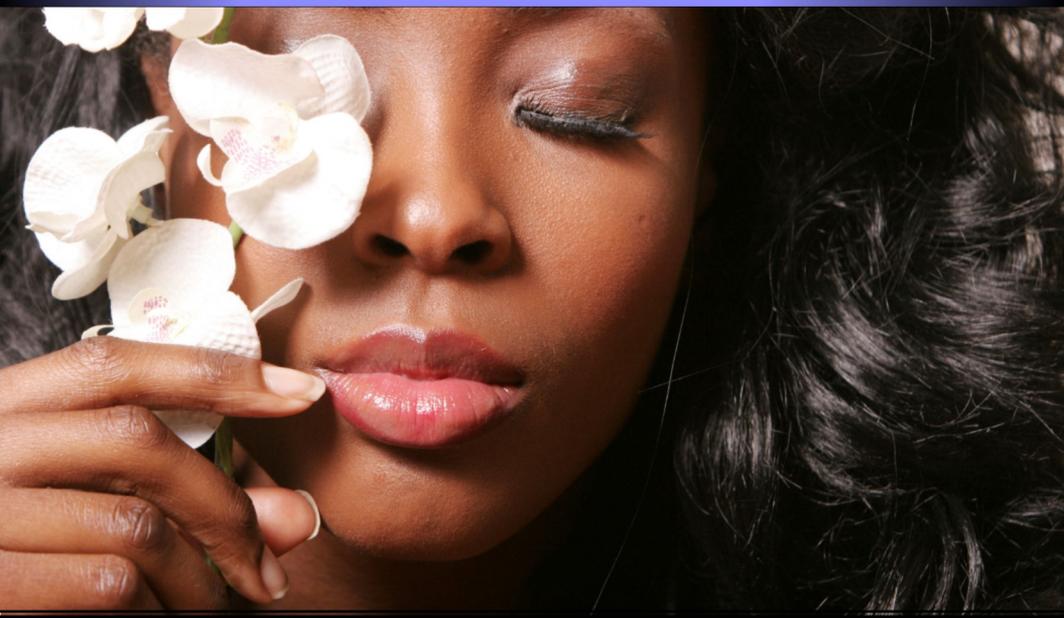


Christian Romance Novel



*The Beauty of
Summer*



Louis N. Jones

The
Beauty of
Summer

A Novel

Louis N. Jones



Note from the Author:

This is a book about intimacy. It is an uncomfortable and controversial subject not often discussed in Christian circles, although it is on the hearts and minds of non-Christians all around the world. One of my callings as a fiction writer and publisher is to merge creativity with reality. As such, the story you are about to read is fiction, but it will ring true with many a reader. Though this is a Christian fiction book, we want to warn you that it may not be for everyone. This book falls in the category commonly called edgy Christian fiction. Because of the subject matter, and to present the reality of the environment where this story takes place, this book contains a few instances of frank language and subject matter that may not be appropriate for all readers. This book contains characters that struggle to find intimacy, but often fall into lust and sex. It contains scenarios that are real and raw, but still restrained and safe for the average Christian reader. This is not a fairy tale, but a book about real romantic relationships where the characters struggle with the myriad of issues those types of relationships present. I pray that you read and enjoy it as a real but redemptive urban Christian romance. If you do enjoy it, I would like to hear from you. If you don't enjoy it, I would like to hear from you as well.

Blessings

Louis N Jones

The Beauty of Summer

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PROLOGUE

Wednesday, 9:01 p.m., Richmond, Virginia

“Why can’t we go to your place?”

The girl, fresh out of high school and ready for as much debauchery and rebellion as her five-foot-eight frame could muster, rolled down the passenger side window and flicked the still-smoldering remnant of a joint out onto the road.

Her date, five years her senior, remained silent and kept his eyes on the road. The motel was somewhere on Broad Street, but he wasn’t sure if he was going in the right direction. He had just passed several blocks of government buildings that quickly made way for pricey townhomes. It didn’t seem like the right neighborhood for a cut-rate motel. He decided to drive only five more blocks before he made a U-turn and headed northwest.

“There’s a Holiday Inn. Why don’t we stop there?” the girl urged.

Because the Super 8 is cheaper, the man thought. But he dared not say that aloud, even though he had long stopped trying to impress her. She was willing to be intimate with him, and that’s all he cared about. “Be cool, Gracie. I’m sure the Super 8 is around here somewhere.”

“Tim, y’know I’d rather go to your place,” Gracie cooed.

“My roommate has the apartment tonight,” Tim lied. His only roommate was a ten-year-old cat, and she was too old to care. He had no intention of allowing Gracie to see where he lived. He was planning for this rendezvous to be short-lived.

He was driving his brother’s car. He drove it a few more blocks, then gave up and decided to go the other direction. He started to make a U-turn

against the posted sign, noticed an RPD cruiser with two officers inside sitting across the street, and made a right instead. For some strange reason, the refrains from the Phil Collins/Philip Bailey song *Easy Lover* began playing in his head.

“You think we can get some snacks before we go to the room?” Gracie said.

“Girl, we just ate,” Tim noted.

“I know. But I’m hungry.”

“Need to stop smokin’ so much of that stuff.”

“Only had two joints today.”

“That’s enough.”

Gracie ignored him. “There’s got to be a 7-Eleven nearby. They have one every five blocks.” She turned to him and said slyly, “There’re other things in there you might need, too.”

Tim looked at her briefly out of the side of his eye before he stopped at a red light. “Don’t worry, girl. I got it covered.”

