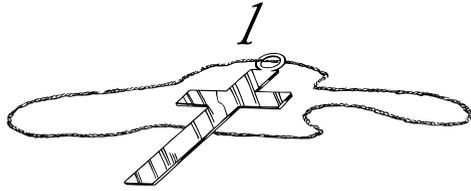


*Sober Faith*

**STEPHANIE PERRY MOORE**

# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	9
1. Toasting Into Trouble	11
2. Hosting Without Permission	22
3. Suffering the Consequences	30
4. Traveling to Love	40
5. Modeling Without Poise	51
6. Discipling My Life	57
7. 'Tempting to Die	68
8. Crashing Downhill	74
9. Waiting with Expectation	81
10. Acting for Him	91
11. Facing My Fears	97
12. Agreeing to Disagree	104
13. Hiding the Truth	114
14. Exempting Your Test	122
15. Walking with Grace	131



## *Toasting Into Trouble*

*P*ayton Skky, you're the most beautiful girl I've ever laid eyes on," my boyfriend genuinely whispered in my ear, as we waltzed across the ballroom in high style.

Leaning my head on his strong shoulder, I quickly replied, "I don't know how I look on the outside, but on the inside being in your arms makes me feel like Cinderella."

Continuing to twirl, I reflected on why I was so happy now, and how the last several months had been more trying than any other period of my short seventeen years. I'd been through quite a bit. Yet, as I trusted God to straighten out my problems, life had gotten remarkably better.

See, I used to date a guy named Dakari Graham. That's Kari 'The Bomb' Graham. This guy is drop-dead fine: caramel skin, perfect flashing smile, and an 'all that' personality. If you didn't know better, you'd think he was Denzel Washington's little brother. Boy, is he smooth.

Anyway, we were together for two great but crazy years. On again, off again—better, best, and sometimes worst. Even

though things weren't perfect, I still thought we'd get married one day. You know, high school sweethearts graduating into eventual wedded bliss.

Sounds great, BUT, Dakari had a different agenda. To be blunt, he broke up with me because I wouldn't put out. He found someone else to give him what I wouldn't. Honestly, it hurt badly that Dakari would rather have none of me if he couldn't have one particular thing. It took a long time, too, for me to see that. I had to get past all the fluff to see that Mr. Graham was missing one particular characteristic. In all his beauty, he failed to hold a strong love for the Lord as deeply in his heart as he held his ego. Luckily, before it was too late, I learned that it's better to please God than to please a guy.

After struggling and straining to stay pure, both physically and spiritually, I chose the higher ground and walked away. What a great choice.

"What are you thinking so hard about, pretty lady?" my escort inquired.

"Oh, nothing," I replied. "I'm just so blessed to be here with you."

When I trusted my heavenly Father and dwelt in His goodness, the Lord soothed my aching heart. He helped me turn my focus back squarely toward Him. See, God knew better than I that I needed much more in my life than just a cute guy. He knew I needed to firmly trust Him in my love life, my friendships, everything. After I got the lesson, the Lord sent my way one of His own to call my own. Mr. Tad Taylor and I have only been dating for a few months, but he's a strong, godly guy. Plus, he's tall, dark, and handsome. That doesn't hurt either.

Although staying pure 'til marriage will be tough, with Tad there's no pressure. We both have the same goal. He actually has a deep relationship with the Lord, which helps him stay strong. That relationship means more to him than

anything he could get from me. He's so much unlike my former beau, Mister "I-want-it, I-get-it," who only cared about satisfying his flesh.

The music was bold, yet sweet. The moment was precious and priceless. The ballroom was strikingly elegant, decked out in red, white, and gold floral. Mom and her Link sisters had really outdone themselves putting this affair together. As Tad and I moved in rhythm with the other dancers, I took it all in and silently reminded myself to tell Mom, "Thanks."

Glancing out of the corner of my eye, I saw my three girlfriends: Rain, Lynzi, and Dymond. We had a sisterhood that meant more to me than a million-dollar savings bond. We were all different, yet genuinely enjoyed each other.

We'd just gone through a terrible misunderstanding—the kind that happens when you make assumptions and jump to conclusions without getting the facts. Fortunately, God allowed us to not be deceived with foolish lies. Thus, we straightened things out and vowed to remain close forever. This Debutante Ball was so special because all of us were overjoyed that our friendship was back intact.

Of the three, I'm the closest to Rain. We've been buddies since we were tots. Rain is my confidante and I'm hers. There's nothing we can't talk about. Although sometimes we don't agree, there's never a time we won't hear each other out. We try to tell each other the truth—the real, hard truth.

As I glanced at the gorgeous, tall, slender girl nearby, I couldn't believe our time on the same road was fading out towards different paths. She was dancing with her equally tall beau, Tyson, who didn't go to our school, Lucy Laney. He went to one of our rival schools, T.W. Josey.

Then there was Lynzi. Boy, had the two of us gone through a lot lately! Both of us had had boyfriend problems. Not only are there biblical reasons not to have sex before you are married, but Lynzi found out there could be terrible

consequences to that sin as well. My girl had a close call; she thought she was pregnant. By grace, only grace, she was not. Luckily, things are looking up for her too, although she is back with her all too pushy guy, Bam. Supposedly, she's got a different mind-set this time. She's trying not to make the same mistake again. I hope she succeeds.

And Dymond, how gorgeous she is as she turns. To think people used to call her fat. Yeah, she's chunky, but boy is she fly. Her thick-framed boyfriend Fatz is crazy, fun, and cool.

My parents seemed so proud sitting nearby as they gazed at me. My mom wanted me to be a deb for years. She is a member of The Links organization, who sponsors this event. At first, I didn't think I'd like being a debutante, but I have truly enjoyed the experience.

Being a deb is as precious as being a budding rose, blooming and blossoming in your own time. We young ladies are learning to make the most out of every day and trying to spring forth goodness. Yet, even as we change, we hope to change into something better.

As we did the figure eight dance and changed partners, I was paired with my ex-boyfriend. He is a senior, just like me, at the same high school. He told me he was going to back down from coming on so strong, but as I noticed him caressing my back and drawing me even closer to him, I kinda figured something else was up.

"What are you doing? What are you doing? Don't you realize it won't work for us anymore? You called it off at the beginning of the school year to date someone else. You didn't want me then, and I don't want you now," I breathed, full of emotion.

"Yeah, I hear what you say, but I also hear my heart. You just met that Tad dude, man. Ya'll only been together . . . what, a couple months? We were together for years, baby, for years, and you s'pose to be mine. I'm sorry, I just gotta

let you know that when you want this, when you want what you used to have, it's yours," Dakari verbalized, as he spun me back into the arms of the one I wanted to be with.

"What was that all about? The brother seemed like he was sayin' some things I'd have a problem with," Tad voiced in an overprotective tone.

"It was nothing. Kari just made me realize that sometimes you don't know what you have until it's gone, and now that I have you I don't want to make Dakari's mistake. So let's not waste time talking about him. Let's continue enjoying this magical moment, 'cause I can't imagine anything going wrong. Our proms are coming up, and pretty soon we'll be graduating, then summer, then college. And I'm ready for it all!" I said to him excitedly.

Tad then flung me back into the arms of Dakari once again. I hated to leave his embrace, but I knew we'd be apart for only a brief moment. My eyes, however, couldn't focus in on my present dance partner. They lingered on the one who owned my heart.

"Why you keep staring at the brother?" Dakari voiced with jealousy. "Him and Starr are all the way on the other side of the room. You got the best-lookin' dude in the place right here. So, check me out!"

I teased, "Someone wants my attention . . . how precious."

Waltzing with Dakari wasn't so terrible. Actually, we were laughing at some of everything. I was glad that he seemed to be cool with us being friends. That's the only way it would ever be.

"Stop, stop putting your hands all over me!" I heard coming from across the room.

The most physically attractive girl at the ball was acting as if she'd lost her mind. And the scariest part about it to me, as I stared at her pushing away from the guy she was twirling with, was that it was Tad Taylor. My escort. Although the orchestra kept playing the music, we all stopped dancing.

Forty-nine debs and forty-nine escorts all turned inwardly to view the spectacle before us.

Starr's long, black, shiny hair was swishing back and forth, as she was pointing at Tad in the weirdest way. He, on the other hand, kept his poise and tried to calm her down.

"What are you talking about? Touch you? We're just dancing," he retorted.

"D-d-don't you try . . . d-d-don't you even act like you weren't trying to get this," Starr mumbled, stuttering and falling all at once.

Dakari got over there just in time to catch her before she fell to the floor. No one knew what was up. We all were so scared. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Love, rushed on to the floor.

Before they could get to her Dakari yelled, "She's OK, she's OK. She just passed out."

His words calmed everyone down. At least she hadn't died right there before us. And then Dakari explained, "She's drunk."

I rushed to Tad's side. "Oh my gosh, what's going on?" I said to him.

"Yo' boy's right. She kept tripping over me. Out of nowhere she started accusing me of stuff. Then she just passed out. But I smelled something on her breath and asked her if she was OK."

She's drunk. Inebriated. Intoxicated. How could someone pour down so much alcohol that they would pass out? She had to be totally out of her mind to drink so much. She had been humiliated earlier in the evening when this guy from the crowd called her some horrible names; maybe it had been too much for her to take.

Dakari and Mr. Love carried Starr off to the side. As she slowly came to, her sluggish body wasn't its usual together self. It was weird to witness.

Amazingly, the music hadn't stopped. However, no one

felt like dancing, most of all Tad. Even though it was a lie, the accusations still hurt.

Velda Flannery, the choreographer, started pushing everyone to get in line for the last dance, The Promenade March. We were to march and parade ourselves before the crowd one last time and then march out into the lobby. As the group began the dance, the pep in our step was lost. Even though I was in a daze over the whole thing myself, I turned to Tad to help him regain his zeal for the moves.

“It’s OK. Everybody knows she was making it up, Tad. Try to forget it,” I urged.

“No, it doesn’t have anything to do with what she said,” Tad told me.

He was very frustrated. I hated the fact that something was weighing heavy on his mind. I hoped he’d open up.

