

SHERYL LISTER

NO
RESERVATIONS

A Novel

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HARPER MUSE

Prologue

YVETTE STEPHENS WISHED SHE COULD BE HAVING this conversation from the comfort of her home, but life had other plans. A wave of pain hit as she tried to adjust herself. Her husband rushed over to help, and she gave him a grateful smile. Joseph had been her rock since high school, and she loved him with every beat of her heart.

“I’m good, babe,” she said with a small smile.

How she wished they had more time. Yvette stared at the three women surrounding her hospital bed with tears in their eyes. Best friends since age eight, they had laughed, cried and seen each other through every challenge life threw their way.

“No crying allowed—or at least save it until I’ve had my say.” They smiled at her. “I just wanted to tell you how much your friendship has meant to me all these years. You’ve been the best sisters of the heart a girl could have.” She reached for Joy’s hand. “Joy, your mama named you right because you’ve been that and more to me. You’ve sacrificed your dreams long enough, sis. It’s time for you to start that business because every woman needs a place of respite.”

Joy laughed through her tears and gave Yvette’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I know, and I promise.”

Yvette shifted her gaze to her second friend. “Diane, you’ve been

the best godmother to Ebony and Ian—all three of you have—and I know you'll be an even better mother. Jeff will come around, just keep working on him."

Diane's pained gaze met Yvette's. "I'm working on him. One way or another," she added with a wry smile.

"Rochelle," Yvette started.

Before she could continue, Rochelle lifted a hand. "I already know what you're going to say."

Joy laughed. "Probably the same thing we've all been saying."

Yvette chuckled, then moaned in pain. "Don't make me laugh. Chelle, girl, I know your sorry ex is enough to make a woman stay single for the rest of this life and the next, but you're a beautiful woman, and you can't do that. Warren is a good man, and he really likes you."

Rochelle raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"I asked. What did you think? Let him in, sis. He can love you like you deserve to be loved." She grasped Rochelle's hand.

"I'll see."

Yvette gave her a look.

"Hey, it's the best I can do."

"Joy and Di, make sure she doesn't mess it up."

"We will," they chorused.

"Watch out for Joe and my babies, okay? And if he finds somebody else, be nice to her." She smiled at Joe. "Well, unless she's a gold-digging heifer. Oh, one more thing. We never got around to taking that trip back to Jamaica. Don't put it off any longer. Make those reservations, and take that trip."

Joe returned her smile, bent to kiss her softly and stroked her brow. "That's enough, baby. You've given a bellyful of advice tonight."

Staring up into his eyes, she felt his pain as surely as the pain coursing through her own body. "I know. I just want my girls to

enjoy their lives and live to the fullest like we talked about while growing up. And we promised we'd go back. I need y'all to take that trip, sisters," she said once more.

"They'll be fine. We all will."

Yvette didn't believe him for a moment. Her eyes drifted shut. Lord, she was so tired.

HARPPER
MUSE



To the sisters of my heart . . .

Chapter 1

Joy

JOY WEST CHECKED HER WATCH FOR THE TENTH TIME and wished the man talking would hurry up. She should have been gone fifteen minutes ago for her Saturday brunch meet-up with her girls Diane Evans and Rochelle Winters. She sent her husband a look, which he pointedly ignored while continuing to show photos of home renovations they'd completed. When they'd started West Home Renovations ten years ago, shortly after their marriage, she had been all fired up. Now, she just wanted out. Of both. She mouthed, *I'm leaving in five minutes*. He must have gotten the message because he did a quick wrap-up.

She stood and extended her hand. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Kelly. We look forward to working with you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. West." Mr. Kelly shook her hand, then Robert's. "Robert, I'll call you on Monday to get on your schedule."

Robert grinned. "Good enough. I'll walk you out."

As soon as they walked out, Joy gathered up all the folders and the contract and made her way to her office. She locked everything in a drawer and grabbed her purse.

“Could you have made it a little less obvious that you wanted to leave?”

Joy glanced over at the door where Robert stood glaring with his arms folded. “You knew I had somewhere to be at eleven, yet you still scheduled the appointment, and on a Saturday when the office is closed.” She hesitated before handing him a small envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Just open it.” She bit her lip anxiously as she waited.

He tore open the envelope and pulled the card out. “An invitation? To dinner?”

She had made a card inviting him to a romantic dinner that evening. “Yes. After I get back later, I was hoping we could go out to dinner tonight and talk. We haven’t done anything together outside of work in months.” Their marriage had been steadily unraveling over the past year. Despite her best efforts to get it back on track—from planning romantic dinners and overnight get-aways to trying to surprise him with lunchtime picnics—nothing had worked. She seemed to be the only one trying to make it work, and she was tired.

“I can’t,” Robert said, tossing the card aside. “I want to get things going for this new project. You know the summer months are our busiest, and June is only two months away.”

Her spirit sank. She couldn’t even interest him in a simple dinner. “It’s *Saturday*, Robert. Even when we were just starting out and had to work long hours, we still managed to find time to do some fun stuff.” The man standing before her was so different from the one she had fallen in love with years ago. No doubt he was still ambitious, intelligent, and handsome. At over six feet tall with a slim, muscular build, his clean-shaven, mahogany good looks still turned heads. However, the funny and engaging man—the one whose smile made her weak—had somehow disappeared

over the past few years. “Speaking of making some time, did you place the ad for another business manager?”

He sighed heavily. “No. The customers love you. Why are you so quick to mess up a good thing? Anyway, I thought you didn’t want to be late,” he said.

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Clearly, he didn’t want to spend time with her. Memories of them cuddling together in bed watching movies while stuffing their faces with popcorn, taking long walks on the beach while holding hands, and having candlelit dinners at their favorite restaurants surfaced. She missed those times with him. She missed them. Not for the first time, she wondered if he might be having an affair. Each rejection cut a little deeper, and the love she used to have for him had waned considerably. For the past year, they had been nothing more than polite strangers in their home.