He made another right turn and then drove a few blocks before the street ended, forcing him to turn right again. He approached the red traffic light at Broad Street and stopped. He turned to Gracie, checked her out, and reached for her. She giggled and playfully slapped his hand away.

“You’re so thirsty,” Gracie said.

“Can’t help it. I have been waiting for you to turn eighteen for months.”

“The light’s green.”

Tim signaled, then made a left turn and headed northwest up Broad Street. He had driven a few blocks before he tried reaching for her again.

“Tim, watch out!” Gracie’s eyes widened in horror.

Gracie's shout was preceded only a second by a loud metallic thud. Tim looked up just in time to see a crumpled late model Acura rolling backwards across the intersection in front of him.

He cursed, then tried to slam on the brakes. But he was going forty miles per hour, so it was much too delayed a reaction. Both he and Gracie shielded their faces as they slammed into the Acura. The force of the impact drove Tim's car under the Acura, forcing the Acura to flip over on its side and land against the median strip dividing Broad Street. The bumper of Tim's car curled up, the hood sank, and the windshield shattered, sending crystalline shards bouncing off the deployed air bags. Tim's car stopped, its nose lodged against the bottom of the Acura, where it was quickly greeted by a spray of leaking transmission fluid. Tim and Gracie lay bloodied and unconscious, each leaning in opposite directions against the center pillars of the car.

Several pedestrians had seen the accident, and a few had started to dial 911 on their cell phones. Some of the men started to approach the vehicles to check on the occupants. The man who approached the Acura could see, through the shattered windshield, a woman, crumpled, bruised, and bloodied, lying on a bed of glass against the passenger side door, which was now flat against the sidewalk.

Unsure if the woman was dead or alive, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911. Once the dispatcher had told him a unit had already been deployed and on its way, he hung up the phone and looked carefully at the woman inside the car. Despite the blood and glass all around her face, he noticed that she was very beautiful.

He had been a Christian since his early teens, and so he did the only thing he knew how to do at that point. He prayed that if she was alive that

the Lord would restore her broken body and lead her on the road to health.
And, if she was dying, that she had made her peace with Christ.

But as of that moment, unbeknownst to him, she had not.

CHAPTER ONE

Six days before

Xavier's marriage proposals were getting more ornate as time went on.

Just two months before, on the fifteenth, Summer Maldonado came to work, sat at her desk, checked her emails, and found a new message from Xavier with a photo attached. The photo was taken of her on a recent romantic trip to the Bahamas. There she was, lying on Paradise Beach in a Caribbean blue one-piece, her perfectly manicured toes dug in the white sand, her natural long black hair pouring gracefully out of a wide-brimmed straw hat, her cinnamon-toned skin glistening in the mid-afternoon sun. The caption on the photo read: "You are the picture of perfection. Will you marry me?"

One month before, also on the fifteenth, a bouquet of fifteen red roses in a tall crystal vase was waiting on her desk upon her return from lunch. The note on the flowers read: "Will you marry me, and let our relationship blossom like the petals of a rose?" The note gave Summer a mile-wide smile. Her boyfriend was corny but thoughtful and sweet.

Summer would answer his last two proposals the same way she answered the eleven previous ones, all tendered on the fifteenth of the month. She would never explicitly tell him no, but always, "Ask me again next month." Xavier would be persistent enough to ask her every month, like clockwork, on the fifteenth.

It was the fifteenth of the month again, and Xavier Williams had texted her earlier that morning to ask her to join him that evening at the Wild Ginger, an Asian restaurant on the western outskirts of Richmond. It was a

Thursday night, but still the Wild Ginger would be almost impossible to get into without a reservation, so Summer knew Xavier had planned several days beforehand.

Thursday was casual day at Visual Notions, one of the leading video production companies in Richmond. But Summer, the marketing manager, had chosen not to dress down that day. She wore a simple purple sheath dress, professional enough for the job, but sexy and formfitting enough to make sure Xavier's eyes didn't stray, which they did from time to time. Just a few minutes after seven, she left the office, which was on the seventh floor of an office building in downtown Richmond. The restaurant was only a fifteen-minute drive away in moderate traffic, so she had plenty of time to get there before the 7:30 reservation.

During the drive, Summer switched on the built-in MP3 player and allowed Stevie Wonder's *Ribbon in the Sky* to drown out the faint street sounds that made it inside the tinted windows of her late model Acura. She had to brace herself to turn down yet another one of Xavier's proposals, and she hoped that the proposal would come at the latter part of the evening, so that it wouldn't dampen the majority of their date. She knew she would have to say yes to him one day, but right now, her mind was not in that space. Her excuse was that she was not ready to be a wife, and that was true, to an extent. But as loving and doting as her boyfriend was, there were some things about him that bothered her. But she had neither the willpower nor the bravery to tell him the truth about himself. So, month after month, she kept hoping he would change and that somehow the rarest of miracles would alight upon him like a feather on the shoulder, and he would transform into a man that she would be comfortable marrying. Someone who was NOT like her father. Xavier did not yet seem inclined to come home drunk and beat

her like her father beat her mother. But his controlling nature and his frequent drinking made him a likely candidate.

Summer hadn't seen Nestor Maldonado in thirty years. She assumed he was still somewhere in Brazil; Summer had no clue where, and she didn't wish to know. But his aura remained with her like a bad odor. He hadn't always been a drunken loser; he had actually been quite personable, engaging and sober when Susan Wright met him during a vacation to Rio. Enthralled with the idea of living in Brazil, and tired of her hardscrabble life in Atlanta, Susan, an African American janitor, married Nestor a year after meeting him. Summer was born in July a year later. Susan named her after her favorite song, "Summertime," from *Porgy and Bess*, the one sang by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. Most people in the states assumed, without asking, that she was named that way because she was born in the summer, not knowing that Brazilian summers began in December.

