who is that? And why does it look like you've seen a ghost?"

I turn my attention to her, wondering how it is that Cianna said words to me with more care, more interest, than she did the entirety of our conversation.

Chapter 7

“Guilty”

Nyla

AN HOUR BEFORE I'm scheduled to arrive at Samia's place, I decide to make a quick stop at the nearest liquor store. I pick up a couple of bottles of our favorite wine before heading next door to the market.

Bright colors fruits and greens occupy my cart. I love to indulge in fresh food, and the process of choosing fruits and vegetables is like heaven to my senses. It's also a reminder of what my refrigerator looked like before my mother left.

My father never did our grocery shopping, and with my mother's sudden absence, it was hard for him to keep up with all the things he was never responsible for. It wasn't that my father thought the deed beyond him. He stepped back because my mother loved the responsibility, and my father loved my mother happy.

My sister and I would ask him for money and take long walks to the supermarket. We filled the carts with mostly junk food and microwavable meals. Now, as an adult, I try my best to eat foods that contribute to my health.

Satisfied, I leave the market with enough time to put my groceries away. Of course, my quick trip home is complicated by a lack of parking. I'm about to give up and head to Samia's rather than risk being late. A major pet peeve of mine.

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As I'm driving toward the corner on Eightieth, I spot a car blocking an empty parking space. The car is running, and I can see the shapes of two figures in the front seats. I pull up beside the car to ask the driver if he or she intended on leaving.

I roll down my window and honk my horn twice and wait for the driver to roll down the window.

Instead of acknowledging me, the window stays up. I can't see the driver clearly through the faintly tinted windows. The car finally honks back, then starts to pull out of the parking space.

"Asshole," I mutter. When the driver has cleared the space, I change gears and back my car. I park, step out, grab my bags—except for the bag containing the wine—and walk to the entrance of my apartment building. I greet the door man and hurry upstairs. I place the fruits and veggies in the clear bins at the bottom of the refrigerator and glance at the time. Samia's place is only a few minutes away. Circling the block looking for parking took longer than I had hoped.

I quickly changed into a jogger set. I'm feeling rushed so I hurry into the bathroom to brush my hair up into a loose elevated bun and change my clothes.

I grab my keys and purse off the kitchen island and leave.

The white car is now double parked a few spots up from mine. A woman is standing outside the car leaning against the passenger window. If I had more time, I'd say something about taking up parking spaces when people like me are circling the block trying to find one.

Then again, that wouldn't be a clever choice. This isn't Texas where most people are understanding. This is New York, I remind myself. Majority of individuals are ill-tempered and quick to react negatively. Wrong or not, the residence here don't take kindly to being addressed.

I remember my first few months of living here. I was walking down the street, holding a slice of pizza. I raised my slice, about to take a bite when a woman walking with her dog bumped right into me, causing me to drop my pizza.

This woman looked down at my pizza spattered on the pavement. She let her brown yorkie circle back to *lick* my slice and kept walking. I called out to her and told her how insolent and revolting she is. She stopped walking and stormed toward me. To put it short,

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our exchange left me highly disturbed. I knew then to keep my mouth shut. You can push me, and I'll happily let it slide and let the lord deal with you. I hate confrontation. And New York radiates with it.

I get into my car, roll down the windows and pull out of my parking space. The woman standing by the white car straightens her position, allowing me a clear view of her face. She looks incredibly familiar. Like Samia's old friend. My eyes squint. "Cianna?" I whisper.

I drive past the car and glance at the driver.

The window is rolled down this time. I make eye contact with a handsome man I've never seen before—but whose single look is intense enough for me not to forget him if we meet again.

I don't know Cianna well enough to stop and question her about why she's in New York, let alone my neighborhood.

If I did, I'd also inquire about the man in the driver seat.



I reach Samia's building with four minutes to spare. My anxiety with time feels like an endless pinch in my nerves. I park next to the entryway of her townhouse, grab the wine bag, and dash up the short flight of stairs to her door.

As I approach, she swings the door open wearing an ivory-colored lounge set. "Hey, Mia."

"Nyla, Nyla, Nyla. You have so much to tell me, don't you?" Samia says, with her hands resting on top of her hips.

"Yes, I do. But first, wine!" I reply, walking to the kitchen and placing the bottle on the counter. I rest my shoes on the shelf under the console table by the front door. I glance around her living room.

"When did you purchase those pillows?" I ask as I admire the pattern. Samia decorated her apartment with a modern bohemian vibe: white walls, sand-hued couches, and a mix of striking prints that somehow all work together. I love being in her apartment. We only live a few blocks away from one another, but it always feels like an escape when I visit.

