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Driving from “No!”

No!” I shouted at the top of my voice. “Stop, Dakari. Please stop!”

He kept on kissing me as if he’d heard me say “yes” instead of “no.”

“I mean it!” I yelled as I pushed him back over to the driver’s side of the car.

Dakari voiced in anger, “What’s your problem? I thought you wanted this as much as me. I took all this time to plan . . .”

“Plan what?” I cut in with disgust. “We’re at a rest stop in my jeep, parked beside a beat-up truck with a German Shepherd tied to the back of it, barking loudly, on the way to your brother’s college football game. I mean, really Dakari, how much of this did you actually plan?”

As I talked, I was busy buttoning my pants. My boyfriend of two years was doing the same. However, it was more than clear he was furious that I had stopped our ten minutes of passion. My roomy jeep was all out of space that day.

“Dannng . . . Payton, I thought you wanted this. I thought you wanted me. We’ve been dating now ever since we were in the tenth grade. It’s my senior year and . . . well . . . I must say that I need more from our relationship. This is unacceptable,” he stated with a stern voice as he started the car.

Tears rolled down my caramel cheeks as he began driving again. *Unacceptable*, I thought deeply to myself. How could he say that to me with such seriousness? Did he think that all we had could be easily thrown away if sex didn’t enter the picture? Was he threatening to leave me if I did not give in?

Shoot, don’t get me wrong; I love him. Not only have I liked him since I was in the seventh grade, but so has every other girl in our school—no, our city. Well, except for my three friends, that is. They love and respect me too much to even think of messing with Dakari. Plus, they all have boyfriends of their own.

Why such an attraction to my guy, Dakari Ross Graham? That’s easy. If you could see him, you’d think he was Denzel Washington’s younger brother. A 6’0”, 185-pound toned body, with perfect honey brown skin, wavy hair, 20/20 vision, and a beautiful smile. What more could any girl want her guy to look like? But if that isn’t enough to attract your attention, he is also the most popular boy in our large high school, since he is the star of our football team. On top of that, he’s an honor student.

That’s why everyone thinks we’re the hottest couple around. I’m the cheerleading captain, president of the honor society, vice president of the Student Government Association, senior editor of our newspaper staff, and a debutante.

Actually, I’m quite looking forward to early April when the civic organization, The Links Incorporated, presents fifty seniors from the metropolitan area to our city in a coming out ball. At first, I didn’t know if I’d get selected. After

all, one hundred fifty-six girls submitted applications to be chosen as a part of this elite group. It's such a big deal in our town. Most of my friends said I was a shoe in, not because of my accomplishments, but because my mother has been a member of the Links organization for twelve years now. However, my mom told me not to assume anything. I didn't know I'd made it until I got a letter of acceptance in the mail—just like everyone else.

Well, we'd been driving for about twenty-five miles, and neither of us had said a word. We'd just been listening to the radio. Truthfully, I couldn't believe he was acting like this. It's not as though this was the first time I'd said, "No!" We had come close many times before, unfortunately, but he'd always said he understood.

I am a virgin, and I want to stay that way till I'm married. My belief in God is what makes my head feel this way. I know that God calls us to wait. It's just my heart that I'm having trouble with. My feelings are so strong for Dakari that I feel like a popsicle on a hot summer day. I melt!

So that's my struggle. I don't lead Dakari on intentionally. Cause when I'm in his arms, I want him just as much as he wants me. But so far, I've always seemed to realize that God would not be pleased. So I stop. Could you imagine God frowning on you from heaven? Not the nicest image.

"So are you gonna talk to me, or what?" I asked in a pitiful voice, sounding like a baby calling for its mother.

"Got nothin' to say," Dakari stated, obviously annoyed with me. "I'm just trying to get us to the game without an argument. Please do not start one."

All I could do was look out the window, up to the sky. It was such a lovely day—too beautiful to be down. The end of August in Georgia is usually very hot. Since we'd had rain the past few days, the atmosphere had cooled down. It was seventy-four degrees, and not a cloud to be found. A great day for Southern Conference football.

Dakari's older brother, Drake, was really good at football. He was a senior at the University of Georgia. At 6'1", two hundred thirty-one pounds, this inside linebacker was the top candidate for the Dick Butkus award going into the season. That's the highest honor given to an NCAA division 1A defensive linebacker. From what I heard, a lot of NFL scouts would be at this game to check out his performance.

Dakari truly admires his brother. Sometimes it makes me sick to see how much pressure he puts on himself to be like Drake, or to exceed what his brother has done.