The marriage went well until Summer was four years old. Several days after her birthday, Nestor lost his job at the soft drink plant as a result of a layoff, and the hard drinks soon followed, with the beatings right on the heels of the drinking. By the time Summer was five years old, she had heard, and in some cases seen, her mother beaten at least twelve times during one of Nestor's drunken tirades. Finally, Susan got tired of it.

The fateful day of Summer's introduction to the United States came on September 8th, the day after Brazil's Independence Day, two months and three days after her fifth birthday. Nestor had come home late the night before, his breath reeking of Skol's, with whatever celebratory spirit he had engaged in long gone by the time he crossed the threshold of his house. Susan met him in the kitchen and accused him of cheating on her, an accusation based purely upon woman's intuition, but in this case, that was

spot on. But for some reason, she never had the gall to confront him about it until then.

The argument in the bedroom became so loud that the words spilled out onto the streets. Susan's words were spiced with Southern rage, and a deep Georgia accent that Susan had tried to conceal, but surged forth whenever she was angry.

You need to leave those bitches alone!

If you don't stop this, I'm gonna take Summer and leave!

A scream. Several crashes. A door slamming. Spewing of obscenities in Portuguese. Another door slam. Then, eerily quiet.

The next day, Summer and her mother were hitch-hiking their way to Galeão International Airport, headed to Atlanta with only two garbage bags of belongings and an open-ended plane ticket purchased months earlier by a cousin in Atlanta who mailed it to Susan to encourage her to leave the son-of-a-bitch.

Xavier had not yet deteriorated as drastically. But Summer could see the signs brewing. The drinking, for one. Xavier could knock them back with the best of them, and it was only Summer's interventions that prevented him on many occasions from tipping over the edge of drunkenness. Xavier also had a paternalistic bent that bothered Summer. Xavier, like Nestor, didn't believe in a woman working. It was why Susan quit her \$20,000-a-year janitorial job and stayed at home to cook his meals and chase dust bunnies. Xavier also believed that the man was the head of the household and that the woman should obey. To Summer, it was elementary math: head of household = man controls woman; woman has no say, no options, no life. And there was no way Summer was going to quit her \$95,000-a-year job for any man, no matter how much he was paid.

Nonetheless, Summer kept hoping that Xavier's love for her would lead him to believe that having a strong, capable, independent woman would prove to be his greatest asset. The drinking she could deal with, but there was no way she was going to marry a man who had every intention of relegating her to housewife.

Summer pulled into the shopping center where the restaurant was located. She found a parking spot near a nail salon, with only a two-minute walk to the front door of the restaurant. Summer's dress was short-sleeved, and it was getting chilly out. She wished she had brought her shawl from the car with her. No worries. She would just send Xavier out to her car to get it.

The restaurant had clean, modern lines, decorated in mauves, grays, and browns, with a huge bar in one wing and a dining area in another, separated by the hostess station and a small waiting area. As she expected, the restaurant was packed, but she had no trouble finding Xavier in the crowd. He was already seated at a small table by himself at the far end of the restaurant, adjacent to a large window with a view of the parking lot. Summer headed to Xavier's table. She drew an admiring glance from a gentleman seated in the waiting area.

Xavier stood as she approached. He was six-foot-one, clean-shaven, with a full head of closely cropped hair and eyeglass frames that would set a full-time minimum wage employee back about two weeks' pay. His fair skin contrasted with his crisply tailored suit, which hung on a thin, not lanky but athletic, build.

Xavier looked just as handsome as the day she met him eighteen months before. Xavier held a plum position as the vice president of media relations at the city's gas utility. Summer had been trying to get the utility's video production contract, and her attempts brought her in frequent contact with

Xavier. They had several business lunches together before Visual Notions won the contract. After the paperwork had been signed, the business lunches turned into dinners. Eventually, Xavier won Summer's heart as well, which was not an easy task. Summer had no lack of men who wanted to court her, but it was Xavier's earthy charisma, his passionate devotion, and his quiet manner that hooked her. He was drawn to her as a person, and not just for her body. And a man who could afford to book the executive suite at the Jefferson Hotel *just because* certainly was a plus.

"*Meu Amor*," Summer said to him as they embraced. They exchanged a simple peck on the lips, which, given the posh surroundings, was a great deal more sedate than how they would have kissed in private.

Xavier motioned Summer to the chair directly across from his. That was odd. Usually they sat at ninety-degree angles to one another. Summer ignored his directive and parked in a chair directly to Xavier's right. She then checked him out in his suit. It looked like the one that she had bought him for his thirty-eighth birthday a few months ago. As her gaze moved up to his eyes, he was looking off into the distance.

Summer followed his gaze but saw that it led nowhere. "Are you alright?" she asked.

Xavier finally looked at her. "I'm fine."

"You look nice. Is that the suit I bought you?"

Xavier looked down at himself, seemingly surprised. "Yeah, I guess it is."

The waiter came over with a wine list. Xavier quickly waved him away. Again, *unusual*. Summer studied his body language. Xavier seemed tense. His arms were tight against his body; his hands clasped in his lap. His gaze wandered off to nowhere again.

Summer toyed with the white napkin on the table and tried to say something to ease the tension. She was usually the talkative one in the relationship, so she had no problem starting a conversation. "So, how was your day?"

"It was good. Yours?"

"Wonderful. I was excited about meeting you here."

"Ever been here before?"

"No. First time." Summer noticed that Xavier's gaze trailed off again. It seemed as if he was looking at the front door.

