

## LOST IN LUST

It was early-early morning—still dark out. The Corolla was loaded to the max. It'd been two days since the weird turkey sandwich dreams. Awakening on a comforter on the floor, I rubbed sleep out of my eyes. I'd spent my last night in an apartment that was almost two months overdue in rent, and Mrs. Rodrigues, the little Mexican widow, didn't want me to leave. And though it'd been a night on the floor, without a bed, it wasn't a bad night, surprisingly.

Before leaving, after a warm hug and exchanging kind words (her speaking broken English and me smiling, speaking back in mostly English with a few Spanish words I'd picked up from Cyntoia and high school), I assured her that if I were to ever come back, she'd be the first to know.

In the course of a few days, a lot had changed; a lot. All of my things were now either packed away tightly in the Corolla or already back in Dorchester. Like bubbles at a car wash, the harsh realities associated with leaving my dreams behind (156 miles behind), were starting to cover a vision I once gazed clearly through. Maybe that new reality would bring a new level of clarity. Maybe it would shine and sparkle, allowing any doubters to see how spotless I could be. But there was this one thing still in my system that had to dislodge. Though clarity was something I sought after, I purposely held off due to the spirit of revenge.

Yes, the dreams and aspiration of living in Rock Hill were becoming things of the past. There would not be a job with the Panthers or Charlotte Hornets after all, at least not for a while. As long as Momma wasn't doing her best, the job with the College of Charleston would have to wait as well. I'd be taking over as acting CEO of JoAnne's Catering Service, a job I knew firsthand and something I felt obligated to do.

It was still dark out, but with evidence of the coming sun turning the horizon a glowing yellowish orange. I pulled the old Corolla onto Interstate 77 southbound.

Though it was days later, the two dreams were still fresh. I'd never taken any kind of hallucinogens, but that was what I imaged it felt like. I'd seen a vivid future, then afterward, getting up out of my slumber, there she was—standing at the sink in the kitchen, awaiting me with a glass of water, the symbol of life.

*"Here you go,"* she'd said, but without actual words, only by handing me the glass. A blink later, her and the water blended together before fizzling away, back to whatever part of my brain they'd come from.

I did drink from the imaginary glass before the vanishing, though it turned out to be me swallowing my own spit.

Was that my future? She was so familiar. Like someone I'd met in a previous life...something lay hidden behind those green eyes that I had to find out.

I felt the subtle jerk after shifting into fifth gear, darkness to the right of me and the growing glow of the sun to my left as I drove past the Rock Hill sign. Though my future was unfocused, I'd try my absolute best to bring my mother and a special young lady back to some form of normalcy.

Moving at Godspeed (for good reason), while praying not to get stopped by South Carolina's finest, as Interstate 77 merged into I-26, the sun floated just above the horizon and gradually climbed in front of me. I was headed east, back to the small town with big hearts and lucid dreams.

Parking in front of the garage door, I got out, inhaled the freshness of what little morning was left, and began a not-so-slow pace toward the front steps. Though the Corolla was loaded, the things in the car would have to wait.

Fumbling with the keys, I was trying to get inside before Miss Janice came out. Lately, she'd been pushing up on me like a hungry cougar trying to eat a helpless fawn. The day prior, she was entirely too persistent in asking when her friend was coming home. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that she was eyeing my crotch, like

literally, eyes down there in a way that made me kind of uncomfortable.

Back in the day, Miss Janice definitely could have gotten it. If we were around the same age, I might have thought about it, but she was old enough to be my mom.

After wrestling with the keys, I heard indecipherable talking coming from the television, before the door unlocked and finally opened. There on the couch, awaiting me, was Shamika. She'd spent the night there while I was away in Rock Hill.

"What's up, sleepyhead?" I asked while coming through the door.

"Heeyyy," she said back, yawning as she arose, stretching those athletic arms, tight shirt exposing a braless chest. With a blanket covering her lap, I imagined boy shorts underneath, or maybe just underwear.

"Well, I see you got some sleep at least. Why didn't you sleep in my bed like I told you?" I asked while gripping the leash connected to two rambunctious eyes.

"You know I'm trying not to intrude, right?" said Shamika, scratching the back of her scalp before tempering another yawn.

