

Prologue

The last notes of the performance blared into the open night sky of the stadium. A breeze blew a chill through her body. She was covered from head to foot in sweat from singing and dancing for hours. The sun was up when their concert started and it had ended in the darkness cast by the chilly night air.

The lights shone so brightly that they blinded her. This was the last time she would stand hand in hand with her co-performers; they now lifted their hands to the sky in a final farewell. The high she got from performing drained from her body as it hit home that this was it. Her last performance for a long time. For how long she didn't know. She smiled for her audience so hard it hurt as she looked into the crowd and tried to focus on the cheering faces; to remember the joy she brought them when she performed. She didn't want to forget it. It would be needed to help her find her way back.

Then she got the bad feeling again. The feeling that had succeeded in pushing her from the one place that felt like home since she could crawl: the stage.

She looked out into the crowd and her gaze settled on a young girl. The girl looked to be close to her own age. The girl smiled and waved as she hung over the barricade; ecstatic. Just happy to be there. She realized she hadn't felt joy like the girl's in a very long time and she knew the way back to her own happiness would be away from this place and on the other side of that barricade...

Chapter One

Sheryl tossed the lip gloss to Deja and she caught it easily with one hand.

“Who did you say was coming again?” Sheryl asked over her shoulder as she flat ironed her unruly curls for what seemed like the third time since they’d been in her room. Deja was still deciding if she wanted to wear “Delicious Doom” dark red lip gloss or a pink stain called “Whisper’s Satin”. They were already late to the party, but they were late to every party.

“I don’t know,” Deja replied, “Does it matter? Jeremiah’s going to be there, so I have to be there.” Jeremiah McKenzie, the school’s star quarterback and her boyfriend of four months. He and Deja had met during summer school. Deja was taking summer classes to get acclimated to normal school since she had been home schooled her whole life. He had told her that he was a football player, but he had forgotten to mention that he was the star quarterback and all the parties she’d be dragged to were because of it.

She chose “Whisper’s Satin” because it went along with her plans for the night. Jeremiah had led the team to another victory and Deja had decided he should get a big reward for his win tonight. Her.

“Oh, that shade is hot on you!” Sheryl had finally stopped ironing her hair and was now pulling Deja’s long dark curly locks away from her face. “It’s ‘c’est magnifique’!” Sheryl cooed in Deja’s mother tongue. Deja made a significant effort not to speak French around kids from school, but they sure did love to speak it to her.

She usually ignored it and swallowed her irritation. Her family had moved there from France last summer. She was pretty fluent in English, solidifying her English by watching loads of American shows and movies after she arrived but she still had a very thick French accent. She never spoke French lately unless she was at home with her mother, a native French woman. Her father was a former United States ambassador to France and had been stationed there as a diplomat when he had met her mother. Her father and mother had married within in a matter of months after a whirlwind romance. Her father had loved her mother and the French people so much, that he had taken her mother’s last name.

Sheryl tugged her fingers through Deja’s long, wavy, and thick curly hair that cascaded all the way down her back ending right below her waist. Her mom had tried to convince her to cut it for years; that so much hair was excessive and took a lot of work, but Deja felt it set her apart. She didn’t mind that she had to wake up two hours before school every morning to blow dry it. Besides, Jeremiah couldn’t get enough of it.

Deja blotted her lips with a tissue to take away the excess lip gloss. She took stock of her choice of clothing for the evening. She usually wasn’t the dress wearing type, but she hoped the jet black knee length halter dress would send him the message as to exactly what kind of night she had in store for him. She wore the double hearted silver necklace he’d given her on their one-month anniversary with silver bracelets to match. The silver set off nicely by the amber glow of her bronze skin. It was a bit too dressy for a post-game party, but she had more than partying on her mind.

“Alright,” Sheryl said with a huff, “I think we’re ready.”

Sheryl had managed to kill every curl of her unruly red hair. She looked like an alternate version of herself with her long straight hair falling below her shoulders.

Lately, Sheryl would complain that she was tired of everyone brushing her off as some bookworm who was overly obsessed with her grades. She wanted to be taken more seriously. Deja had also met her in an advanced course. While Deja glided effortlessly through her difficult courses, her homeschooling putting her so far ahead of what they were teaching in public school that she had managed to skip two grades, Sheryl worked tirelessly; spending nearly all of her time studying to maintain a 4.0 GPA with hopes of getting into one of many top colleges she had on her prospects list.