Summer asked a burning question. "Are you expecting someone? I mean, other than me?"

Xavier's eyes finally returned to her. "I have something I need to tell you."

Summer swallowed hard. There was no passion, no joy in his voice. She tried to play off the obvious implication in his voice by making jest. "What, you're breaking up with me?" She said it with a bat of her eyes and a bedroom voice.

Xavier was silent.

Summer waited for a laugh, a smile, an angry denial, anything that would acknowledge the humor in what she had said. Instead, he just sat there, carefully avoiding her eyes. Summer drew back in her chair and said, "X, what's going on?"

"Summer, this is not easy for me to say."

Summer felt blood rushing from her face. There were only two reasons people made that statement: if someone had died, or if they were about to end a relationship. And Xavier's incessant staring at the front door give her a clue as to which one it was.

“X, don’t tell me you’re breaking up with me.”

C’mon, X. Tell me no. Tell me I’m wrong. Stop my heart from beating so fast in my chest.

Finally, he looked at her. And his eyes told her the truth. *Dear Jesus.*

Summer drew back in her chair again. "X, please don’t kid around with me."

"I'm serious."

Summer looked in his eyes and didn't see any hint of his normal jovial nature. But something didn't gel. Why would he invite her to a fancy restaurant just to break up with her before they served the wine? That was too callous for Xavier, so she knew this conversation had to be leading somewhere other than the termination of their fifteen-month relationship.

"X, stop kidding with me. Let's talk real here."

"This is not a joke, Summer."

There were two things at that moment that convinced Summer that Xavier was not joking. The first was that he used her real name. Xavier never called her by her real name unless he was angry. Usually it was *honey* or *baby* or *sweetie* or *gorgeous* or some variation thereof.

But Summer was *really* convinced when she looked up in response to a shadow darkening their table. The person standing there was not a waiter.

Xavier stood. "Summer, you know Jada."

Summer looked up at Jada Hardy with the scorn of forty jilted women. Jada Hardy was the assistant to the president of Visual Notions. Her office was just ten paces away from Summer's. There she stood, fake auburn hair, fake nails, Hershey-bar-dark model-thin body, and enough chest that if someone tapped her gently on the head from behind, she would tip over forward. And for all she knew, *that* might be fake. Summer quickly dialed

back her hard look, realizing that Jada had enough clout to get her fired with a bat of her eyelashes. Summer had liked Jada. Until now.

Jada tried to be cordial in a less-than-cordial situation. "Hi, Summer."

Summer looked down at the table. "Jada."

Jada walked over to Xavier's side of the table. Summer looked up just in time to see Jada plant a respectable kiss on Xavier's cheek. She then sat in the chair directly to Xavier's left. When Xavier sat back down, he looked over at Summer and saw a blaze in her eyes.

"Summer, I wanted to let you know that me and Jada have been seeing each other for a few months now."

Summer inhaled deeply. Her heart began to palpitate. The shock of that statement cut her deeply than anything she would have imagined, rendering her vocal cords inoperative. She focused her eyes on the table, fighting back tears, not wanting to give either of them the pleasure of seeing her cry.

At that moment, Summer realized the mistake she had made a few months before. Summer had invited Xavier to her office to have lunch, something she rarely did with her friends. She preferred to separate her business and personal interests as much as possible. After lunch, when Summer was walking Xavier to the door, Jada strolled past. In courtesy, Summer introduced Jada to Xavier, referring to him as "one of Visual Notions' clients." Not my *boyfriend*, or my *man*, or even my *friend*, but my *client*. The last thing you want to do is introduce your man to another gorgeous, buxom, clasping woman as nothing more than a business interest.

The waiter returned to the table, interrupting an awkward silence. Once he had given his welcoming spiel, he asked for their drink orders. Xavier politely sent him away once again, and then focused his attention on the two lovely ladies sitting at his table.

Emboldened now that the worst of his silent confession was over, Xavier said, "Listen, I know the two of you have to work together. I was hoping we could come together, talk it out, and at least be civil to one another."

Summer knew the hidden meaning behind Xavier's words: this is my new girl. I'm going to be coming around the office quite a bit, nuzzling up to her, and I don't want you screwing things up.

Summer phased out Jada for a moment and focused her icy glare on Xavier. "You couldn't even give me the courtesy of breaking up with me without bringing your new girlfriend along, and you expect me to be civil?" Summer threw her hands up. "I don't even know why you're doing this."

"Why I'm doing what?"

"Why you're breaking up with me."

"You know why."

"Because—" Summer stopped, realizing that what she was about to say was too personal for Jada's ears, and frankly none of her business. She turned to Jada. "Could you excuse us for a moment?"

Jada cut her eyes at Xavier, seeking his permission. Xavier nodded. Jada cut a final glance at Summer before she stood and walked toward the bar on the other side of the restaurant.

Summer leaned in toward Xavier. "You're breaking up with me because I wouldn't marry you?"

"You know I'm looking for a relationship that is going somewhere, Summer. I've been asking you for your hand for months. I can't wait any longer."

Summer sighed. "You know I have issues with marriage—"

"Yeah, I know. And your daddy issues. Although I don't think you're against the idea of marriage as much as you are against the idea of marrying me."

Summer leaned back in her chair. She couldn't argue. Xavier was a fantastic boyfriend. But not every relationship was made to make the leap to marriage. From her perspective, there was so much that needed to be worked out. Unfortunately, Xavier had lost patience. And with so many women around waiting to throw themselves at a handsome, high-paid stud such as Xavier, he no longer needed to be patient.