The game was not only just about Drake. Dakari had special interest in it as well. He was being recruited by Georgia since he was projected to have a thousand-yard rushing season. And because Athens is only an hour and a half away from Augusta, Dakari is really considering them as his first choice. It doesn't hurt that Drake goes there too. But he also likes Auburn. I guess it's because Bo Jackson, Dakari's all-time favorite player, played there. He always says, "Bo is the greatest athlete of our lifetime!" I'm not that into sports, so I wouldn't know. I just yell and scream, especially when my boyfriend carries the ball.

This was the first of two visits that the University of Georgia had set up for Dakari. He got to bring his parents and a guest to tour the athletic facilities, have lunch, and watch the game. Then sometime later this fall, Dakari was invited for an overnight visit. That's when he'll meet the head coach, hang out with the players, visit a guidance counselor, and tour the entire campus.

We were meeting his parents up there. They left early that morning so they could have breakfast with Drake. I thought that was weird, since Drake had to play a game against Tennessee. But Dakari informed me that the players get to report late since it is a four o'clock game.

As we exited off the interstate, I just felt uneasy. I didn't want to be around Dakari's folks when it was clear we were

having problems. Nor did I want Dakari to be so mad at me that everyone would notice his negative attitude. So, I tried again to break the ice. This time, however, before I spoke, I prayed.

Silently I thought, “Lord, I’m struggling bad in the area of fornication. But You know me. Even when I let You down, I still plead for Your help. Father, only You know that I’m trying really hard to stay pure. After all, I did finally say, ‘No!’ even if it was after I almost had my clothes off. Fortunately, Lord, I did stop. I just need Your continued strength in this area. But now I ask You to fill me with the right words to say. I love Dakari and I just want him to open up and . . . well . . . basically get over it! Please help me. Please, dear Lord, help us.”

After hesitating, I softly spoke, “Dakari, I know you’re upset. And you should be. I did get you as worked up as you got me. But we both made a commitment long ago to wait . . . and I want to stick to it. Don’t be mad at me for wanting to honor God. I mean, it’s not like I stopped because I don’t love you.”

Looking over at him, I could tell my words were sinking in. His whole demeanor had changed. He didn’t appear to be so uptight.

Noticing his pleasant change, I took the liberty of making a statement that I knew he would love to hear. “Sweetie, you know I want you to be my first,” I expressed tenderly.

“Yeah, I thought you did,” Dakari voiced in a teddy bear tone.

I replied, “I just want to make sure you’re my only. Remember, I love you that much!”

“And, Payton, I love you too! It’s just getting hard. What can I say? Shoot, I’m a growing man and my needs are changing. I am trying to keep them in check. But when you rub me like that and say those things you whisper in my ear . . . the way you say them, I can’t control anything,” he said woundedly.

From that point, until we parked, I felt we really connected. He's honest with me and I appreciate that. I just feel glad that he is able to let out his feelings. And I mine. 'Cause I learned a long time ago that keeping things all bottled up only makes for a super big explosion sooner or later.

This seems weird. All these college women dressed in uniforms practically flirting with these young high school boys. If another one comes prancing over here to my man, I'm gonna—

“Oh my gosh, you're Dakari Graham, Drake's little brother. I've been waiting all morning to meet you,” this absolutely gorgeous girl said, fawning over my guy.

She interrupted my thought.

“I'm Shari Rice. You're my recruit!” she blabbed excitedly. “Why don't I give you and Mr. Graham a tour. I know you both have probably seen everything. After all, our best defensive player, number fifty-five, is your relative. However, we have several new things that Coach Eckerd has added this season. And you absolutely must see them.”

Mr. Graham responded, “Sure, we'd love to check them out.”

Dakari smiled continually at this Shari girl and just nodded his nappy head as to give his approval of her idea. He practically drooled, obviously ecstatic that she was his hostess. Mrs. Graham and I just stood together on the other side of her. Shari then turned to us and stared. I'd swear, if I were of the betting kind, she was sizing me up.

“Well, I'm sure your lovely mother and adorable little sister want to stay here in the recruiting room,” she said confidently, as if I could be nothing more.

I walked around her and discreetly tried to tap Dakari so he'd speak up. But I saw his mother chuckle out of the corner of my eye. She and I have been tight for years. It

seemed that Mrs. Graham always had my back.

“Oh, that’s not his sister, honey,” his mother voiced with pride.

Dakari came out of his daze and said, “Uh—no, this is my girlfriend, Payton!”

“Pay-ton,” Shari uttered almost sarcastically while she extended her clay-colored hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Wow, you must be the luckiest girl in your school.”

