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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*



Chasing Peers' Acceptance

Why are they staring at me? I said to myself as I ate lunch for the first time in the school cafeteria.

The food was OK, but it had nothing on Mom's home-cooked grub. As I looked up from eating the mushy mashed potatoes, I saw two girls checking me out. I had noticed them watching me about five minutes earlier. The first time, I thought they just simply glanced my way at the same time I glanced theirs. But then, more and more as I tried to play it off and act like I wasn't looking at them, I noticed them really staring at me. They were talking about me. I wasn't sure they were saying anything negative, but that was my guess. College was a trip.

One thing being a debutante did teach me last year was how to get along and appreciate everybody's differences. Accept people for who they are, that kind of thing. Make new friends and not be intimidated by qualities in others that I find attractive and I myself lack.

However, when two adorable African-American girls would

rather sit across the room and chatter about me than come over and introduce themselves, I knew that they didn't have the same privileges that I'd had. I didn't mean that arrogantly. You could have the best of the best and just be downright unfriendly. I think the village that raised me, that brought me out to society, taught me values that made my stock go up, and I appreciated that.

The question was how long was I gonna sit there and let them pick me apart. I was starting to get self-conscious. Was it my hair? I was wearing a straw set—you know, where the hair stylist wraps your hair around straws, sits you under the dryer and then pulls them out and you have little, bitty, mini curls. It was kind of poofy, but I knew that within the course of the week it would fall. With registration, orientation, and me getting involved in freshman activities, fooling with my hair would be the last thing I wanted to worry with. Or maybe they were saying something good about me. Yeah, right! I doubted it, but either way I was tired of the looks, and I had finished my meal, so I picked up my tray and headed to put it up.

I was behind them when I reentered the room. I heard the one with soft lemon skin and naturally wavy hair say, "Where'd she go?"

Then the milk-chocolate girl with short clothes and a sassy, short haircut said, "Probably to take off them ugly shoes she had on." Then they giggled.

"So what's wrong with my shoes?" I replied. "These Reebok Slides are very comfortable."

They looked so stunned. Yep, I had caught them, and they couldn't say, "Girl, we weren't talkin' 'bout you." If nothing else, black women have instincts. They know when another sistah is checking them out.

"Well, it might have seemed that we were being naughty, but we were simply making an observation," the prissy, light brown one said. "Don't take it the wrong way," she added.

I gave a fake smile. There was no right way to take someone saying something negative about you.

“I’m Blake Carrington from Atlanta, and this is Shanay. Tell her where you’re from.” She hit her on the arm.

“I’m sure she don’t wanna know all dat,” Shanay said.

They were cute but definitely weird. Earlier I would have thought I could have befriended them. However, after briefly talking with them, I didn’t see any close friendships developing. They seemed quite stuck on themselves.

“See y’all around,” I said as I threw up my hand.

“So do you want to go with me?” Laurel asked me in our room.

“No,” I told her with disgust. “Going to a white frat party does not seem interesting. No!”

“Well, darn, Payton. You don’t have to be so touchy. You don’t want to hear me play my music . . . It bothers you. You don’t wanna try out for a sorority with me. I’m trying, but you’re not making it easy.”

Laurel and I had roomed together for about four days. Though she was cool, she was still white, and we were not gonna be totally there with each other. I wanted her to like me, but I didn’t wanna be fake. And I didn’t wanna go to a stupid white party and be the only shot of pepper there. No, it just wasn’t interesting to me, but who could blame me about the country music junk? It just wasn’t my taste. Some pop music I liked, but country? That’s pushing it too far. I’m well-rounded, but uh-uh, some of her stuff is not for me.

My mother is a Delta, and I didn’t even know if I wanted to pledge that one day. But she would tell me I was stupid for talkin’ ’bout whether I wanna be an Alpha Gam or a Tri Del. Me wanting to pledge a white sorority wouldn’t be the only drawback. They probably wouldn’t want me anyway. Laurel

was so sweet and naive that when I finally said no forcefully about some things, she got all sensitive.

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry you think I’m being abrupt, but there are just some things about black people that you have got to understand.”

“I want to understand.”

“Our suite mates don’t even want to get to know me. Why do you care so much?” I asked with genuine concern. “We’re cool. We don’t have to be best friends.”

With a sad tone she said, “Yeah, you’re right. We can just exist. We don’t really have to like it.”

“I’m not saying that. Ugh!”