When they had started dating, Summer told him that she intended to be celibate until marriage. Her mother had raised her that way, according to her Christian principles. And Summer considered herself a Christian, even though she had not been to church in many months. But Xavier was the type of man who was used to wrinkling a woman's sheets within one to two weeks of the first date, so challenges greeted his relationship with Summer from the beginning. And Summer went into the relationship fully intending to make a decision about marrying Xavier within a few months. But then, the alcoholism and the controlling issues surfaced, and that was all she needed to hold off any possibility of a deeper relationship. Summer adored her mother, but she didn't want to become her by marrying a man that was potentially abusive. She saw how much it affected her mother, and she had no intention of following in those footsteps.

But now she sat there, quickly drowning in the hurt and pain of rejection. What was worse, he was cheating on her with a co-worker, a woman she respected and trusted. She fast-forwarded through her life and realized she was about to go through life once again without a man, lonely and depressed. Thirty-five years old, and no closer to having a successful

relationship than she was at eighteen. Her entire life had been relationship-deprived, especially since moving to Richmond. The realization of losing the one person who seemed drawn to her was so frightening that her next words were a compromise against facing the ugliness of the next few months, perhaps years, of her life.

"X, I don't want to lose you. I could look more closely at this marriage thing. Please let's talk and work this out."

"Summer, I've already proposed to Jada, and she accepted."

Summer squeezed her eyes shut. This was unbelievable. The evening was just getting worse, and she could feel Xavier slipping out of her grasp. "You haven't known her that long."

"But we don't need to know each other for long to know that we were meant for each other. When you feel that way, there's no sense waiting."

"You used to say that about us."

"What?"

"That we were meant for each other."

Xavier looked away. "Maybe I was mistaken."

That stung more than anything that Xavier had said. That their relationship was a sham, a *mistake*. She wasted fifteen months of her life on a mistake. They were hard, sharp words, but she didn't want to acknowledge them. She knew that Xavier was the man for her. She knew it now more than ever.

And with those thoughts, she was moving into the same dangerous territory and destructive co-dependent behavior that her mother had exhibited throughout a year of abuse; that sometimes it was better having a man in your life that abused you, than no man at all.

Summer's next words were abrupt and only half-hearted. "Okay, I'll marry you."

Xavier shook his head. "We had our chance, Summer. I'm going to be with Jada now." He looked toward the bar, hoping that he could meet eyes with Jada and summon her to return to the table.

Summer's eyes were moist with tears now, and as she blinked, they started to flow down her face. "How can you do this to me?" She made no effort to stop the flow, as they had begun to drip off her chin and onto the tablecloth. A few of the patrons noticed her tears and stole periodic glances, trying to figure out what was going on without appearing nosy.

Jada returned to the table, at which point Summer noticed that several of the patrons had noticed her crying. Flustered, Summer grabbed her purse, got up from the table, and without a word, headed for the door. One of the waiters saw her on the way out and asked if she was okay. She hurried past him without answering.

Then suddenly, just before she reached the front door, anger mingled with her sadness like a suitor cutting in on a dance. This woman, Jada, the one she trusted and respected for years, just stole her man from her. There was no way she was going to do that without Summer making a bold statement about it.

Summer turned around and headed back into the restaurant. On a table near the door, three wine glasses, half-full with Merlot, were sitting there, left by departing patrons. Summer clutched her purse tighter between her left arm and her side, then grabbed two of the glasses. She marched toward Xavier's table. Xavier and his new girl-toy Jada were sitting next to each other, nuzzling close while reviewing the wine selection, so they didn't notice her approach. By the time they did, it was too late.

With the precision of a gunslinger, Summer hurled both the glasses forward, sending the wine out of the glasses and directly into Xavier and Jada's faces. They jumped up and screamed, and the room fell silent, as all eyes were now on them. Summer dropped the glasses on the table and marched toward the door. The glasses rolled off the table and crashed on the floor, creating the only sound in the room at that moment.

As Summer left, she couldn't help but notice that a few of the women, understanding her pain, had smiles on their faces.

* * *

Summer went home to her apartment in the Midlothian area of Richmond, just a ten-minute drive away from the restaurant. As she entered her apartment and tossed her purse on the couch, she regretted, for a moment, that she was not one of those sisters who would have cussed Xavier out within an inch of his life, and then keyed his BMW on the way out. But this hurt, *really* hurt. She couldn't believe that the man she loved did this to her. It was a type of grief that felt worse to her than a death of a loved one. And without hope, the grief was much more difficult to survive.

Summer's only hope was that Xavier would come to his senses, change his mind, and return to her with hat in hand and an apology. Maybe once he saw how much he had hurt her, he would reconsider his decision to marry Jada. Maybe once again her phone would ring, or her doorbell would chime, and Xavier would be on the other end, realizing what a fool he was.

Summer looked out over the city through her patio door. She lived alone, which she hoped would only be a temporary situation since moving from Atlanta two years ago. Her mother, Susan, still lived in Atlanta, in a four-bedroom house owned by her cousin, the same cousin who gave them shelter

after their retreat from Brazil. Over the years since returning to the States, Susan eked out a living at various janitorial jobs, as her lack of education would not allow her to do much else. Nonetheless, she pushed Summer to do well in school, always impressing upon her that an education was the key to getting anywhere in America, unlike Brazil, where many women tended to rely on their husbands. Summer was denied the pleasures of daily TV watching, as Susan wanted her to focus on her studies. It was not a struggle, as Summer loved to read and would devour any printed material she could find. Even the myriad of boys who called on Summer during her high school years could not get far as long as Susan was guardian of the gates.

