

ONE

*Too Little Too Late*

Joni's right leg bounced up and down more rapidly as each second passed. She was uncomfortable. She was frustrated. She was getting angry. Joni felt the guy she had been dating for ten months didn't know her at all.

Her roommates were out for the night for one reason or the other. Dinner, two movies, and baked cookies... It was a great precursor to an evening of privacy, fun, and quality time.

The only light in the three bedroom townhome shone from the forty inch television that sat in front of them. The volume was at a medium level to allow occasional chatter. It was a typical date night for Joni and Marlon.

Joni's eyes settled on the two movie cases that sat on the table in front of them. The one labeled *Taken* was empty. They were half-way through that one and had one more to go. From the way things were looking, Joni

didn't think they were going to get to watch *Date Night*. Their evening was no longer fun to her. Sighing audibly, she looked to the left at her companion. The television light cast a shadow on the right side of his face.

He was handsome. Even in a stressful situation, his good looks were not lost on Joni. His charm was hard to resist. He'd worked his magic on her almost a year earlier. He had deep dimples that she admired. Joni shook her head in disbelief. She wished he could just behave. She decided to push past the weakness and forge ahead towards a resolution.

"Marlon..." Her patience was running low.

Marlon looked at her, those dimples protruding through the shadows, and grinned. It seemed he'd missed the point. He had one thing, and one thing only on his mind. Joni could have sworn she saw lust dripping from his eyes.

She rolled hers. Did she not make herself clear time after time?

Marlon was really pushing his luck and Joni didn't know if their relationship was worth the hassle.

He cautiously moved his hand further up

her leg. "Baby, I'm just saying," Marlon basically moaned. "Come on, now."

"Come on now, what?" Joni's voice was slightly raised. She couldn't believe they were about to go through this again. She grabbed his hand and shoved it from between her legs. "Goodness, Marlon. Stop!"

Marlon smacked his lips and flung his body to the far end of the couch. His hope deflated instantly. He was now pouting like a little kid and was growing more and more unattractive to Joni. She watched him take out his cell phone and begin to play around on it.

Marlon obviously wanted Joni to clearly see that he had become detached from their evening of watching movies. He knew she didn't like him playing on his phone when he was with her. Marlon was purposely trying to ruin this night. He seemed just as fed up with her as she was with him.

"Really, Marlon? Are you really acting like this? I didn't think you would do this tonight."

Without raising his head or looking her way, he mumbled, "You don't want to do it any night."

Aside from being angry, Joni's feelings

were actually hurt. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction, though. She decided to focus her attention on the movie. She gave Liam Neeson her full attention. The way he was going to any and all lengths to retrieve his daughter made her think of a similar love.

Just like that, her mind drifted and settled on something more pleasant. She remembered how her Pastor had taught on love. It was not a feeling; but rather, a choice. Love took stamina, endurance, and commitment. It was not for the faint of heart. Joni couldn't wait until the day that someone loved her the way God commanded. Sometimes she thought Marlon was that man. Other times, like now, she didn't know.

Overall, he was a good man. He made her laugh. Just before he tried to cop a feel, he had her doubled-over in laughter. Thinking back on that moment made Joni smile.

"So you think this is funny? Is this a joke to you?"

Joni look wide-eyed at Marlon. His abrupt questions caught her off guard. Just as soon as she was calming down, he had managed to rile her back up.

"Marlon, is there something else going on? Seriously. I've never seen you act like this. What is wrong?"

“Whatever, Joni. Watch the movie. Keep smiling and laughing all you want.”

She had had enough of his tantrum. She wanted him to leave. However, she was conscious of her tone and word choice. “Would you rather call it a night? We can do this some other time, you know.”

“I’m still here, right?” He finally looked up from his phone. “I know how to leave if that’s what I feel like doing.”

Joni stared at this stranger for few seconds before saying, “But you’re clearly agitated, Marlon. And you being agitated is agitating me.”

“Go pray or something then, Joni.”

“Wow!” Joni had had enough. “So now you’re insulting me. Ok.” Joni grabbed the remote and pressed the stop button, slamming the remote on the table after the movie had vanished from the screen.

“This night is over, Marlon.” She got up from the couch, slipped her fresh pedicure in her shoes that had been sitting in front of her on the floor, and began picking up their glasses and plates. She was so angry that she bumped her knee on the table next to the couch trying to rush away from the scene.

Marlon realized she hurt herself and seemed to snap out of his disposition. He

leaned towards her, hoping she was alright.

“You need to leave!” she said.

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she willed them back. This situation was not worth her tears. She marched over to the kitchen counter and began to run dish water. She didn’t normally mind washing dishes but tonight, she was angry that their dishwasher had broken last week. *When is that slow landlord going to send someone to fix this thing?* Then again, the distraction of preparing to clean settled her a little.

“So you really want me to leave?” Marlon asked. He had sat back on the couch and was facing the blank screen. He had put his phone back in his pocket. His voice had become more peaceful.

Joni didn’t answer. She couldn’t answer. There was a huge lump in her throat that was preventing her from doing so.

Marlon asked again. “Joni? Are you asking me to leave?”

She said nothing. She turned off the dish water, causing the apartment to be void of sound and leaned forward on the counter. With her head in her hands, she took in the smell of the lavender scented bubbles that Ultra Gain had produced. She closed her eyes and gave herself a pep talk. *You will not cry. You will not*

*cry. Joni, you better not cry.*

Her silence was loud and caused Marlon to turn to look for her. To him, Joni seemed more easily rattled tonight than usual. Plus, he knew he was being a jerk. Joni was a good girl... the best girl any guy could have, and he was blowing it. The thought of losing her replaced his frustration and made him get up and go to her.

"Baby?"

He was by her side in three strides.

*Oh so now I'm 'baby,'* she thought.

His tone was gentler. She noticed. He touched her arm. She didn't resist. He pulled her to him and stooped to wrap his arms around her.

He said, "I'm sorry. I'm stupid. I'm sorry."

With that simple declaration, Joni gave in and put her arms around his neck. The bubbles that had gathered on her hands began to drip down his neck. Marlon squeezed her more tightly and lifted her slightly off the ground. Her Betsy Johnson leopard flats dangled in the air.

"Baby, I'm trippin'. I'm sorry." Marlon stroked the back of her head.

Joni began to cry.

Shocked, Marlon placed her feet back on

the wooden floor and stepped back so he could see her. That made her aware of herself and she began wiping the tears from her face but he stopped her. Marlon placed Joni's hands around his waist, pushed her hair back from her face, and began to kiss her tears away.

Joni closed her eyes and exhaled. To her, it was the most beautiful of sentiments. Marlon was showing her a different side of himself. However, it was too little too late. She was tired of fighting with him about something that was never going to change.

She sniffed and said softly, "Yes."

Confused, he cupped her face with his hand, looked straight into her eyes, and asked, "Yes, what, baby?"

Joni gently grabbed his hand, removing it from her face.

"Yes. I'm asking you to leave."