I went into the bathroom and slammed the door. She was such a baby! I’d heard white girls were soft. Being here for only a while had shown me that there was truth to that statement. But the girls on the other side of that door, however, were definitely tough ones. It was funny because Laurel wanted to get to know me so well, and they didn’t want to have a thing to do with me. Could I just find a happy medium someplace?

As I brushed my teeth, I looked up in the mirror. The image staring back at me looked as it always looked. A confident, attractive young lady with a lot of potential and a smiling face. The only difference was this time after rinsing out my mouth, there was no genuine smile plastered there. I was baffled because I didn’t really know whom to lean on. My girls Lynzi, Dymond, and Rain had been more than anchors over the last several years of my life—they were a part of me. We thought alike. Thought so much alike that sometimes we really got on one another’s nerves. We enjoyed one another, and now they were not part of my daily life.

Though Dakari and Tad were somewhere on campus, the relationships I shared with them were strained. I thought it was gonna be easy to make other close black girlfriends. However, when I saw them on campus, freshmen like me

since most of the upperclassmen hadn't arrived yet, they seemed more into what I was wearing than what I was about as a person. That's just not the kind of friends I wanted to make. I wanted to find something in common with my dear white roommate, whom I like, but not being on the same wavelength was tough.

"I miss my friends!" I said aloud.

Two years ago, I'd read a book for class called *Who Moved My Cheese?* Although I thought the title was stupid, after getting into the book I grew to like it. It was about two mice and two humans being in a maze and trying to find the quickest way to the cheese. Basically, what I learned from reading the book was that mice don't really think too much about change. If the cheese is moved in the maze, they just go and sniff it out, no big deal. But for humans, they get so comfortable with where the cheese is that if it is moved, it's almost as if life is over. We as humans need to think more like mice and not get so stressed out every time our cheese is moved. Especially me, Payton Skky.

Well, as far as friends in my life, the cheese was definitely moved, and I was not happy about it at all. I could think like the humans in the book and really stress out and be in such a pity party that my whole freshman year goes by and life is just horrible. Or I could think like the mice and find someone to fill the girlfriend thing in my life.

So I said to myself in the mirror, "OK, I'm going to think like the mice."

I opened the door and called out to Laurel. "Do you have any plans for dinner?"

"No, no, I don't. I've got to do sorority stuff next week, and I'll probably be gone most of the time, so you won't have to worry about listening to my country music because I won't be here."

"You know, I'm sorry about that," I said to her. "I'm not sorry about not liking country music because I don't, but

you like it. I can stand to listen to it sometimes, I guess. You should be comfortable in your own room.”

After telling Laurel I was sorry for being mean to her and truly letting her know why, she said she understood. My mood could have been because it was just that time of the month. I realized another reason why I had been so cranky. Being in hot Georgia, with a cramping stomach and no friends, could make me a crabby girl.

The two of us went over to the cafeteria. I hadn't eaten there since earlier in the week when I had encountered Blake and Shanay. The food tasted better, maybe because I had a new attitude. I was determined to find the good in stuff rather than point out the negatives. It still wasn't Mom's food, but it was better than all the fast food I had been stuffing my belly with over the last couple of days.

Laurel and I started talking about things that we have in common. The one big thing that we shared was the fact that we both had ex-guys at this school. Though she didn't have two ex-boyfriends like me, the one that she did have sounded like an interesting character. When she told me their story of how he was so mean to her after their breakup, I wanted to punch him out. I didn't know him, but what a jerk! Maybe it was more of my hormones than anything, but based on the profile she had painted of him, I didn't like him.

“Excuse me, ladies,” a warm, authoritative voice spoke. “My name is Karlton Kincaid, and I just wanna snag a minute of this pretty lady's time,” he said as he looked at Laurel, but touched my shoulder.

“Sure,” Laurel said. “I need more ketchup for my fries anyway.” She got up and left.

He sat down beside me and told me all about himself. This Tampa native was now a junior at Georgia. He invited me to a party that was sponsored by the Student Government Association for the black freshmen. When he

said he was the director of minority recruitment, I started to holler.

“Wow! Well, did you know Hayli?”

I asked him that because she was Dakari’s brother’s fiancée, and she had held that position last year. She basically got me to come here. When we talked, he told me that he was very good friends with Hayli and that she had told him to look out for Payton Skky. He was happy he’d run into me before school had started.

