

## Prologue: Cheryl

"I shouldn't have come here." I said, staring up at the ceiling. A strong pair of hands swept across my waist as he planted kisses down my back.

"Why you say that?"

"You know why," I said as I turned to face him.

"I'm glad you did. I missed you. In fact, why don't you stay here with me?"

"Jason, you know I can't. I have to go back. Classes start in a couple of days, and I pretty much missed out on registration. Thank God I was able to scramble up some classes online, or I would have missed the entire semester."

"Why can't you just enroll in a college down here? There are plenty of good colleges in New York."

I sighed and stared at my ex-boyfriend. The ex I ran into while visiting my cousin Tanya and Bruce in New York. The ex I said I wouldn't talk to again if my life depended on. The ex that I quickly agreed to see and slept with as soon as I walked into his studio apartment. Just one look at his dark chocolate skin, muscular body, and those dimples on each of his cheeks, and I was a goner.

I met Jason Hardaway two years ago while taking geometry at Dawson High School. The two of us were mainly acquaintances at first, having the occasional conversation before class or asking about a math problem or two. But one day, things changed between us. He pulled me to the side and told me he'd had a crush on me from the moment I walked into our geometry class. He didn't know how to talk to me, so he would just talk about geometry to spark up a conversation. I thought him being so nervous around me was cute, so when he asked me out, I quickly said yes. Now, I wondered was I just dumb or naïve back then, because now, I hate that I even agreed to go out with him. That was when everything I thought about love became a bunch of bullshit.

After dating for several months, we decided to make things official, which was good for me, but I guess he didn't understand the concept of being exclusive. With the constant cheating he was doing, along with other things that I didn't care to remember, I decided to end things between us before graduation. I forgot that Jason mentioned before our breakup that he was thinking about moving to New York to attend school, so I was shocked to see him one day walking down Times Square. Just then, I thought about all the good times we'd had together and that made me want to spend one day with him.

Actually, I think the main reason for my faulty decision to be with him was due to the issues I'm having with my parents. They're the main reason why I'm even in New York for the summer. I packed my bags and left without an explanation because I was tired of dealing with them. Well, my mom in particular. If it was one thing I could get rid of in my life, it would be my parents. I know that sound harsh, but they are the reason why I am the way I am today- totally and utterly fucked up.

"I'm not moving to New York to stay with you, if that's what you're implying."

"Why not? Cheryl, you know we're good together. Sure, we had a few mishaps, but we were

young then. Now, we're both matured and having this chance meeting shows that we belong together."

"Maybe so, but school is about to start, and I just want to finish my year at Shaw. It's the college--"

"Your parents went to and you don't want to disappoint them. I know the story, Cheryl."

I stared at Jason again as I got up from the covers. I went over to the armchair near the door to retrieve my clothes.

"You don't understand my situation."

"I understand it perfectly clear. You're scared of your parents. You always have been."

I pushed my honey brown curls from my face, wishing I didn't decide to make my hair naturally curly before coming to New York. Sure, Texas weather is terrible during the summer, but New York's weather is just as bad and made my head look like a frizz ball.

"That is the reason why we broke up, because your parents didn't think I was good enough for you," Jason said as he put on a t-shirt that was on the floor.

"My parents didn't have anything to do with our breakup. That was done all by you and how you treated me."

"How many times do I have to apologize for what I did? I know I put you through a lot, and I'm truly sorry about that."

"I need to go," I said as I slid my feet through my open-toe slingback sandals. I don't know why I let myself be carried away with him again. Why I let down my guard and be with him, knowing it would only be trouble.

"Can I at least call you later? I know you have a few days left before you head back."

I turned away from the door and looked at him.

"Maybe," I said, opening the door and closing it.

I leaned against it and contemplating about what the hell I had just done. Why can't I just let the past be in the past? I have enough issues to deal with, so why bring more issues into my already complicated life?

