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It never fails. Daddy always finds a way to make morning service extend well into the afternoon, even after he promised he'd keep it short. Today, during his sermon, he took twenty minutes to really drive home the point that Jesus helps those who help themselves. Like, he repeated that sentence over and over, broken up by heavy gasps, performative joy, and call-and-response praise from the congregation.

And it's not just him, either. Bertha, our choir director, and Miss Annabelle, our lead singer, are in on the conspiracy. I swear, they try to turn every Sunday into an episode of *Sunday Best*. Not every song should be ten minutes long, and I promise you, they shouldn't all end in an elaborate praise break.

But that's partly Dom's fault. With him on the drums and his best friend, Terrence, on the bass, together they're always egging on the congregation, summoning the holy ghost, trying to get Sistah Betsy to jump up and down in the aisle—but really

they're just trying to get her wig to fall off again. I've told Dom I'm sure she's found better ways to secure that thing on her head after how embarrassed she was that magnificent Sunday. But he thinks there's still hope.

Daddy has already "opened the doors of the church," we've already done the last offering and final announcements, but for some reason Daddy's trying to start his sermon back up. I don't have time for this. At this rate, I won't get to straighten my hair before Dom picks me up for our date tonight. Today is our two-year anniversary. I stressed that to Daddy before we left the house this morning. I said, "Daddy, tonight is important. We have to get out on time. *Please*." But he kept saying, "You can't rush praise, Mo-Mo, but for you, I'll try my best."

Are you, Daddy? Is this your best?

"It don't matter who," Daddy shouts into the microphone, closing out the service with his familiar chant. Thank *God*, we're almost out of here.

"It don't matter what!" He's got a big smile on his face, sweat dotting his forehead. This is his favorite part of the week, his favorite part of the day, his favorite part of everything. He loves being in this church more than he loves working on the deck in our backyard, and he loves doing that a *whole* lot.

I know that being pastor of this church is his greatest joy, but I don't get it. Just, like, *how*? Doesn't this get old? It's the same thing every single Sunday, ever since he was a kid. But somehow, when he was a young, poor boy in the eighties, he came to this ancient building, with its stained-glass windows, haunting

Jesus paintings, and funeral flowers, and was like, *Yeah, I like this a lot*. How can someone that young appreciate the rules and the politics and the *"shhh, pay attention"* and the *"you better close your eyes when you pray"* that comprises every Black Baptist church in the south? How does anyone of any age fall in love with that?

But it's his—the church and the congregation and the title—handed down to him after Pastor B. D. Jackson died. I was only five then, but at the time, the congregation was unsure about Daddy. Since he was so young, they worried he would be flaky. At least, that's what he tells me, because all I've ever seen is their adoration for him. They worship the ground Pastor T walks on, while I do everything I can just to keep my eyes open every Sunday.

I love my daddy, but I hate church.

The only good thing about coming to this place, sitting on the front pew beside my no-nonsense tyrant of a mother, is Dom. His drums are set up below the pulpit, so he's literally sitting in front of me at all times. He's the reason I can't ever keep my eyes on my Bible.

As the congregation shouts back, "Yeah," Dom joins in with a kick to his bass drum and a few taps on his cymbal, then his eyes lift slowly to mine.

Dominic Hudson is my daddy's protégé. He's really good at performing in church. But he's also really good at sports, so *everyone* in town knows who he is. And despite the fact that he's more involved in church than me, the pastor's daughter, he

doesn't have that unbreakable reputation of being a Christian kid. Probably because he's a lot different when we're not in church, and when adults aren't around to hear him cuss.

Dom's my dream boy. He's gorgeous, popular, sweet, and really into me. When he holds my gaze, nothing else matters. My daddy's voice and the accompanying praise fade out. My heart lurches, beating faster than his kick drum. I'm so lucky to have him. That's what everyone says. I'm so lucky to have captured *The* Dominic Hudson's heart. And they're right. He treats me like my daddy treats my mom. Like a queen. Like a gem. Like *his*.

Dom smirks at me and nudges his head over to Deacon Hanson, whose eyes are closed and whose face is pointed up to the ceiling, as if he's wrapping himself in God's word. Dom rolls his eyes to the back of his head and moves his mouth up and down like a fish. He's so goofy, and he knows exactly how to make me laugh.

But then, amidst my snickering, my mother snaps her fingers in front of my face.

My stomach clenches, and the butterflies inside go *poof*. Looking at her is like looking at Medusa. Her dark, narrowed eyes and flaring nostrils turn me to stone. That's the second time she's caught us playing around today. She leans into my ear. "Don't make me get onto you again, Monique, or I promise you won't be going *anywhere* tonight."