“I’m more concerned about our marriage than this company, but it feels like I’m the only one who’s been trying to make it work these past several months. I’ve asked you to talk to me, I’ve tried to get us to spend more time together, but I don’t know what else to do,” she said. “If you want out, just say so,” she added softly, hoping he’d say he didn’t want their marriage to end.

“That’s the third or fourth time you’ve mentioned that or threatened to leave, so maybe you’re the one who wants out,” Robert snapped. “And didn’t you say you had somewhere to be?”

“If I wanted out, I wouldn’t be trying so hard to save this marriage.” Joy rolled her eyes and strode past him out the door. “I’ll see you later.”

In the car, she took a deep breath and willed back her tears. She was so tired of being the only one making an effort to repair their relationship and wondered after his response—or lack thereof—if she was fighting a losing battle and should just call it quits. Clearly Robert didn’t seem to care one way or another. After sending a

quick text to her friends, she started the car and drove off.

Thirty minutes later, she parked, rushed inside the Mimosa House and scanned the area. Diane threw up a wave, and Joy started in that direction. She hugged Diane and Rochelle.

“I’m so sorry I’m late.” She dropped down into a chair and picked up a menu. “Have you guys ordered yet? I need a mimosa or maybe something stronger.”

Rochelle eyed her. “That bad?”

“Worse.” Her entire life was falling apart, and she’d lost one of her best friends. She glanced over to the empty fourth chair at their table. That it would be vacant from here on out only made her sadder. It had been two weeks since they’d buried Yvette, and Joy still couldn’t get used to the fact that she was gone. She had been only thirty-eight, and cancer had stolen her life.

“I hear you. And it’s hard knowing Yvette isn’t coming.” They fell silent. Rochelle blew out a long breath. “Man, I miss her.”

“She was always the one who gave us good advice. Now who’s going to keep us in line?” They had often teased Yvette about having an old soul because she had been wise beyond her years.

They ordered their drinks and food, and as soon as the mimosas hit the table, Joy took a big gulp.

“You want to let us in on what happened, Joy?” Diane asked after taking a sip of her own drink.

“Robert. He deliberately scheduled an appointment for a new client this morning after I told him I was meeting you guys. We haven’t worked on a Saturday in over three years, and now, all of a sudden, he’s acting like we need to be available every day of the week.” Joy took another healthy swig.

Rochelle reached over and snatched the flute. “Give me that. If you don’t slow down, you’re going to be passed out under the table.”

Joy rubbed her temples. “I know, I know. It’s just that since

I told him I was ready to start working on opening the spa, he's changed. We *agreed* that after West Home Renovations was on solid footing, that it would be my turn. We've been in the black for three years running."

"You've been talking about expanding for over a year."

Joy reached for her glass and saluted Rochelle. "Exactly." The conversation paused as the server returned with their food. They thanked the young woman and dug in. "I asked him about placing an ad for a business manager to take my place so I can devote my time to getting my business off the ground, and do you know what he said? He told me all the customers like me, and he didn't know why I wanted to mess up a good thing." Just the thought of his audacity made her angry all over again.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Diane said, "I hate to say it, but Yvette might've been right." She cut into her omelet and forked up a portion.

Joy finished chewing a piece of toast. "I've been thinking a lot about what she said, and I don't think Robert's going to get on board." The conversation she'd had with Yvette a few months ago played in her mind.

"I've been listening to Robert lately, and it seems as if he's really happy about the company's growth. He doesn't strike me as wanting things to change."

Joy stared at Yvette. "I know. Every time I bring up the spa, he shifts the conversation."

"There's going to come a time when you're forced to decide if opening your place is what you really want or if you'll be content with the way things are now. I just hope it doesn't come down to you having to choose between it and your marriage."

"If I have to choose, then the decision is obvious."

A touch on her arm brought Joy out of her thoughts.

"Well then, he needs to get his ass out of the way." Rochelle

lifted her glass in a mock toast. “You know we’ve got your back, sis.”

Diane followed suit. “Chelle’s right. Whatever you need, we’ll help you.”

“Thanks.” She could always count on them. “What about you two? Have you thought more about what Yvette said?”

Diane set her fork on the plate. “Honestly, I’ve done nothing but think about it. The wait for adopting a baby is so long and, lately, I’ve been wondering, at my age, whether an older child might be a better option.”

Joy smiled. “That’s wonderful. There are so many of them who need a good home. Is Jeffrey okay with that?”

“I thought he was, but every time I try to start the conversation, he claims he’s too busy or it’s not the right time.”

What is it with these men? “Whatever you decide, I’ll be ready to don my godmother hat.” Joy had never wanted children and was perfectly content with her current role as godmother to Yvette’s two children and Rochelle’s daughter, and aunt to her brother’s two sons. It had taken years for her family, particularly her mother, to come to grips with Joy’s belief that not all women had to be mothers. “What about you, Chelle? Have you talked to Warren lately?”

“Not since the funeral, and we didn’t really have a long conversation.”

“Maybe not, but I saw him bringing you water and holding your hand.”

“And that little kiss on the forehead,” Diane added with a wide grin. “You do know what they say about a forehead kiss, right?”

Rochelle divided a wary glance between Joy’s and Diane’s smiling faces. “No. What?”

“It means that he cares a lot about you, and it’s not all about the sex. He wants you to know that you’re special and he respects you

and wants to protect you.”

“I think you’re reading way more into it.” Joy shook her head.

At five eight, Rochelle was the tallest of the group. With her full figure, clear mocha complexion, dark brown eyes and long hair, she was absolutely gorgeous, but she didn’t see herself that way. Joy’s friend’s self-esteem had taken a beating from her ex in ways Joy suspected Rochelle hadn’t even shared with them. If anyone deserved some happiness in her life, Chelle did.

They continued to converse while finishing the meal and for another hour afterward.