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I looked up at the ceiling in my bedroom, wondering why I keep thinking about last summer with Jason and thinking about the issues I have with my parents. I'm trying so hard to let everything go, but the more I try not to think about things, the more they kept coming into my mind.

I rolled over to my side and took a deep breath. I have to find some way to let things go; if I don't, it's going to continue to consume me, making my already miserable life even harder to deal with.

## Chapter 1

### Cheryl

“Wow, can you guys believe this is a new year and a new semester? I wonder what these four months will bring,” Britney Lewis said, then sipped on her mocha latte.

I sighed and looked around the student lounge at Shaw University, sipping on my cafe latte, wondering if I even wanted to come back for this semester. We still had another week until classes began, but students were able to come back early to get settled into their living arrangements as well as register for classes.

The two of us, along with my cousin, Riana Robertson, and her boyfriend, Shawn Walker, were sitting in a booth near the window, looking over our schedules for the new semester. Well, Britney and I were looking at our schedules. Riana and Shawn, on the other hand, were too busy tonguing each other down to even notice anything. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for my cousin because she's happy and in love, but what I don't want to see is her and Shawn displaying their love everywhere we go. It's kind of annoying and equally embarrassing.

Britney looked over at them and shook her head.

“Seriously, you two save us the visual and just go back to the apartment. You are practically giving everyone a show with your PDA.”

Riana looked at us and shyly smiled.

“Were we doing it again?”

“Yes.” Britney and I both said.

“Sorry, but we can't help it. I definitely can't,” Shawn said as he sucked on Riana's neck. She started to giggle, and kissed Shawn again. I literally almost gagged watching those two.

“Don't pay any attention to them. I guess we wouldn't know about that since we're not in love,” Britney said, smiling.

“What about you and Jay? Don't tell me you two are still trying to figure things out?”

Britney and my cousin, Jayden, are a complicated couple. One minute, they're together, and the next, they're not. I guess I could say the same about myself and Shawn's older brother, Marcus. Technically, Marcus and I are not a couple. We're just friends with partial benefits.

“Jay and I are in the complicated stage. We're just good friends, that's all.”

“Oh really? The way you two carry on, I would have thought you were together,” Riana said.

“Since classes are about to start and Jay is getting ready for the season opener, we're probably going to scale back on seeing each other.”

I looked up from my latte and noticed Marcus walking into the lounge. I had to take a minute to look at the man that had graced my life since last August. He and I met at a party that turned into a nightmare when Riana was slipped a roofie and was almost raped by the Dean of Academics'

son. Since then, Marcus and I became really good friends, and he even helped me deal with some issues I was having with my parents. Well, technically, I'm still having those same issues with them; I'm just not letting them consume me like I used to.

At first, I thought Marcus was going to be a fling or even a one-night stand because that's how I wanted things to be; but after the time I'd spent with him, I realized that he was a really great person to hang out with, not to mention the man is fine. I can see why Riana wanted to be with Shawn every waking moment because given the chance with Marcus, I think I could be the same way with him, too.

I stared at him, studying his coffee brown skin, how his body looked in a pale blue sweater and dark jeans, his hair, which was in a tapered fade, and his eyes. I have never seen a pair of eyes that gorgeous on a man before. Those light gray eyes could be the death of me, and I asked one day if they were contacts. He said they weren't, which was an instant turn-on for me.

"Hey bro, you have your classes straight for the semester?" Shawn asked and gave Marcus a fist pound before he sat beside me in the booth. Marcus is in his second semester at Shaw, pursuing his MBA. That's another turn-on for me: a man furthering his education.

"Yeah. Just had to get this finance course that I needed. How are you this morning?" he asked, giving me a sexy grin while taking my hand in his.

My heart suddenly skipped a beat once his hand touched mine. Just his touch would be enough for me to be all over him, but I quickly composed myself. There's one thing he and I haven't done, and that was sleep together. We have done other things, but we haven't had sex; that must mean something since I heard from various sources that one-night stands are his specialty. Either that or he doesn't want to sleep with me, which I would find pretty doubtful since I let him feel me up one day.