"They arrived last week," she says and sets wine glasses on the coffee table, taking a seat.

I sit down on the couch, crossing my legs. My arm reaches for a wine glass, eager to take a sip.

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"It's only been two days since we had lunch and I already feel like I'm missing out on a lot," she says, brushing her hair back with her hands.

"I slept with Ryan," I blurt out, covering my face with one hand.

"What?" she shouts with wide eyes. "How did you end up sleeping with the same cheater you were so happy about breaking up with?"

"I wasn't happy," I return, defensively. I hike my eyebrows. "I was just... relieved."

"Your relationship with him ended a long time ago. Ryan will always be Ryan. I'm not surprised this happened. At all." She takes a sip of wine. "Sucks you didn't have the heart to break up with him long before he cheated. How did you end up sleeping with him?"

"He dropped by first thing this morning. I thought long and hard about not answering the door but figured he needed closure. He sounded out of sorts, and I didn't want to be a bitch. I ran to the bathroom to freshen up before I let him in."

Her face gives me a look and it reads, don't fool me.

"It was five in the morning, Samia. What was I supposed to do?"

I'm hoping my facial expression is enough to convince her that Ryan being at my door, sounding forlorn, was enough for me to invite him in. I continue with the happenings, unable to resist recalling how furious I felt when Ryan didn't start a war over losing me. And how much I needed to feel wanted.

I pull the Bordeaux wine glass to my lips and sip the bittersweet liquid. "We were on the same page," I say, wrapping it up. "It was almost too easy for me. He started to leave, and I followed him to the door. Things took off from there. I went grocery shopping and now, here I am, with you," I wink. "Ryan and I have an understanding."

"Nyla, why did you have sex with him?" she shifts her body. "And don't insult me with a deceiving answer."

"Frankly, I had sex with Ryan because he made it easier to end things. I thought it'd be complicated."

She nods her head and tightens her lips. "So you wanted to reward him?"

"Exactly!" my voice pitches. "Like a parting gift."

Her eyes roll, not buying into my awful lie. "*Lies.*"

"Okay, it was a sense of nostalgia."

"That's a *lie*, too, Nyla."

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Of course Samia would challenge my actions by encouraging me to confront deeper emotions tied to my past traumas.

“Fine. He accepted our breakup with such formality. His willingness to leave me ... that was triggering.”

A sigh escapes her mouth. “Nyla, you can’t—”

I interrupt her. “I know what you’re going to say. This isn’t *that*.”

“Yes, it is *that*.” Her voice is heavy with disappointment. “You essentially admitted to having sex with him because of some trauma response.”

“Mia, I’ve also been sexually frustrated, and judging by the way Ryan responded, he didn’t mind at all.”

“Sure. Whatever sounds good in your head.”

Carefully twirling the glass between my fingers, I think about the mundaneness of our sexual encounters. My sexual aspirations run deeper than the type of rather predictable intercourse we had. The sex was decent as our relationship. I want more than decent. It’s not only sexually. It’s emotionally and intimately, too. No women should feel ashamed to admit that.

“I don’t like the idea you fucked him because you were triggered, but if you slept with him to feed your sexual needs then who am I to judge.” She takes a short sip, finishing what’s left of her wine, and continues, “when you said you slept with Ryan, I thought you meant to start your relationship over.” She gets up and walks to the kitchen to grab the bottle. “I mean, I assumed you both had makeup sex.”

“It wasn’t makeup sex. It was simply *exit* sex and it did the minimum of what I needed done.” We burst out into laughter. “Plus, my vibrator is losing its touch.” I move from the couch to sit on one of the barstools in the kitchen.

“A vibrator can never lose its touch. It *can* desensitize you. However, feeling the real thing from time to time *is* needed,” she states.

I shrug my shoulders in agreement. “All truth in those words.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel good, Samia. I feel fine. I’m okay.”

She eyes me curiously. “Are you sure? You overdid it by trying to reassure me.”

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“Ryan has practically been gone our entire relationship. The frequent business trips crippled us. This break-up was inevitable. I am very much okay with that.”

“I understand. Are you happy to have received closure?”

“I didn’t need closure, Ryan did. I know it’s only been a few weeks, but as I’ve said before, I have been disconnected from him for a long time now—not that there was ever anything special about our connection. Ryan and I are history. Plus, you know me, Mia, I always feel alone, and it isn’t because of *him*.”