“Shoot, no ma’am! He’s the lucky one. Not only is she smart, but her daddy is rich,” Mr. Graham said jokingly.

Frankly, I don’t know why everyone always assumes that we’re rich. My father is the first and only black automobile dealer in town. He owns a Chrysler dealership that he inherited from his dad, who founded the CBDA, Chrysler Black Dealer Association. Though my grandpa is still alive, he retired and moved to Conyers, Georgia, with my grandmother. We have money and all, but my dad—whose word to me is as good as the Bible—tells me “by no means are we rich.” We do live in the nicest neighborhood in town, however, and I count it a blessing that I have never wanted a thing I didn’t get.

As the three of them walked away I asked, “Mrs. Graham, who are these girls?”

The two of us sat at a nearby table and she replied, “Oh, they are called Georgia Girls. They’re the official hostesses for the football team. The university uses them to help entice these boys to their school. If I’m not mistaken, almost every major division one school has some similar organization. The majority of these girls do a classy job, but it’s clear that all do not. Miss Shari has another agenda. She’s a bit too . . . friendly. Actually, I thought Drake’s girlfriend, Hayli, would be Dakari’s hostess. She is an officer in this group.”

Mrs. Graham loved to see her boys dating successful women. She is an accountant, on the board of trustees at her church, and treasurer of the Delta Sigma Theta Alumnae

chapter, of which my mom is also a member.

“You’ve met her, right Payton?” she questioned while stretching her neck to look around for Hayli.

“Yes ma’am,” I answered, “at your home this summer, for your Fourth of July picnic. We really didn’t get a chance to chat, but she seemed nice.”

“I like her a lot. She wants to be a dentist and hopefully have her own practice. Plus, she’s always there for my baby! I’ve ruled out the fact that she is only with him because of his success. Mr. Graham and I met her parents at a game last year and they were very sweet people. She only has one flaw,” Mrs. Graham stated with a smiling frown on her face.

I asked, “What’s that?”

“She’s an AKA,” his mother blurted out.

I haven’t quite understood the rivalry between the Deltas and the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. I’ve asked my mother about it, and she said I’ll understand it better when and if I pledge myself.

My friend Dymond has an older sister who goes to South Carolina State University. Well, she was trying to pledge one of the sororities, but they wouldn’t accept her. They heard that she had gone to the other sorority’s rush. Having different black female organizations is great, but not when we get so involved with stupid stuff that we tear each other down.

An hour passed and neither Dakari, his father, nor Shari was back. The game would be starting soon. I caught myself getting paranoid. *What if he wants to date his pretty hostess? How will he break it to me?* I shook my head. *No, that can’t be the case. Our love is too strong,* I told myself to ease my worry.

Mrs. Graham had gone to the washroom. When she returned, Hayli was with her. It does feel good to be start-

ing my last year of high school, but I imagine Hayli has got to be on top of the world. A senior in college! That's impressive! I just pray God grants me the opportunity to feel the same joy one day.

"Look who I ran into in the ladies' room," Mrs. Graham stated with enthusiasm. "Hayli, you remember Payton, Dakari's friend? Well, she's joining us this visit."

Hayli smiled at me and asked, "How've you been?"

"I'm great! Thanks for asking. And you?" I questioned.

"Things are going pretty good. I was telling Mrs. Graham that she doesn't have to worry about our hostess Shari coming on to her younger son," Hayli commented.

I quickly said with a disturbed tone, "How can you be so sure?"

"Well, ask anyone here and they'll tell you. Shari is after Drake. She's always going to the dorm, leaving notes on his car. That daggone girl sent him flowers last week on the first day of school. She's just hoping Dakari and Mr. Graham will put in a good word for her," she uttered with disgust in her voice.

The three of us kept talking about how scandalous some women can be when they decide they want someone else's man. I didn't believe we were gossiping because we really weren't referring to anyone in particular. Although, over the two years that I've dated Dakari, I've had my share of run-ins with girls thinking they could just up and take my guy.

I guess you could say that for the rest of the game, Hayli became the hostess for Mrs. Graham and me. Dakari took it upon himself to sit beside Shari the whole game. He's got some nerve. The boy didn't even ask me if it was OK with me. However, since they were sitting two rows in front of us, I was able to make sure things stayed on the up-and-up between Shari and him.

At halftime Dakari's family seemed to be extremely pleased. Drake had two sacks and a forced fumble. The team was also ahead of Tennessee by twenty-one points. All of the recruits were on the field, watching as the guys warmed up. Some of the special recruits got to go in the locker room. Dakari was one of the chosen few. Hayli said if they are picked to go in at the break, then the coach really wants to make a good impression.