“Have you thought about the other thing Yvette said?” Joy asked the group.

“What other thing?” Diane asked.

“Going back to Jamaica.”

The four of them had made the first trip there right after graduating from college. While they’d been childhood friends, it had been there on the beach where they’d pledged to be sisters for life. They’d promised to go back every five years to recommit. Somehow, life always got in the way, and those reservations had never been made. Sure, they’d gone on day trips and weekenders, but with everyone starting jobs, getting married and having children, and navigating through life’s ups and downs, the trip hadn’t happened.

Rochelle clasped her hands together on the table. “Not really. With everything going on at work and Haley finishing up her first year of high school... But you’re right, we need to make this happen.”

Diane nodded. “I agree. It’s been pretty stressful at work and home, but we should think about doing it this summer. I know we haven’t wavered in our commitment as sisters, but there was something special and magical about the little ceremony we had in Jamaica.”

“Yeah,” Joy said.

Silence stretched between them, and she wondered if they all had the same regrets. They shouldn’t have kept putting off the trip, and now it would never be the four of them. Once again, Joy’s eyes strayed to the empty chair. The women chatted for a while longer, and when it was time to leave, they shared strong hugs, made a promise to meet again in a couple of weeks to start planning the trip and went their separate ways.

The house was quiet when Joy arrived, and a part of her was glad Robert hadn’t made it home. After changing out of her black slacks and silk, printed blouse and into a pair of comfortable sweats and a T-shirt and put her shoulder-length hair up into a ponytail, she powered up her laptop. She’d been working on her business plan for over three years and felt it was solid enough to take to the bank. She only hoped she’d be able to secure the loan on her own now that she knew for sure she wouldn’t be able to count on the promised assets from their company. The next step was to find the perfect spot for her dream spa. She had initially thought about buying the old community center that had been vacated after the city built a new one ten miles away. It already had ample parking and an industrial-sized kitchen. The grounds connected to a park, which would be ideal for a small walking trail or a couple of gazebos, but the noise from children playing would defeat the whole purpose of it being a retreat, so she’d nixed the idea.

For the next hour, she searched for properties that would be a good fit for what she wanted—something relatively small and intimate but could accommodate at least six treatment rooms. Her fingers froze on the track pad when she saw a ten-thousand-square-foot space that had originally been a small women’s gym in El Dorado Hills. Joy quickly clicked on each picture, and her excitement rose with each one. There were seven large rooms that she could use for the various treatments and another space that she

could have reconfigured into an industrial kitchen, as she planned to offer a limited menu. It also had a locker room, showers and plenty of bathroom stalls.

Joy read further and saw that there were an additional ten acres of land on the property that could be developed. Her smile widened, and her mind went into overdrive. She opened her wish list document, and her fingers flew across the keyboard. She was so engrossed in the task that she didn't hear Robert come in until he appeared beside her desk. She jumped and clutched her chest.

"You scared me."

Robert mumbled something that sounded like, "Sorry." He peered over her shoulder. "Are you researching ideas for Mr. Kelly's project?"

"No. This is for the spa. Do you want to see?"

"No." His deep voice was curt as he pivoted on his heel and stalked out of her office.

Get his ass out of the way, indeed. She'd sacrificed her dreams long enough.

Chapter 2

Diane

DIANE EVANS SAT ON THE SIDE OF HER BED FRIDAY evening reading the latest test results from Dr. Fields. Her fertility specialist had called to share the information earlier, but seeing it in black and white made it all too real. *Premature menopause*. The phrase played in her mind over and over. How could she be entering menopause at thirty-eight? She swiped at the tears flowing down her face. Even though she knew there was a slim chance of her being able to conceive and carry a child, this blow hit her hard. She hadn't mentioned it to Chelle and Joy last weekend during their brunch get-together because they were dealing with their own problems.

That never stopped you before, her inner voice chimed.

Truthfully, she hoped that by not saying the words, they wouldn't be true. Adoption was still on the table, but in a perfect world, she would have been able to do both.

"Why are you still sitting here? You're not even dressed yet."

She glanced over her shoulder at her husband, Jeffrey, as he rushed into the room and over to the walk-in closet.

Jeffrey looked down at his watch. "The guests will be here in less than an hour, and we need to make sure everything is ready."

"And the reason you can't do it would be what? They're *your* guests." Surely he could see that she'd been crying, but he didn't

even ask why.

He took down a tie and walked over to the mirror to put it on. “Can we not do this tonight, Di, please? We can talk about whatever you want tomorrow, but my boss is coming, and you know I’m up for asset manager this quarter.”

“All the more reason for you to host this dinner yourself.” Diane rose from the bed and went into the bathroom. For the past three months, Jeffrey had been working longer hours and hosting one business dinner after another. But Diane always ended up doing all the work while he stood by and accepted the praise. Tonight, she didn’t feel like it. Tonight, she wanted to take a long bath, put on her pajamas and crawl into bed with a book and a bowl of her favorite chocolate chip ice cream. Instead, she settled for a quick shower. She applied light makeup to her tawny-brown face and recombined her short, layered hair, then slipped into her dress and smoothed a hand down the front. At five six, she’d maintained her size ten frame.

Her hand stopped on her belly, and Diane felt her emotions rising once more with the knowledge that it would never be filled with the baby she desperately wanted. Sighing, she pushed the thoughts away and headed downstairs. And by the time the six guests arrived, she had her smile firmly in place.

Diane made sure the service staff she’d hired for the night replenished the hors d’oeuvres, kept the glasses full and served each one of the dinner courses on time.

“Everything tastes so good, Diane.” Jeffrey’s boss’s wife, Adele, said halfway through the last course.

“Thank you, Adele.”