*Wait, does she have dried-up drool on the side of her face? Or is that—eye mucus? Ew...*

"Everything okay?" I asked, face contorted slightly.

"Yeah, I'm good. Oh!" She lit up. "Your neighbor came by—Janice. She seemed very surprised to see *me*."

"When?" I asked.

"Last night," she replied.

"Oh, okay. Did she say what she wanted?"

"*Onion* is what she said, but I thought maybe she meant sausage." She giggled. "You got somethin' goin' on with that...*much* older woman? You can tell me. I won't judge." She giggled again.

"What? No. Hell nah! She's Momma's friend. From across the street, you know, over there." I pointed to Momma's bedroom, then thought about it and pointed to the kitchen, then to my bedroom, thought again, jabbed a finger back to Momma's room, then stopped. I was rattled; lost in my own thoughts, lost in the house I'd grown up in.

“Okay, so all of those places, huh?”

“What! No! Man come on, stop playin’, Shamika...What happened?” I asked. “What happened between y’all?”

As I asked the question, a car commercial came on the television. I couldn’t believe my own eyes: it was Cyntoia, looking as beautiful as ever. With the camera zoomed out showing an overhead shot of her surrounded by a flock of certified used cars, she was wearing a tight business-type skirt with high heels, urging the viewer to, “Come on down.”

As she continued talking, gesturing enthusiastically at the viewer, the camera zoomed in on her goddess-like features. She was still the most beautiful person I knew. Standing next to a 2012 Camry with colorful flags waving casually in the backdrop, she wasn’t as conniving as I remembered. She looked regal—or maybe I was fooling myself. At any rate, that special thing about her was on full display, that thing I’d always been too immature to handle...the *it*-factor, whatever *it* was. Cyntoia was definitely someone who wanted and deserved the finer things in life. Things I could not provide.

Standing there, hypnotized by the shiny cars, the swaying flags, and her every word, my awareness of her half-naked sister, who happened to be perched on my mother’s couch, had gone black.

In this dark abyss of thought, there was only Cyntoia and I. Moments that’d long passed...memories still lingering in my mind...memories I could not shake or let go of, those memories were still there.

“Hello,” I thought I heard. “Wow... *Is she that captivating? Monte...*” Snap! Snap! “Monte! Are you okay? Monte!!”

“Huh. Oh, yeah. Yeah, I’m good,” I said finally.

“You sure?” Shamika asked.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“You still love her,” she insisted.

“What, no...Why do you say that?” I swallowed.

“Uh, I don’t know. Maybe because you just completely blacked out during that tacky commercial.”

“Just thinking. I’m good.” I laughed a much-needed gasp of a laugh. “It’s just—it’s my first time seeing it, that’s all.”

“Okay...so, by y’all, I’m guessing you mean my sister and me?”

“Huh?”

“Before you went bye-bye, you asked the question, ‘What happened between y’all?’” said Shamika.

“Well, yeah—what happened?”

“Oh, nothin’ serious. She called me all types of mean names, cursed me out. Bitch this, and thot that. Threatened to break my legs. Slut this. Hoe that. That sort of thing... For some crazy reason, she got it in her disturbed head that I have something going on with that really old man of hers, Rob, the car salesman—owner, or whatever he is. It’s his dealership. That’s how she got the commercial.”

“Rob, Rob—oh, Uncle Rob!” I tried laughing again but could only manage a weird snicker.

*So, he owns the dealership. That explains the used Beamer.*

“Yeah, that perv,” said Shamika.

“Well—did you?”

“Did I what? Are you insane, Monte? Hell no! Why would I want to screw some old, hairy, smelly, old man like that? You know what, fuck you for askin’ me some dumb shit like that! I mean, what do I look like? I’ve got much better things to do with my life than to get wit’ some nasty ass old man! Yuck!”

“Look, Meeka—”

At that, Shamika threw the blanket off her lap and stepped right into my space.

“No! Don’t ‘*look Meeka*’ me! If you think I could ever do somethin’ like that, you don’t know me very well.”

