

Lost and Found

Chapter 1

The way life had been going didn't seem so bad, but I had to worry about it later since Darrius came to the door. I swear he wanted a piece of me more than anything, but that wasn't going to happen. Although I liked the attention, I didn't want him knocking on my door daily, or even every two days. He'd been on my bumper since I moved into the complex eight months ago.

"Come on, Monica. Let a brotha in!"

"No. You can't. I'm busy!"

"You ain't busy. You lyin'."

"Oh, so you can look in my apartment now?" I thought he had a lot of nerve accusing me of lying.

"Umm...no."

"Then stop trying to tell me I'm lying. Worry about your own apartment and all those females coming in and out."

"Why you worrying about what I do?"

"The same reason you worry about me."

"Man, whateva!"

"Whatever to you, too!"

Darrius stormed off, which nearly caused me to laugh. At one point in time, I had a crush on him, but after he did my best friend LaToya dirty, I lost interest in him. The fact that he didn't believe in a higher power only enhanced how turned off I was. I'm not the holiest by far, but I can't deal with someone who's foul and has a clear unwillingness to do right by others. Things might be different if he had been a man and fessed up, but he failed to own up to his shameful behavior. He flat out cheated on LaToya, in *her* car. I wanted to slap the taste out his mouth but thought twice about it.

My attention needed to be on my kids and getting ready for work, where I had to be in less than an hour. Luckily, I took a shower earlier and just had to get dressed.

"Julius and Dawntai, make sure you're ready so I can drop you off at your grandma's."

Dawntai came out to ask how long she and her brother would be at their grandma's house.

"I might pick you guys up after I get off."

The look on her face let me know she wanted to be over my mother's longer. Would caving in be bad? Sure, I'd get time to myself, but I hated how Dawntai wanted to be over my mom's more than she liked hanging out with me. I get on her case whenever she messes up, while my mom handles things much softer than I do. My mother has a soft spot for my kids, which I appreciate, even though I want her to be hard on them sometimes.

"Oh, Mom," Julius said, "can we go get ice cream if you pick us up later?"

"Yes, Julius." *Him and his ice cream.*

Julius, only five years old, likes ice cream so much that he asks for some almost every day. Even though I can be labeled a "hood" mother, I had to act conservative with him. I didn't yell at him unless it was absolutely necessary. Seeing how some mothers treat their kids made me feel bad, especially one day after I'd gone to church. I'd planned to spend time with a friend, but she crammed the idea of going to church down my throat.

I hadn't been to church for two months since then. With all the things happening, I should've gone back to church. I got in my own way, and most of the time I didn't want to

go because I didn't think it would help any, but life halfway satisfied me and the void in my life kept bugging me. What's weird is I liked watching shows about church, but I struggled with going as often as possible. I could rush to get to work because getting money helped me provide for my kids, but I couldn't readily get to church weekly to do better in life and show my kids the correct way to live. Of course, I didn't know when I'd get to that point.

I got to work a couple minutes late, but I didn't get told anything by my boss. She usually did breathe down people's necks for being even a minute or two late, like she never showed up at least half an hour late herself. People who break rules but expect others to follow them are so hard to deal with.

"Can I get some help over here?" I overheard. The person asking for help wasn't someone I knew well, so of course I couldn't say whether I liked them or not.

Walking past a bunch of people I worked with was only natural, but I noticed how some of them were watching me. What bothered me was that some of the guys would stare at my butt when I walked by; I knew that because I could hear them discuss it so intently. I couldn't just blow up because it would seem like I wanted to cause a scene.

"Monica."

I turned around, searching for Ashlynn, a cool white girl whom I had things in common with, our love of Usher and Tyrese being two of them.

"Hey, girl." I'd missed her. We had gotten so tight with each other to the point where I'm sure our co-workers suspected we were lesbians.

"Are you going to the club this weekend?"

"I don't know if I'll be able to go."

"Why not? You need a babysitter?"