Jeffrey shot Diane a look, which she ignored. The woman had called Diane by her first name, and Diane didn’t see any reason not to do the same, particularly since Adele wasn’t much older. The conversation flowed around the table, and they all laughed

loudly at the many bad jokes Jeffrey's boss told. She figured more than one person must have been up for a promotion since his boss wouldn't have been able to tell a good joke even if Bernie Mac walked up and handed the man a script. She had never been so glad to end a dinner in her life...unless she counted the last four times they'd hosted Jeffrey's work colleagues.

Jeffrey stood. "We can all adjourn to the living room for after-dinner drinks."

How about they all adjourn somewhere else? An old saying popped into Diane's head: *You ain't gotta go home, but you got to get the hell out of here.* She allowed Jeffrey to help her up and led the guests into the next room. Once again, Adele tried to engage her in conversation.

"What is it that you do again, Diane?"

"I'm the director of a preschool and day care center."

"Oh, that must be challenging."

"Some days it is, but I love the kids."

"Are you and Jeff planning to have any children of your own?" Adele asked with a sly grin.

Before Diane could answer, Jeffrey slid an arm around her waist and said laughingly, "We're working on it."

It took everything inside Diane not to knock that fake smile right off his face. They weren't working on anything. She couldn't get him to *talk* about fostering or adopting a child for five minutes, let alone *work* on it. She discreetly pushed his arm away and pasted a smile on her face.

"I need to go check on dessert. I'll be right back."

Instead of going to the kitchen, she made her way down the short hallway to the half bathroom. After closing the door, she leaned against the counter and drew in several calming breaths. How dare he stand there and lie? She'd had to beg and plead for him to accompany her to one doctor after another for five years,

in the hopes that she would be able to fill that missing piece in her life by having a child. She'd had her life all mapped out—career, marriage, then children. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she wouldn't be able to have it all. But as her mother often said, we plan and God laughs. Only she couldn't find one thing funny.

Diane stood there a moment longer before going back to the front. She stopped in the kitchen and asked that the dessert be served now instead of later, as had been planned. The quicker they finished, the quicker she could curl up in her bed and begin her pity party. She donned her polite mask once again—the one that said everything was okay—and announced dessert.

Forty-five minutes later, the last of the stragglers were leaving, including Jeffrey's boss and his wife.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Paulson," Jeffrey said, shaking the man's hand. "It's always a pleasure to have you and your lovely wife in our home."

Diane barely stifled an eye roll.

Mr. Paulson turned to Diane. "Everything was just wonderful, Diane."

"Thank you. I'm glad you both enjoyed yourselves. You two have a good evening."

Jeffrey paid the staff, and they departed. As soon as the door closed, she breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

"How could you embarrass me like that in front of my boss by calling his wife by her first name?"

This time she did roll her eyes. "She called me by mine. And as far as being an embarrassment, that honor goes solely to you."

Jeffrey's eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"That whole *we're working on it* crap when Adele asked about us having children." Diane stepped around him and went upstairs to their bedroom. She removed her jewelry and dress.

“What was I supposed to say?”

She spun around and glared at him. “How about the truth! You know what hurts the most? When you came in earlier, you *knew* I’d been crying, but you didn’t bother to ask why. The doctor called me today and said I’ve started menopause prematurely. Do you know what that means?” she asked, her voice and emotions rising. “It means that I will *never* be able to have the babies I wanted.”

“Diane—”

“Are you ready to discuss being foster parents or adopting, or did we take all those classes for nothing? Every time I bring it up, you conveniently find something else to do.”

“I’m forty years old and at the peak of my career. Besides, you said the waiting list for newborns is long. It could be three or four years, and I don’t know if I want to deal with a baby at that point.”

“I know that, and I’ve been thinking we could adopt an older child instead.”

Jeffrey waved a hand. “*No*. I’m not bringing that kind of drama into my house. There’s no telling what kinds of problems those kids have.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” She was done with this conversation. Snatching her nightshirt from the drawer, Diane strode toward the bathroom.

“Look, I didn’t know.”

She stopped, faced him and chuckled bitterly. “Of course you didn’t. The only thing you were concerned about was that dinner. I guess I know what’s really important to you these days.” She waited for him to say something, *anything*, but he just stood there. Her heart breaking, she continued to the bathroom and took a long, leisurely candlelit bubble bath. Afterward, Diane trudged back downstairs, got that bowl of ice cream and went back up to her bed.

Jeffrey watched her every move, but he still didn't utter a word.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, he said, "Regardless of what's going on between us, Diane, I really am sorry about the news from your doctor."

"I appreciate you saying that," she said, moving the ice cream around in her bowl. Tonight she would eat her dessert and indulge in her pity party. Tomorrow, she planned to find a way to fulfill her dream. One way or another.

HARPER
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Chapter 3

Rochelle

ROCHELLE WINTERS DROPPED DOWN ON HER BED AND groaned. Some days she felt as if she had nothing left to give, and today was one of them. Her day had started at seven thirty, and with the second registered dental hygienist calling out sick, she'd had to take up the slack and stay half an hour past her normal four o'clock time. She had never been so glad to see Friday, which seemed to be how she'd felt for the past several weeks. Taking a moment to kick off her shoes, she laid back against the pillow and closed her eyes. Fifteen minutes. That's all she needed.

"Mom, can you sign my trip slip? Oh, and am I still getting my hair braided next weekend? Don't forget we're supposed to go shopping on Sunday."

Rochelle cracked open one eye and stared at her fourteen-year-old daughter. "Haley, leave the trip slip on the nightstand and I'll sign it. Yes, you're getting your hair braided, and I didn't forget."

"But why can't you just sign it now?"

"You're not getting on the bus in the next five minutes, so there's no rush. Can you just give me a few minutes to catch my breath? It's been a long day. We'll do dinner in a little while and talk."

Haley placed the paper on the nightstand. "Okay. You're not sick, are you?"

Good grief. How many questions does this child have today? "No,

baby. Just tired.” More like two weeks past exhaustion if she were being honest. Rochelle closed her eyes again as soon as Haley walked out. She didn’t realize she had dozed off until she felt a gentle shake.