*Okay...she’s hot. I mean hot, hot—heated, like blow your house down, dragon breath hot. Like, though you are wearing tight boy shorts (like I thought), you’re standing entirely too close, hollering in my face with stink breath, hot. Ill.*

“You got life real mes—”

“Messed up. Yeah, I know...I’m sorry for thinking anything other than you being an innocent bystander in this whole situation. I know your sister, and being that we’ve had our share of crazy moments, yeah, I definitely get your point.”

“She’s lost her mind since she left you for that bum. Now she’s in a corner, not wanting to admit that she played herself. And that’s

exactly what's happening. He's playing her. She does those commercials for free you know."

*Commercials? She has more than one?*

"Anyways, why did *you* leave? Don't y'all share that apartment?" I asked.

"The apartment is in her name. She'll have to figure out the rent by herself now. I can't live with all that drama."

Shamika had a point. I'd never known her to be a person to seek out unnecessary drama. Cyntoia, on the other hand, was like a radio tower that emitted only negative waves. She wasn't the loud type—the ghetto diva who got into arguments in grocery lines. In fact, I'd never been able to pinpoint exactly what it was about her. Cyntoia couldn't be pleased—no matter how hard a person tried—which tested her relationship with my mom. Momma, though I loved her dearly, sort of had the same traits, only not nearly as demanding (in a passive-aggressive kind of way). Put those two together with me in the middle, you got the perfect dysfunctional sandwich.

Deep down, I knew Cyntoia was part of the reason Momma was in the hospital. Maybe a very small part, but she played her role perfectly.

"Look, Monte, I really appreciate you letting me spend the night," said Shamika as she turned to go to the kitchen, skintight boy shorts, gray like a dull nickel, hugging athletic curves perfectly.

"I'm already looking for another roommate."

"Okay, cool," I said, trying my damndest to keep those starving rottweiler puppies on the leash.

The refrigerator light illuminated her, and my thoughts, which had become so hard to keep in check, took a horrible turn for the worst. I once again didn't care that she was my ex's little sister or that she was my guest. At that point, the underappreciated gentleman in me was ready to hang up his clean coat.

"You ever thought about modeling?" I asked before wiping at my bristled throat in an attempt to calm the madness.

The compliment, cast like a squiggly worm on the end of a shiny hook, was taken.

"Boy, if you don't stop... You know I'm not model material," she replied with a grin that begged for more.

“What? Come on, now. Look at you.” I stepped in her direction. “You really turned out to be somethin’ else. Seriously...”

“Monte, stop playin’ with me.”

“Girl,” I said while gliding like a sailboat toward the kitchen, “I can definitely see you modeling—underwear, at least.” I smiled.

“These are not underwear I’ll have you know. They’re shorts...are you okay?”

“Who, me? Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied.

“Had I known it would be a problem, I would’ve worn pants and a jacket to bed.”

“C’mon, now, you know I’m just tryin’ to give you a compliment. I don’t care what you have on. You can be naked for all I care.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

“So, if I took off my clothes right now, it wouldn’t bother you?”

“Yeah, that’s right! Go ahead, be my guest.”

She sucked her teeth before saying, “boy, please...”

“I’m serious...it won’t bother me none.”

“*Anyway*...where’s the mustard? I’m hungry,” she said while rummaging through the fridge—bent over—perfect boonkie, gray shorts looking like a full moon.

As a wave of pure arousal came over me like a sudden flash flood, my canines started tingling while that inner wolf began to howl.

Not clear on whether to advance or step back, I stepped behind her, reached over her bent frame, and took the mustard.

“You mean this bright yellow thing that has a big red flag that reads French’s?”

She backed into me, then stood erect, putting her warm back against my chest.

The moment had come. We’d been toying around since that day she left me on red at the arena. Then again at the Battery. Yes, her sister had pissed her off, but I wasn’t sure if it had much to do with her coming over. Was it all a part of some elaborate plan, using the argument as an excuse? What I did know was if the situation were to stay the same, if she insisted on staying there, pushing up against me, challenging me in front of the opened refrigerator, we were

going to commit a carnal sin, right there, in Momma's beloved kitchen.

On an already warm morning, the heat between us was rising as though hot biscuits in the oven. Still standing there in front of me—pressing—she bent forward again. Without thought, I turned her to face me and began kissing her neck. This did not come instinctively. The memory of morning breath was still fresh in my mind. Her neck, on the other hand, smelled somewhat sweaty, but not rank, mixed with something familiar.