He wore glasses and had on a bow tie, which on another day I might have found quite nerdy, but today I found it had appeal. He had a unique sense of style. He was very refined, kind of like a white boy in black skin. I was digging it.

“You’re cuter than she said you were,” he commented, flattering me.

“Well, she didn’t tell me about you at all, and when I talk to her I’m gonna have to ask her why she was holdin’ out,” I joked back.

He blushed. “Do you have plans for this evening?”

“No. My roommate is going to a KA party, and I don’t think I’ll be joining her, so I thought my night was going to be dead. I haven’t heard anything about this party.”

“Well, we’re just tryin’ to throw something together. When I bumped into a lot of new freshmen, they had been saying that they hadn’t had a chance to meet one another. Quite a few black students enrolled. We’ve got about three hundred and something.”

“Really? I haven’t seen that many around here.”

He said, “Yeah, so we’re throwin’ a little somethin’ together. It’s not on campus, so hopefully people will be able to find it. But my past experience tells me that we can always find a party.”

“Yeah,” I said, laughing back.

“And I’ve been on campus all week, and I have not bumped into you,” he said.

“Well, I’ve been here. I’ve been around. What time does the party start?”

“We’ll kick off around nine, but you know it won’t be jumpin’ ’til about eleven.”

“Cool. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Well, you’ll have to save me a dance.”

“I’ll have to do that.” I smiled as he got up from his seat. “Bye, Karlton Kincaid.”

As I watched him walk away, I felt more relaxed. I was worried about just making new friends, like Blake and Shanay. They were obviously not the only ones I had to choose from. I was looking forward to the party later that evening. Hopefully it would prove to be exciting for me. It was quite interesting as I watched the tall, slim guy stroll farther and farther out of my presence. It was a brief encounter but definitely one that was intriguing and memorable.

“Thanks for picking us up,” Dakari said as he and Tad got into my ride.

They both had cars, but the football coach did not want freshmen ballplayers to have access to them during camp, so they called me and asked if I was going to the party. Chauffeuring my two ex-boyfriends around was going to be interesting.

They had been together as roommates for a week. Day in and day out at training camp and all that was affiliated with that. They had the pressure of learning the plays and winning the coach’s favor. But just watching them walk to my car, I could see a bond was forming, which was quite weird because the two of them had despised each other in high school. They were both great running backs, and now they were friends. Well, maybe “friends” was too strong a word.

I couldn't help but say, "This is a trip, the two of y'all tight. This is real crazy."

"Who said we were tight?" Tad said as he settled into the backseat.

"For real. Dang, it ain't like that," Dakari said as he tried kissing me on the cheek.

"Don't even go there. You know you wrong!" I said as I shoved him in the side.

"We're goin' to a party! Hands up! Hands up!" Dakari joked.

"You better act like you got some sense. Don't be givin' my school a bad name."

"Yo' skirt kind of short," Dakari said. "Look, Tad."

Tad peeped over my shoulder and said, "Yeah, I see what you mean. What's up wit' dat, Payton?"

"It's only 'cause I'm driving. My skirt is not short. Ain't nobody talkin' 'bout what y'all got on."

To think I worried about how we were going to get along. The three of us had a fun relationship. I didn't belong to either one of those guys. They clearly understood that, and so did I. Yet we had so much history that there was no way we could not be there for one another. So it was kind of like I had big brothers at school with me. Only by a couple of months, but they were lookin' out for me nonetheless. I'm sure there was a little bit more going on underneath that, too, but for the moment we put all that aside and were just buds. I was cool with my new role as I escorted them to the party.

Unfortunately, two hours into it when the place got packed and I was standing there with these two gorgeous guys on both sides of me, I got a lot of mean looks from a lot of sistahs. No guys were coming up to me asking me to dance, and that wasn't cool.

"OK, y'all go y'all's way. I will let you guys know when it's time to go."

“Oooohh. Don’t let us miss curfew for real, for real,” Dakari said.

Tad agreed, “Yeah. We gotta be back right at twelve. So it’s eleven now, and it is not our fault folks waited to come, but we gotta go in a little while.”

“That’s cool. I don’t wanna be out all night anyway,” I told them. “Now, y’all go. Leave me alone so I can make some friends. Get my groove on and dance.”

“You better be good,” Dakari said to me.

Dakari being the clown he was, headed over to the dance floor alone and started cutting up. Immediately, everybody checked him out and knew that he was going to be one of those guys everybody wanted to know. He was a nut. I hadn’t seen that side of him since eleventh grade.

