



I FOUND
Love IN YOU
A SMALL TOWN CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

G. FIFE

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

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I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Happy Holidays from my family to yours!

I hope you enjoy this short Holiday Romance!

BY G.FIFE

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I Found Love in You

A Small town Christmas Novella

By G. Fife

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Prologue

August 11th

My hands shook violently as I held the white plastic stick. The word *Pregnant* glares at me from the digital screen as tears build in my eyes before cascading down my cheeks. “Dammit, Noelani!”

“Is everything ok in there?” The voice on the other side of the door says, startling me.

I wiped my face frantically and shoved the pregnancy test in the bathroom drawer. I looked into the mirror as dread consumed me, knotting my stomach. How was I going to step out of this bathroom and tell the man who only moments earlier, told me he just wanted to be friends, that I was pregnant.

“Noelani, answer me.”

“I’ll be out in a minute Kingston.” The words came out stronger than I felt, but I couldn’t let this man know that I was hurting, and I damn sure couldn’t tell him I was pregnant. I’d just turned thirty, was an up and coming chef, and I’d allowed myself to get pregnant by a man who hadn’t committed himself to me.

I’d met Kingston only two months prior while working at a dinner party for his law firm. He’d praised my Osso Buco dish and my smile in the same sentence. The way he’d captured me with his eyes then devoured me with his need to know more, had me abandoning my job for the remainder of the evening. Kingston allowed me to speak candidly about my passion for creating dishes. His knowledge and enthusiasm for all things culinary matched my own. I basked in the way he intently watched me as I spoke as if I were as equally amazing as the food I created. I fell hard for him very quickly, but as I’d just found out, the feeling wasn’t mutual.

Kingston was a fantastic lover. He knew exactly how to use his hands to make me melt like ice on a midsummer night. Kingston’s hands were as strong and powerful as his presence. He didn’t quite reach six feet tall, but his presence was that of a giant. His skin was a perfect shade of brown, the red undertones of his close-cut and neatly trimmed facial hair accentuated his magnificent face. I’d never met a man as gorgeous as Kingston.

“I’m sorry that I sprung this on you so suddenly. I just felt we were getting too serious too fast.”

I closed my eyes. Kingston had no idea how serious things had just gotten for us. We’d just prepared and eaten a deliciously romantic dinner, and devoured each other for dessert. I was still

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

wearing the skimpy black laced lingerie for Christ's sake. Before I could bask in the glow of our lovemaking, he told me that he felt we should just be friends.

I'd already planned to take the pregnancy test later after Kingston had left for the evening, but his confession had me running to the bathroom to vomit. The flutters in my belly and my missing cycle had placed the thought in my mind days ago. I pulled the test out immediately and not even a full minute after peeing on the stick; I knew that we were having a baby. I wasn't the type of woman that would ever keep her child from its father, but in this instance, nobody would blame me, *would they?* I swung the master bathroom door open and eyed Kingston, who sat on the edge of my comfy queen bed. The sheets were still messy from our lovemaking session that now didn't feel like much love. I marched to the closet and pulled my favorite pullover from the hanger and tossed it over my head, covering my slender but curvaceous frame. I pulled my fiery red dipped Locs into a ponytail at the back of my nape. I was preparing for the fight that was sure to come following my next words. I batted my eyes rapidly and pressed my lips tightly together, displaying my annoyance. I knew Kingston loved my lips. They were full, pouty, and naturally tinted pink. It was the first thing most men noticed about me.

Kingston grabbed my hand before I could speak. His touch was so gentle it released some of the anger I'd built up after hearing that he was ending things so abruptly.

"Come here," he said, pulling me toward the bed.

I followed because that's what he did to me. He made me make irrational decisions when my mind screamed at me to snap out of it. He reclaimed his seat on the bed and pulled me down on his lap.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, Noelani." He touched my forehead with the back of his hand like a mother checking for a fever. "Are you ok? It sounded like you were sick." I slowly nodded as he caressed my face with those strong hands. How could a man who handled me so gently only want to be friends?

"Kingston, I have something to tell you." His touch was forcing me to trust him, forcing me to believe in him.

"I'm listening?"

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

I peered deeply into his eyes as he continuously caressed my face. I saw sincerity. I saw a man that would never walk away from a woman who was mothering his child, and I allowed the words to escape.

“I’m pregnant.”

His hand fell from my face slowly, but his eyes stayed locked with mine. That single gesture gave me so much hope.

“You’re what?”

“Pregnant,” I repeated. Kingston still didn’t look away, so I continued. “I know, it caught me off guard as well, but I just took the test and, well, it’s positive.”

Kingston stood, causing me to slide from his lap and land on my feet on the floor. The chuckle that escaped him was cold, not at all pleasant. “Noelani, lying about being pregnant to keep me in your life, is a bit disturbing and childish.”