Tonight, she also wore a short dress but of a dark purple with a belt cinching the waist that accentuated her hips making her look womanly. The boys at the party would have to be dead not to notice her. She looked good. Deja told her so and they giggled on their way out to the car.

They almost made it before Sheryl’s overprotective mother, Mrs. Dawson, caught them and gave them the same lecture she had given them every time they went out. No drinking and driving. No staying

out past twelve. Call and check in every two hours to ensure everything was okay. Deja's parents were much more laid back so Mrs. Dawson's overt apprehension always seemed extreme to her. She suffered through the lecture with a smile and nodded her promises simultaneously along with Sheryl until they were finally set free.

Deja hadn't told Sheryl her plans for the night because she wasn't sure they would be successful. Although, she and Jeremiah had been dating for several weeks, they still hadn't gone all the way.

She was surprised she'd managed to keep her virginity this long with Jeremiah's smoking hot all-American good looks. His deep blue eyes, golden blond hair and athletic body would make any girl swoon. He had had a serious girlfriend before Deja so she knew he wasn't a virgin and that fact made her ready to rid herself of her own virginity that much more.

They pulled into the yard and found a spot among the slew of cars parked haphazardly across the yard. Sheryl pulled a bottle of vodka out of her purse, gulped about a third of it down and belched loudly. She pushed it towards Deja, "Want some?" she slurred.

"No, I'm fine," Deja was on a mission and wanted to keep her wits about her.

She got out of the car and entered the party. It was large turnout. Most of the crowd were upperclassmen; Juniors and Seniors. Skipping two grades usually meant Deja was the youngest of the group when she hung out with Jeremiah and his friends. She blended in easily though and no one really questioned her age. They only thought of her as Jeremiah's girl. She wondered sometimes what people would think if they knew he was dating someone who should have been a Freshmen. A popular kid like Jeremiah wouldn't be caught dead dating an underclassman but he had never made an issue out of it.

Homeschooling then entering high school as a Junior made it so that Deja didn't know how kids her age were supposed to act. Her way of handling it was to keep a low profile which helped keep her age from being a topic of discussion.

She made her way through kids standing around, lounging in chairs and dancing on a make shift dance floor in the middle of the room.

Many guys turned their heads to study her as she crossed the room. She ignored their long stares as she made her way to the kitchen. She always went to the kitchen first when she came to parties. It was a great, quieter place to get information.

The door swung behind her and she entered the kitchen to see Joseph, a football player and a Junior, with his head in the fridge rummaging through the contents inside. Perfect.

"Hey, Joe," she said, casually. Trying to play it cool and keep the desperation out of her voice, "seen Jeremiah around anywhere?"

Joseph dragged his head out of the fridge as if it took effort and looked at Deja. He took her in from head to foot and leered at her in her revealing dress before pointing to the glass doors that lead to the backyard.

"Thanks!" she said hastily as she quickly crossed the kitchen and went into the backyard.

Her eyes roamed the darkness for a bit before she caught Jeremiah sitting on a lounge chair with a beer in hand. He held his head down close to Tristan, another guy on the team, having what seemed to be an intense conversation with him. He gestured in the air before him as he made whatever point he was expressing.

Deja walked over and stood before him. He stopped talking and dropped his hands as he peered up at her. His looked surprised to see her. He was used to her wearing t-shirts and jeans and wondered why she was so dressed up.

He ended his conversation with Tristan, put his beer aside and stood up to hug Deja hello.

She stood on tiptoes; him being almost a foot taller than her, and whispered in his ear, "I really need to talk to you. Alone."

He looked at her, again, questioning her with his eyes before taking her hand and leading her into the house.

They walked past dancing and lounging kids upstairs where they were lucky to find an empty room. She didn't waste any time and pounced on him kissing him fiercely.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” He pulled away from her holding up his hands, “Easy, tiger. What’s gotten into you? And why are you dressed like this?”

Great. The exact opposite of the reaction she’d been hoping for. Her shoulders sagged as she sat on the bed. He joined her and looked at her quizzically.

“You know,” she started, “it’s been months and we still haven’t...”

He looked at her for a moment before it dawned on him, “Oh, well, I thought we were waiting for the right time.”

She let out a frustrated puff of air and climbed into his lap and straddled him. Through light kisses she said, “I’m... tired... of... waiting.” He kissed her back momentarily before pushing her back down on the bed next to him.