During the middle of the third quarter, Dakari came back to our section. He came straight over to where I was sitting with Hayli and his parents and introduced this really cute guy.

"Hey, everyone! Meet my newfound friend, Tad Taylor. He was in the locker room with me," Dakari announced with a fake smile.

Mr. Graham responded in an investigating tone, "Tad Taylor? Ahh, this is North Augusta's star halfback. Son, this is your competition, when it comes to stats and all. Say, Tad, how many yards are you planning on running this year?"

"Oh, sir, I don't honestly know. Whatever God allows me to get will be just fine with me," Tad answered humbly.

Dakari didn't like this guy. It was obvious even when he was introducing us to Tad that he practically despised him. This Morris Chestnut look-alike's Worchestershire Sauce-colored skin and short Schwarzenegger body made him almost irresistible. But when Dakari introduced me as his lady, neither he nor I expected the enticing response we got from Tad. When I reached out my hand to shake his, this intriguing gentleman took my fingers gently and kissed them.

Wow! I absolutely thought that I'd faint into his arms. If my heart did not belong to Dakari, I probably would have. And if my boyfriend looked any madder, steam would have been shooting out his ears. I was glad to know that my man could still get jealous.

As I lay in the passenger seat of my Chrysler Jeep, I just relaxed. It had been such a trying day. My sunroof was open and I reclined in the seat, adoring the starry night. Dakari and Drake had gone for a stroll so that they could catch up on things. I told him I'd meet him at the car.

While I waited, I looked past the stars and focused on the God I could clearly see in the clouds.

"Lord," I began in a quiet voice, "school is gonna start in two days, and I have no idea what to expect out of my senior year. Actually, I'm a little frightened. What if my grades slip? I'm registered for all these AP classes. I'm told that the teachers on that level are horrible. Help me to impress them. Oh, and my friends . . . Father, I don't want to fall out with them. Let us get along. Only You know how bossy Dymond can be, or how whiney Rain always is, and how insensitive Lynzi seems. OK, OK, Holy Spirit, I confess. I'm not the greatest friend either. I'm working on that. And I know I've asked You to bless my relationship with Dakari ten thousand times, but please . . . I come once again asking You to keep us together."

About five minutes later, I heard Dakari and Drake coming to the car. They couldn't see me because I was reclining. Just as I started to raise up and speak to them, I was frozen by words that numbed my soul.

"I don't know, Drake, man," Dakari stated with concern. "My thing with Payton is getting a little old. I do love her and all, but . . ."

Drake cut in and said, "You want to have sex with her?" "Heck yes! I do. I mean, dang, we've been dating for two whole years."

I was disappointed.

He continued, "I've played along with this 'wait till we're married' stuff for long enough. Shoot, she knows I'm there for her. This is just unacceptable."

There it was again. The phrase that put a lump in my

throat. “Lord,” I pondered, speaking in a whisper to the sky. “What are You doing up there? I just finished praying. Didn’t You hear me? I asked You to keep us together. Yet as I listen—eavesdrop, actually—it sounds as if we’re headed apart, unless I GIVE IN! Lord, is that what You want? Only You know how much I love him. It feels as if I’m being pushed into a corner. One kiss from Dakari, and they might as well hand me a cream-colored wedding dress. What else do I do with this information but give in? I can’t lose him, Lord. Or can I? No, no, I can’t.”

After my talk with God, I closed the sunroof and rolled down the window. Dakari and Drake looked surprised. “Hey guys,” I said, looking tired.

“Payton, we didn’t know you were in there. What were you doing all this time?” Drake asked, obviously picking me to see if I had heard them.

“Oh, I was just dozing,” I stated, sort of stretching the truth.

They said their goodbyes, and I hugged Drake. I wanted to go off on them both. I wanted them to tell me to my face what they discussed behind my back. However, I retreated in silence. Our ride home was much the same as the drive up. We hardly said a thing. I told Dakari I was sleepy, so I wouldn’t have to pretend. Frankly, at that point I was all confused. If Dakari loved me the way that I loved him, then how could he say what he said? All the way home I tried to answer that question. But when we got to Augusta, I still didn’t have an answer. All I knew was that our relationship was dramatically different, ever since we started driving from NO!



Controlling My Man

So, have you guys heard?” Lynzi asked with excitement as she entered the backseat of my car.