“People don’t ever think about it . . . consequences . . . actions. I wish folks would think about stuff. Then . . .” Tad counseled the air.

He was so disgusted that he couldn’t even finish his thought. Although he never regained his enthusiasm, we finished the dance. I was so thankful that he was my escort. As we marched out of the place, I thought, though it wasn’t a perfect night, Tad was surely a perfect date.

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About thirty minutes had passed. Everyone stood in line to take pictures with their escorts under the display of roses. Even though the fizzle had faded from our evening like a soda turns flat, Tad and I managed to pose with a smile.

“Are you ready? I’m kinda ready to go,” Tad said to me after our shots were finished.

“No, no, we can’t go now. They’re . . . um . . . having refreshments for us in the back room. Just hang with me for a few more minutes. Please?” I begged him with puppy dog eyes, trying to convince him to stay.

Tad agreed to stay. When we entered the other room, he went to stand with my girlfriends' escorts, Tyson, Bam, and Fatz. I sat down with my girls, and we reviewed the night's events.

"Miss Starr had two episodes tonight, ya'll. See, ya trip on folks and that stuff comes back to you," Dymond giggled.

"Ya'll! What kinda word is that? With the GPA you have and all the stuff you've got going for you, you talk so crazy, Dy," I said, actually trying to stop the gossip.

My three friends looked at me as if I was the one who was crazy. Slang is all we ever speak to each other. It's our own language. It's who we are. How we breathe.

I sounded like my mother. "OK, OK, OK, I'm trippin'," I apologized.

They all shook their heads in agreement and we laughed. The detour had worked. At least we weren't still bashing Starr. I was kinda angry too. I figured she had enough to deal with without us trippin'. Suddenly, we all felt a chill and simultaneously turned our heads toward the door.

"I kinda feel sorry for her," I said to my three girlfriends.

Starr was standing there in front of all of her peers. She had to be embarrassed. She had to be humiliated. Dakari was nowhere around.

"Who's she lookin' for?" Rain questioned.

"Don't know, but I saw Dakari leave. He's through with that girl. And needs to be," Lynzi said.

"Why do you feel sorry for her anyway, Payton?" Dymond asked. "Who cares about her? All the drama she gave you, taking yo' man and stuff. Tryin' to get your other one. And you feel sorry for her. Tuhh! Give me a break."

I couldn't answer them. Starr had made my senior year crazy. To a rational person, it did seem kinda stupid for me to care about her feelings and to care about her pain so

much. But I did care. I cared a lot. We were about to graduate in a few months. Prom was before us, and our summer was full of expectations. Then college right down the road. Yet, I couldn't feel completely happy when someone else was sad.

I left my friends to go to Starr's side. Before I could get there, Starr started towards Tad. "OK, OK, what's going on?" I said to myself. "What is she saying to him?" Tad saw me and reached his hand out to mine. I came over to his side.

Strangely enough, Starr unexpectedly replied with remorse, "I owe you both an apology. Um, I'm sorry. I feel sick now and I know I made a fool of myself, but I didn't have to say what Dakari said I said to you. I actually can't even remember too much, but . . . I just want to tell you that I'm sorry."

"You should be sorry, you lush!" was yelled out from some unknown, cruel person in the room.

Whoever said that terrible remark should have been thrown out. However, the sponsors weren't around yet. Plus, no one knew who said it.

Starr picked up the bottom of her dress and left the premises. Although once again I felt bad for her, I knew I couldn't solve all her problems. So, I did the only thing anyone could do to help her. I silently prayed.

"Lord, she needs You," I breathed at heaven. "Starr Love needs Your help."

"Let's go!" Bam came behind Tad and me and whispered. "I got a surprise for ya'll in my ride. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!"

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After gathering the group, all of us were finally out at Bam's car. He went to the trunk and pulled out a bottle. At first, I didn't know what to make of the situation.

"Man, what's up?" Tad asked.

"Ahh, just a little som'n, som'n to celebrate this wonder-

ful accomplishment. You know, the coming out of these fo' beautiful ladies."

Bam started passing cups around. Dymond and Lynzi grabbed theirs instantly. Rain hesitated, but then slowly took a cup herself. Like a heart in two pieces, I was torn.

Tad gently leaned over to me and uttered, "I don't want any part of this. Let's go."

My girlfriends looked at me and could sense my reluctance. I almost felt as if they were in my ear and heard every private word Tad spoke to me. Though it wasn't a cool evening, the confrontation chilled me.

Tad didn't wait around for my decision. He left me standing with the group. His dark frame, usually so upbeat, now took on a somber appearance. Watching him stroll away, I sensed his disappointment.

As Tad walked away Bam blurted, "Man, don't be no punk. It ain't nothin' but a lil' sip. What's up? Ya can't handle that?"

"Man . . . whatever," Tad retorted, turned, and retreated. "Not that I owe you any explanation, but I don't touch the sauce. My Bible tells me not to. Havin' God's approval is more important than yours."

"Alright then, church boy. I hear ya. Hope ya don't mind if I have a lil' nip-nip?" Bam kiddingly questioned.

With a serious expression, Tad replied, "Sad scene, brother, if your 'little' turns into a lot. Then the next thing you know, you and this car end up in a ditch somewhere."

Surely he was exaggerating. What could it really hurt? I thought. I mean it was really only just a few sips. Nothing more! I wasn't going to drink the whole bottle. Besides, I had never tried alcohol. I was curious.

I knew Lynzi dabbled with it. Her mom let her drink wine at home. She had been trying to get me to taste it for a while. I wasn't interested in doing so, 'til that moment.

As I watched Bam pour my glass, I had some doubts.

Although I knew I shouldn't, I really wanted to. That desire to be daring grew stronger as I heard the sizzle fill my cup.

"Are you ready?" Tad probed, as he returned and nudged my shoulder.

Firmly, I replied, "No, I want to try it."

Disgusted with me, he stormed away. As I slowly lifted my glass, I reassured myself that I did want to do this. Life was changing for me. So many good things were happening. I deserved a celebration. "Cheers," Bam toasted.

Before the alcoholic beverage could touch my tongue, I witnessed my boyfriend kick his car door. Doing what I wanted was causing us problems. The thought of losing him over champagne made me begin to taste how bitterly stupid that choice might prove to be.

Suddenly I shook from the strong taste. Then questions filled what was left of my brain, as my heart felt warm. I realized I might have been in over my head. Was this the right choice? Was one drink, one drink too many? Was I toasting into trouble?

# *Staying Pure*

**STEPHANIE PERRY MOORE**

# *Contents*

Acknowledgements	8
1. Driving from “No!”	12
2. Controlling My Man	22
3. Breaking It Off	34
4. Crying with Brian	47
5. Meeting the Debs	61
6. Buffing My Nails	75
7. Learning the Campus	87
8. Expecting . . . Maybe . . . Baby?	100
9. Testing Our Friendship	111
10. Ringing My Heart	124
11. Falling for Chocolate	137
12. Studying God’s Word	149
13. Practicing Every Move	161
14. Seeking Another Chance	173
15. Twirling with Destiny	184

1



## *Driving from “No!”*

**N**o!” I shouted at the top of my voice. “Stop, Dakari. Please stop!”

He kept on kissing me as if he’d heard me say “yes” instead of “no.”

“I mean it!” I yelled as I pushed him back over to the driver’s side of the car.

Dakari voiced in anger, “What’s your problem? I thought you wanted this as much as me. I took all this time to plan . . .”

“Plan what?” I cut in with disgust. “We’re at a rest stop in my jeep, parked beside a beat-up truck with a German Shepherd tied to the back of it, barking loudly, on the way to your brother’s college football game. I mean, really Dakari, how much of this did you actually plan?”

As I talked, I was busy buttoning my pants. My boyfriend of two years was doing the same. However, it was more than clear he was furious that I had stopped our ten minutes of passion. My roomy jeep was all out of space that day.

“Dannng . . . Payton, I thought you wanted this. I thought you wanted me. We’ve been dating now ever since we were in the tenth grade. It’s my senior year and . . . well . . . I must say that I need more from our relationship. This is unacceptable,” he stated with a stern voice as he started the car.

Tears rolled down my caramel cheeks as he began driving again. *Unacceptable*, I thought deeply to myself. How could he say that to me with such seriousness? Did he think that all we had could be easily thrown away if sex didn’t enter the picture? Was he threatening to leave me if I did not give in?

Shoot, don’t get me wrong; I love him. Not only have I liked him since I was in the seventh grade, but so has every other girl in our school—no, our city. Well, except for my three friends, that is. They love and respect me too much to even think of messing with Dakari. Plus, they all have boyfriends of their own.

Why such an attraction to my guy, Dakari Ross Graham? That’s easy. If you could see him, you’d think he was Denzel Washington’s younger brother. A 6’0”, 185-pound toned body, with perfect honey brown skin, wavy hair, 20/20 vision, and a beautiful smile. What more could any girl want her guy to look like? But if that isn’t enough to attract your attention, he is also the most popular boy in our large high school, since he is the star of our football team. On top of that, he’s an honor student.

That’s why everyone thinks we’re the hottest couple around. I’m the cheerleading captain, president of the honor society, vice president of the Student Government Association, senior editor of our newspaper staff, and a debutante.

Actually, I’m quite looking forward to early April when the civic organization, The Links Incorporated, presents fifty seniors from the metropolitan area to our city in a coming out ball. At first, I didn’t know if I’d get selected. After

all, one hundred fifty-six girls submitted applications to be chosen as a part of this elite group. It's such a big deal in our town. Most of my friends said I was a shoe in, not because of my accomplishments, but because my mother has been a member of the Links organization for twelve years now. However, my mom told me not to assume anything. I didn't know I'd made it until I got a letter of acceptance in the mail—just like everyone else.

Well, we'd been driving for about twenty-five miles, and neither of us had said a word. We'd just been listening to the radio. Truthfully, I couldn't believe he was acting like this. It's not as though this was the first time I'd said, "No!" We had come close many times before, unfortunately, but he'd always said he understood.