Tad, on the other hand, was kind of reserved and stood by me a second and said, “So how’ve you been? We haven’t talked in a week. What’s been up with you? You missed me or what?” he whispered.

“You missed me?” I asked him as he looked one way and I looked the other. It was so funny because we were acting like we weren’t together. However, the stuff we were talking about was together stuff.

“I thought about you when I was out in the hot sun and didn’t want to run another lap and needed a pretty sight to keep me going.”

“Yeah, I thought about you. I’ve been praying for you and your camp. I’ve been praying for you and Dakari, hoping you wouldn’t kill each other in that room. I guess it’s kind of been a prayer answered.”

“Yeah, we’re gettin’ along. He’s cool. We’re gonna be OK . . . I guess.”

“Great,” I replied.

Dakari came back over and grabbed Tad. “Come on, man. Let’s dance with the honeys.”

They went cruising and checking out all the girls on the

scene. Though Tad was a strong Christian, he was still a guy.

This is gonna be hard, I thought: *My two men checkin' out other girls.*

I looked over and saw Blake and Shanay walk in.

“Dannng!” I heard Dakari yell as he hit Tad on the back.

I couldn't even stand it, so I walked to the rest room. When I came out, Tad was dancing with Blake, and Dakari was dancing with Shanay. My head was hurting.

“You lookin' at the dance floor mighty hard, lady,” I heard someone from behind me say.

“Karlton! Hey!” I said as I turned around, happy to see him.

“You savin' a dance for me?”

“Sure, why not?”

I grabbed his hand and ushered him between Tad and Dakari. I was determined that they would see me having more fun than them. As I danced, I grabbed my waistband and rolled up my skirt an inch or two. The guys talked about it being short in the car, but it was really short now. I don't know what I was thinking; I just wanted their eyes to be on me and not on those chicks they were dancing with. Yes, I had issues, but it's what I did. In my heart, I was convinced that I shouldn't try to lure a guy by being sexy. What a shallow relationship that would be.

“You can really move,” Karlton said to me as though he was into me, too.

“You ain't as stiff as you look,” I said to him.

When the slow song came on, Karlton automatically assumed we were going to dance together. He grabbed my waist and pulled me to him. We rocked to the left, went to the right, skipped a beat, and then rocked back to the other side. He had rhythm. As we circled around, I saw both Tad and Dakari rocking, too.

“So, can I get your number and call you?” Karlton asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Are you OK, Payton? You don’t seem to be all into this dance,” he said as I stepped on his foot.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. What’d you say?” I asked him, clearly out of it.

I looked down at my watch, and it was now eleven-thirty. As close as we were, packed up in the little place, I could read Blake and Shanay’s lips. They were digging my guys a little too much.

I pushed Karlton back and said to Dakari and Tad, “Y’all, it’s time to go.”

“It’s time to go? Who are you talkin’ to?” Blake said.

“I’m talkin’ to him, and I’m talkin’ to him,” I uttered, pointing to Tad and Dakari.

“Dang! It’s that time already?” Dakari said.

“Yep. Gotta go.”

At that moment the guys were clueless to the women, who were shocked that I was commanding such attention. I knew exactly what I was doing.

“See y’all later. We gotta go,” Dakari said to the girls.

Blake and Shanay stood on the dance floor alone with their arms crossed. They were rolling their eyes at me. I had wanted so much to be accepted by those girls when I saw them, days back. Then they started talking about me like I didn’t have it goin’ on. Well now, the two men that they were into were riding with me, and I for sure had it going on.

“Don’t pout, ladies. It doesn’t look pleasin’,” I teased as I walked past them. “I saw y’all were into my men. Don’t worry; they are taken. They both want me. I just haven’t decided which one I want.”

“You know those guys for real?” Blake asked.

Tainting the truth, I said, “Boyfriends. They like my shoes.”

As I walked away from them with my head upright, I felt good. Maybe too good. I knew I was cocky and didn’t

necessarily have to be, but all week I had been trying to figure out where I belonged.

At that moment, I knew I could find my way. Whether they'd admit it or not, I had Blake and Shanay's respect. As far as getting along with my roommate, I knew I could do some things with Laurel. Where Tad and Dakari were concerned, I knew we were still figuring all that out. Fitting in didn't have to be such a burden anymore. I could just let it all go, be me, and quit chasing peers' acceptance.