"Yeah, that and I already have people hitting me up left and right. It's hard to decide."

"If you want, I can go wherever you go."

I didn't want to brush Ashlynn off, but we'd hung out the past three weekends. One of those weekends, Darrius tried hooking up a double date, but I didn't like the idea. Ashlynn wanted to meet the guy who'd been suggested for her. I had to tell her that she should just meet him without me being present, which didn't go too bad. She begged like a kid for me to go, but I wouldn't give in.

"We'll see."

My answer met a screw face. It's like she tried to figure out my short answers or avoidance.

"Come on. Let's walk to the other side of the floor."

I did. The great thing about the Target where I work is that the middle of the store is set up in a way that makes it difficult for managers and supervisors to see employees hiding at its far ends. Some workers blew their cover by standing in the center of an aisle, playing around. I liked having fun at work, but some of the workers left themselves open to get disciplined.

"You ever wanted to go to church?" I asked Ashlynn this out of nowhere.

"Uh...umm...I haven't thought about it much. I used to go."

"How come you don't go now?"

"I can't even tell you. I guess sometimes I just don't think I'll fit in. Talking about religion strikes a nerve. Every time I hear people talking about religion, or even church, a bunch of arguing starts and no one really agrees on anything. It's stupid."

"That's true. The only thing I've really thought about was going for my own growth and not letting people bother me. Everybody has something to say, but no one person's

beliefs are all the way right. Some people feel their beliefs should be followed by everyone."

"Let's go over here," Ashlynn said after watching the stuff going on behind me. "Yeah, I get annoyed."

A customer walked by; hopefully, they hadn't been listening to our conversation. Once we got to the right location, Ashlynn started telling me how she used to go out with this guy who would berate her because she didn't get as involved in the church as he was. His verbal abuse damaged her mentally and emotionally to the point where her hair started falling out. She would just pull it out once it basically shed out of her scalp, although some of it would fall to the floor.

"I was helping a customer one time, and a few strands came out right in front of them. That was so embarrassing."

Hearing that worried me. I would've retaliated. I wouldn't stand to be abused. I'd tell someone in my family and have them do something to the guy. Maybe God told her not to seek revenge. When I had to go through unnecessary times in my life with guys, I spazzed out on them most of the time. After what I went through with my kids' father, you could say I turned into one of those bad words as relates to men.

"We should keep from getting in trouble, but that's crazy. You should have gotten out of that situation way before it took too much out of you."

"I was afraid to. I thought he'd hunt me down if I tried to leave. He threatened me a lot."

"Damn! Sounds like a plain bad person to be with. I don't want to say too much, but that's what I think."

"Don't even worry about it. I understand what you mean. I won't be mad if you call me stupid for getting with him. Love blinded me."

Certain things about the conversation were déjà vu. Before I started sounding like a man-basher, I stopped myself. I'd done it so many times before, but I didn't want to get balls deep in talking trash about men. Women do it way too much. I can't say whether we should stop or not expect guys to say things back.

"Let's get to work before someone walks over and goes to tell." Ashlynn probably didn't want to cut our discussion short, but since there was no telling who would go tell, the best thing to do was split up.

"I'll see you soon. Let's knock this day out."

I looked around for customers, assuming some of them intended to be dishonest. I couldn't figure out why I judged them when I didn't even know them. Something had me tripping, but I believed whatever it was would keep me from getting too close for comfort. I don't remember if my attitude was a little off that day.

Chapter 2

Man, I swear people can be so bothersome. Darrius came knocking on my door again, and before long he started talking about how I need a man like him to protect me.

"What if I'm driving by myself and I get into an accident?" I asked to throw him off track.

He stumbled over his response. I sort of liked messing with him, but he had stalker tendencies. I had to find ways to keep him on his toes and play mind games with him to get him to leave me alone long enough for me to do what I needed to. I never wanted to call the police; he didn't need the trouble anyway since he had two years of probation left.