She straightens her back and crosses her legs at the ankle, pasting a pretty church smile back on her face. It's not like my

mom is ever a sweet person, but in church, she's extra, *extra* callous. She won't have me embarrassing her in front of all these people.

Ever so perfect and elegant, my mother is exactly who you picture when you think of *Southern Black Women*. She carries herself like a queen, and in this tiny town with only about ten percent Black people, we kind of are royalty. My daddy is the pastor of the only Black church in town; he's a mentor to all the Black athletes and friends with all the coaches. Everybody knows him, and everybody knows my mother—pastor's wife, first-grade teacher, three-time first-place winner of the Annual Fall Festival Pie Baking Contest with her famous sweet potato pie.

While I'm just their daughter. Which means people at school tend to be careful around me. They tend to watch their language, neglect to invite me to parties because they know I won't be allowed to go anyway, and act like I'm some Goody Two-shoes snitch, even though I've never snitched on anyone in my life. I wish I was afforded the same benefit of the doubt that they give Dom—even though he's practically the pastor's son, he's still *cool*.

"Amen," Daddy says, calming the congregation, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. "Praise God. Now, as you know, every first Sunday I like to have our closing prayer led by one of the youthssss," he hisses, amplifying my anxiety, because then Mom lays her hand on my back and starts pushing me forward.

No. I will not get up in front of all these people and pray.

With literally every Black kid who goes to my school watching? Nope. Not only will that be terrible for my already ingrained reputation as a church girl, but I'm also just really bad at it. Daddy says praying is as simple as having a conversation with God, but it's obvious that there's a cadence to it.

"Anybody?" Daddy asks, looking around the church.

"Go," Mom says, pushing harder, but I don't move. And I know there's a chance she'll forbid me from going out with Dom tonight if I don't get up there, but there's an even bigger chance she'll disown me if I go up there and choke. She needs to ask herself, what's more embarrassing—me not volunteering, or me choking in front of all these people?

Before she can drag me up by my hair, Sasha Howser, Terrence's little sister, stands and goes to the front—saving me and burying me at the same time, because she's always the example Mom uses when critiquing my behavior. *Why can't you do this like Sasha or do that like Sasha?* Now I'll never live this down.

I've never seen someone so young be so committed to Christ. And I, honestly, have never hated anyone more than I hate her. She's always got her nose tucked in her Bible, always has her fingers clasped tight during prayer.

"Come on up, Sasha. Give her a hand, church," Daddy says, making his way to the edge of the pulpit to hand her the microphone. The congregation claps for her and praises her for her initiative. Mom reluctantly removes her hand from my back to join in on the praise.

Sasha walks up in her modest bag of a dress with a smile

pasted on her pretty face. Microphone in hand, she says, "Thank you, Pastor T. Everyone, please bow your heads and join me in prayer."

I bow my head, but I don't join her in prayer. I'm fuming. This might actually be worse than me going up there and choking. I just know all the way home Mom is going to go on and on about how Sasha is so much better than me.

"Father God, we come to you, humble and grateful for another day to give you the glory. You didn't have to spare us, but you did, Lord. Touched us early this morning, filling us with the breath of life."

"Yes, Lord," my mom whispers beside me.

I've got my head bowed and my hands clasped in my lap, like a good pastor's daughter, but then I feel a vibration on the pew. My open eyes widen and still, my gaze freezing within the cracks of my knuckles. It's not my phone—I know that immediately. It's Reggie's.

I almost forgot that he was sitting next to me. He's been unusually quiet and well-behaved, up until now. I watch out of the corner of my eye as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. The screen says "Laser" as it buzzes in his hand. I can feel my mom's nerves getting worked up, feel her body getting stiffer with every second that he doesn't decline the call.

Then, oh my God, while Sasha prays into the microphone, and as the congregation throws in "Yes, Lord" and "Amen" and "Thank you, Jesus," Reggie *answers his phone*.

"Yo, Laser." Then he laughs.

My mom scrambles, pushing against my shoulder as she reaches across me.

"Nah, man, I'm gonna have to call you—"

Mom snatches the phone right out of his hand, scowling at him in utter disbelief.

My body burns with embarrassment. And I'm not exactly sure what I'm embarrassed about. That everyone is looking at us? Yeah, but also how my mom has no shame in disciplining a child who isn't even hers. I know that while he's at church, Reggie is our responsibility—we're his ride here and back—but still.

