

Prologue

“Come on Monica, it’s your thirtieth birthday. Not the end of the world.”

Monica groaned loudly into her phone receiver. “Girl, don’t remind me. I can’t believe it. I’m thirty years old. I feel so old.”

Her friend Tina sucked her teeth on the other line. “Girl will you stop whining? You’ll feel better once we go out and have some fun. Let’s go *clubbin’*. We need to celebrate.”

Monica Stevens sat on her bed Indian style with a large bowl of chocolate chip ice cream on her lap. For the past hour, it was her best friend Tina Sommers, who continued to console her over the phone. Monica felt she had reached the prime of her life and felt like crying her eyes out.

“Man, if you’re acting like this at thirty, how are you going to take it at forty?” Tina asked again.

Monica sighed. “Tina you don’t understand, my biological clock is ticking fast. I’m not a young woman anymore.”

“Girl please, you’re thirty not fifty. You’re taking this way out of proportion. All you need is—”

“A man,” Monica interrupted sarcastically as she placed another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

Tina laughed. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

Monica didn’t laugh with her. “But it’s true, right?” she asked after she swallowed quickly. “Look, do you remember that list I had in college?”

Tina sighed heavily over the phone. “*Aghhh*, how many times are you going to bring this up?”

“Do you remember?” Monica repeated ignoring her question.

“Yeah, the one that said that—”

“*I was going to be engaged by twenty-four, married at twenty-six and have at least one child before thirty,*” they stated in unison.

Tina chuckled. “Okay so you’re a few years late. What’s the big deal?”

“A few,” Monica exclaimed. “How about eight years late. At the rate I’m going I might be forty by the time I have my first child.”

“Again, you’re blowing this way out of proportion,” Tina argued. “You know you can’t dictate your life on paper. Sometimes things just don’t turn out the way you want it. Look at me. I’m not married.”

“No, but at least you have Joshua,” Monica pointed out.

Joshua is Tina’s six-year old son. “Yeah but his father and I aren’t together. Honey, every woman wants the whole package, not just you. Look, we were in college when you made that plan and didn’t take into account the things that could go wrong.”

Monica and Tina met freshman year in college. They ended up as roommates when their assigned roommates decided to attend other colleges. They were paired up by their resident advisor after orientation and remained best friends ever since. It was during their junior year at a basketball game when Tina first laid eyes on Joshua’s father, Bryan Henderson. He was tall, with caramel skin and mysterious dark brown eyes. She was mesmerized by his athletic build. She followed his every move as he ran up and down the court.

“Hey, who’s that guy with the ball?” Tina asked tugging at Monica’s sleeve.

Monica giggled. “Girl, that’s Bryan Henderson, star player of the team. Haven’t you been reading about him in the school newspaper? He’s one of the top twenty picks for the NBA.”

Tina shook her head. “Now you know I’m not into sports but him,” she paused as she watched him throw the ball directly into the net. “I’m definitely into.”

They laughed in unison. Suddenly everyone in the gym began to shout Bryan’s name. He had just stolen the ball again from the other team. He began dribbling quickly towards the basket on the opposite side. Tina braced herself as she watched him jump up and dunk the ball into the basket in one swift move. The crowd went wild. Both she and Monica jumped from their seats and cheered. Right then was when she first fell in love.

Soon after, she began to drag Monica to every one of his games. She became jealous of the many girls, aka gold-diggers, that flocked behind him after each game. She fantasized about him daily and longed to be with him in more ways than one. Her fantasy finally became reality when he approached her after a game. They talked for a while, then to her surprise, he asked her out. She happily accepted while receiving dirty looks from the gold-diggers who impatiently waited for him by the locker room. After a couple of months of dating, the two became inseparable.

On their six month anniversary he told her he loved her. Towards the end of their senior year, he began receiving several offers from professional teams. He was ecstatic. She had never seen him happier, but unfortunately his dreams were quickly shattered a couple of months before graduation.

“What do you mean you’re pregnant?” he asked unbelievably. He began to pace up and down his dorm room floor while she sat quietly on his bed. “Are you sure it was positive?”

Tina nodded silently. Her eyes were puffy from hours of crying. “I took the test three times. And I missed my period last month. I thought it was stress from finals but I guess I was wrong.”