My mouth fell open. Had he just called me a liar, childish and crazy? I felt the hair on my arms raise as the anger returned and my eyes began batting rapidly. “I would never lie about something like this.”

“How convenient that you find out that you’re pregnant the very moment I want to call it quits.”

“I realize the timing seems planned, but it’s our reality.”

“And you just so happened to have a pregnancy test here?”

“I haven’t been feeling well for about a week, and I missed my cycle, so I purchased the test. I was going to take the test later to confirm what I already knew.”

“But instead, you took it when I told you that I wanted to end things in hopes of what exactly?”

I pressed my lips together tightly. His gentleness had thrown me briefly. He’d sucked the fight out of me, and now I wasn’t prepared to fight this fight with him. “In hopes that you would be a decent human being and acknowledge you were going to be a dad!” I shouted.

“I thought you were better than this, Noelani. Using a baby to trap a man doesn’t seem like your style, but I guess I gave you way too much credit. I’m so disappointed in you.” He stepped into his jeans he’d grabbed from the floor and pulled them on, followed by his shirt.

“What do you want from me, money?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“I want you to go to hell, Kingston! I don’t need anything from you.” I stormed into the bathroom and snatched the pregnancy test from the drawer and returned, placing it in his hand. “Now, get the hell out of my house.”

He stood silently, looking down at the test. We stood like that for what seemed like hours before he dropped the test to the floor. I watched with tear-filled eyes as it fell in slow motion. It landed with a thud as I watched Kingston walked out of my home and out of my life as if he’d never seen it.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Chapter One

November 25th

The very moment I heard the lyrics, “*I don’t want a lot for Christmas*” from Mariah Carey’s *All I Want for Christmas Is You*, I knew that Christmas was upon us. It didn’t matter that only hours earlier; Thanksgiving dinner sat on our table. I could smell Christmas approaching. It was my favorite time of year. I stood in the lobby of the Blake hotel decorating the hotel’s 24-foot Christmas tree in preparation of *Light up Taylor Mill*. The perfectly strung lights hung in rows on the tree, as I placed the ornaments in shades of silver and gold strategically around it. While I was the hotel chef, Mr. Blake called on me each year to decorate the lobby of the small hotel, and I enjoyed every moment of it.

“Noelani, where do you want me to place this stocking?”

“You can hang it next to the others on the fireplace,” I said, pointing in the direction I wanted my Christmas assistant to place the stocking. “Perfect,” I praised as she placed it in the correct location. I climbed the ladder to the top and set the oversized glitter gold star at the top to add the final touch. The Blake tree was *the* tree to see in Taylor Mill. People from all over the town stopped by just to delight in it.

“Be careful up there. You know Mr. Blake’s too cheap to pay you workman’s compensation if you fall.” I looked down to see my best friend, Trent, holding the ladder tightly. Trent was the only friend or family I had in Kentucky, where we both lived. I was an only child, and my parents retired to Florida five years earlier. I’d come to the tiny town of Taylor Mill to be the head chef at the growing Blake Hotel after spending many Christmas’s here as a child. It was the only hotel in the city and was founded and owned by the Blake family. The hotel was historic, having been established in the early 1900s by Bradford Blake. It had recently undergone minor renovations by the new owner Jameson Blake. While Taylor Mill’s business district was growing, it was the town’s grand Christmas display that kept the hotel doors open. Starting the day after Thanksgiving, the town hosted *Light up Taylor Mill*, which brought in guests from all around. Every building, business, and home displayed well planned Christmas lights and decorations. There was a massive tree in the center of downtown that would soon be surrounded by an ice skating rink to be enjoyed by all. Local businesses set up booths surrounding the rink, allowing guests to shop while out enjoying the fantastic light display. It was quickly becoming a

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

tourist attraction, and the Blake was the only hotel for over fifty miles. The hotel booked a year in advance for Christmas. In trying to keep up with the growing trends, Mr. Blake had offered me a job as head chef to bring some pizzazz to the ever-increasing population of patriates that stopped by the hotel.

“Must you be so loud?” I scolded Trent.

“There’s no one here, Noelani.”

“I know, but I don’t want people to get the wrong idea and think Mr. Blake is broke.”

“I said cheap, not broke, besides his family founded the first hotel in Taylor Mill’s, black, white or otherwise. I don’t think anyone would buy that he’s broke.”

“This is true.”

“You’ve outdone yourself this year, my friend,” Trent said, eyeballing the many decorations that were now on display.

“Thank you.”

We stepped back and watched the tree shimmer in all of the requisite silver, gold, and crystal that I’d chosen.

“I’m so happy to see that you’re somewhat back to yourself. You haven’t been the same since your split with Kingston.”

“Oh please, don’t mention that man’s name to me.”