“Mom, are you awake?”

“I am now,” she murmured. She glanced over at the clock. Only ten minutes had passed. “I can’t even get fifteen minutes. What is it?”

“Can I spend the night at Ebony’s house?”

Rochelle’s eyes snapped open and she sat up. “Honey, I don’t know if that’s a good idea with everything going on.” The godsisters usually spent one weekend night together during the school year, alternating houses, and this month was supposed to be at the Stephenses’ home. It had been three weeks since Yvette died, and both Ebony and Ian were struggling with the loss. They all were.

Just yesterday, Rochelle had picked up her phone to send Yvette a text, and it wasn’t until she’d typed half the message that she’d remember that her friend was no longer here. It had taken a good thirty minutes for the tears to stop and for Rochelle to get herself together. She wondered how long it would take for the unexpected bouts of grief to become manageable.

“*Please?* Uncle Joe said it was okay.”

She sighed. “I’ll call him in about thirty minutes, *after* I relax, and see what he says.”

“Yes!” Haley did a little dance out the door.

She wanted to tell her not to get her hopes up because Joe had his hands full, but she didn’t have the heart. Maybe she’d offer to let Ebony stay here instead, to give him a break. Resuming her position, she adjusted the pillow beneath her head, set the alarm on her watch and drifted off.

When she woke up, Rochelle felt marginally better. She made her way to the kitchen and saw Haley curled up on the sofa in the

family room rewatching one of the *High School Musical* movies. As she pulled out the ingredients to make spaghetti and preheated the oven to make cookies, she remembered she was supposed to make a call. She sliced enough of the homemade cookie dough she had in the freezer to make a dozen, placed them on a pan and stuck it the oven when it got to the correct baking temperature, then went back to the bedroom to call Joe.

“Hey, Joe. It’s Chelle,” she said when he answered.

“Hey, Chelle. You calling about Haley staying over?”

“Yep. Are you sure you’re okay with it? They can stay over here instead.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m trying to keep as many things normal for the kids as possible, and it’s no trouble. I was just going to order pizza and let them watch a movie—*Captain Marvel*, I think.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. But if it gets to be too much, call me, and I’ll come get them.”

Joe chuckled. “Hey, you know I will. Ian and I will probably watch another Marvel movie. He told me he didn’t want to watch with them because they giggle too much.”

She laughed. Ian was two years younger than Haley and Ebony and still in the “girls are yucky” phase. “What time do you want me to bring her over?”

“If it was left up to them, an hour ago, but whenever you want. We’ll be here.”

“We’ll see you in a little while.” Rochelle disconnected.

She could hear the sadness in Joe’s voice. He and Yvette were a perfect match, and they brought out the best in each other. Too bad Rochelle couldn’t say the same about her ex.

Picking up her phone again, she sent a text to Joy and Diane: **Talked to Joe, and I'm a little worried about him. I'm dropping Haley off in a little while and was thinking you can meet me**

there for a few minutes.

A couple of minutes later, Joy replied: I'm leaving the office now and will meet you there. Do you need me to stop and pick up food?

Rochelle: No. They're ordering pizza and watching a movie.

Diane: Hey. I can stop by for a couple of minutes. Will pick up some drinks and popcorn on the way.

Rochelle pocketed her phone and smiled as she walked down the hall to the kitchen. She knew she could count on them. "Haley, get your stuff together, and as soon as these cookies are done, I'll take you over."

She sometimes had to repeat herself for her daughter to get moving. This time, the words were barely off her tongue before the child was up and sprinting down the hallway. Shaking her head, she placed the ground turkey back in the refrigerator. That was one less thing she had to do today. She'd figure out something to eat for herself after she got back. The oven timer sounded a minute later, and Rochelle removed the cookies. She had just placed them on a plate when Haley returned.

"I'm ready." Haley held up her bag.

"That was fast."

"I had it already packed, just in case."

Smiling, she handed her daughter the foil-covered plate and said, "Let's go, girl."

She put on her shoes, passed a mirror and realized her hair was sticking up all over her head. Rochelle redid her ponytail and debated on whether to change out of her scrubs. She'd only be gone long enough to drop Haley off, so she kept them on.

The normal twenty-minute drive took almost double the time with all the traffic. Rochelle noticed Joy's and Diane's cars there as she parked in front of the house. Haley nearly jumped out of the car with excitement. Apparently, Ebony felt the same way, as

she came barreling out the door. The two girls embraced as if they hadn't seen each other in months. In reality, it had been less than two weeks.

"Hi, Aunt Chelle." Ebony wrapped her thin arms around Rochelle.

Rochelle hugged her tight. "How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess." She held the door open. "Daddy is in the kitchen with Aunt Joy and Aunt Diane. Come on, Haley."

Rochelle watched the two girls disappear around the corner and made her way to the family room, where she found Ian. "Hey, Ian."

"Hi, Aunt Chelle." Ian stood, gave her a quick hug and flopped back down on the sofa.

Joe rounded the corner and gave her a hug. "Hey, Chelle. I see you called in reinforcements."

She gave Joe a strong hug and chuckled. "Hey, that's what we do. We're family."

"Di and Joy are in the kitchen."

She followed him there, hugged her two friends and took a seat at the table.

Joe took the vacant one.

"How are you holding up?" she asked, studying the weary lines etched around his light brown eyes. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days.

He shrugged and ran a hand over his close-cropped hair. "Some days I think I'm doing okay and others, not so much. I thought I was ready, but... I miss her so much. I keep expecting to hear her laughter. I still talk to her in my mind and wish she was here, but my heart and soul know she's at peace."

Rochelle felt his pain as if it were her own. At two years older, he had been like a big brother to her, Joy and Diane, and she wished she could do something to help. "I know you do. We all

do. Is there anything you need me to do?"

Joy reached out and took Joe's hand. "You know we're here for whatever you all need."

Diane nodded.