“I want it to be special,” he smoothed her hair with his hand, “Not on a stranger’s bed during some party when anyone can walk in.”

“I want to get your mind off all the pressure you’ve been under lately.”

He laughed. This was going the worst possible way she could have imagined. Now he was laughing at her.

“With sex?” he grinned, “You want to get my mind off everything with sex?”

“It’s not only that,” she whined,

“Everything lately has been about football, college scouts, and colleges. You barely have time for me.”

“Fine,” he said giving in, “Next weekend we’ll go away. Get a hotel somewhere and have fun.”

She lit up. “Really!?” then she quickly came to her senses, “Well, there’s no way our parents would agree to that.”

“They won’t have to. Tell them you’re staying at Sheryl’s.” For a moment a darkness fell over his features before he said, “And I doubt my dad will care if I spend a few nights away from the house. I’ll tell him I’m scoping out a college that’s out of town.”

His father only seemed to care about a few things lately: Running the huge metropolitan hospital that was partly owned by Jeremiah’s family, serving on the hospital’s board of trustees, being the chief of surgery of the hospital, and Jeremiah getting a football scholarship to a school with a major football team. He dreamed of his son one day playing pro football and devoted a lot of his time and energy into making it happen. Anytime he was not working at the hospital, he was researching schools and phoning up college coaches trying to get a good word in about Jeremiah. Every passing game more and more college scouts were showing up to watch Jeremiah play. It forced him to play his best every game. When he wasn’t on the field, he was with a teammate discussing strategy.

The fact that he still volunteered with her at the hospital on weekends was a bit surprising but even during those brief moments of time that they still had together he had a faraway look in his eye. She knew it was because he was thinking about football.

“So, come on,” he said, rousing her out of her ruminations, “Let’s go back to the party and when we do it, we’ll do it the right way.”

“Fine.” she said reluctantly agreeing for the moment. Her plans for the night ruined. Now he was going to go back to some dark corner to talk football while she had to find a way to entertain herself at yet another lame party. Although she could understand him wanting their first time together to be special, part of her still wanted it to be now. She had taken her time picking out the hottest dress and wearing slutty makeup all for nothing. The only thing left to do was to consume as much alcohol as she could to forget Jeremiah’s rejection as he went back to his buddies.

Without saying goodbye, she barged out of the door and back to the kitchen where she knew there had to be something alcoholic to drink. She looked under the counter and was rewarded with a nice bottle of Triple Sec. She knew it was supposed to be mixed with something, but she filled a red plastic cup to the brim and drank it straight.

Thirty minutes later she sat next to a guy who was more far gone than she who was alternating from speaking gibberish to laughing at himself. She smiled at him as the world began to spin. She leaned back

and tried to anchor herself to the couch. The next thing she knew was she was being shaken awake by Jeremiah.

“Wake up! What were you doing with your head in that guy’s crotch?” He shook her again as her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

She barely remembered passing out next to the guy and certainly didn’t remember slumping over into this lap. She tried to answer but her words only came out as mumbles.

“How much did you drink? Are you trying to kill yourself? You know your heart can’t take this.”

Her heart. Her faulty heart that had given her problems since she was a little kid. It would speed up when it wanted to or make her pass out at any given time. Doctors had no explanation for her condition and Jeremiah was always overly concerned about it.

He picked her up, carried her to his car and drove her home where he found her keys in her purse and took her inside hoping against hope her parents weren’t up waiting for her.

He was lucky as her parents weren’t anywhere to be found. He took her up to her room, pulled her dress off over her head and dressed her in an oversize sweater he found while digging through her drawers. He then tucked her under her sheets.

She reached towards him in an effort to say something that would somehow improve her predicament but only managed more incoherent mumbles; her words slurred and barely audible. He shook his head.

“Look at you. I hope you get yourself together in the morning before your parents find you,” he gathered her hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear, “You’re going to have some headache when you wake up.”

He placed a 32-ounce Gatorade on her dresser that he had stopped and picked up on the way to her house.

“Try to drink this. Hopefully it’ll stop you from feeling too awful.” He took off her shoes before placing her comforter over her, “I never want to see you like this again,” he whispered before leaving her room and sneaking out.

Later, after she had sobered up a bit, she found herself with the Gatorade lying on the cool tiles of her bathroom floor. It was times like these she was grateful she had her own bathroom. Pangs of embarrassment flushed through her as she remembered how she behaved that night. She could only hope Jeremiah would be lenient tomorrow. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.