“Oh, no you don’t, Miss Thang,” I responded, looking at my girlfriend as if she had lost her mind. “How dare you enter my ride and not even say ‘Hello’ or ‘Good morning’ to me and Rain. Don’t nobody wanna hear no gossip.”

Rain’s quiet voice contradicted me, “Speak for yourself, Payton. I wanna hear the latest.”

“All you two can think to talk about is other people,” I said with an attitude.

“Well, excuse me,” Lynzi teased. “What’s wrong with you?”

“She was like that when I got in the car . . . and all I said was ‘Hello,’” Rain commented. “Maybe we should just catch the bus to school, Lynzi.”

“Well, I don’t know ’bout all that,” Lynzi quickly replied, looking over the seat directly at Rain. “No, seriously Payton, what’s wrong?”

I didn't know whether to tell my best friends or keep this to myself. The fact was, Dakari and I were having severe problems. If our relationship was a burn, it would now be considered . . . "third degree." Yesterday, he didn't call me at all. For us, that was a definite sign of trouble. If we didn't speak at least three times a day something was wrong. But not speaking at all! I was really buggin.'

Besides pacing the floor waiting for him to ring my phone, I had tried on fourteen outfits deciding what to wear the first day of school. He always liked it when I wore my form-fitting black jeans. So, to catch his eye, I decided to wear them.

That's what I was thinking about: could I win back his attention? When Lynzi snapped me back with, "Hello . . . earth to Payton."

I turned from my silence and said with watery eyes, "Dakari and I aren't doing that good."

Rain spoke with concern, "Payton, what do you mean? You guys are tighter than tight. What could possibly happen to shake you two up?"

"It's hard to explain. Well, not really," I said reluctantly. "Basically, he wants to sleep with me, and I don't know if I can. As it is, my resistance has caused major tension. I'm afraid if I don't, we're through."

"Maybe, then, that's best. Is he really worth not sticking to your commitment?" Rain insisted, as if I should say no!

Lynzi responded before I could answer, "Oh, yeah. Hot, fine Dakari Graham is worth it. Girlfriend, loosen up and let him set you on fire!"

We entered the school parking lot as the two of them bickered back and forth. I knew not to solicit their opinions. It was evident that they were biased. Rain had not been intimate with a guy. If she had her way, she'd be my personal gatekeeper to assure no man enters until I say, "I do!" Lynzi, on the other hand, cannot wait for the day that

I open up physically to a guy. She acts like hearing that I'm no longer a virgin will somehow ease her guilt. Lynzi once told me when she was tipsy from a wine cooler she had snagged from her mother's stash, "Sometimes I hate that my innocence is lost."

As we got out of the car, our girlfriend Dymond ran toward us. She is the sexiest one-hundred-sixty-pound woman I had ever seen . . . with her short skirts and beautiful smooth skin. Her hair is as silky and reddish brown as my grandmother's cow Bessie.

"So Lynzi," Dymond said, out of breath, "Did you tell them?"

Lynzi looked at me and said, "Something else came up."

"What's the big news?" I asked impatiently.

We headed inside the school and Dymond explained, "There's this new girl. And from what I saw last night, we all better grab tighter to our men 'cause this chick has her claws sharp."

"What did you see last night?" Rain asked with desperation in her voice.

Dymond huddled us together and said, "I went to the movies with my cousin from Beech Island, right? And, well, afterwards we went to Howard James Barbecue to eat. I don't know why ya'll weren't there. The place was packed."

Howard James Barbecue is a little hole in the wall that serves the best pork and hash you'd ever wanna taste. It's been the hangout spot for a while now. Not only is the food good, but the dark atmosphere with pool and other games in every corner keeps the owner Howard and his wife Gussie Bell very busy.

Dymond continued, "Anyway, things were as they always are. You know, some guys smacking and some guys macking. Basically, everybody was doing their own thing. Then all of a sudden, this high yellow Robin Givens wanna-be walked in wearing a tight—too tight—white leather

pantsuit. Now ya'll know it was eighty-two degrees last night. However—”

“Excuse me, Dymond,” Rain cut in with annoyance in her voice, “I’m high yellow! You say it as if it’s a bad thing. I can’t help it if you are—”

Dymond broke her off and calmly said, “See, now why you trippin’? My mama always told me that nice lighter skinned folks were referred to as light skinned, but the ones who think they are all that are called high yellow. This chick that walked into our hangout place, swinging her hair and hips at the same time, most definitely thought that she was all that. Every guy’s eye in the place was on her. Including Fatz! And you know I was ticked, ’cause that’s my man.”

“Well, what else do you know about her?” I questioned.