He shook his head. "Not right now. You all have been lifesavers bringing food and checking on us." Joe paused, then said, "I have something I'd planned to give you later, but since you're all here, now is as good a time as any." He stood, left the room and came back a moment later. "Yvette left this for you all."

Rochelle, sitting closest, accepted the large envelope he handed her. She took a deep breath, opened it and pulled out a sheet of paper and three smaller envelopes with her, Diane's and Joy's names on them. Scanning the sheet of paper, she felt her emotions rising. "This note is from Yvette. 'Sisters,'" she read, "I figured you three would still be talking about making those reservations ten years from now and never get the trip done, so I made them for you. Remember how we used to love hanging out at the beach, laughing, gorging ourselves on too much chocolate and sipping on wine coolers? It's time to enjoy it again. Before any one of you starts, I booked the trip for the second week in July. Chelle, I made sure it was during the summer so you don't have to worry about school for Haley. And since she spends a couple of weeks with your parents, you'll be free." Rochelle chuckled and continued reading. "Diane, there are far less students at the day care, and I know you have your summer program laid out right down to the smallest detail. You have an assistant director, so let her earn her money for a week."

"That girl," Diane said, shaking her head and smiling. "She knew me well."

"She knows us all." Rochelle smiled and lifted the paper again. "Joy, I know you'll be ready with your bags packed. You were always the one to help me get the other two in line. I'm counting

on you to do it one more time.”

Joy released a deep breath and swiped at the moisture in her eyes. “I’ve got my girl on this.”

“Since you all love me, I know I can count on you three not to waste my money. Y’all better have your butts on that plane to Jamaica. Make sure to buy some cute clothes and have a drink on me. If you don’t, I’ll be waiting for you when you get to heaven, and it’s not going to be pretty. Until we meet again, Yvette.”

Rochelle set the letter down. No one spoke for a lengthy moment.

Joe broke the silence. “She loved you all.” He reached over and gave them each their plane tickets and Visa gift cards worth two hundred dollars each.

Diane held up the gift card. “What’s this for?”

“To get your shopping started.”

Joy ran her hand over the ticket. “She was one of a kind. So I guess that means we’re going to Jamaica in about three months.”

Rochelle smiled. “I guess so.”

“And we’re going to look good while we’re there,” Diane added as she stood. “I need to get going. Joe, if you need anything, let me know.”

Joe nodded and rose to his feet. “Thanks for the popcorn and drinks. I think we should have enough for about ten movie nights,” he said with a chuckle.

“I need to get going too,” Joy said.

Rochelle gave both her friends a strong hug. “Thanks. We’ll have to schedule a time to go shopping.”

Joy laughed. “You ain’t said nothing but a word.”

Diane smiled. “Probably not, Miss Shopaholic.”

While Joe led them out, Rochelle went to check on Haley and Ebony. “Haley, where are those cookies?”

“Oh, sorry, Mom.” Haley grabbed the plate off the bed and

handed it to Rochelle.

Shaking her head, she took the plate into the kitchen, placed it on the table and reclaimed her seat. Joe returned as she sat. “I made a few chocolate chip cookies to go along with the other snacks.”

“My favorite.” Joe immediately lifted the foil and snagged one. He bit into it and let out a moan. “These are so good. Whenever you made them for Yvette, I rarely got one.”

She smiled, recalling how much her friend had loved the cookies. “No one got any if she saw them first.” From the first time Rochelle had made them when they were juniors in high school, Yvette had always told her how good they tasted and tried to come up with a million reasons Rochelle *had* to bake more. It became standard for Rochelle to bake her some for every celebration, from birthdays and holidays to work promotions and just because. She drew in a deep breath and wondered if she’d made a mistake in bringing them.

The doorbell rang, interrupting their conversation. “Excuse me. Probably one of my neighbors. They’ve been stopping by regularly.”

While he was gone, she bowed her head and prayed for help. She needed to keep it together and be strong for Yvette’s family, although she didn’t know how she’d do it with her own grief still so fresh and raw.

“Hello, Rochelle.”

Her head came up sharply. “Oh. Um...hey, Warren.”

Warren McIntyre smiled and sat in the chair next to her.

Rochelle eyed Joe, who still stood behind Warren.

He held up his hands in mock surrender and mouthed, *I didn’t know he was coming over.*

She threw him a look that said she didn’t believe him. Now she wished she had taken time to change, especially with Warren

staring at her the way he always did. He had on a pair of nice jeans and a polo shirt, and at forty-two, the man was drop-dead fine and could pass for someone a decade younger. His mahogany-colored face remained unlined, and his body was toned and tight. She, on the other hand, needed to lose a good twenty-five pounds.

Rochelle's gaze dropped. *Great. Is that a toothpaste stain on my shirt?*

She clasped her hands in front of her and leaned her forearms on the table, hoping to hide it.

"I'm going to check on the girls. I'll be right back." Joe made a hasty exit.

Warren covered her hands with one of his. "How've you been?"

"Alright. Just working a lot." She resisted the urge to pull her hands back and shift in her chair. Every time she was around him, she felt like a sixteen-year-old girl on her first date. After her short-lived marriage, Rochelle had shoved men and dating to the farthest corner of a closet and shut the door firmly. The few times she did venture out to date had turned out disastrous, sending her right back to her simple, single and safe life.

"When are you going to let me take you out to dinner?"

Rochelle stared at him. He'd been asking her out for the past three months, and she'd turned him down each time. Any other man would have walked away long ago, but not Warren. Whenever they had some get-together, he would always do nice stuff for her.

"Let him in, sis. He can love you like you deserve to be loved."

Yvette's words came back to her. Rochelle didn't know about the whole love thing, but she figured one dinner couldn't hurt. "How about tonight?"

His eyes widened in surprise. "You wouldn't tease a brother, would you?"

She couldn't stop the smile that curved her lips. "No."