He groaned. "I can't deal with this right now. I have a state championship game coming up. I thought you said you were on the pill?"

She frowned at him. "Bryan, the pill is not one hundred percent effective. Look, do you think I want to deal with this right now? I'm not ready for any of this either but we have to figure out what we need to do."

He finally stopped pacing and sat down next to her. He took her hand. "Tina we're both too young to have a baby. We have only one choice."

She raised an eyebrow. "One choice," she repeated. "What choice is that?"

"Look I heard there's a clinic a couple of miles from—"

She wrenched her hand away. She stood up and glared at him. "Wait, you want me to have an abortion? Bryan you know I don't believe in that." She placed her hand on her stomach. "How can you even think of killing our baby?"

"Tina—"

"No," she interjected. "Why can't we just get an apartment together after graduation? You can find a job and—"

He rolled his eyes in frustration. "And what, get on welfare?" he interrupted.

"Hell no, I refuse to have our lives messed up like that."

Tears began to well up in her eyes again. Part of her hoped he would be a little happy about the baby. "Look this baby is a part of you and me. How can you believe our lives will be messed up? Yes things will change, but we can make this work." She sat back down on his bed. She took one of his hands and placed it on her stomach. "A tiny life is growing inside me and it's ours."

They were quiet for a moment. He finally shook his head. "I don't know about this Tina," he told her still skeptical

She pulled him to look at her. "Bryan, do you love me?"

He didn't look towards her. He shook his head instead. "That has nothing to do—" he began.

She placed both her hands on his face. She forced him to look at her. "Do you love me?" she repeated more firmly.

He closed his eyes briefly. "Yes. Yes, I love you but what if things don't work out the way we want?"

She stroked his face. "I'd feel better knowing we at least tried. Baby, we'll take it one day at a time." She kissed him lightly on the lips and gave him a hug. He hugged her tightly in return.

That night as they lay in each other's arms, Bryan's mind was still flooded with doubts. "Aren't you scared?" he asked her.

She remained quiet for a moment. "Terrified," she admitted finally. "But having you by my side makes everything better." She snuggled closer to him and quickly fell asleep.

He lay awake as she slept. His views were definitely different from hers. He had other plans for his future and having a baby was not a part of them. He kissed her softly on the forehead then tried to focus on sleeping. He just prayed that things would turn out for the best.

After graduation they ended up getting an apartment together as planned. He turned down all offers from professional basketball teams and began to look for a full-time job. Things slowly began to change when he could not find a job. Many rejections were due to lack of experience. They began to argue constantly throughout her pregnancy and within two months got evicted from their apartment. They each ended up moving back home with their parents. Tina became very depressed. She lost weight and was put on bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy. As time went on she began to see less of Bryan. He didn't return her calls and missed most of her doctor's appointments.

When Tina went into labor, it was Monica who was by her side in the delivery room. Joshua Steven Henderson was finally born after sixteen hours of labor. They both cried as his tiny naked body was placed into Tina's arms. Tina began sobbing afterwards. Monica felt helpless.

The next morning she called Bryan and threatened his life if he didn't come by to see the baby. A couple hours later he showed up at the hospital with no apology. He reiterated that he was not ready for the responsibility of taking care of a child and thought it was best they went their separate ways.

Afterwards, Tina had a nervous breakdown. She wouldn't eat and had many sleepless nights. At times she didn't even want to touch Joshua because he reminded her so much of his father. Her parents fought her to seek counseling. She reluctantly agreed. She even found a support group for single moms and went once a week. She began to feel better when she saw other women in her situation.

"Trust me Monica," she continued. "I love Joshua with all my heart. I would do anything for him but if I could go back, I would do some things differently. I put up with a lot of shit from that man. I thank God everyday for giving me the strength to make it through," she paused. "Wait hold up, when did this conversation turn on me?"

Monica laughed. "I guess you have some things on your mind too?"

Tina snorted. “Yeah, like what I ever saw in that man in the first place.”

“Admit it Tina, you still love him.”

“We are not talking about me right now,” Tina reminded her. “Anyway, all I care about is making sure my child support check is in the mail *on time*.”