“See, that’s just it,” Dymond interjected. “Me and my cousin left shortly after that. Shoot, I had to take her home, and that was a twenty-five minute ride one way. I hated leaving. Our crew of fellas seemed to want to be all over her. But I made Fatz promise he’d call me in an hour. Since he was driving Dakari, Bam, and Tyson home, I felt good, you know, since the finest guys in the place would be gone.”

“How do you know she’s going to school here.” I asked, hoping Dymond was wrong earlier.

“Because, girl, Fatz told me when he called last night. Oh yeah, and guess what her name is: Starr Love! Do you believe that?”

“That name sounds like trouble,” Lynzi said.

On the first day of school, there is always an assembly for the seniors, a time where our cool principal, Dr. Franklin, gives us a pep talk. Our class of one hundred twenty-one predominantly African-American students were all in the gym. I admit we were a tad juvenile at first—throwing pieces of paper at each other and yelling across the

open space. But when the head man walked in, we all calmed down. He sure had our respect.

“So they let anybody become seniors, huh?” Dr. Franklin stated in a joking way. “Seriously though, I’m extremely proud of each and every one of you. Remember, you are the first class that will graduate under my full administration. We all started here together and have been through several changes. Fortunately, you’ve hung in there and are on the last leg. Don’t mess up. I’m counting on you guys to set the example for the underclassmen. It’s been said that most of you won’t graduate . . . Let’s prove them wrong.”

As he talked, I looked around for Dakari. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen him. Dymond was sitting by me and she kept saying that she had something to tell me through the assembly. Lynzi and Rain were sitting on the other side of me. We had to sit with our first period class. Dymond and I were excited to learn that our first four classes were together. They were all honor courses.

Every time Dymond fixed her lips to tell me whatever it was this time, Mrs. Guice, our AP calculus teacher, would hush her up. It felt like I was at the ophthalmologist’s office reading a chart the way my eyes were scanning the bleachers. It was odd that I couldn’t find my boyfriend.

I’m not trying to brag or nothing, but I’m a pretty good-looking gal. Five feet five inches tall and one hundred twenty-five pounds. With honey brown skin, I turn a few heads. Actually, I’ve only been at school for an hour and a few gentlemen have already inquired about a date. Well, one was a freshman, so I won’t count him.

“Before I let you go,” I heard Dr. Franklin say as I briefly tuned back into him, “just remember that only you can control what happens to you this year. Don’t look back and regret your decisions. Make wise choices now. If you need me, I’ve got plenty of room in my office at the front of the school. Now kids, get out of here and get some knowledge

into those brains. And hey, let's have a great year!"

Just as we all rose to exit the gymnasium and go to our respective classes, the bell rang. It was like that sound woke my brain up. Next, I immediately spotted the love of my life.

"Girl, there he is," I said excitedly to Dymond as I pointed to Dakari heading out the door. "You know I love—"

Before I could finish that statement, I saw the most horrific, unbelievably confusing sight. This girl whom I had never seen had *her* arm around *my* man's waist. They were laughing. I thought I'd faint when I saw him return her gesture, placing his arm around her. My mouth hung open, as I flopped down on the nearest bench.

My true friend spoke to comfort me. "Payton, I know you're hurting. I'm not sure of everything that's going on with you and Dakari, but it's obvious that things aren't all together. I was trying to tell you earlier that Fatz told me he didn't take Dakari home last night. It seems Mr. 'No Good' Graham rode home with Starr," she said in a most sympathetic voice.

"Are you serious, Dy?" I asked with a teary heart.

Dymond responded, "Yeah, and unfortunately, Fatz thinks he likes this girl."

"Was that her?" I questioned, still not believing this whole thing. "Was that this Moon person?"

"Starr is her name, Payton. Not Moon," Dymond said as she just had to correct me. "That was her."

By this time, my sadness had turned to anger. "Shoot, moon, cloud, sun, star—I don't care. But I'm going after them. I have to get to the bottom of this."

I jumped to my feet, grabbed my black bag, and raced to the door.

"Wait for me!" Dymond screamed from a distance.

When I got outside the gym, they were nowhere to be found. I searched and searched through the crowded hallway,

but still had no luck. As I turned down the science hall, I heard a big commotion. It seemed that someone else had beat me to the punch of confronting Dakari.

All I could hear was Dakari's voice saying, "You better step off. It's none of your business."