I am a virgin, and I want to stay that way till I'm married. My belief in God is what makes my head feel this way. I know that God calls us to wait. It's just my heart that I'm having trouble with. My feelings are so strong for Dakari that I feel like a popsicle on a hot summer day. I melt!

So that's my struggle. I don't lead Dakari on intentionally. Cause when I'm in his arms, I want him just as much as he wants me. But so far, I've always seemed to realize that God would not be pleased. So I stop. Could you imagine God frowning on you from heaven? Not the nicest image.

"So are you gonna talk to me, or what?" I asked in a pitiful voice, sounding like a baby calling for its mother.

"Got nothin' to say," Dakari stated, obviously annoyed with me. "I'm just trying to get us to the game without an argument. Please do not start one."

All I could do was look out the window, up to the sky. It was such a lovely day—too beautiful to be down. The end of August in Georgia is usually very hot. Since we'd had rain the past few days, the atmosphere had cooled down. It was seventy-four degrees, and not a cloud to be found. A great day for Southern Conference football.

Dakari's older brother, Drake, was really good at football. He was a senior at the University of Georgia. At 6'1", two hundred thirty-one pounds, this inside linebacker was the top candidate for the Dick Butkus award going into the season. That's the highest honor given to an NCAA division 1A defensive linebacker. From what I heard, a lot of NFL scouts would be at this game to check out his performance.

Dakari truly admires his brother. Sometimes it makes me sick to see how much pressure he puts on himself to be like Drake, or to exceed what his brother has done.

The game was not only just about Drake. Dakari had special interest in it as well. He was being recruited by Georgia since he was projected to have a thousand-yard rushing season. And because Athens is only an hour and a half away from Augusta, Dakari is really considering them as his first choice. It doesn't hurt that Drake goes there too. But he also likes Auburn. I guess it's because Bo Jackson, Dakari's all-time favorite player, played there. He always says, "Bo is the greatest athlete of our lifetime!" I'm not that into sports, so I wouldn't know. I just yell and scream, especially when my boyfriend carries the ball.

This was the first of two visits that the University of Georgia had set up for Dakari. He got to bring his parents and a guest to tour the athletic facilities, have lunch, and watch the game. Then sometime later this fall, Dakari was invited for an overnight visit. That's when he'll meet the head coach, hang out with the players, visit a guidance counselor, and tour the entire campus.

We were meeting his parents up there. They left early that morning so they could have breakfast with Drake. I thought that was weird, since Drake had to play a game against Tennessee. But Dakari informed me that the players get to report late since it is a four o'clock game.

As we exited off the interstate, I just felt uneasy. I didn't want to be around Dakari's folks when it was clear we were

having problems. Nor did I want Dakari to be so mad at me that everyone would notice his negative attitude. So, I tried again to break the ice. This time, however, before I spoke, I prayed.

Silently I thought, "Lord, I'm struggling bad in the area of fornication. But You know me. Even when I let You down, I still plead for Your help. Father, only You know that I'm trying really hard to stay pure. After all, I did finally say, 'No!' even if it was after I almost had my clothes off. Fortunately, Lord, I did stop. I just need Your continued strength in this area. But now I ask You to fill me with the right words to say. I love Dakari and I just want him to open up and . . . well . . . basically get over it! Please help me. Please, dear Lord, help us."

After hesitating, I softly spoke, "Dakari, I know you're upset. And you should be. I did get you as worked up as you got me. But we both made a commitment long ago to wait . . . and I want to stick to it. Don't be mad at me for wanting to honor God. I mean, it's not like I stopped because I don't love you."

Looking over at him, I could tell my words were sinking in. His whole demeanor had changed. He didn't appear to be so uptight.

Noticing his pleasant change, I took the liberty of making a statement that I knew he would love to hear. "Sweetie, you know I want you to be my first," I expressed tenderly.

"Yeah, I thought you did," Dakari voiced in a teddy bear tone.

I replied, "I just want to make sure you're my only. Remember, I love you that much!"

"And, Payton, I love you too! It's just getting hard. What can I say? Shoot, I'm a growing man and my needs are changing. I am trying to keep them in check. But when you rub me like that and say those things you whisper in my ear . . . the way you say them, I can't control anything," he said woundedly.

From that point, until we parked, I felt we really connected. He's honest with me and I appreciate that. I just feel glad that he is able to let out his feelings. And I mine. 'Cause I learned a long time ago that keeping things all bottled up only makes for a super big explosion sooner or later.

---

This seems weird. All these college women dressed in uniforms practically flirting with these young high school boys. If another one comes prancing over here to my man, I'm gonna—

"Oh my gosh, you're Dakari Graham, Drake's little brother. I've been waiting all morning to meet you," this absolutely gorgeous girl said, fawning over my guy.

She interrupted my thought.

"I'm Shari Rice. You're my recruit!" she blabbed excitedly. "Why don't I give you and Mr. Graham a tour. I know you both have probably seen everything. After all, our best defensive player, number fifty-five, is your relative. However, we have several new things that Coach Eckerd has added this season. And you absolutely must see them."

Mr. Graham responded, "Sure, we'd love to check them out."

Dakari smiled continually at this Shari girl and just nodded his nappy head as to give his approval of her idea. He practically drooled, obviously ecstatic that she was his hostess. Mrs. Graham and I just stood together on the other side of her. Shari then turned to us and stared. I'd swear, if I were of the betting kind, she was sizing me up.

"Well, I'm sure your lovely mother and adorable little sister want to stay here in the recruiting room," she said confidently, as if I could be nothing more.

I walked around her and discreetly tried to tap Dakari so he'd speak up. But I saw his mother chuckle out of the corner of my eye. She and I have been tight for years. It

seemed that Mrs. Graham always had my back.

“Oh, that’s not his sister, honey,” his mother voiced with pride.

Dakari came out of his daze and said, “Uh—no, this is my girlfriend, Payton!”

“Pay-ton,” Shari uttered almost sarcastically while she extended her clay-colored hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Wow, you must be the luckiest girl in your school.”

“Shoot, no ma’am! He’s the lucky one. Not only is she smart, but her daddy is rich,” Mr. Graham said jokingly.

Frankly, I don’t know why everyone always assumes that we’re rich. My father is the first and only black automobile dealer in town. He owns a Chrysler dealership that he inherited from his dad, who founded the CBDA, Chrysler Black Dealer Association. Though my grandpa is still alive, he retired and moved to Conyers, Georgia, with my grandmother. We have money and all, but my dad—whose word to me is as good as the Bible—tells me “by no means are we rich.” We do live in the nicest neighborhood in town, however, and I count it a blessing that I have never wanted a thing I didn’t get.

As the three of them walked away I asked, “Mrs. Graham, who are these girls?”

The two of us sat at a nearby table and she replied, “Oh, they are called Georgia Girls. They’re the official hostesses for the football team. The university uses them to help entice these boys to their school. If I’m not mistaken, almost every major division one school has some similar organization. The majority of these girls do a classy job, but it’s clear that all do not. Miss Shari has another agenda. She’s a bit too . . . friendly. Actually, I thought Drake’s girlfriend, Hayli, would be Dakari’s hostess. She is an officer in this group.”

Mrs. Graham loved to see her boys dating successful women. She is an accountant, on the board of trustees at her church, and treasurer of the Delta Sigma Theta Alumnae

chapter, of which my mom is also a member.

“You’ve met her, right Payton?” she questioned while stretching her neck to look around for Hayli.

“Yes ma’am,” I answered, “at your home this summer, for your Fourth of July picnic. We really didn’t get a chance to chat, but she seemed nice.”

“I like her a lot. She wants to be a dentist and hopefully have her own practice. Plus, she’s always there for my baby! I’ve ruled out the fact that she is only with him because of his success. Mr. Graham and I met her parents at a game last year and they were very sweet people. She only has one flaw,” Mrs. Graham stated with a smiling frown on her face.

I asked, “What’s that?”

“She’s an AKA,” his mother blurted out.

I haven’t quite understood the rivalry between the Deltas and the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. I’ve asked my mother about it, and she said I’ll understand it better when and if I pledge myself.

My friend Dymond has an older sister who goes to South Carolina State University. Well, she was trying to pledge one of the sororities, but they wouldn’t accept her. They heard that she had gone to the other sorority’s rush. Having different black female organizations is great, but not when we get so involved with stupid stuff that we tear each other down.

---

An hour passed and neither Dakari, his father, nor Shari was back. The game would be starting soon. I caught myself getting paranoid. *What if he wants to date his pretty hostess? How will he break it to me?* I shook my head. *No, that can’t be the case. Our love is too strong,* I told myself to ease my worry.

Mrs. Graham had gone to the washroom. When she returned, Hayli was with her. It does feel good to be start-

ing my last year of high school, but I imagine Hayli has got to be on top of the world. A senior in college! That's impressive! I just pray God grants me the opportunity to feel the same joy one day.

"Look who I ran into in the ladies' room," Mrs. Graham stated with enthusiasm. "Hayli, you remember Payton, Dakari's friend? Well, she's joining us this visit."

Hayli smiled at me and asked, "How've you been?"

"I'm great! Thanks for asking. And you?" I questioned.

"Things are going pretty good. I was telling Mrs. Graham that she doesn't have to worry about our hostess Shari coming on to her younger son," Hayli commented.

I quickly said with a disturbed tone, "How can you be so sure?"

"Well, ask anyone here and they'll tell you. Shari is after Drake. She's always going to the dorm, leaving notes on his car. That daggone girl sent him flowers last week on the first day of school. She's just hoping Dakari and Mr. Graham will put in a good word for her," she uttered with disgust in her voice.

The three of us kept talking about how scandalous some women can be when they decide they want someone else's man. I didn't believe we were gossiping because we really weren't referring to anyone in particular. Although, over the two years that I've dated Dakari, I've had my share of run-ins with girls thinking they could just up and take my guy.

I guess you could say that for the rest of the game, Hayli became the hostess for Mrs. Graham and me. Dakari took it upon himself to sit beside Shari the whole game. He's got some nerve. The boy didn't even ask me if it was OK with me. However, since they were sitting two rows in front of us, I was able to make sure things stayed on the up-and-up between Shari and him.