He looks at my mom, aghast at her audacity, then he looks down at me, like I have the power to do anything about it. I don't. So I slowly duck my eyes back down to my lap, clasp my hands a little tighter, and mentally thank God for what just happened. Nothing I've done today compares to what Reggie just did. Mom won't even remember having to get onto me and Dom. She won't remember that it should have been me up there praying, instead of Sasha, because *Reggie answered his phone in the middle of church*.

He's not from here. And he, apparently, hasn't gotten his fill of my mom's vengeful glares, because every Sunday he makes a scene. Last Sunday, he was caught singing, "My God is awful," instead of the classic, "My God is awesome." The Sunday before that he actually tried stealing from the offering bowl, which is kind of ironic, because stealing is the whole reason he's here—in our town and in our church.

From what I've heard, Reggie used to live in Huntsville, just one town over, but he allegedly got expelled for breaking into his school and stealing a bunch of dumb stuff, like those crappy TVs that teachers wheel in when they don't feel like teaching. You would think he'd have learned his lesson. But lessons slide off this boy like bald tires on black ice. Nothing fazes him. Especially not Daddy praying for him at every family dinner, forcing him to be here every Sunday, or making him do volunteer work around the church, as if just being in this building will change his heart. He's only been here a month and he's already made a terrible name for himself. I'm convinced that God has given up on Reggie, and I'm starting to think my daddy should too.

Sasha closes out her prayer and Reggie exclaims, "Amen," louder than anyone.

My mom drops his phone in her purse and whispers, "See me after church."

He smiles back at her sweetly. "Sure thing."

I don't think he understands what he's getting himself into with my mom. She doesn't hold herself back for anybody, and she definitely doesn't stand for being disrespected by a child—especially not troublemakers like Reginald Turner. She's had more than twenty years of experience with kids like him in her classroom. She didn't get her reputation as the most respected teacher in the district by letting kids walk all over her.

After service, Mom holds him hostage in the back seat of our Cadillac while she and Daddy make their rounds, consulting

with everyone in the congregation. And when they get stuck in a day-long conversation with Deacon Hanson about how he's still waiting on his disability check, Dom pulls me around the side of the church.

Pinkies linked, I check over my shoulder at the crowd in the grass lot, then back to his low fade and the chain around his neck. I notice a red gift bag dangling from his free hand and bite the corner of my lip. He got me a gift? Glimpsing the size of the bag, I think it must be jewelry. Maybe a ring—a placeholder until we're old enough to be married, like my parents.

They were together at seventeen, just like us. After high school, they went to the same college, graduated four years later, got married, and conceived my sister. They did everything right. That's all everyone (especially my parents) has ever wanted for me and Dom—for us to do everything right.

He presses my back against the big oak tree behind the building, our feet caught in the grooves of the roots, then we turn invisible. We've got spots like this all over town, spots where we can kiss without anyone (Mom) calling us inappropriate, "trying to be grown," or demons of lust. But Dom's kisses liquefy me. I *am* a demon of lust. I am raging hormones cloaked in a church dress.

"I got something for you," he says against my mouth. My eyes flutter open as he pulls back, blinking at me with his heavy brown eyes, the color of iced tea in the sun. My heart drums against my chest when he holds up the little red bag. "I couldn't

decide if I should give it to you now or tonight. But I figured I'd give it to you now, so you can wear it for our date."

My eyes bulge. It's *definitely* jewelry.

It's one thing to wear Dom's letterman jacket—to have its sleeves swallow my arms whole, to have his last name, *Hudson*, printed on my back as I stroll down the hallway. But a ring? That would make me more than just his high school girlfriend. It would make me his future.

I take the bag with a stupid grin on my face. "I thought we said we weren't doing gifts."

He shrugs. "Couldn't resist."

There's a single piece of red tissue paper stuffed inside. After I pull it out, my fingers land on something softer and much more delicate than the tiny felt box I expected. I hold my expression steady as I pull out a clump of red lace. "Is this . . . lingerie?" I ask, horrified and disappointed and confused, but still smiling.

"Yeah. We were gonna try again tonight, right?"

My lips still. *Were* we? I was really hoping tonight would be unencumbered with struggle. I drop my gaze to his black dress shoes tangled in the tree roots, sorting through the sudden anxiety clogging my throat.

"Mo, it's our two-year anniversary." His tone hardens. "I think it's about time we get this figured out, once and for all."

"I know," I say, nodding but not making eye contact. When I look back up, his expression is toeing the line between frustration and anger.

"You *want* to have sex, right?" he asks.

I think so. I mean, yeah. I do. I really do. But for some reason, for me, just wanting to isn't enough. I nod and force a smile, though, because I don't want him to stop believing in me. "I'll wear it for you," I say.