But aside from being woken up by his knocking, when I turned on the TV at about seven, I turned to the news and tragedy had struck again. People from the 'hood are used to bad news. I guess this bad news was a warning, or I could continue thinking getting close to God could wait. I'd been under the impression that church was corny when I was in middle school and high school. I think about *Temptation*, the Tyler Perry movie many people felt was corny and predictable. People should understand there are consequences for everything they do. Whenever I'd spend so much time trying to get attention from males, it was clear I hadn't learned that lesson well enough.

With Terrance, Dawntai and Julius' father, I had my guard down, which turned out to be a bad choice. All of the compliments he gave me, talking about my booty, my breast, telling me I was "the bomb," must've been the same stuff he fed other chicks. Questioning him didn't help any, so I quit probing him but after noticing how many calls he'd get, I hoped to be able to check his phone. About three weeks went by, and I itched to get a chance to see what numbers were in his phone.

I finally got the chance on a Wednesday, more than seven months ago. He came home late. I almost fell asleep, but his opening the door of our apartment woke me up. I pretended to be asleep, and he came in and went straight to the bathroom. After that, he put his phone on the charger near our bed and walked out the room. I wondered if his phone died on him because he wouldn't answer when I'd called earlier that night.

I waited to check his phone. If he took long enough, there'd be plenty of time for me to get the proof I needed to go crazy on him. No religious mumbo jumbo was needed at the moment. Thinking back, I feel stupid for allowing my anger to cloud my ability to reason. It's easy to assume God doesn't care about you when bad things happen.

Terrance did me wrong. He had a few numbers in his phone and had been having long conversations with these females. He tried to lie and say one of his homeboys had been using his phone.

"Who, Terrance? Who?!" My waiting until the morning after finding the text messages worked out well because I slept off some anger and frustration, but I still told him how I felt. "I could just kill you for this. I don't want to be with you and don't need you. I feel dumb for loving you."

Terrance's lost expression told me he was unsure how to respond. The look on his face made things worse because he realized he messed, but he tried to play clueless. What's the point of standing there, looking stupid? Tears moistened my face. I saw his ash gray Ralph Lauren button up and could smell traces of one of his colognes.

"You definitely won't be pulling this on me anymore. Either you go, or I will."

He gave me a cold, familiar stare, the same one he did when I was pregnant with

Dawntai. With Julius, he said he would do his best to support him. We had them quick, but Dawntai was older than Julius by a year and some months, so I thought Terrance would pull through in that amount of time - but that didn't end up being the case.

"You don't have to go. I won't do it again."

"Save that for some dumb chick, Terrance." I wanted to believe him, but his betrayal hurt far too much for me to forgive and forget.

"I'm really sorry."

"Am I supposed to believe you're sorry? You just shouldn't have done what you did. An apology won't take back you cheating on me." I tried to walk to the bedroom to avoid seeing his face, but he followed me. I shrugged him off when he tried to grab me, but he wouldn't leave me alone.

"Don't touch me, Terrance!"

"Monica, listen to me. I wasn't trying to do you wrong. What I did was stupid."

"Thanks for admitting it." I kept trying to walk away.

I wanted to pardon him, but something told me not to. We'd had some very good sex a couple days before and seemed connected. Sure, we also had a minor dispute, but the make-up sex was out of this world. The argument was over something quite dumb.

Whenever I reflected on what I did to him, I tried to apologize, but maybe he got tired of my antics and strayed because he wanted to have less to do with me. If so, the time had come for us to move on after three years.

"I can't do this anymore. We just don't need to be together. I need time to be alone." As good as our good times had been, he made a mistake he shouldn't have.

The tension brewed as he stood there, and I expected him to snap at any second, but he just walked into our room. I headed for the kitchen, wondering if he'd come out of the room; the next thing I knew, he stormed out the front door with a duffel bag. He came back the next day to get the rest of his stuff. I didn't know how he got back to the apartment, but I had to force myself not to care.