I actually thought it was one of my girlfriends taking up for me. I mean, here it is, Dakari and I weren't even broken up. Well, if we were, I wasn't told about it. And here he is being seen around a school that I've run for three years, in the arms of another. Yet, when I got to the middle of the circle, I was surprised to find my younger brother, Perry, defending my honor.

"How you gonna diss my sister like that man?" Perry yelled as he pushed Dakari on the shoulder, throwing him back a few feet.

I screamed, "Perry, no!"

Luckily, I got there when I did because they were about to fight. My brother may only be a sophomore, but he's tough. Dakari had much respect for Perry and vice versa. They are even teammates. Last year, my little brother, a wide receiver, was the only freshman to start on the team. They had been in football camp all summer long and had developed quite a good rapport. Shoot, they have a lot in common: both offensive players, and both love me. But at that moment the tension was so thick, you couldn't chop it with an axe.

"Guys, let's not get worked up," I said, standing between them.

"Who is SHE, Kari?" Starr asked, placing her well-manicured hand on Dakari's chest.

I grabbed hers and flung it off his chest.

"KARI!" I said as I stared him in the face, "the question is, who is she?"

Starr blabbed, "Don't—don't touch me again."

"I won't have to, as long as you don't overstep and touch my man," I said.

“Oh,” Starr said with her eyes wide as if a secret had been told. “This is the ex-girlfriend that you said couldn’t satisfy you?”

“Ex?” I asked hesitantly, hoping that she didn’t know something I didn’t, nor did I want to.

Starr spoke in a sly tone, “Yes honey, I assume he became my man when I gave what you wouldn’t, or should I say couldn’t, last night!”

My focus had been so channeled to Dakari and this bimbo that I had forgotten the audience. Well, after that comment, the folks reminded me of their presence. All the hissing and oohing got on my nerves. I was both stunned and embarrassed at the same time. Trying to hold it together in front of the crowd, I turned away from Dakari and Starr, excusing my way through the crowd. The bell rang again and everyone jetted to second period.

When I was clear of the masses, I ran to a corner under the stairs and cried. I don’t know how long I was in that state. I do know that I’ve never felt so empty.

“Payton Skky, is that you under those steps?” I heard an authoritative voice shout.

Trying to talk and dry my eyes at the same time, I said, “Yes sir!”

It was Dr. Franklin. He made me go with him to his office. Our principal looked out for me. My friends said he treats me special because my father is on the school board. That probably is true, yet he always relates to me as a genuine mentor and friend.

Dr. Franklin’s office was pretty elaborate. The darn thing is larger than our largest classroom. He has plaques all over the wall. Rumor has it that he’s up for the Augusta school system superintendent’s job. It’s becoming available at the end of the school year. Right now we’ve got an interim boss because this summer Dr. Pugh, who held the position for eight years, pleaded guilty to embezzling school funds.

“So, what’s the problem?” Dr. Franklin kindly asked, as he handed me a glass of water and a tissue. He isn’t the nicest looking fifty-year-old man. Short and stocky, he has a belly like a bowl full of jelly, plump and giggly. He’d put you in the mind of a black Colonel Sanders. You know, Colonel Sanders, the chicken man.

Everyday for the last three years, he wore a black suit. When I was a freshman, I thought it was the same ugly polyester suit. One day, a bunch of us finally got the nerve to ask him. I still remember his response. The man is so crazy.

“The same suit?” Dr. Franklin said laughingly, “You guys must be crazy. Or heck, you all must think I am. Shucks, I got a job. I work Monday through Friday. Remember, I am not tight. Everyday someone is begging me for money. ‘Dr. Franklin, can I have a dollar?’ ‘Ah, sir, loan me fifty cents.’ Sound familiar? Just to kill your curiosity, I have twenty black suits. Hey, what can I say, I look good in black.”

We all laughed for days. Most of us still tease him occasionally. We say, “Ooh Dr. Franklin, you sure look goooood in black!” Actually, when he’s about to give a demerit or something, nine times out of ten, if we give him that compliment, we get off scot-free.

Finally, after being embarrassed, I opened up and told my principal everything. It felt natural. He is just that easy to talk to.

“Girl, you’re crazy letting that tackhead joker get to you. With all the stuff you have on the ball, I wouldn’t give losing him a second thought. Now, I’m going to tell you something, and if you are smart, you’ll take this advice seriously,” Dr. Franklin voiced as he leaned over his desk and looked me straight in the eye. “If you really feel that Dakari Graham is the one and only, and you can’t live without him etc., etc., ignore him. He’ll come back. On the other hand, Payton, if you go around here moping, crying, begging, and

caring, he'll run as fast as he can in the opposite direction. And remember, if he doesn't come back, you will be better off without him."