*Cyntoia—she smells like her sister...*

It was the natural smell of a heated woman: pheromones, the chemicals that manifested during arousal. In another quick move, I embraced her, pulling her in closer. More kissing on the neck. We were way past crossing the line. Things would never be the same.

“Monte—w-what are we doing?”

“Don't worry. Nobody has to know,” was my only answer.

Whatever it was felt impossible to stop. Yes, she smelled like Cyntoia, and yes, Cyntoia had done me wrong. Those two thoughts wrestled in my mind, but only for a brief moment.

A new realization fell on me like I'd been knocked unconscious and suddenly awakened. She'd cheated on me at least once while I was deployed to Iraq. She was my first and only. There'd never been anyone before or after her.

It was Benjamin, my battle buddy and best friend, who'd warned me. But when going through life in love, seeing the obvious was a challenge. Literally, my sight was zeroed in on that one person. Everyday life became one long, drawn-out tunnel—with the light and her waiting for me at the end. When I was with her, I was out in an open field. The sun shone brighter there. The birds sang happier. There were flowers—so many of them. The aroma of those charming flowers infused the air.

In that new place, the two of us walked and talked, stopped from time to time to admire each other's faces and the many plants that grew there. No other outside forces mattered. If a lie was threatening to bring down that paradise, the truth didn't matter because I couldn't see it. In that place, at the end of the tunnel, only me and that special person mattered.



So, when Benjamin suggested (that time when Cyntoia answered the phone out of breath, or those other times when she didn't answer the phone at all, or when she was supposed to call at a specific time but didn't) that maybe she was messing around, we nearly got into a physical altercation. He was accusing *my* girl of being something other than wholesome.

Thinking back, things fit together like a perfect puzzle. Even the parts that *didn't* fit perfectly were being forced. They had to fit in order to make the present moment seem right.

There I was, in my mother's kitchen, about to do things with my ex's sister that the walls were probably going to look away from. Or not.

"Do you have something?" asked Shamika.

"Huh?" I said back.

"Protection?"

"Oh, no..."

I'd driven all the way back from Rock Hill knowing damn well the possibility of getting hot and sweaty with Shamika was likely—this time in bed, not on the basketball court. How stupid can a person be?

"I'm not on anything," she said in a soft tone.

Being completely out of my rational mind, I said, "That's cool, I'll just—pull out."

"What? Nuh-uh...I can't get pregnant. In case you didn't know, I have a basketball scholarship. Not to mention, my sister is your ex."

By then, that raging, no-good dog in me, a spirit I was becoming more and more familiar with, was telling me to *keep going*. *Convince her*, it hissed.

There was no way I was going to just run to CVS, buy a box of condoms, and be back in time before either her, or myself, thought too long and hard about it. Hell no. She would be mine, and she would be mine right then and there.

"Okay, okay," I said, as I tried to figure things out.

I'd come too far, reached too high to turn back. As my mind scrambled like a barefooted quarterback in rain, I whispered in her ear, "*Just let me get the tip in.*"

I expected a sudden gushing of laughter, but none came. She considered. She didn't say that, but she did. It'd come in the form of her silence.

Next thing I knew, we'd somehow made our way to Momma's bed. We were both naked, still touching, still kissing on the neck on my Momma's bed.

*How in the hell did we get here?*

Then the moment came. My big bulky self was on top of her smaller but not exactly petite self; she was muscular, much more so than me. There was no more going back and forth, or holding back, for that matter. No thinking it was wrong, no envisioning how horrified Cyntoia would be if she ever found out. The time had come.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a hard knock at the front door.

"Who's that?" said Shamika directly to my face, her breath not so bad.

"I-I don't know?" I replied.

Going stiff like two caught mannequins advertising the missionary position, the only thing moving were our terrified eyes and racing hearts.

*Boom, boom, boom!* The knocking came again, much harder and much louder.

If the mood hadn't been ruined the first time, it was fading fast.

"Are you going to see who it is?" Shamika whispered sharply.

I thought about it. Then looked at her as if to say, *Let's go together.*

"Yeah. I am...probably Jehovah's Witnesses."

*"Knocking like that?"*