Summer's devotion to her studies earned her several scholarships, which enabled her to attend Clark Atlanta University with barely an out-of-pocket investment. Susan was proud to be able to send her daughter to a college that had produced the likes of Ralph Abernathy, James Weldon Johnson, and other African Americans who broke down barriers of racial segregation. She had intended to major in history and become a teacher. However, after she spent some time volunteering at the college radio station, a college boyfriend told her the five-foot-ten-inch well-spoken beauty would be a great media personality. She decided to major, and eventually earn a degree, in journalism and communications. During her sophomore year, she became the fill-in host of a drive-time jazz program, replacing the regular host whenever he was away.

Summer continued to volunteer at the public radio station after she graduated from Clark. Eventually, the station manager hired Summer to be the drive-time host of her jazz program. The program was appropriately named "Summertime," and the *Porgy and Bess* song became the theme of the show. Summer then used her newfound clout to get Susan hired as a

production assistant, even though Susan had little experience in radio. Summer felt that the Lord was blessing her mother and her, and she was grateful to be in God's good graces.

However, several years later, the station began to lose funding, and cutbacks were necessary. Syndicated programming replaced Summer's program, and she was eventually fired due to a reduction in force. Susan retained her job at the station despite her inclination to quit in protest once Summer got fired. Summer urged her not to. She didn't want to see her mother return to wielding mops, buckets, brooms, and rags, and some days coming home too tired to eat.

It wasn't long before Summer's absence from the station was felt, and fans and local media began to inquire what had happened to her. Once word spread about her termination, media companies began to court her with offers. The most promising came from a local entrepreneur and TV producer, Mark Battman, who had assembled a team to look into the feasibility of starting a video production firm in the West End of Richmond. The West End was a burgeoning area with many new corporations, museums, and restaurants, all potential clients for Battman's new firm. Summer, with now over ten years' of radio experience, agreed to partner with Mark. Summer would lend credibility to Mark's firm and help him win clients in the greater Richmond area. With Mark's and Summer's experience, the newly created Visual Notions would win five clients even before the name plate was affixed to their rented suite in downtown Richmond.

Summer was heartbroken at having to leave her mother in Atlanta while she helped run this upstart firm in Richmond. It wasn't that she didn't have any other choices. But this was clearly the best one, an opportunity that was too good to pass up. She always planned to save enough money and buy a

house, then send for her mother to come live with her in Richmond. She was still several thousand dollars away from attaining that goal. Maintaining the upscale life in Richmond proved to be very expensive. With her apartment, weekly maid service, expensive restaurant meals, and the high taxes of living single and childless, she spent almost three-quarters of her monthly income. She had \$20,000 in savings, not nearly enough for a down payment on the type of home where she could ensure that her mother had her space, and she would have hers.

Summer was too upset to eat. She pulled off her dress, left it on the floor near the patio door, and headed to bed. On the way, she picked up her purse, pulled out her iPhone, and cradled it in her hand on her way to the bedroom. In case Xavier changed his mind about her, she did not want to miss his call.

* * *

Summer would fall asleep for an hour, wake up for an hour, and then fall asleep again for an hour, *rinse, repeat*, until she finally awoke at seven in the morning. She thought about staying home, so she didn't have to deal with Jada. But she needed to work to keep her mind off Xavier. She showered, dressed, and then headed out.

When she arrived at work at eight, Jada hadn't arrived yet, which was a small blessing. Summer could sequester herself in her office, shut the door, pull the blinds to the large window facing the corridor, and hopefully not have to deal with her all day. She could use this day to catch up on paperwork.

At 9 a.m., there was a gentle tap at her office door. Summer hoped it wasn't Jada. "Come in."

Mark Battman walked in, opening the door until it hit the door stop and bounced back an inch. He was about an inch shorter than Summer, thin, with a five o'clock shadow. His hair was cut short on the sides and jagged on top, making him look a lot younger than his forty-five years. To Summer, he resembled a younger, skinnier Brad Pitt. Summer found him quite attractive, and might have flirted with him a while back if he wasn't married with kids.

"Summer, may I see you for a moment?" Mark said. Although he phrased his statement as a question, Summer could tell by his tone that he wasn't asking.

"Okay." Summer dropped some papers she was holding and got up to follow Mark out the door. She was surprised when Mark turned left, rather than right, toward his office. She continued to follow Mark past the studio and into the empty general conference room. Mark motioned toward a chair, then closed the door. As Summer sat down, and before the door was completely closed, she could see Lenny Yates, the security guard, just outside the door.

The stark realization hit her at that moment. In less than five minutes, she would be out of a job. Jada had obviously told Mark about the dinner the night before and about Summer redecorating her face with a \$200 bottle of Merlot. Jada had already stolen her man. Summer didn't think Jada would be as petty as to take her job, too.

Mark sat down two chairs away from Summer. He looked down at the table for a few seconds, collecting his thoughts, before he finally said, "Summer, Jada called me last night. Something about you assaulting her at dinner, and—"

"Mark, are you going to fire me?" Summer interrupted. "Because if so, get on with it. I don't need the foreplay before the screw."

Mark looked down at the table, unable to meet her eyes. "I'm sorry, Summer. You've been a great employee, but—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Summer was up and out the door, headed back to her office. Mark looked up and nodded to the security guard, who followed her.

Summer marched back into her office and grabbed her purse and jacket. They were the only personal items she regularly kept in her office. Lenny, the security guard, stood just outside the door.

"Miss Maldonado, what happened? Why'd you get fired?"

