

Nana was right. I *DID* love hot chocolate. What she didn't know was that whenever she made it after Mom passed, I threw it out once she turned her back. Some things were never the same. I hadn't drank hot chocolate since I left the Peach State. And I doubt I would ever again.

NONA



"Hi, Wesley." My emotions were too busy running every which way but loose to muster any real enthusiasm.

"Man, you don't know how good it is to see you!"

"Yeah, she's a pretty popular woman tonight," Geoffrey interjected before recognition smacked him in the face.

"You're . . . you're Wesley Thorpe, the wide receiver for the Chargers, aren't you?" He grinned like a newly freed-slave, which was okay since I needed *Harriett Tubman right about now. A sistah could use some freedom of her own.*

"Yeah, that's me." Wesley extended his hand. Geoffrey shook it vigorously. He was a fan. Great! *Now I'm out with an insecure male groupie.*

"I'm always telling my boys that if you throw the ball anywhere near Wes T, he'll catch it! You think I could get an autograph?"

Damn! Not only a club member, he was the damn president!

"No problem, man," Wesley replied whipping out a pen. "Would you mind if I catch up with Nona alone for a moment?"

"Actually I would m—," I started to say.

"Naw, dawg. Go ahead." Geoffrey interrupted, taking his autograph penance. *He should've asked for a couple heads of cattle and a parcel of land while he was at it.* He slid out of the booth.

"So imagine our running into each other like this?"

"Wesley, what are you doing here?"

"I can't come get my grub on like everyone else?"

"It's a free country, I guess."

"Actually, some friends organized a birthday party. We just ended up here."

I'd hoped he wouldn't mention it. I didn't want to hear about his birthday anymore. I didn't want to remember a day that had, for a brief period in my life, been as important as Easter to Christians. I hadn't forgotten, but I chose not to remember. I'd spent the last several years thinking of it as just another day on the calendar.

But it was a poor pretense. My thoughts always fall on him, us, and me without him in that order. And I wasn't reliving that story tonight.

"Well, I should probably let you get back to your party?"

"Ouch! I can't even get a 'happy birthday' wish?"

"You made do these last few birthdays. You'll be okay."

"That's cold. If you're not careful, you're going to make me think you aren't happy to see me."

"Exactly how should I be? I haven't heard from you in forever."

"Didn't you get my phone calls? I figured you would recognize the San Diego area code."

"What?"

"Damn, Nona, I've been thinking about you a lot."

"Oh yeah? How's your wife feel about that?"

"See, why you got to be like that? You know I made a mistake."

"Hindsight's 20/20, huh?"

"All I'm saying is that I miss you. I miss us."

"Us? There's no us. Remember?! *Us* ended five years ago!"

"I know. I just didn't know what I had back then. But we can fix all that. I'm getting a divorce."

"So why you telling me?"

"Baby, I don't want to do this in some loud restaurant. Let's go somewhere and talk."

"I don't think so."

“Why not? You want to stay here with that buster?”

“Oh, I guess you forgot. There was a time when I wanted to talk. I called all your numbers, texted, e-mailed, faxed and visited. Damn near everything but sent up smoke signals. Funny thing, though, you had nothing to say then. You forget that?”

“Like I said, I made a mistake. I wish I could go back and change that, but I can’t. All I can do, all I want to do is make it right by you. Right here, right now.”

I looked deeply into his eyes. They reflected sorrow and longing. At least I hoped it was longing. Maybe it was lust.

“Baby, don’t you remember our last night together? You know, the night I got drafted.”

I didn’t answer. I just looked into the eyes that five years earlier had, when they fell upon me, been the light of my life. It seemed like an eternity ago, but I did miss them. I mean him.

So my silence was no deterrence.

“Nona, don’t you remember that? We poured champagne all over each other, made love on the beach and awoke to the sunrise in each other arms. We were young, free and ready to conquer the world. Don’t you want that feeling back again?”

More silence. I’d imagined this encounter over the years. It had different versions. If angry, I envisioned smashing him in the head with a drinking glass or something. Then I summoned Wonder Woman-like strength and kicked his ass. It was a nice thought, but strictly fantasy. Wesley’s chiseled 6’6”; 250lbs frame was probably the model for the popular “The Thinker” sculpture. The only thing getting smashed would’ve been me.

In other daydreams, he found me irresistible and wanted me back. He’d beg, cry and otherwise reduce himself to win my heart again. But the last laugh was mine. He gets dissed by my talk-to-the-hand treatment.

But this was reality. “What do you want me to say, Wesley?”

Never did I imagine we'd meet like this. Here in this romantic place with dim lighting and words soft enough to penetrate the crust around my heart. So much time had passed between us. God, so many memories. So much pain. I wasn't even sure love lived here anymore.

"It can't hurt to talk, can it?" He almost whispered.

"I guess not," I relented.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, this was the moment when the woman sighed. She dropped her protective emotional walls and was vulnerable anew in that breath. I wasn't sure I was really feeling that.

Besides, the next scene was usually booty time. That wasn't what this was about. *Was it? I mean, I wasn't ready to go there again with him.*

DORIAN



I stepped away from the table for a moment. This trip down memory lane left a brotha' thinking about how cruel life could be. Damn Ricky! Sometimes that cat can be a jackass. I swear. No one can hurt you like family can. Pain like this could only come from close quarters.

I looped around the restaurant to check out the scene. A pretty, light-skinned sistah who looked like the woman that played "Janine" on *House of Payne*, sat with a group on the left. Must've been girls' night out. A cat resembling a Michael Clark Duncan sat to the right. He was too small, though, to be the real deal.

Nearing the stairs to VIP, a statuesque woman with jet black hair half-way down her back caught my eye. She was staring out over the dining room.

Now this was just what the doctor ordered. My team could use a new player. *And from the looks of things, the draft was gon' be held tonight!*