At halftime Dakari's family seemed to be extremely pleased. Drake had two sacks and a forced fumble. The team was also ahead of Tennessee by twenty-one points. All of the recruits were on the field, watching as the guys warmed up. Some of the special recruits got to go in the locker room. Dakari was one of the chosen few. Hayli said if they are picked to go in at the break, then the coach really wants to make a good impression.

During the middle of the third quarter, Dakari came back to our section. He came straight over to where I was sitting with Hayli and his parents and introduced this really cute guy.

"Hey, everyone! Meet my newfound friend, Tad Taylor. He was in the locker room with me," Dakari announced with a fake smile.

Mr. Graham responded in an investigating tone, "Tad Taylor? Ahh, this is North Augusta's star halfback. Son, this is your competition, when it comes to stats and all. Say, Tad, how many yards are you planning on running this year?"

"Oh, sir, I don't honestly know. Whatever God allows me to get will be just fine with me," Tad answered humbly.

Dakari didn't like this guy. It was obvious even when he was introducing us to Tad that he practically despised him. This Morris Chestnut look-alike's Worchestershire Sauce-colored skin and short Schwarzenegger body made him almost irresistible. But when Dakari introduced me as his lady, neither he nor I expected the enticing response we got from Tad. When I reached out my hand to shake his, this intriguing gentleman took my fingers gently and kissed them.

Wow! I absolutely thought that I'd faint into his arms. If my heart did not belong to Dakari, I probably would have. And if my boyfriend looked any madder, steam would have been shooting out his ears. I was glad to know that my man could still get jealous.

As I lay in the passenger seat of my Chrysler Jeep, I just relaxed. It had been such a trying day. My sunroof was open and I reclined in the seat, adoring the starry night. Dakari and Drake had gone for a stroll so that they could catch up on things. I told him I'd meet him at the car.

While I waited, I looked past the stars and focused on the God I could clearly see in the clouds.

"Lord," I began in a quiet voice, "school is gonna start in two days, and I have no idea what to expect out of my senior year. Actually, I'm a little frightened. What if my grades slip? I'm registered for all these AP classes. I'm told that the teachers on that level are horrible. Help me to impress them. Oh, and my friends . . . Father, I don't want to fall out with them. Let us get along. Only You know how bossy Dymond can be, or how whiney Rain always is, and how insensitive Lynzi seems. OK, OK, Holy Spirit, I confess. I'm not the greatest friend either. I'm working on that. And I know I've asked You to bless my relationship with Dakari ten thousand times, but please . . . I come once again asking You to keep us together."

About five minutes later, I heard Dakari and Drake coming to the car. They couldn't see me because I was reclining. Just as I started to raise up and speak to them, I was frozen by words that numbed my soul.

"I don't know, Drake, man," Dakari stated with concern. "My thing with Payton is getting a little old. I do love her and all, but . . ."

Drake cut in and said, "You want to have sex with her?" "Heck yes! I do. I mean, dang, we've been dating for two whole years."

I was disappointed.

He continued, "I've played along with this 'wait till we're married' stuff for long enough. Shoot, she knows I'm there for her. This is just unacceptable."

There it was again. The phrase that put a lump in my

throat. “Lord,” I pondered, speaking in a whisper to the sky. “What are You doing up there? I just finished praying. Didn’t You hear me? I asked You to keep us together. Yet as I listen—eavesdrop, actually—it sounds as if we’re headed apart, unless I GIVE IN! Lord, is that what You want? Only You know how much I love him. It feels as if I’m being pushed into a corner. One kiss from Dakari, and they might as well hand me a cream-colored wedding dress. What else do I do with this information but give in? I can’t lose him, Lord. Or can I? No, no, I can’t.”

After my talk with God, I closed the sunroof and rolled down the window. Dakari and Drake looked surprised. “Hey guys,” I said, looking tired.

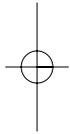
“Payton, we didn’t know you were in there. What were you doing all this time?” Drake asked, obviously picking me to see if I had heard them.

“Oh, I was just dozing,” I stated, sort of stretching the truth.

They said their goodbyes, and I hugged Drake. I wanted to go off on them both. I wanted them to tell me to my face what they discussed behind my back. However, I retreated in silence. Our ride home was much the same as the drive up. We hardly said a thing. I told Dakari I was sleepy, so I wouldn’t have to pretend. Frankly, at that point I was all confused. If Dakari loved me the way that I loved him, then how could he say what he said? All the way home I tried to answer that question. But when we got to Augusta, I still didn’t have an answer. All I knew was that our relationship was dramatically different, ever since we started driving from NO!

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# *Surrendered Heart*



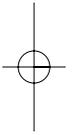
**STEPHANIE PERRY MOORE**

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# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	8
1. Embracing the Good	10
2. Releasing All Fears	22
3. Transitioning Once Again	35
4. Learning What's Important	50
5. Building on History	60
6. Choosing Him Finally	77
7. Meeting Good People	88
8. Sharing My Faith	101
9. Caring for Friends	114
10. Tripping over Everything	124
11. Going Up North	135
12. Realizing the Dilemma	146
13. Bumping into Blessings	155
14. Fixing the Strife	164
15. Feeling Totally Happy	171



1



## *Embracing the Good*

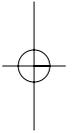
*M*y feet were planted firmly on the ground, but it felt as if I were a part of the beautiful sky. I was closer to God than I had been my whole life. My head was more clear and my heart was more His. The unsure feeling of who I was subsided.

“Lord, thank You,” I cried. “I’m so grateful that You stuck by me. You are the truth, the way, and the light. The only thing that is important is pleasing You. I have given all of my trouble to You, and now I am free. I’m a new Payton Skky. I want to walk a life that pleases You.”

I completely loved the Lamb of God. I was happy to give my problems to God. With His help I could live a victorious Christian life.

---

As soon as I made it to my cold bedroom the phone rang.



“Hello?”

“Hey,” Tad said in a way that melted my heart.

“Oh, hey. You made it home.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to let you know that I got here safely. I really enjoyed our evening,” he told me.

He was such a gentleman. We had come from my father’s Christmas party at the car dealership. Tad Taylor, my former boyfriend, meant more to me than I wanted to admit. Since I had taken him through so much, Tad decided we didn’t need to be together.

That night we didn’t kiss, hold hands, or do anything romantic, but it felt so right just being with him. Though he was dating another girl, I was starting to realize that, deep within, I was hoping we could be more than friends again. If we ever were, I knew I would not let go of such a special guy.

“I really enjoyed our time together, too,” I told him.

We spent another ten minutes on the phone talking about our Christmas plans. He was leaving the next day to go with the University of Georgia football team to the bowl game in Florida. I was going to spend the first part of Christmas Day with my family and then go to Conyers to spend time at my grandparents’ house.

“Do you think you’ll be able to go to the bowl game?” Tad asked me sweetly.

“I don’t know. Going down to Florida sounds mighty appealing, but I don’t know if I can.”

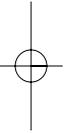
“Well, I have some extra tickets, so if you want to go just let me know.”

“Thanks for asking. Merry Christmas, Tad. I hope you get a chance to play in the game and show off.”

“I don’t know about all of that, but I hope we win.”

“You’re always so modest, Tad,” I told him.

“I don’t look at it that way. I’d say I’m just humble. This talent comes from the Lord.”



“Yeah, what are you thinking about? You’re kind of quiet,” I said after an unusual silence.

“I was just thinking about when I first met you. Payton, you blew me away with your beauty. Looking at you made me feel special.”

Inside I was breaking. As sweet as he was, I had messed up. I treated him ten times worse than anyone deserved, especially him.

His phone clicked for another call, which was a good thing because I didn’t know how to respond to his compliment. No matter how fond he was of me, I wasn’t his girl anymore. When he came back to the phone and told me it was Vonda, a girl from his hometown, whom he was dating, I knew that he was moving on without me.

---

“Rain, what’s wrong?” I asked in a panic as my best friend from high school entered my room with bloodshot eyes.

She stretched out her arms as if she wanted me to hug her. As we embraced, the tears started flowing from her eyes. She cried as if her whole world had fallen apart.

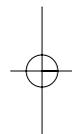
“Rain, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

I wondered what could have her so upset. *Did she have a car accident? Is someone in her family hurt? Or worse, did someone die?* While terrible thoughts raced through my mind, she continued to cry uncontrollably.

She still wouldn’t speak so I prayed to myself. *Lord, how am I supposed to help her when she won’t talk to me? My friend is in my arms breaking down. Help me get it together to open her up. If she won’t, then please don’t let the situation get any worse.*

Finally she said, “It’s Tyson.”

Tyson was her boyfriend all during high school and he was sweet. He didn’t go to Lucy Laney with us; he went to



school across town. Rain and Tyson were inseparable. They even went to college in the same city to be near each other. Rain went to Spelman while Tyson went to Georgia Tech.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked, handing her a tissue.

“It was just like what happened last year in high school with Dakari.” Rain spoke in a soft, sad tone. “A couple of girls keep coming on to him at Georgia Tech. He wants me to make a choice whether I want to be with him physically or not. I want to be with him, but I want to wait until we’re married. I thought he would understand. I got my Bible so that we could pray through it. Girl, he took my Bible and threw it across the room! He was so mad. He said he was faithful to me and when he wanted to take the relationship further he thought I would. He said I was wasting his time. He told me that by keeping the good-girl act I wasn’t going to get anybody. He used to tell me that he loved the fact that I was a virgin.”

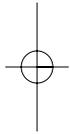
I explained, “Maybe he was just saying what he knew you wanted to hear. I know it hurts back then because I’ve been there. I’m so happy that you and Dakari didn’t get intimately involved. Imagine how much worse you would be feeling if you gave it up to him and he still left.”

“If I would’ve done it, maybe he wouldn’t be gone,” she said, unsure.

“*Maybe* is the key word there. The uncertainty of it all is enough for you to send him packing.”