"Long story, Len," Summer said, leaving everything else in the office as it was and walking past him toward the elevator. She didn't bother to say anything to her fellow employees; this was embarrassing enough without having to answer all their questions. When she reached the elevator, she saw that Lenny was not far behind. "Don't worry, Len. I'm not going to steal any paper clips or burn the office down."

"I know, Miss Maldonado. But I gotta do my job."

"At least you have one." When the elevator door opened, Summer and Lenny boarded it. Just after she pressed the lobby button and before the door closed, she saw Mark standing in the foyer, watching her leave.

"He's such a coward," Summer whispered to herself, though loudly enough for Lenny to hear.

"Don't worry, Miss Maldonado. You'll be alright. Just hang in there."

"Thanks, Len."

When the elevator arrived at the lobby floor, and they had disembarked, Lenny turned to her, nodded downward and said, "I gotta get that access card from you."

Summer reached down at her waist and snapped the access card from her belt. She handed it to Lenny, then secured her purse on her shoulder and headed for the exit.

"Good luck, Miss Maldonado," Lenny said as Summer passed the security desk.

"Thanks, Len. Take care."

As she walked out to the parking lot and toward her car, Summer had never felt so defeated in her life. She lost her man, she lost her job, and now she had lost what little self-respect she had left. As she climbed into her car, she knew that Lenny's statement, "you're gonna be alright," was an overused cliché.

She was *not* going to be alright.

* * *

Summer was lying on the couch staring at the ceiling when she heard her phone ring. Thinking it might be Xavier, she scrambled off the couch and to the kitchen, where she had left her phone. Checking the caller ID, she saw the word: "Mãe." She was disappointed it wasn't Xavier, but she was always glad to hear from her mother, whom she spoke to at least twice a day.

She answered the call. "Olá, Mãe."

"Olá, dear. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Mãe."

"No, you're not."

Summer walked back to the couch, engaging the speakerphone. "What are you talking about?"

"You're not fine."

Summer wasn't sure if it was something in her voice that gave her away, or if her mother had developed some clairvoyant talent. "Why do you say that?"

"I called your job today to speak to you. They told me you no longer worked there. So, you either quit or you got fired, neither of which makes you *fine*."

"Why didn't you call me on my cell, Mãe?"

"I did. Earlier today. You didn't answer, so I called your job."

Summer remembered. Once she had arrived home, she paced the floor for an hour before lying on the couch. She dozed off for a couple of hours, and now it was well past two in the afternoon. She likely hadn't heard the phone ring while she was asleep.

Summer lay on the couch, holding the phone in her hand at arm's length from her lips. "I got fired."

"What happened? Why did they fire you?"

"I didn't ask the official reason. But the real reason was that I tossed a drink in the face of the president's assistant at dinner last night."

"Why did you do that?"

Summer sighed. She decided to tell her mother the whole story, knowing that Susan would interrogate her until she did. "X and I broke up last night. He invited me to this romantic Asian restaurant, just to break up with me. And he actually brought his new girlfriend with him, the president's assistant. I was so hurt, shocked, embarrassed, and betrayed. I didn't know what to do. I just snapped, and I went back into the restaurant and tossed drinks in X's face and hers. Then I left."

"And they fired you for that? That didn't happen on the job."

"Doesn't matter, Mãe. It's considered assault on a fellow employee, even if it happened away from the job. It's against policy. And Mark didn't even want to get my side of the story. He'd made up his mind to fire me before he met with me. He even had a security guard waiting in case I acted like a drama queen."

"Wow."

"Wouldn't surprise me if Mark is doing Jada. A lot of people in the office think so."

"Isn't he married?"

"When has that ever made a difference, Mãe? You should know better."

Silence on the other end.

Summer gulped. "I'm sorry, Mãe. I shouldn't have said that."

After an awkward but silent few seconds, Susan spoke again. "Well, you're not fine. You're upset. I can hear it in your voice. Virginia is only a two-hour plane ride away. I'm coming up there."

"Mãe, you don't have to do that."

Susan knew her daughter well enough to know that those words meant: Mãe, you don't have to upend your life and inconvenience yourself and cancel your plans just to tend to me, but I would really like it if you would. "Yes, I do. Now the last-minute plane ticket is going to be steep, but I'm not going to let my daughter wallow in misery the whole weekend by herself."

Sumer didn't argue. "I'll cover the plane ticket, Mãe. Don't worry about that." Tears started to flow down her face.

"Okay. I'll be there before bedtime."

"Thanks, Mãe."

"See you later, dear."

News of her mother's visit strengthened Summer's resolve. With her mother coming, at least she had someone to talk to. She had failed at making any friends, other than Xavier, since coming to Richmond. She couldn't figure out what it was about herself that made people not enjoy her company. Even when she was living in Atlanta, friends were few and far between.

She decided to tidy up the apartment. The maid was not due until tomorrow, but Summer wanted things to be neat and clean before her mother arrived later that evening.

* * *

Thinking that a jog around the community would clear her head, Summer put on her pink workout shorts, black activewear tank top, and running shoes, tied her hair into a ponytail, and started to do stretches in the foyer of her apartment to ready herself for her run. She knew going for a jog by herself was tactically risky in this neighborhood. She didn't have to worry about being attacked, but she did have to worry about men in the neighborhood seeing an attractive woman jogging by herself and using that as an opportunity to try out whatever come-on lines they had conceived. When she first moved into the neighborhood, that was an attractive and welcome prospect. Now, she didn't want to *think* about men.

When she went outside, it was 6:05 p.m. The sun was low in the sky, and the air was at sixty-eight degrees, ten degrees cooler than it had been most of the day. Summer took a deep breath and then started her jog. She would start at her apartment building door and then circle three times around the neighborhood. That would give her a two-mile run.