He studied her a moment, seemingly searching for some hint of guile. Finally, he said, "It's a date."

"What's a date?" Joe asked, coming into the kitchen.

Warren grinned. "Rochelle finally agreed to let me take her out to dinner tonight."

"I see. Well, she's free the whole night since Haley is spending the night here."

Rochelle's gaze flew to Joe's. Was he trying to take up the matchmaking mantle his wife had started?

Warren stood and extended his hand. "Then we should get started. I don't want to waste one moment."

She hesitated briefly before placing her hand in his and letting him help her up. "I'm going to tell Haley I'm leaving. I'll be right back."

Around the corner, she let the wall take her weight. She'd been out of the game far too long and started to have second thoughts. "I can do this," she whispered under her breath repeatedly. *It's only dinner.* In control again, she said her goodbyes to the girls and Ian and went back to the kitchen. "I'm ready. Where do you want me to meet you?"

"Meet me?" He shook his head. "Rochelle, a real man picks his date up and drops her off at her door. Always."

Oo-kay. "Um...that's fine." She gave him her address. "I need to go home and change." His gaze made a slow tour from her face to her feet and back up again, making her breath stack up in her throat and her heart race. And she wanted to hide. Did he see what she saw every time she looked in a mirror—a tired, overweight woman?

"You look fine to me, but if you'd like to change, that's fine too. I'll follow you home and wait for you. Will that work?"

"Sure." Rochelle hugged Joe and whispered, "I am so going to get you."

Joe merely smiled. “Take good care of her, Warren. She’s like a sister to me.”

“Oh, I will.” Warren spoke the words to Joe, but his eyes never left Rochelle’s.

As soon as she got into the car, she engaged the Bluetooth and called Diane. “Hey, Di. Call Joy. I need help.”

“Hang on.” Diane came back on the line. “Joy, are you there?”

“I’m here. Hey, Chelle. What’s going on?”

“Warren showed up after you two left.”

“Alrighty now.”

“I knew you were going to say that, Joy. Anyway, he asked me out to dinner and—”

Diane cut in. “Girl, please don’t tell me you turned the man down *again*.”

“Can you guys stop interrupting and let me finish, please? Now, for the record, I didn’t turn him down. And we’re going tonight.”

Joy and Diane’s screams came through the line, followed by “It’s about time” and “Finally.”

“I can’t remember the last time I went out, and I just don’t know if it’s a good idea.”

“It’s a great idea, Chelle. What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know, Di.” Since she had gained weight, none of her clothes fit well. She had never been small, but lately she hovered between a size eighteen and twenty, depending on the style. It was the one thing that made her self-conscious, and she wondered what Warren saw in her.

“I know it better not be those scrubs you still have on,” Joy said.

“Where are you going?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Well, a nice pair of slacks and a cute top will work. I would say bring a blazer just in case, but these mid-April temps here in

Sacramento are already acting like it's summer."

Joy was right about the weather. It had been in the mideighties all week. Rochelle mentally tried to recall what she had in her closet and sighed. "I'll see what works. I'm pulling into the driveway, so I have to go."

"Whatever you decide will be fine. Go and have a good time. We'll be expecting the details tomorrow," Diane added with a little laugh.

"Thanks, and I'm sure you will." She ended the call and reached for the door handle, but Warren was already there and opening it. "I need to change clothes. Where are we going?"

"Somewhere casual, so don't worry about getting dressed up. We'll save that for next time."

He reached up toward her face, and she instinctively drew back and gasped. Clutching her chest, she closed her eyes as a fear she hadn't experienced in years rose up and nearly overwhelmed her. When she opened them again, he was staring at her with a mixture of shock and concern.

"Are you okay?" Warren slowly dropped his hand and moved a few steps away. "There was a piece of lint in your hair, and I—"

"Y-yes. Fine." Or at least she would be as soon as her heart rate returned to a normal pace and her hands stopped shaking.

"Are you sure?"

Rochelle nodded but knew he had questions. They stood there a moment longer.

He opened his mouth and closed it again, then scrubbed a hand down his face.

"Go ahead and ask your question."

"Joe mentioned you were divorced, and I'm not trying to get into your business, but..." He paused before continuing. "Did he hit you? I just want to know what I'm up against."

Her brow lifted. “What does that mean?”

“It means I really want to get to know you, but I also want to be careful not to frighten you or make you uncomfortable in any way.”

Rochelle hesitated. “Once, and I walked,” she said softly.

In one of her ex’s rages, he’d backhanded her, and although it caught her off guard, she’d managed to dodge most of the force, and his hand merely glanced off her cheek. The impact had been far less than the blows she’d taken from his words.

His concerned gaze met hers. “I can wait outside for you if it’ll make you more at ease.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

He had been nothing but kind to her. Inside, she directed him to a seat in the living room.

“I won’t be long.” She continued to her bedroom and cursed under her breath. She hadn’t reacted like that in years and had no idea why it had happened today. *Probably some leftover memory from all the times my crazy ex threatened to hit me...or the one time he did.*

Shaking her head, she quickly searched and settled on a pair of black jeans and a short-sleeved button-down top that fit reasonably well. After freshening up, she dressed, brushed her hair out, applied eyeliner and lip color, then went out front. “I’m ready.”

He stood. “You look beautiful.”

She wished she felt that way. “Did you decide where we’re going?”

“Have you been to that soul food place in Oak Park called Fixins?”

“No, but I’ve heard of it. The food is supposed to be pretty good.”

“We could go there, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.” On the way out the door, she caught her reflection in

the mirror and tugged on her shirt. She wished she had something else to wear.

By the time they arrived at the restaurant, Rochelle was still a little nervous because it had been so long since she'd been on a date. But when he placed his hand in the small of her back to guide her, something about the soft pressure seemed to calm and excite her at the same time. A hostess led them to a booth near the back. The paintings on the wall and the music playing in the background made her feel as if she'd stepped into somebody's big mama's house. It had a true southern vibe. They pored over the menu for a few minutes, and she chose the shrimp and grits, while Warren opted for the fried chicken with collard greens and red beans and rice. Both chose sweet tea.