“You’re so strong, Payton. I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Remember, Rain, I wasn’t strong initially. One thing I have learned is that guys come and go, circumstances come and go, but God is constant, and He can see you through all of this. The reason you didn’t have sex with Tyson is that God wanted you to say no. Because you have honored Him, God is going to bless you. Yes, Tyson was the guy you loved, but you love God more and the Lord ain’t gonna leave you.



He's gonna fix this. Just watch. Please, just don't make the mistake I made. If God sends you a good Christian guy, don't make him second best. You're gonna get over this, Rain. You have to pray and let God be your everything. You know I'm here for you. It's too bad you didn't bring clothes. You could have spent the night."

"We just got back from my grandmother's, and we brought her with us. I think I need to spend some time with her. Thanks for being such a great friend. I love you, Payton Skky. I used to think you were selfish sometimes and only cared about yourself, but I was wrong."

"I wasn't always a good friend, but I'm trying to be a better person. I'm trying to live like Jesus would and not like Payton would. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah, that's good advice, and I need to do that too. I know these next couple of days aren't going to be easy, but before I go tell me what's up with you, Payton. What's up with you and Georgia?"

"My school is a totally different place than I was used to. When I get down, I just think about high school and I laugh. Something about you, Dymond, or Lynzi always gets my spirit up. I had a roommate who tried to kill herself, two girls who wanted Tad and Dakari, a suite mate that didn't like me, bad grades, and a whole bunch of stuff."

"Oh, girl, are we gonna make it? College is hard."

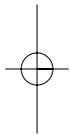
"Yes, it is, but we made it through high school at Lucy Laney and you know how crazy that place was. We can make it, right?" I questioned.

"Yeah! I miss you, Payton."

"Girl, I miss you too."

---

"Granddaddy?" I said in a startled tone when I awoke from sleep and saw my grandfather standing over me.



It was Christmas morning, but the sun wasn't up yet. I heard heavy breathing and something made me wake up.

"Granddaddy, are you OK?"

"Yeah. I just thought I would get up early and maximize my day. It's Christmas, you know. I remember when I was your age. It was my first Christmas out of high school when I proposed to your grandmother."

"Right out of high school?"

"We didn't have choices about college back then. When you graduated you were considered an adult. I asked her to marry me, but what other choice could she make? As you guys say, I was *the man* back then and my game was tight."

I couldn't believe I was laughing at 5:10 in the morning. Something about being with him right then and there didn't bother me. I didn't care that it was early. I didn't care that I needed more sleep. I was just happy that he sat on the edge of my bed and told me romantic stories of him dating my grandmother.

"She was a great gal, Payton, and similar to you. She is beautiful now, but back then she made my heart dance."

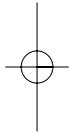
"Oh, that's so sweet."

"What about you? Is your heart dancing for anybody? I've been praying for your mate."

"Are you trying to marry me off?" I joked. "Times have changed, Granddaddy. I'm not trying to get married until who-knows-when."

"That's good. I'm glad you're focused. Being an independent woman is great. But there is nothing wrong with letting a nice young gentleman into your life, especially the right one, one who loves the Lord. I don't want you to get with someone who looks halfway decent but treats you like he treats the bottom of his shoe. Be smart, my dear. You're my granddaughter, and you deserve the best. When I'm gone—"

"Don't say that," I said, cutting my grandfather off.



He had been talking about dying a lot lately, and it was starting to make me uncomfortable. I know no one can live forever, but just because he was old didn't mean he was going to go before me. I hugged him tightly. How dare he talk about when he was gone? He was so strong he was probably going to outlive all of us.

"Do you smell them biscuits?" he asked. "That's one thing I love about your grandmother."

My grandmother was up cooking early Christmas morning, and I knew my mother wouldn't like that too much. The whole point of staying at our house on Christmas morning was so that my mom could prepare her spread in her kitchen. Just like my grandmother wasn't too fond of Pillar's mom because she is white, she never really liked my mother, either, and my mother is black.

My grandmother and my mom didn't have a bad relationship, but it wasn't a warm and fuzzy one. So I got up, put on my robe, helped my grandfather into the kitchen, and went to find my mother to do damage control.

I hugged her and said, "Grandma is helping you out so you won't have to work so hard on Christmas."

"Don't tell me she's in there baking," my mom said with a slight attitude.

"All right, I won't," I told her.

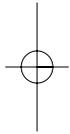
She gave my dad a sour look. "Perry, you know I wanted to do this. Why didn't you tell your mother?"

"You know my mom," Dad said, throwing his hands up in the air.

It was Christmas morning, and I didn't want any family drama. "Let's all take a deep breath," I said, "and remember this is supposed to be a good day."

"Yeah, honey, just tolerate my mom for today. You know she doesn't mean any harm. She never does."

My mom was extremely disappointed, probably more so because her parents decided once again not to come to



Christmas dinner. My maternal grandparents lived in south Florida. She had no siblings so she missed her parents terribly. My mom had an older sister who had died from scarlet fever when she was ten, and her relationship with her mother was strained because of that. Maybe that was why Grandma couldn't really relate to me.

Today wasn't going like she wanted it to, and she needed a hug. So I followed her into her bathroom.

"Mom, I'm sorry your day isn't going like you planned. I just want you to know that Christmas can still be special and I love you. We can still celebrate Jesus' birth."

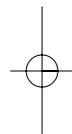
She grabbed my robe and pulled me toward her. "Thanks for understanding, Payton. Thanks for caring about me. But I will be fine. Now let me get ready and eat some of your grandmother's cooking. I prayed to Jesus because I didn't know how I was going to make it this morning, but He sent you in here to give me the wind to carry on. I'm glad you're home for the holidays. We will have to do something extra-special before you go back to school."

I went into the living room and grabbed a couple of presents from under the tree. My father had already given me an empty square box. Self-esteem was inside of it, he said. He told me I was just like the box, that I had self-esteem wrapped secretly inside. Every time I looked at the package I knew that we had that in common. I had been dealing with a lot last semester at school. I felt as if I didn't measure up, and my father's present made my day.

Now it was Christmas morning and I was ready to open some presents, put on some new clothes, get some money or something. As my dad always did, he went over and pulled out some old videotapes from Christmases past.

Perry Jr., my younger brother, came over to me with a present. "Here."

During all the Christmas rush I had forgotten to get him



something. I had something for everyone except him.

When I opened the present I saw a beautiful silver bracelet. “I’m gonna hook you up,” I told him.

“You know what I want, right?”

Of course I knew. He wanted what he always wanted and what he could never seem to have enough of—tennis shoes.

Despite its rough beginning, we somehow got through the morning. My cousin Pillar and her family were supposed to come for Christmas, but they didn’t. Though I missed Pillar, I wasn’t heartbroken that she didn’t come. My grandfather was really disappointed, but his two daughters were going to be there.

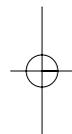
We arrived in Conyers about two, which gave my parents just enough time to get to the airport to pick up my two aunts. My Aunt Esther was coming from Dallas and my Aunt Georgia was coming from New Jersey.

As we ate a traditional soul-food dinner at my grandparents’ table, I couldn’t help but think about the Georgia football team. I hoped Tad was having a good Christmas.

*Wow! I thought. I’m not even thinking about Dakari, and he plays football, too. Lord, if there is any way You can help me get Tad back . . .*

My grandfather led most of the dinner conversation as he reminisced about his life. He talked about being a father of four kids and about getting the dealership.

“As I think back over all my years,” my grandfather began, “life really started to get good for me at sixty. I finally went back to the place where I was born. God showed me that He wanted me to know Him, and that having a relationship with Him is far more important than anything. The Lord is my best friend. I’m going to leave here soon, but I know that I will have life eternally. Christmas Day is all about praising the name of Jesus Christ. When I leave this earth I can’t wait for my Lord to say, ‘Well done.’ If God can’t



be enough to fulfill you, then what do you have to look forward to? Thank You, Jesus, for being good to me! Thank You,” my grandfather shouted as he got up and left the table.

We all looked at one another. It wasn't a sermon, but it was a moving testimony.

My grandfather was right. Christmas was about praising the name of Jesus. The day was almost over, but before it was, my grandfather set us all straight about the true reason to celebrate Christmas.

---

*Lord, I said on my knees in the guest room of my grandparents' home, I feel so at peace right now and it feels as if You've come down from heaven and wrapped Your arms around me. Not that I'm wishing that wasn't the case, but something seems weird. I join my grandfather in praising You. Thank You for my blessing.*

My grandfather came into my room and cut my prayer short. “Payton, you make me so proud. Come and give me a hug.”

I got off my knees and hugged my grandfather.

“Keep on doing what you're doing. Don't lose sight of the goal. It's all about winning souls for Him.”

“I don't do a lot of witnessing, but Tad has helped me a lot.”

“He sounds like a nice young man.”

“I think you met him at graduation.”

“Oh, I remember he was a really nice gentleman. Payton, I don't feel good. I'm going to go lie down for a while. Will you bring me some water in a little bit?”

“Yes. Of course I will, Granddaddy.”

“Where did your dad go?”

“He went to play basketball with Perry.”

“Where are all the ladies? The house is so quiet.”

“They are out on the porch. Do you need any help?” I asked as I saw him cringe at his stomach.

“No, I’ll be all right. You just make sure that everyone gets along and knows that it’s Christmas.”

I went into the kitchen to get my grandfather some water. It had been twenty minutes since I had talked to him. The heat wasn’t on because the gas fireplace was going.

I opened the bedroom door and put the water on the dresser. He was asleep and it was cold in the house, but he didn’t have a blanket on him. I got a blanket from the closet and tucked it around him. It was as if he was a block of ice. I picked up the glass of water and tried to wake him.

“Papa,” I said softly, “wake up and drink some water.”

I went to the other side of the room and turned on the light. He was lying almost too still and I started to panic.

“Papa, wake up.”

I touched his chest. His heart wasn’t beating. Without a thought I let go of the glass of water and started trying to make his heart beat with my hands.

I screamed, “Papa! Wake up!”

I heard the back door open and my brother and father laughing.