Samia perches on one of the bar stools next to me. She tips her glass to her lips and sips. Turning to face me, she verbalizes, “Your isolation habits have always stemmed from your mother not being around. You get emotional, you hate feeling lonely, yet you sabotage anything that looks like commitment unless it’s *our* relationship. You need to allow yourself to feel more. Know what it feels like to open yourself up to someone. Platonically and romantically. Learn to commit without fear. There is nothing to be afraid of, Nyla.”

My nose flares. Irritation prickles against my skin. I know she means well but her words smell rotten coming out of her mouth. Because those words. Her words. Are so *wrong*. They make me feel like she’s tactically pushing me away.

I put pressure around the stem of my wine glass with my fingers. “There’s *everything* to be afraid of, Samia. Opening myself up for possible obliteration is not what I will happily sign up for. There are so many things in life that’s out of my control, but protecting myself in this regard, I have full control of.

“Yes, my mother totally screwed me ,” I go on, “and her absence does have a lot to do with this ... this cage ... this unsettling feeling I’ve walked around with my entire life. You’re right about *that*. I’ve been searching for something to replace the fulfillment I had *before* she left—which doesn’t make sense to me sometimes,” I ramble. “I don’t have any desire to get close to anyone to make life feel less lonely for me. I did that with Ryan. I won’t do it again.”

Samia lays a comforting hand over mine. “I get that. *However*, if you continue searching for that *exact* feeling you are going to keep sabotaging yourself. A mother’s love is a different kind of love, Nyla, you know this. You can’t replace that kind of love, and you can’t

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change the fact that you grew up without her, but you can change how you allow it to control your life.”

My head tilts to the side. I pull my hand away from her comfort. “Easy for you to say. You grew up with both of your parents.”

“Yes, I did. Which is why I clearly understand that kind of love is irreplaceable.” I bite the side of my lip as I listen to Samia some more. I cool down inside as we talk more about my mother, more about her, and more about how much I should never trust a man who looks at his reflection every chance he gets. “Listen, I’m happy for you. Despite Ryan’s tasteless actions, I’m extremely happy you are moving forward in truth. It’s important to own what we feel inside—in spite of the judgment that comes with walking in the truth,” she articulates.

I feel Samia’s words. I also note the resentment in her tonality. I watch her face as I twirl my wineglass by the stem. “Is everything okay?” I ask curiously. “It sounds like there’s much to unpack with that testimony.”

She chews bitterly on her upper lip while scrolling through her phone, not once does she glance my way, she says, “yeah, everything is great. I’m perfectly fine.” Her eyes dart to mine. “I was just saying, you know?”

I offer her a small smile, though my mind is not at rest.

“How are things with Hudson?” I ask and proceed to drink the claret liquid I’ve practically abandoned.

“It’s going well. Nothing new,” she says, with less enthusiasm.

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“As if you’re *bored* with him, Mia.”

“Bored? That’s not what I said. Hudson and I are *good*. There’s nothing particular to report.”

“I don’t mean to push. I get the sense you’re not saying something. I’m here for you if you need to talk.” I finish off my wine.

“I’m great, Nyla.” She hops off the barstool and plants a kiss on my cheek. “Everything is as it’s supposed to be. More wine?” I shook my head no, and she grabs both of our wine glasses by the base and strolls to the dishwasher. “If I, Samia Johnson, were going through something, I’d let you know,” she states, offering me a wink. “Please stop being detective Porter and take what I am saying at face value.”

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I throw my hands up in the air. “Fine. I give up. Though I meant to ask you.” She glances at me over her shoulder. “I think I saw Cianna. Do you know if she’s in New York?”

“She is.” She turns her back to me and starts the washer. “We met up for drinks a few days ago.”

“Why didn’t you mention this to me?”

“Nyla, it wasn’t significant enough to report.”

“Seems like there’s nothing you feel you *should* be reporting to me.”

She turns to face me with a rueful look. “I’m sorry. I’m not keeping things from you. It’s just... you and Cianna barely know each other. You met her, what? Once?”

She’s right. I’m not expecting her reaction. Better yet, I don’t understand it. It’s not her answer that has me unsettled. The redness manifesting itself on Samia’s cheeks revealed to me one thing. She *was* guilty of *intentionally* withholding this from me. What are her reasons?

Is it something that had the potential of ripping our friendship apart beyond repair? I don’t know why I do this, but my thoughts gamble like a lottery and the only probable outcomes are negative, and heart breaking.

My mind begins to race. I think about our conversation and her advice for me to open up more. Is she pushing me away?

Gradually, the fear of losing Samia slides up my spine like a slithering snake.