Over dinner, he told her about his job as a high school psychologist and some of the challenges he faced.

"I don't think I could deal with that many teenagers. The one I have at home is enough."

Warren laughed. "I feel the same way sometimes, but I like to think I'm making a difference in a few lives. The best part is when one of my students graduates from college, then comes back to tell me how much my support and advice helped them." He shook his head. "I can't tell you how proud it makes me."

The emotion in his voice gave Rochelle another glimpse into his personality and provided one more piece of evidence of him being a good man. Until now, she hadn't let herself think of him as anything but a friend, even though she could admit that she'd been secretly attracted to him. However, tonight she could feel the chemistry between them rising with each passing moment. Every sweet gesture, soft touch of his hand on hers and magnetic smile pulled her in.

The server returned with their food a moment later, and she waited until the young man left before continuing the conversa-

tion.

“You’re obviously really great at being a counselor. Do many of them keep in touch?”

He nodded. “More than I would’ve ever imagined. I’ve been invited to and attended college graduations, weddings, and even a few christenings.” Warren took a bite of his chicken.

“That’s pretty amazing. Any advice for a mother of a teen?” she asked with a smile.

“You’re already doing great. From what I’ve seen, you’re a wonderful mother. Haley has grown into a lovely young woman.”

Rochelle pretended to concentrate on her food, not wanting him to see how uncomfortable she had become. Ever since her disastrous marriage, she’d had a hard time accepting compliments, always expecting the other shoe to drop in the form of a negative comment.

He’s not Kenny, she reminded herself. Just the opposite, and like her older sister, Valerie, always said, Rochelle had to stop judging every man’s intent by her sorry ex’s. She lifted her head and stared into Warren’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Warren smiled. “No thanks necessary. You’ve done all the work.” They both laughed, then he leaned forward and asked, “How are you all doing with losing Yvette? I know it has to be hard on you.”

Rochelle drew in a deep breath. “Harder than I ever anticipated. The grief pops up out of nowhere, and then there are times when I forget and pick up the phone to call or text her.” She shook her head as she felt her emotions rising.

“I understand. It’s been tough. Rochelle, if you ever need someone to talk to or just a shoulder to cry on, I’m here. No matter what time it is, you can call me.”

She met his sincere gaze and nodded. “Thanks. That means a

lot.”

He took a sip of his tea. “So, what do you do for fun when you’re not being Mom?”

“I don’t have much time for fun, but I hang out with Diane and Joy.”

“You have to make time. It’s important for your mental health.”

“I know. When it’s basketball season, I try to get to at least one Warriors game. Does that count for fun?”

His eyes lit up. “You like basketball?”

“I do.”

“So do I, along with football. We’ll have to go to a game when the season starts. So, are you Team LeBron or Team Jordan as to who’s the best of all time?”

“Neither. I mean, they’re in the conversation for best of all time, but until I see somebody hit a hundred points in a game or average fifty points for an *entire* season like Wilt Chamberlain, then I can’t consider them to be the best. But LeBron being the all-time scoring leader is definitely up there.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

Over dinner, they continued to converse about their favorite players, then everything and nothing. Then the conversation turned to music. She was surprised to find they liked a lot of the same artists. And every time he stared at her with one of those heated looks, her pulse skipped, and she had to resist the urge to fan herself.

Eyes shining, he picked up her hand and placed a soft kiss on the back. “Basketball, music. You, Rochelle Winters, are a woman after my own heart. I’m going to enjoy finding out what else you like.”

The heat from his soft lips on her hand sent all kinds of sensations flowing up her arm. *Breathe. Don’t swoon under the table,*

girl.

She wasn't used to such frank male scrutiny, and by the time he took her home, she was still a mass of nerves. Was he planning to kiss her? Would it be another one of those sweet forehead kisses or something more intense?

Taking her hand, he walked her to the door. "I really enjoyed dinner tonight and hope we can do it again soon."

Part of her wanted to tell him no because trusting another man was hard, and she didn't want to be hurt again. However, the other part—the one that had enjoyed his company—wanted nothing more than to see him again. The latter won. "I'd like that."

"Would it be okay if I kissed you goodnight?"

She appreciated him asking. Most men would expect it. "Yes."

A small smile tilted the corner of his mouth. He lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers once, twice, and the sweetness poured over her like warm honey. He touched his mouth to hers once more, gifting her with butterfly kisses all over her lips before slipping his tongue inside and swirling it around hers. Sensations she hadn't felt in a long time, if ever, flowed through her, and her arms came up and wound around his neck. Her knees went weak, and she probably would have melted to the floor if Warren's arms hadn't been securely around her. A soft moan escaped as desire flooded her entire being. After another second, she eased back. *What was that?* "Um...so that's what you call a goodnight kiss, huh?"

Warren's deep chuckle floated through the air. "That was just a *taste*, baby." He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "We'll save the rest for another time." He tossed her a bold wink.

A taste? If that was only a taste, she wondered what a full goodnight one would feel like.

Warren kissed her once more. "Sleep well, beautiful."

She nodded, her heart racing a mile a minute. "You too." Ro-

chelle closed the door behind him and leaned her forehead against it. *The man could kiss!*

HARPER
MUSE



About the Author



Photo by Ashley Taylor of Taylor'd Shots Photography

SHERYL LISTER IS A MULTI-AWARD WINNING AUTHOR and has enjoyed reading and writing for as long as she can remember. She is a former pediatric occupational therapist with over twenty years of experience and often says she “played” for a living. A California native, Sheryl is a wife, mother of three daughters and a son-in-love, and grandmother to two special boys. When she’s not writing, Sheryl can be found on a date with her husband or in the kitchen whipping up delicious meals and desserts to satisfy her inner foodie.



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