“Daddy! Come here! Hurry! It’s Granddaddy!”

My father rushed into the room and Perry pulled me back. My father checked Granddad’s pulse. “Call 911!”

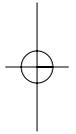
“Oh, no,” I screamed.

My screams alerted everyone. As they came into the room they realized what was going on and more cries started.

My dad turned to us and said, “He’s gone.” His eyes were bloodshot and I know it was hard for him to say.

I rushed to his side and buried my head in my grandfather’s lap.

The paramedics finally arrived and my dad pulled me



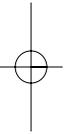
away.

“No! Leave me alone!” I shouted.

“Payton, c’mon, honey. If anything can be done, let them do it.”

I walked back to the doorway and stared at my grandfather. He had a look on his face that was happier than I had ever seen him. No one was touching me, but I felt that feeling again like when I fell on my knees. It was as if God was holding me. I realized why He had come earlier to give me peace. He knew I needed comfort that only He could give.

My grandfather was now with our heavenly Father, but I was really going to miss him. For that reason, it was hard embracing the good.



*Sweetest Gift*

**STEPHANIE PERRY MOORE**

# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	8
1. Reliving the Past	10
2. Chasing Peers' Acceptance	22
3. Wanting to Control	35
4. Experiencing New Emotions	51
5. Laboring for Love	64
6. Trying Out Churches	79
7. Celebrating What Exactly?	96
8. Deciding to Quit	112
9. Becoming Someone Else	128
10. Reaping No Benefits	139
11. Planting Hopeful Seeds	153
12. Seeing the Blessings	164
13. Passing Whichever Test	174
14. Putting Up Decorations	186
15. Loving Every Part	195

1



## *Reliving the Past*

Well, Lord,” I prayed on my knees in my new dorm room, “this is a little different. Not my cozy room at home. I’m a big girl now. And not that You don’t know, but I am very, very nervous. A freshman in college, and although school doesn’t start for another week, I don’t know if I’ll be ready. I am truly nervous. Will I make friends? Maybe all this is stupid. I’ve been waiting to graduate forever, and I’ve been waiting to move out and be on my own even longer. Now I’ve gotten the opportunity, and I don’t know if I even want it. Help me. Give me strength. Help me find out who I am so that I can make it on my own.”

I had a lot to say to my Father above. I hated being timid, but I was. He could help me, so I prayed on: “No more parents to lean on; it’s just me and You. Thanks again for my new roommate, Laurel. Yeah, she’s white, but she doesn’t seem ditsy; she’s cool. Though she seems cool now, living with her might be different . . . just help us. Help me to make You proud in all I do. My ex-boyfriends Dakari and

Tad will be at Georgia, too. Lord, please run interference. Oh, and I pray for my girlfriends, Lynzi, Dymond, and Rain, that wherever they are, Lord, You'll be with them. And for my mom—I know it is hard for her not having me at home. Well, I'm gonna try to sleep for the first time in this bed. Bless Daddy too. Amen.”

As I lay back on the bed, I looked over at Laurel. She was knocked out. Such peace seemed to overcome her. However, I couldn't sleep. The last year of my life had been full of so much drama. So I kind of reflected and thought about what had brought me from that point to this one.

It seemed like the craziness started just last August when my boyfriend of three years, Dakari, wanted us to go to his brother's football game. Which is so weird because at the time Dakari and I were driving from Augusta to where we are now, Athens. We went to see his brother, Drake, a senior, play football for Georgia.

Being in my jeep that day, I never would have thought a year would pass, and I would be a freshman at Georgia. I never really gave much thought to where I wanted to go to college, but I knew the University of Georgia was not high on my list. I wanted to go to an HBC, a historically black college. I have two girlfriends that took that route: Dymond, who's at Howard, and Rain, who's at Spelman. I thought I would be at a school like that, not at UGA. But, anyway, Dakari and I were driving, and we pulled off the road at a rest stop. It was kind of isolated, and nobody was there, and one thing led to another, and, boy, were we feeling each other.

It was hot and passionate. Dakari is a real cute brotha and all, but something inside of me said, *No, this is not what I want*. So I pushed him off me and ended the craziness.

I remember him yelling, “What! You don't want this?”

It wasn't that I didn't want it, because I did. But we said we would wait until marriage, and we were only seniors in

high school. Actually, our senior year hadn't even started yet. So why tread into forbidden territory?

Dakari said he was cool with it. Little did I know he really wasn't cool with it at all. He was hot, ticked off at me, and our relationship would never be the same. We went on to that game, faked it, I guess. We met his parents up at the college and pretty much had a great time.

Oh, yeah, that's the day I met Tad Taylor. He was another football player who was being recruited by UGA. When I first saw him, *umm*. I didn't even know at that moment that the fascination I felt for him would last and that he'd one day be mine.

Dakari was jealous when he introduced me to Tad because the charming guy kissed my hand. However, at that point, I wanted Dakari to be jealous. He was mad that we didn't go farther. So, hey, if this Tad guy could ruffle his feathers, I played the role. Not that it was all about games, but we were young, and in one whole year, I had done so much growing up.

Fast-forward three days from that moment: Dakari broke up with me on the first day of school for some new chick, Starr Love. What a name; I still can't believe that name. She looked like a star too. She was gorgeous. She had breathtaking, sunrise skin and ginger brown hair that flowed like a river. Her body was way tighter than mine. For three years, I had been the stuff at my school, and now Starr had come along and not only captivated the school but took my man, too. How humbling!

It was hard to swallow. I was so angry at everybody. Perry, my brother, who is two years younger, tried to fight Dakari because he left me for another. I was definitely mad at Dakari. I remember I tried to give it up to him after I found out he had another girlfriend. But I can say I'm glad he turned me down, because here I am still a virgin. Wow! After all that, God helped me stay pure.

I thought I'd never have another boyfriend. I was humiliated by Starr's presence at my school. But amazingly enough, I became homecoming queen. I remember those days so well. Starr had been nominated. I was ticked off; people didn't even know her! I remember that night as if it were yesterday: Her dad, the judge, escorted her out onto the field; and my dad, the car dealer, escorted me.

She mumbled, "Did you see my boyfriend do well in the first half of the game? Now all he needs is for the homecoming queen to be his girlfriend. Oh, I guess that can't be you.'Cause you are no longer the woman in his life."

Her face was cracked and on the ground when they called my name instead of hers. It was great for about five minutes after I won, but when I saw her dancing with Dakari at the homecoming dance, I realized that she had the bigger prize. I really cared for him. We had been tight.

That's when I felt God had let me down. Or so I thought. I had to search within myself, see what I was all about. Gratefully, I learned it was not about a guy. I couldn't find happiness in Dakari. I needed to find happiness in Christ. I think I learned that when the Lord let me run into Tad the weekend I came back up to UGA to visit.

I tried to play hard to get for a while, but I think it was around Christmas when I found out Tad Taylor was from Aiken, South Carolina, which is twenty-five minutes away from my house. Tad Taylor, that chocolate brotha who was after God's own heart, started telling me how much he admired me. He started dating me the way God wants a guy to date one of His girls. It was like night and day compared to my time with Dakari.

It was always weird to me how one day a guy becomes a husband, and he's supposed to lead, when he never did it in a dating relationship the way God expects. Yet a woman is supposed to follow. I guess that's where the whole equally yoked thing comes in. God says that a Christian should only

date or marry a Christian. This is so the couple can share common, deep issues of the heart. Maybe if girls would start expecting more from guys that they go out with, then there wouldn't be so much drama. There surely was drama for Tad and me. Even though Tad was a Christian, when we started dating and connecting on that spiritual level, I was attracted to him physically. I just couldn't get around wanting to give it up, and for the wrong reason or the right reason, I was there. Fortunately, Tad was strong enough for the both of us; and there again, God was looking out for me.

So Tad escorted me to my debutante ball, which was fun. I was one of fifty girls presented to society by the Links Organization, which was a group of strong black women that my mom was a part of. I didn't think I'd have an escort, but Tad hooked me up. He escorted me to the ball, and, boy, did we have a ball. By that time—six months later—Dakari was so fed up with Starr that he wanted me back, and I think I wanted him back, too. Drama, drama, drama.

---

I went down the hall to get a soda out of the machine. The walls of my new surroundings were eerie. Dorm life, ugh! It was nothing like I thought it would be. It wasn't horrible! There were no roaches or anything, but it just wasn't cozy, like home. I didn't think I was going to like it.

When I bent down to get a Coke, I heard a pleasant voice behind me say, "So you can't sleep either?"

When I turned around, it was a face like mine. A timid, stout, coffee-colored girl that seemed just as scared as I was to be there. Without thinking, I hugged her. She must have thought I was weird. I didn't even know what I was thinking. I was just so happy to see another person like me that I hugged her tight. Surely we weren't gonna be the only blacks at UGA. After all, I knew Tad and Dakari. Seeing

another black female in the dorm when all I had seen were white faces that mostly hated seeing me there was great. I knew I wasn't welcome, because I overheard my two suite mates talking about how they wished they didn't have to share a bathroom with a black girl. That's probably what the hug was about. Somewhere deep down inside, I was happy to know that I wasn't alone. The Lord had placed someone at school to whom I could relate. I was overjoyed.

"I'm Payton," I said as I released my grasp.

"Payton, hi. I'm Cammie."

"Kammie with a K, or Cammie with a C?" I questioned, seeing her name in my mind.

"Cammie with a C. C-A-M-M-I-E."

"Where are you from, Cammie?"

"Opelika, Alabama."

"Where?" I asked her, unsure I had heard correctly.

"Opelika. You ever heard of Auburn?"

"Yeah, that's another SEC school."

"Well, Opelika is right beside Auburn."

"So why didn't you go to Auburn?"

"Well, I lived there all my life, and I just wanted to get away. A lot of my friends from high school went to Auburn."

"Really? I can understand wanting to get away. How long have you been here?"

"Today's my first day."

"Yeah, me too," I told her.

"You like it?" she asked.

"I don't think so."

"Why'd you hug me?" she asked candidly.