Sitting in this seat, my body grows stiff with uneasiness. I tap my fingers against the butcher block island, and wonder, what ending do I have to prepare myself for concerning my best friend?

Chapter 8

“Suspicious”

Mars

SUSPICION IS A brutal destroyer of trust, and I have never given Cianna a reason to doubt my loyalty to her.

Until now.

Minutes pass after seeing *her*. Experiencing her face that close gave me one good thing to smile about in a moment where the frown lines on my forehead took better shape on my face than the curve of my mouth. I shouldn't feel good about how good it felt seeing her. I'm not supposed to have feelings about another woman at all.

Cianna has checked out on me, and I despise her for it. I despise her for leaving me vulnerable to feeling like I need more. For making me realize there's so much missing between us that I'm willing to go after it. Even if it means with someone else.

This is way more than us going through a rough patch. Repeatedly, she has disregarded my concerns, neglected my needs and our relationship. It's not until I unintentionally question another woman's appearance out loud that Cianna suddenly starts paying attention.

“What the hell do you mean by that?” she demanded. “Do you know her? Who is she?”

When I don't speak for a long moment, she opens the car door to get out, mumbling words of frustration. The door slams shut.

LANDING ON MARS

Thoughtful, my hands brush against my beard again.

I feel wrong because I love Cianna and respect her just as much.

I've always put Cianna first. But putting her first has not serviced me well. I'm met with rejection and a lack of participation in our union. I can't concern myself with her feelings right now.

At this moment, I'm choosing me. Even if that means blocking Cianna out and consuming myself with thoughts about another woman. God, it feels wrong to think that way. I'm not the man I feel myself becoming.

I'm watching the women through my rearview mirror. After parking she gets out of the car, carrying grocery bags to the corner entrance on eightieth street. I wonder if she lives inside of the building she's about to walk in.

A strange feeling teems inside of me. An urge to do right and not become the kind of man I've never been.

My focus shifts back to Cianna, who is standing beside my car. The sun beams off her mahogany hair. I roll my window down and ask her to get back in so we can discuss what's important. She ignores me, waving me off.

I wish she would stop being concerned about what I said minutes ago and focus on everything I've expressed since we sat down at the restaurant. I want to have a decent conversation with her. I want to dive into her mind, figure out what's going on with us. I can't do that if she's resisting me. Pushing me away.

I don't fault Cianna for being concerned about how stunned I was seeing another woman. If the tables were turned, I would be suspicious, too. If anyone should be suspicious, it should be me. Her mistreatment as my woman has been going unanswered for too long.

I'm finding it hard to be sympathetic to her right now. It's like trying to scoop water from a well that's run dry. I'm tired of being the only one trying just to come up with nothing.

Minutes later, the woman rushes out of the apartment building wearing comfortable attire. She gets back into her car.

I'm not familiar with seeing her dressed down, still her beauty is captivating. She pulls out of the parking space and drives slowly past my car. Our eyes meet. She stares at me, I stare back. Only breaking our contact when she passes by. Cianna finally gets back into the car and starts once more to ask me about the other woman.

ASHLEY HOWARD

“Cianna, for the tenth time already, I do not know that woman. I’ve never met her.” I’m firm. I’m frustrated. I hate being grilled like this. “Can we please move on? Can we focus on what matters?”

I’ve never lied to Cianna before. Although, I’m being honest with her as far as not actually knowing the woman—what Cianna doesn’t know is that her disinterest in me, *in us*, is fueling me to *want* to know about her as much, if not more than she does.

“There’s nothing for us to discuss, Mars. You keep knocking on a door that won’t open. Drive me home please.”

My eyes close, wishing Cianna could erase the last three seconds it took for her to disperse nine words that changes everything for me.

I turn my head to observe Cianna’s profile. Her face is glowing with dampness from standing in the sun. She’s staring out of the window, oblivious to the impact of her words.

You keep knocking on a door that won’t open.

I swallow the lump formed in my throat.

You keep knocking on a door that won’t open.

I let her words float until they settle on a soothing oceanfront.

You keep knocking on a door that won’t open.

Nine words confirm I’m climbing an endless fence with thorns.

Nine words that make me feel like an elephant stepped on my goddamn chest.

Nine words leading me to a decision I did not intend on making out of respect for what’s left of our relationship.

You keep knocking on a door that won’t open.

You keep knocking on a door that won’t open.

Torturously, my mind replays her words, trying to convince myself they aren’t true. But they are. It seems as though I’ve reached my breaking point.

I’m going on a mission.

A mission ending with me finding out exactly who this mysterious woman is.