As she jogged, Summer noted the differences between this community and the community she had left in Atlanta. This neighborhood, called Crestlane, was a gated community of corporate professionals and mid- to high-level government workers. Here, most people stayed in their apartments except to travel to and from places outside of the community. It was quiet, and not many people were around except for fellow joggers and some male service workers, who were prone to stopping whatever they were doing and ogling her as she jogged past.

The neighborhood where her mother lived in Atlanta was a mix of low to middle-income persons, a community decidedly blue-collar. It was a community of mostly detached single-family homes, with a couple of apartment buildings on the outskirts of the neighborhood. Susan's cousin Cicely owned a home in the community since the sixties. Given the opportunity, she would fete visitors with the tale of how the neighborhood was upscale until the late eighties. In the early nineties, people who were making money moved out to neighborhoods such as Lithonia or Druid Hills, leaving only low-income workers who could not afford to move. Despite white-collar flight and an escalating crime rate, Cicely stayed in her home. She would rather live there than in one of those boring upper-class communities, where people didn't know their neighbors. *Something about struggling together creates community*, she would say. As a result, everyone in the neighborhood knew everyone else in the neighborhood, kids would come outside to play with other neighborhood kids, mothers would exchange anecdotes and gossip on the sidewalk outside their homes, and men would tinker with their cars and catch up with other men on the latest with the Falcons or who was the cutest dime piece in the neighborhood. It wasn't a perfect neighborhood by any stretch of the imagination, but there was *life*.

Living in Crestlane for two years, Summer understood the dichotomy on a greater level. Compared to her old neighborhood in Atlanta, Crestlane was about as dry as a Peruvian desert.

On her second jogging pass, Summer stopped at the gate booth. She did not recognize the Puerto Rican woman sitting there.

Summer spoke to draw the woman's attention away from her cell phone. "Hi."

"Hi," the woman said, setting her phone on the desk. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Summer Maldonado. I'm in Apartment 323B. I'm expecting my mother sometime this evening, maybe as late as 10 p.m. I just wanted to make sure she was let in without a problem."

The woman grabbed a clipboard with forms from somewhere down out of Summer's sight. "Your mother's name?"

"Susan Maldonado."

The woman started writing. "Okay. I'll see to it, Miss Maldonado."

"Are you new here?"

"No, I'm temporary. I actually work at Alliance, across town."

"What happened to the regular gate attendant?"

The woman continued to write. "She quit."

"Why?"

"Something about she didn't pass some certification. So, rather than wait for them to fire her, she quit. That was dumb though."

"Why?"

"You quit, you don't get unemployment."

"So, are they looking for someone to replace her?"

"I think so. You interested?"

“Maybe.”

“You'll have to check with the Crestlane office.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Summer started her jog again, intending to go around the community one more time before she stopped, took a bath, and started preparing dinner.

* * *

It was 8 p.m., and Summer had just spent the last full twenty-four hours without Xavier. She had hoped that cooking would help keep her mind off him, but even as she took the herb-crusteD roasted chicken out of the oven, she could not stop thinking about him and hoping that he would call, stop by, text, tweet, Facebook, email, *anything*. She kept hope alive by imagining that *Miss Thing* Jada would set him off in some way, forcing him to abandon his marriage plans and come running back to her. Maybe he would realize that God never intended him to be with a woman whose bosom was made in a factory in Singapore.

How horrible a girlfriend must I have been for Xavier to date someone else while we were still together, and then propose to her? The words he spoke stuck in Summer's mind, like a kernel of popcorn between the teeth. A mistake. Was their relationship a mistake? Was there nothing redeeming in their entire fifteen months together for their relationship to be classified as nothing more than a mistake? It didn't seem like a mistake during their first date, when he drove her to Yorktown; they ate a fancy steak dinner, and then they strolled on the beach by the York River, talking for hours.

It didn't seem that way on Christmas Day, when Xavier invited Summer and Susan to his mother and father's house in Petersburg. There, they sat among Xavier's two brothers and three sisters, along with assorted in-laws,

aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews, all buzzing about and making Summer feel as if she was part of the family.

It didn't seem that way during the many days they sat cuddled on Summer's couch, binge-watching old TV comedies and kissing like teenagers during every commercial.

It didn't seem that way on her birthday, when he feted her with yellow roses, and then an evening of scrumptious Caribbean food and live jazz at a club in the West End of Richmond. Even after the club, they went to his apartment, put on Cannonball Adderley's *Dancing in the Dark*, and danced until Summer felt as if she was floating out of her body. That night, more than any other, was the most tempting for her, for she was sure she would have violated her Christian principles and made love to him if he had pressed her. But he didn't. Instead, rather than drive her home, he set her up in his spare bedroom, while he went to his. In hindsight, Summer thought she should have gone into his bedroom and given herself to him. Maybe then, he would still be with her.

No, it was not a mistake, Summer thought. A good relationship cannot be made into a mistake just because another woman comes along. Xavier was not perfect, but he was the man for her. She knew that now. Without him, she had nothing. With him, she had everything she needed. And there was no way she was going to allow that wench Jada to take her man. Not without a fight.

Summer placed the chicken on the counter, and then placed fresh green beans inside of a frying pan with some olive oil. She had to come up with a way to get Xavier back. But whatever her plans, she could not share them with her mother. Her mother had raised her to be proud, strong, and independent. Not a blubbering idiot begging for her man back. But Summer

was not as strong as her mother hoped she was. She was weak. She knew it. Weak and flawed. She needed and wanted Xavier. Without him, she could no longer live.