"Yeah?" His eyes light back up, and he kisses me fast. "I can't wait to see you in it. And you know what?"

"What?" I ask, trying to feign enthusiasm.

"I've got another idea for how to make it work this time." I ask him what it is, but he just snuggles his face into my neck. "I'll tell you later." I giggle at his tickles, then find his chin and pull his lips back to mine. We kiss through the chattering and the laughing at the front of the church. We kiss through my fear and my apprehension. We kiss like a married couple.

My daddy says kids like us should keep our tongues in our mouths. He says kisses on the lips shouldn't last any longer than a couple of seconds. Anything longer is a precursor for activities that we've got no business partaking in—until we're married. But Dom and I are in love. He's the only boy I've set my eyes on for the past ten years, and eventually we *will* get married. So, what's the use in waiting? If we end up in the same place as my parents, who cares about all the stuff in the middle?

Dom slides his lips over my neck, slides his hands down my backside, filling up his palms and squeezing. I tilt my neck to the right so he can kiss me lower. Then, as his lips near the neckline of my dress, I hear "Monique?" behind us.

My eyes pop open to find Reggie standing a few feet back, watching us go way too far on church grounds. I rush to lift Dom's hands off my butt. "Yeah?" I squeak.

"Sorry to interrupt, but your dad told me to come get you."

I nod at him, my cheeks on fire. "Okay. I'm on my way."

He takes one last look at us tangled up together. Then he spins on his heel and heads back to the front. God only knows how long he'd been standing there, or how much he saw.

Dom slides his hands over my backside again. "I love your dad, but I don't understand why he's trying so hard to help that kid. He's a lost cause."

"Daddy doesn't think there's anything wrong with Reggie."

Dom pushes off the tree and grabs my hand, leading me around the side of the church. "Oh, there's definitely something wrong with Reggie. I mean, who answers their phone during church?"

When we get to the front, my parents are beside the Cadillac. The second my daddy sees Dom, his smile grows too big for his face. That's how he always reacts when he sees Dom. Daddy grabs him by the back of his neck and pulls him into his chest. "Good job up there, boy."

"Thanks, Pastor T." Dom laughs sheepishly, pulling out of my daddy's embrace. "But Pastor, I was wondering, am I still good to take Mo out tonight? It's our anniversary."

Daddy looks at me, like he's thinking about it. "I don't know."

I tilt my head impatiently. "Daddy." We talked about this at length before church. He knows how much I've been looking forward to tonight.

"I'm serious, baby. Your auntie and uncle are coming over for dinner. Maybe you two should join us, instead of going out."

"Daddy, no."

"And there's that movie you've been wanting to watch. What's it called?" he asks me. "That's right. *Terrible Twos*."

"Daddy, that's you! You've been pushing that movie on me for weeks!"

He laughs, pinching my cheek. "I'm just messing with y'all." Then he opens the passenger-side door and reaches for Mom's hand. "Of course y'all can go out. What's on the agenda for tonight?"

The tiny gift bag in my hand suddenly weighs a ton.

Dom says, "Probably go to dinner in Spring—somewhere we've never been before. That's almost to Houston, so we might be a li'l late getting back." He's trying to tack on time in case our *once and for all* takes longer than planned.

Daddy tilts his head. "Are you asking for an extension on her curfew?" He smiles.

"Daddy, it's our anniversary," I say.

And just when it looks like he's about to agree, Mom comes in and sucks the fun out of everything—as usual. "Monique's curfew is ten p.m. Absolutely no exceptions, Dom."

Dom and I both look at Daddy, waiting for him to override her decision, but she keeps going. "And you *need* to stop all that playing in church. Stop distracting my daughter, or else *this*"—she waves her finger between me and Dom—"is over."

There it is—the ultimatum. Dom nods. "Yes, ma'am. I understand. I'll have her back by ten o'clock, sharp."

Dom knows my parents as well as he knows his own dad. And with my mom, he knows exactly the point to stop pushing. He's spent enough time with her to know she doesn't bluff.

Daddy leads her into the passenger seat, closes her door, and walks around the front. "See ya at the house later on, son."

"Yes, sir."

Reggie's already buckled in on the other side when I climb into the back seat. Dom bends down and whispers in my ear, "I'll pick you up at six. Don't forget to wear that for me tonight." Then he kisses my cheek. "See y'all," he says before shutting my door.

I stay facing forward, not watching him grow smaller in my window, not looking down at the burning-hot contraband in my lap, ignoring his words ringing in my ears: *once and for all*.