"I'm great, what about you?"

"I'm doing pretty good, now that I've seen you."

I smiled and caressed his skin. I know I shouldn't be doing that, but his skin felt so good against mine.

"Okay, that is my cue to leave." Britney said, grabbing her purse and coffee cup.

"Don't go, Brit. We still have to go to Bed, Bath, and Beyond to pick out some items for the apartment," I said.

"I'll just meet y'all there. Besides, this is the couples' booth now, and I'm not trying to be the fifth wheel."

"Cheryl and I are just friends," Marcus said, staring at me.

I gave a tiny smile and looked at Britney.

"Yeah. Marcus and I are just friends."

Even though my mouth was moving, why did I feel a little sad that I just uttered those words out loud?

## Chapter 2

### Marcus

Damn, why did I just say that?

I glanced at Cheryl, who gave a straight face while agreeing that we were just friends. She and I both know there is something there that is beyond friendship. We're just too scared to admit it. Well, I can't speak for her, but for me, it definitely scared the hell out of me because I don't do commitment.

Every relationship I'd been in, I found something wrong with the female. It could have been the simplest thing as her calling me nonstop or wanting to spend every moment with me. I usually find fault because I don't want to get too attached to the person. To be honest, I usually stay with a girl long enough to sleep with her, then move on. But with Cheryl, I know I couldn't do that. I think that's why I haven't initiated us sleeping together because she could be more than a fling. She may actually be someone I want to commit to.

"Actually, why don't we all go? I have to do some other errands today," Riana said as she got up from the booth.

"I'll be by your place later, okay?" Shawn said to Riana.

"Are you spending the night?"

"Of course," he said and gave her another kiss.

I looked at Shawn, wondering how my little brother could already be in a committed relationship with someone. I should be the one in a committed relationship, but he's always had an old soul, so it wasn't any surprise that he would be head over heels in love with someone again.

Cheryl rolled her eyes at them and got up from the booth as well.

"I'll just have my heavy duty ear plugs in. I do not need to hear any moaning or screaming from the two of you."

"Seriously, Cheryl?" Riana asked.

"Yes, seriously. You two are nymphos. You can't keep your damn hands off of each other."

"Why don't you just come over to my place? We can hang out if they get too rowdy," I said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It'll be fun," I said.

I don't know what I'm doing. Hell, I know what I'm doing. I wanted to spend time with Cheryl. Since the time we have known each other, I've wanted to be around her more and more. We have spent the night together before, so it's not a big deal. Expect for one time, when things got a little too heavy for us, leading me to sleep on the couch with a damn hard-on.

"And you know me; I'll be at Monica's tonight. She and Donnell recently had their annual argument, so we're having a girls' night in; the place is all yours," Britney said.

“Fine with us,” Riana said as she put her arms around Shawn and kissed him again.

“See you later, baby.” Shawn said, smacking her on the ass.

Riana smiled and walked out of the lounge with Cheryl and Britney.

I looked at my brother and laughed.

“I can say you two are definitely in love. Or in lust.”

“There’s nothing wrong with showing your affection to the person you love. You’ll know that one day,” Shawn said.

“Anyway, I need some advice.”

He raised his eyebrow at me, probably wondering why I would need his advice.

“You’re asking me, your little bro, for advice, that’s a first.”

“Don’t let it go to your head. It’s about Cheryl.”

“Kind of figured. First thing I need to know is are you a couple?”

“No.”

“Do you want to become one?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know. I think I do, but I don’t know if she does, and I might end of fucking it up if we do become one.”

Shawn smiled. “I never thought I would see you worried about messing up a relationship. You must really like Cheryl.”

“Maybe. To be honest, I don’t know what I feel. The past couple of months I’ve spent with her, I developed some sort of feelings, but I’m just not sure if it will go anywhere.”