"Girl, I don't know. I guess I was just happy to see another black face. Sorry if I offended you."

"Oh, no, no. Though Opelika has a lot of whites, I can tell these girls up here aren't used to seeing a lot of blacks."

"Tell me about it."

Since her roommate was asleep and mine was asleep,

too, we went over to the front of the dorm into the commons area and sat down. I started telling her about my crazy past and talked about my prom.

“It was crazy,” I said. “I was dating one guy, Tad, and I went to his prom, but he had to go somewhere like a Christian retreat or something and couldn’t take me to mine. Girl, I was mad. So, my ex-boyfriend, Dakari, wanted to take me, so I went with him. It was a trip! We were prom king and queen. He kissed me, and I liked it. The thing about it was Tad felt so bad that he came to my prom, in a tux and all, and saw me on stage kissing Dakari.”

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m very serious. Talk about drama my senior year. I kind of liked them both. My feelings swung back and forth between the two.”

“So what about your girlfriends?”

“I had good girlfriends in school. I miss them. One of my girlfriends, Lynzi, had a hard year.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, intrigued by my story.

“Well, she had a boyfriend, Bam.”

“Bam?”

“Yeah, that’s his nickname. We’ve called him that for so long I don’t even know what his real name is.”

“We’ve got some folks like that in Opelika.”

“Lynzi’s parents are divorced, so she had issues anyway. I’m so proud of the fact that I’m a virgin that I could just go and scream it off a rooftop. I’m a virgin! But Lynzi is the opposite. I think she lost her virginity at the age of fourteen when her dad moved out. She had a cheatin’ boyfriend named Bam. To make a long story short, she thought she was pregnant.”

“No, girl, she thought she was pregnant?”

“Yeah, we kind of had a scare. A rumor got around school, and the only people who knew were Bam and me. When it got out, no one thought that Bam would spread a

rumor about himself fathering a baby. So Lynzi got mad at me. My other close girlfriend, Dymond, who likes to know everybody's b'ness, got mad at me because I didn't tell her. I had one girlfriend mad at me because she thought I told, and one mad at me because I didn't tell. That was really the first time we had serious best-friend tension.

"I had another friend, Rain, this tall, beautiful girl, who tried to keep the peace, but it wasn't workin' for a while. When it all came out, Bam was the one who told loud-mouthed Dakari who told some football players, and it went on from there. Lynzi had taken some pregnancy tests, and they came out positive."

"So what happened? Did she have an abortion and nobody knew?"

"No, it wasn't nothin' like that. They weren't even pregnancy kits. They were like ovulation predictors or something." I laughed as I told the story.

Cammie was cool. It was neat. I was scared being there, and God provided someone to let me just unleash and talk about stuff that really meant a lot to me. Bringing back up all that stuff allowed me to know that God was watching out for me in more ways than one and more than I ever knew. 'Cause just like He was there then, He's here now.

"Well, that's good she wasn't pregnant," Cammie cut in and reminded me of my place in the story.

"Yes . . . but she wanted to kill herself some months later."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I guess because Bam broke up with her and because of the situation with her parents. We went through this whole thing with drinking, and she hit a tree."

"Is she OK?"

"Yeah. She walked away from that, too," I said, laughing. "I'm not laughing because I think it's funny. I'm laughing because I can't believe all this stuff happened in one year."

“Yeah, a lot of stuff did happen to you,” Cammie agreed.

I must have been missing home. I was telling a stranger all of my business. Actually, though, talking through everything was somehow therapeutic. I’m glad I went against my character and bared my soul.

“Then as I bounced back and forth from Tad to Dakari, my cousin Pillar from Denver, who’s gonna be a senior this year, came to visit. We never were close. I think Tad and Dakari liked her. Maybe they didn’t really like her, but they gave her attention. I wanted them both and didn’t want her to have either one. Then I let myself get caught up in the wrong guy because Dakari was the one paying her the most attention. We started getting closer again, and the next thing I knew we were in a hotel room, and he wanted to go farther than I was willing to take it. It was not a good scene.”

“Oh, my gosh. Did he force himself on you?”

“Something like that, but luckily he stopped. . .”

“And?” Cammie pressed.

“And I realized that though I still care for him, which is stupid, he isn’t the one for me.”

I hoped those words I was saying to Cammie were the truth. Because Dakari had a way of batting his eyes and saying the right stuff to make any girl fall for him. I hoped that I could remember the words that I was saying to this stranger. I did not need Dakari; he was not the one for me. Whatever might come up in these next four years with us being together at school, I could not allow myself to be swayed his way.

“On the other hand, Tad was there. He understood, and he was cool about it.”

“So are y’all together?”

“I don’t know. There has been so much damage. Speaking of damage, my friend Lynzi. . .”

“The one who thought she was pregnant?”

“Yeah, she came across this guy, and he assaulted her, too.”

“Oh, boy. She must be a wreck.”

“Yep, she joined the army. She was supposed to come here with me, but she said she needed a structured environment. She needed to toughen up. Well, I see you yawnin’,” I said to Cammie. “What room are you in?”

“Three-twelve,” she said.

“I’m on the first floor. I’m in Room 106. We’ll have to hook up. My phone is in, but I can’t remember the number, plus it’s late. Come down tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” she said.

Speaking from the heart, I told her, “It was nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

---

I saw the sun peering through my window. As I looked at the rays, I remembered the events of my first days in the dorm room, when Dakari came over and tried to tell me he was sorry. Sorry for being forceful with me a month earlier!

We went outside because I knew the conversation might not be too pretty. After all, I was furious with Dakari. I told him no, he kept going. A part of me didn’t know if I could forgive him. When he came to my new surroundings and wanted forgiveness, I just lost it. I didn’t want him to touch me; I didn’t want him to say anything to me. When Tad walked up on the situation, the two of them got into it. They started scuffling; one thing led to another, and my dorm room window got busted. Drama, yet again. I was happy my suite mates were there and had someone come and fix it. I hoped the new day would bring joy.

Laurel was still sleeping. I didn’t know too much about the girl that lay just a few feet away from me. She seemed nice, and I appreciated the fact that she had my back when

it came to our new suite mates Jewels and Anna.

One thing I'd learned was that being black is hard and being a woman is hard. It's not that easy being a Christian either. Though I didn't know who Payton was, I knew who I was trying to be—and that was a good person. It was gonna be interesting with those two crazy girls, Jewels and Anna, on the other side of the bathroom, because I was only gonna take so much of their mess.

I've found that most of the time when you have something bad, you also have something good, and Laurel was a good white girl and a good roommate so far. She was a good Christian to whom I hoped I could grow closer.

---

My cousin Pillar was going to be a senior. I was so glad that we had resolved our issues. Being biracial is tough in this world. It gave my heart joy to know that in the end we had worked through the issues, and she knew I was only a phone call away. If she ever needed a friend, I would be there. Though she hadn't accepted Christ, she had accepted me with all my faults. Though she had some, too, being with her taught me that I can't judge people if I've got charges against me. I can't polish other folks if I'm tarnished. I can't try to fix others if I'm broken. For the first time, I realized I'm not "Perfect Payton."

Looking at the dawn of the new day, I thought of both of my ex-boyfriends a few hundred feet away in some other dorm as roommates. I thought of my parents miles away in the comfort of their own home. I then realized, with God being everywhere, I'd have help finding my way. I had to look forward to the future, and He's got a lot of good stuff for me. I've got to believe that I am somebody, and I'm gonna stand on God's Word no matter what comes my way.

Though I didn't get any sleep, I put on my slippers and thought, *I can't live in fear. I've gotta look toward the future with excitement and quit reliving the past . . . .*

*Saved Race*

**STEPHANIE PERRY MOORE**

# *Contents*

Acknowledgments	8
1. Finishing the Statement	10
2. Calling My Name	19
3. Spoiling the Fun	26
4. Trying Too Hard	36
5. Embracing Beyond Belief	46
6. Invading Wrong Territory	53
7. Vacationing with Trouble	60
8. Dating Just Because	71
9. Mending the Tear	83
10. Longing for Home	93
11. Outside the Boxes	102
12. Picking People Up	114
13. Saying Meaningful Good-Byes	125
14. Dying for Peace	138
15. Understanding What Counts	149

1



# *Finishing the Statement*

We know the color of our skin, yet when we go out into the world, we do not need to be afraid to feel like we're equal to anyone else. In Christ we are excellent, and we can compete with the very best," I voiced with pride to my brown classmates.

Although that sounded arrogant, I knew it was true. We all fall short of excellence, but God is perfect. Thanks to His presence in a sinful me, I can claim His goodness.

Continuing, I encouraged, "And because of His love for us, we can be all that anyone else can be. And don't misunderstand: I'm not even saying we're better because we're black; I'm saying because we're saved, because Jesus' blood is running through us, we can overcome any obstacle that is before us. We can climb over mountains that will be hard to climb, and we can get through valleys that are deep and depressing, and we can achieve. Just remember to seek ye first, and my prayer, as I close, is that all of your dreams will be given. Thanks."

It was weird receiving a standing ovation, especially when I didn't even know that Pastor McClep was going to put me on the spot. He had asked me to stand before my graduating class and give a baccalaureate speech. I didn't know what I was going to say but it just came. It came naturally. Our past. Our present. Our future. Words of wisdom from God flowed to my lips, to say to my friends that we are to be congratulated. And as they saluted me, I humbly accepted the praise, and applauded them in return.

"Let's give her another round of applause," my pastor said as I was taking my seat. "We're really proud of you, Payton, really proud of you."

Humbly I smiled. "Thank you, Sir."

At that moment, I felt loved by my parents, my peers, and even myself. I was proud of me, and I so hoped God was as well. I had a lot to learn, but I was working towards it. And although I had failed in several areas in my life, like being angry at God and choosing lust over the love of Christ, I hoped I had become a stronger person for my mistakes.

After the service, I went down to the reception hall, and was greeted first by Tad Taylor, a guy who I wasn't even sure was my boyfriend or my good friend. Either way, I had serious feelings for him that ran deep as the ocean's bottom. He reached over and planted a sweet peck on my cheek.