We talked a little while longer. I really felt better after our discussion. Dr. Franklin had convinced me to be strong. When he saw a slight smile on my face, he wrote me a pass.

As I walked out the door, he kidded, "Don't worry about paying me monetarily for this counseling session. It was free. I do, however, expect to be paid by seeing the name Payton Skky on my straight-A honor roll."

After taking a positive attitude, the day just flew by. It was already seventh period: cheerleading for me. Well, really it's called Athletics. I think it's so cool that we get a grade for yelling and screaming. It works out great. Not only is it good because the football team is nearby, but if we get our formation, routines, stunts, and cheers down, we don't have to stay after school for practice.

Lynzi is my only tight girlfriend on the squad. Dymond is on flag corps. We got mad when she didn't make the dance team. Word got out that the judges thought she was too fat and kept her off. And supposedly, she was the best one that tried out. Now Rain is on the girls' basketball team. She's the most feminine, cutest player I've ever seen. Rain sits out when she breaks a nail, but she can ball.

As I came out of the locker room from changing into my shorts, I noticed Dakari doing warm-ups. I quickly turned and walked the other way. The only class we have together is second period Physics with Ms. Brown. However, I missed that class today due to my session in the office. Therefore, I hadn't seen the chump since that girl informed me that my man was no longer my man.

I truly thought he'd let me go my own way. You see, Dakari hates scenes. But before I could get too far away, he

jumped in front of me.

Out of breath, he gasped, "Payton, we need to talk."

"Dakari, or should I say KARI," I sighed in a smart tone, "I can't deal with this now. So please get out of my way."

He responded, "No, I don't wanna talk here. I was thinking maybe I could come by and swoop you up after my practice."

"Well, if I'm there and I feel like it . . . then maybe," I stated, giving him the hard time that he so richly deserved.

"Come on, baby. Please don't play me like this. My heart is breaking and I wanna straighten things," he explained with a grin on his adorable face.

I was so happy to hear him say that he wanted to work things out. But could I really forgive all this stuff? *Maybe it's not all true. I haven't spoken to Dakari. Yeah, that's it. Starr lied,* I pondered.

Immediately, I fell back into love. "Sure, we can get together!" I exclaimed with excitement. "I'll be ready."

Dakari hugged me and said, "Cool!"

When cheerleading practice was over, Lynzi and I sat in my car while we waited for Rain to come out of the locker room. We thought her team would be finished when we were, but they were running over. I didn't want to wait all day because I needed to get home and change. I was ecstatic that Dakari and I were gonna work things out. Truthfully, I couldn't believe I fell for all that garbage Starr told me anyway. You'd think I would have more faith in my guy.

Lynzi nosily asked, "So, before practice I saw you and Dakari locked in an embrace. What's all that about?"

"What do you mean, 'What's that all about?' That's a dumb question, Lynzi. He's my darn boyfriend; that's what it's about," I said defensively.

"Well, excuse me for caring," Lynzi expressed, "but he sure isn't acting like your boyfriend!"

“Caring? Oh no, girlfriend I think you’re prying!” I stated in an escalated pitch.

She screamed, “Don’t get all crazy on me because your so-called guy is tripping!”

“Huh, you should know about that, as much as Bam has cheated on you!” I yelled back.

“Whatever, Payton!” Lynzi shouted. “If you wanna turn this around, fine. Yeah, I’ll be the first to admit that my relationship is rocky. At least I’m acknowledging the fact. I ask you, how can you deal with the situation if you refuse to believe that there is even a problem? I know I wasn’t there, but Dymond told me Starr announced she got with Dakari.”

“For your information, he practically told me she was lying. So stay out of my business,” I blurted out.

Rain came to the car, luckily. You could hear a paper clip drop all the way home. From then on, the conversation was . . . well, there was no conversation. Rain knew something had gone down, but she dared not ask what.

“I don’t know, Lord,” I said as I knelt on my knees praying before Dakari came. “Maybe I was wrong to get upset with Lynzi. I didn’t have to throw in her face how deceitful Bam is, to hurt her like that. Please forgive me. I’ll apologize to my dear friend. But she just got under my skin. While we’re talking, I must also repent in another area. Only You know that I was annoyed with You earlier today. I just couldn’t figure out why You would allow someone else to have my guy. Later, I found out it wasn’t true. I’m so sorry for being mad at You. I need Your anointed help daily. Clearly, I see You’ve got things under control up there! So, I’ll back off and let You do Your job. I now know, only You are in charge of controlling my man.”