A couple of years after Joshua’s birth, Bryan returned to school and obtained his graduate degree in Finance. He became a successful stockbroker. It was then Monica convinced Tina to put him on child support. Out of anger, he demanded a paternity test. When the results came back positive, his anger quickly diminished.

He finally realized he had to be a father to his son. Now along with making child support payments, he picks up Joshua every other weekend for some father/son time. Tina didn’t like it at first, but after seeing them together she knew she couldn’t bear to tear them apart. Not only did Joshua need his mother, he needed his father as well.

“You’re so mean,” Monica giggled. “Well, at least he’s come to his senses now.” Tina sucked her teeth again. “*Anyway*, back to the subject at hand. Honey, you have a great life. You’re smart, beautiful, independent, and have a wonderful job. What more can you ask for?”

Monica was quiet for a moment. Her friend was right. What more could she ask for? As an Accountant Executive at Meyer and Jacob Associates, she made a pretty decent salary. She owned a beautiful town home and just purchased a brand new car. She had everything she needed to be happy yet something was still missing...*a man*.

“Will you stop feeling sorry for yourself?” Tina snapped, interrupting her thoughts. “This conversation is starting to make me feel old.”

Monica giggled. “Wait, you are older than me, aren’t you?”

Tina laughed. “Only by a couple of months, if you want to get technical, but forget all that; right now I want you to go to your closet and put on that cute black dress you brought from Shauna’s job last week. We can go to the Moonlight. I’ll call Shauna and tell her to get ready. ”

Shauna Knowles completed the trio of best friends. They met at a night club several years ago. Shauna was passing through the dancing crowd after she had just brought herself a drink when some random guy brushed passed her and squeezed her ass. She yelled at the guy then threw her drink in his face. Some of her drink ended up on Monica and Tina while they were dancing. She quickly apologized but they weren’t angry. They were amazed to see a woman at her height be able to stick up for herself. Shauna’s five foot four frame was nothing compared to the guy who was over six feet tall, but she stood her ground. After that night, the three became best of friends.

Monica sat up quickly. “The Moonlight, hold on that’s Michael’s spot.”

Michael Edison was Monica's ex-boyfriend. Dark and sexy, was the only way to describe him; from his broad shoulders to his rippled chest. She thought he was absolutely FOINE! They were together for a year. The sex was phenomenal. He satisfied her sexually in so many ways. He was a freak just like her. From handcuffs, blindfolds, whips; they had fun learning each other's desires. She fell in love quick and hard.

Two weeks after their one year anniversary, he gave her the *'I just need some time to find myself'* speech, aka *'I want to sleep with skanks one last time before I really commit to you'* speech. She was crushed, yet she didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break into pieces. Instead she told him she felt the same way.

"And," Tina scoffed. "Michael doesn't own the club."

"Tina, it's only been a month since our breakup," she stated miserably. "I don't feel like seeing him yet. What if he's out there with some *hoochie*?"

"So what, I bet you she won't look as good as you do?"

"That's not the point," Monica disagreed.

"No, the point is, it's your birthday and I'm not going to let you spend it alone because you don't want to bump into your ex. Do you know how many fine men will be out there tonight?"

Monica thought for a moment. She placed her bowl of ice cream on her nightstand next to a framed picture of her and Michael. She picked it up and stared at it for a moment. After their breakup, she packed all his belongings into a large box then threw the box in the back of her closet. For some reason she couldn't let go of their picture though. "I don't know. I'm really not up to it tonight," she finally replied.

"*Girl*, don't make me hurt you," Tina finally threatened with a little edge in her voice.

Monica sighed then placed the frame back on her nightstand. She slid off her bed. The truth was she really didn't want to stay home. Sulking with a pint of ice cream was definitely not something she was looking forward to do on her birthday. "All right, all right, I'm already heading for my closet."

Tina squealed in delight from the other end. "Good, now while you're in there, bring me that black halter top I like."

Monica snorted. "You might as well keep it. You wear it more than me."

Tina ignored her comment. She was too busy deciding which black pumps she was going to wear with her friend's top. "Just hurry up and get dressed. You know tonight is ladies night. Ladies free before midnight."

"I know the routine. I'll be there in an hour."