"We're proud of you, lady. That was an awesome speech. You want some punch?"

"Yeah, that would be great," I told him.

"Cool . . . I'll be right back."

"So, what's up? You gon' be a motivational speaker or something?" my girlfriend Dymond joked.

It was so good to be with my friends. I hugged Dymond Johnson, Rain Crandle, and Lynzi Brown really tight, for in the back of my mind, I knew that pretty soon the four of us wouldn't be together. We would go on from this place and

hear our names called in a couple days, get our diplomas, spend our summers in different places, and hopefully come back together once more to get ready for school and depart for different destinations. At least Lynzi and I would be off to the same university.

I just hoped our future would never take us to places where we'd be marrying men with different interests, living in cities far away, and having careers that wouldn't allow reunions. All of that would hinder us from being close like this again. However, I couldn't and didn't know the future, so I held on extra tight, and in my mind thanked God for friends like these in high school. The past four years with them had been a blast.

"Oooh, yo' church got a spread," Lynzi said, cracking a smile.

"Well, I see the patient has gotten better."

"Yeah, I'm still a little weak. I can't stand up too long, but I can definitely say I'm on the right track."

This was a day of blessings. My crazy friend, Lynzi, had had a horrible car accident just a few short weeks ago. No one thought she would survive that ordeal. The God I know and love is truly a miracle worker. As I stood there and looked at the miracle before me, I came to understand God even better.

Mr. and Mrs. Perry Skky Sr., my parents, started walking toward my girlfriends and me. The smile on their faces made me feel good inside.

My dad is a successful automobile dealer and my mom is a "domestic engineer." Though she stays at home, she is very active in the community. It is her forte. She is a success in her own right, raising lots of money for several causes that wouldn't have made it without her. She always makes sure to give God the credit, though. I knew my parents were proud of me. Mom's humility and my dad's business sense are what make me proud of them. Seeing their

eyes shine with accomplishment for who I had become made me feel good all over.

My dad reached out and gave me a hug. My mom kept smiling. Although they didn't tell me, for once in my life I knew I had done OK. Where I would go from here was uncertain. Where I had been to get to this point was quite crazy, especially this last year. But for one shining moment, I was glad they were glad that I had done OK.

---

"You'd better c'mon," my brother, Perry, said to me in haste later that afternoon. "Yo' boys about to fight."

I had no clue what he was talking about. Perry had been known to exaggerate, but this time his actions of haste seemed as if something was up. I followed him to the church parking lot, where I saw Tad and Dakari, my ex-boyfriend, all up in each other's faces.

"Oh no, see, we're not having this," I stepped in between them and said. "We're on church grounds and y'all acting like y'all in the streets somewhere. I'm not gon' have my parents, my pastor, or anybody come out here and see y'all actin' crazy. Don't trip!"

"You think I was about to fight him?" Tad said.

"I don't know what's going on. All I know is that y'all are getting loud; my brother comes to get me, and y'all confronting each other and stuff. I mean, what else am I suppose to think? The two of you are best friends? Tuh, I don't think so! It's obvious y'all can't even be in the same room. At least be cordial enough to enjoy the same air. What is this about?"

"Man . . . it ain't nothin' . . . it ain't nothin'," Dakari said.

"Yeah, you right, it's nothin'." Tad attacked verbally. "You step to me like that again, we gon' have some problems. That's all I have to say."

Both of them were tight-lipped about what it was that had the two of them upset. It kinda bothered me. I really wondered what was up. Tad came over and kissed me on the cheek, sorta abruptly, and said he'd call me later. Then Tad disappeared. Dakari simply left the scene without even saying good-bye.

As I watched the cute guy of my past walk away, our history came to mind. He had been the one that held my heart for most of my high school days. However, in the beginning of our senior year, he decided since I wasn't putting out, he wasn't going to put up with me. He dissed me for another girl. A girl who started meeting some of his physical needs. I am grateful he broke up with me because I kept my virginity. Also, I found and fell for a wonderful guy, Tad Taylor. However, seeing my ex get in his car, seeing Dakari Ross Graham driving away . . . I knew the connection was still there.

"Girl, you better get over that," Lynzi came up behind me and exclaimed.

"See, why you all up in my business? This ain't about you."

"Well, it don't need to be about Dakari. For real. For real."

"I don't know, Lynzi. I don't think it's about Dakari. I just think that for some reason he still means something."

"But what about Tad?" she questioned.

That was a good question. What about Tad? I had to truly ask myself. What was up? If I cared about Tad, why would Dakari even still be an issue? Why all the guy drama anyway? I should be focused on what's about to come in my life, but when I thought about college, I couldn't get rid of the two of them, because the three of us were all going to the same college, the University of Georgia.

"You gon' have a lot of trouble next year at school," Lynzi said, reading my mind.

“Yeah, you’re right, but at least I’ll have you there.”

“Um, that’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about. Girl, I’m joining the army. I just need some discipline in my life. I need some structure. I’m not ready for college yet. I don’t even know what it is I wanna be.”

I couldn’t say anything. A part of my heart just sank. Not going to school with Lynzi! She was my girl. I was counting on her to be my roommate at Georgia. Lynzi not going? I couldn’t comprehend the thought.

“Ahhh, don’t even act like that,” she said after seeing the dejection on my face. “You’ll be fine.”

---

Since I exempted my exams, I was helping my teacher, Mrs. Guice, take down some of the boards in her room—trying to make graduation come faster, I guess. Though I should have been relaxing, my mind was weighed down with many different things: college, guys, and expectations. I was so burdened with stuff.

My thoughts were interrupted when the frail Caucasian woman in her midfifties called out to me. “Payton, hon, as I sit here looking at you, you pretty thing, I’m just at a loss for words.” It was funny seeing her all emotional. Although she was tiny, she was a powerful lady. She kept all of us on our p’s and q’s. I had never seen this side of Mrs. Guice, and I didn’t know how to respond, so I just sat there, waiting for her to open up.

After taking a deep breath, she said, “When I came to this school fifteen years ago, I had apprehensions. You know, me being a young white lady teaching at a school that was predominantly black was very tough on me, but I overcame that and learned we are all the same. You opened my eyes. I really never met an African-American young lady who had as much poise and class and style as you.”

Mrs. Guice was silent after saying all that. I guess she was waiting on a response from me. My teacher was just staring.

At first I was a little hesitant. Kinda rubbed me the wrong way. I had just completed a debutante ball, where there were fifty girls who had poise and style and were “all that.” Not because we were African-American women, but just because. Still, I was able to accept her comment in the way that it was meant—as a compliment and not a critique. However, I still didn’t know what to say. I, too, was at a loss for words. I just smiled and took it in.

When the bell rang for school to be over, I headed out the door on my way home. I was planning on going to the senior movie night. First I needed to change clothes, get a bite to eat, and pick up my girls. Before I got to my jeep, Dakari pulled up in front of me in a fly, red hot Ferrari.

“Please get in. We really need to talk,” he pleaded.

I was hesitant and didn’t move. He stopped his brother’s car in the middle of the street. He got out. He came around. He opened the other door and practically put me in the new car.

“You got some nerve,” I told him when he started driving me away.

“I apologize for being so abrupt, but we need to settle some things. I just wanted to talk to you and let you know what was really going on. I needed to tell you what was up before yo’ boy got to you, and you know . . . just messed up your mind. I wanted you to hear from me what was up.”

“What are you talking about?” I uttered, in a state of confusion.

“I’m talking about what we were discussing yesterday at your church. Um, I just wanna tell you what we were talking about because I think you should hear it from me. It might sound offensive if it comes from anyone else. And that’s not the way it is intended. I care . . . I really care about

you, and I don't want to throw away whatever it is we got 'cause somebody tells you something I said and misrepresents me."

I leaned back against the car door. My seat belt was still on, but yet, I was turned, and I was just checking the brother out. He was trippin'. He was really worrying about something that didn't seem so serious to me. Tad hadn't even called me last night, so obviously it wasn't that big a deal, or was it? Did Dakari upset Tad so much that he couldn't even call?

"You better slow down. You're going mighty fast," I said to Dakari as we drove through historic Augusta.

"I got this; just listen because this is major. Basically, I just told the guy that he might say he's all holy roly and everything, and that the sex stuff might not be an issue, but, um, the more he hangs around you . . . I mean, I'm a man . . . I know it's gon' be an issue, and I told him he better not compromise you in any way. 'Cause if there's any disrespecting going on, then it's gon' be me and him."

I was digesting the information and Dakari was still speeding. Before anything could be uttered or exchanged between the two of us, lights started flashing from behind. We got pulled over by a cop who wasn't too friendly. The guy had Dakari outside the car with his hands on top of the hood. Yes, Dakari was speeding, but all the roughness and the hard-core treatment, I felt, was way too premature. Especially since Dakari was extremely respectful to the officer.

I couldn't help but feel that this was one of those race incidents because the cop was white and Dakari was black. Driving While Black is a serious issue. I just never experienced it until now. And I felt that moment was D. W. B. because of the circumstances and negative vibes we were getting from the cop. Not because I feel all cops are racist, but because this one had no regard for my friend's welfare.

The cop confirmed it when he ignorantly uttered out of

his mouth: “You people do this all the time. Thinking you can get away with this or that. I don’t know; y’all are always carrying weapons, I have to protect myself. Get out the car, and don’t say one word, ’cause if you do, then you’ll be in jail like the rest of your . . . what do y’all call it? Brothas and sistahs.”

I knew Dakari wanted to go off. I knew he wanted to say so many things. So did I, but I was scared. The cop was an authority and even though he was wrong, he had the upper hand. I just kept praying quietly to myself. So many times over the last couple of days, I wanted to say something but didn’t know quite what to say. I told Dakari to keep his mouth shut. Sometimes words aren’t necessary. You just have to pray and let God handle it. Sometimes you don’t have to have the answers. Sometimes you can’t say what you really feel. You just have to let the Holy Spirit take control. At that horrific moment when so much of me was dying to come out, I realized that in life you won’t always be finishing the statement.