“Have you tried talking to her? She probably feels the same way you do but just doesn’t know how to express it.”

I sighed, leaning back in my seat.

“I know I’m going to mess it up. I always find some way to mess things up in a relationship.”

“That’s your problem: You’re expecting something to happen. This time, just let things be. You won’t know until you give it a try.”

I looked at Shawn, nodding my head in agreement. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I should just let things be and take a chance with Cheryl. I’m pretty sure she’s willing to do the same with me.

“I think I will, bro. In fact, I think tonight is the perfect time to do it, but I’m going to need your help.”

“Of course. Name it.”

I smiled, thinking that maybe I’m willing to give whatever I have with Cheryl a chance. I just hope she feels the same way.

## Cheryl

Britney, Riana, and I were inside Bed, Bath, and Beyond, looking for items for our apartment. After the fall semester ended, Riana suggested that I moved in permanently with them and we get a three-bedroom apartment. For me, that was a great idea, considering I didn’t want to move into the dorms, and I definitely didn’t want to go back to my parents. I haven’t spoken to them since

October when they demanded an explanation about why I didn't receive a dorm assignment for the semester. I thought I was able to get away with them not knowing about that, but the university sent a notice home informing me I was on a waiting list and that I could possibly receive an assignment when the spring semester started.

After I explained to them what happened and told them I was staying with Riana, they went ballistic, saying I should come home or they'll cut me off financially. After they realized I wasn't coming home, they did cut off my credit cards, but I was still able to access my savings account, so there was no love lost.

My parents have always acted kind of like tyrants since I had the ability to talk. I don't know why they were always so hard on me and not my two older siblings. It seemed as if they had a vendetta towards me because I was born. It's not my problem I was conceived and was brought into the world. They should have protected themselves a little bit better if they didn't want any more children.

"What you two think about this?" Britney asked as she held up a beige and brown throw rug.

"Too plain," I said.

"I kind of like it," Riana said while scrolling through her phone. She had been on it since we arrived. I'm pretty sure she's texting Shawn. One time I used her phone when my battery was low and accidentally clicked on her texts. I was shocked to see some of the stuff she was saying to him. I think my eyes are still traumatized over those texts.

"You're not even paying attention to anything. Tell Shawn to stop sexting you so we can all give input about the apartment," I said, jokingly.

"First, how you know I was texting Shawn? And second, we're not sexting each other, it was just that one time you used my phone, which by the way, you had no right going through my texts."

I smirked at her as I glanced at a cookware set in the kitchen aisle. I thought about purchasing it so I could make dinner for Marcus. His birthday was coming up in two months, so I was thinking about planning a special night for him. Even though we're not a couple, I still wanted to show my appreciation to him for everything he's done for me since becoming friends. He has been really wonderful, and I just want to show him how much he has changed my life in a short amount of time.

"Actually, we were texting about you. You have anything nice to wear in your closet? I know practically all of your clothes are still at your parents' house."

"I do. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, just wear your best outfit tonight. It's a surprise."

"Okay, why is Shawn telling you to tell me to wear something nice?"

"No reason. Besides, you should be receiving a text from Marcus pretty soon."

I looked at my cousin, wondering what she was up to, when my phone starting vibrating. I pulled it out of my purse. Sure enough, it was a text from Marcus.

**I'm pretty sure Ri already mentioned it, but pick out your best outfit. I have something planned for us tonight.**

I looked at Riana and sighed.

“Should I be worried?”

“About what? I’m pretty sure whatever he has planned will be wonderful.”

I sighed again, not sure what to expect later tonight. I should be happy that Marcus is planning a special night for us. This is kind of the first between us. But if things progressed, would I want him to be consumed by the baggage I have in my life? He already knew about my family, but there were other things he doesn’t know about me. Do I really want him to know about the other issues of my past, or should I shield him away from it?