Trent hugged me. “I’m sorry. You’re right let’s never mention that name again.” Trent grabbed my hand, pulling me in the direction of the kitchen. I admired the ripped jeans, wine-colored pea coat, and man bun he wore. The style screamed Trent in all of his fabulousness. The man's skin was so light people often questioned his race, but his mother was as brown as I was. From his colorful, bold wardrobe, his sassy colloquialisms, and his animated mannerisms, one might question Trent’s sexuality, but the man kept a gorgeous woman on his arm.

“I’m hungry, Noelani.”

“Could that be why you drug me to the kitchen?”

“Of course, it is. Now make me something great.”

I threw a towel at him. “I will whip us up something light, but you have to play *This Christmas* while I create. I don’t want to lose this Christmas feeling I have.”

“Donnie or Chris?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“You know I love Chris, but I’m a traditional girl.”

“Donnie, it is.” Trent pulled out his phone and allowed the song to stream through the kitchen speakers as I placed my Locs into the head wrap I wore while in the kitchen. I’d been growing them since I was eighteen, and that had been twelve years ago. They were my crown and glory as it was rare to see anyone in Taylor Mill with Locs. The fiery red tips touched my waist and matched my cocoa brown skin tone to sweet perfection. I skipped the chef coat and tied an apron loosely around my petite waist.

“I think you love Christmas more than anyone I know,” Trent said, twirling around me as I placed fresh spinach and cheese-filled ravioli noodles into a boiling pot of water.

“How could anyone not love Christmas living here? It’s so magical. If you ever meet my parents, you’ll see where my love for Christmas started. They loved it so much they gave me the name Noelani.”

“Wait, I thought your name was Hawaiian?”

“It is, but my parents are not. They only chose it because it had the word Noel in it.” Trent threw back his head, laughing. “You can’t be serious?”

“But I am.”

Trent’s laugh escalated. “In the two years I’ve known you, I had no idea. How does a couple who loves Christmas to that extent move to a place like Florida?”

“That I can’t answer for you. I’ve wondered that same thing since they decided to move.” I drained and plated the noodles, adding sliced cherry tomatoes, a little house-made pasta sauce, and sprinkled it with cheese before passing a plate to Trent. He sniffed the plate dramatically before allowing his eyes to roll back. “This smells amazing,” he said before taking a bite. I joined him, sticking my fork into his plate and grabbing a ravioli before placing it in my mouth. “Are you working tonight?” I shook my head, unable to speak with my mouth full.

“No, so we should go back to my apartment and watch Christmas movies and drink hot chocolate all night,” I said once I’d freed my mouth of food.

“As exciting as that sounds, I have a date tonight.”

“Another date? You’re no fun.”

“We still have six weeks until Christmas. We have plenty of time for that. Raincheck?”

“Raincheck.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“OK, walk me out.” Trent and I strolled out to the hotel lobby arm in arm singing.

“I don’t want a lot for Christmas,” I sang.

“There is just one thing I need,” Trent countered.

“And I don’t care about the presents.”

“Underneath the Christmas tree,” we both chorused.

We were stopped in our tracks when we noticed what looked like African royalty lingering in the lobby — three handsome men in garbs that made them stand out like peacocks among sparrows. Their ebony skin glowed from the effects of being kissed by the sun. We watched as the bellmen loaded their expensive luggage onto the luggage carts, and led the three impeccably dressed gentlemen to the elevators. Living in Taylor Mill, you knew just about everyone. The people you didn’t know stood out like sore thumbs, and a group of men like that would have the town talking in no time.

“That looked like African royalty right there,” Trent whispered.

“I wonder who they are.”

“There is only one way to find out,” Trent said, leading me to the front desk. The leggy concierge, Brianna, greeted us with her perfect smile. Everyone in Taylor Mill called her Bri. She was petite, beautiful, and the town gossip, but all loved her.

“Bri, who were those gentlemen?” I whispered as we reached the counter.

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” she said, feigning ignorance.

“Bri!” Trent and I said at the same time.

“They’re guests visiting from Nigeria. I don’t know the specifics as to why they’re here, but if I had to guess money is involved,” she responded in the same hushed tone.

“Why would anyone from Nigeria want to visit Taylor Mill?” I asked no one in particular.

“When does Santa come to visit the hotel?” Trent asked, and both Bri and I eyed him suspiciously.

“He’ll be here tonight,” Bri answered.

“Why?” I asked, knowing that there was more to his question.

“Because I’m going to ask him to bring you a handsome African Prince for the Holidays.”

I hit him playfully on the arm as he headed toward the door sticking out his tongue at me.

“Have fun on your date!” I yelled as he spun through the revolving door.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

A handsome, African Prince didn't sound bad, I thought to myself before touching my belly and smiling if he would only choose a thirty-year-old, pregnant, chef as a mate.

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Two**November 26th*

I arrived at the Blake the following morning at my usual time of 5 AM. The hotel was quickly becoming known for its delicious brunch buffet that I'd started only a year earlier. The locals stopped in on the weekends just to enjoy breakfast as they did their weekend shopping, and, with the holidays fast approaching, the crowd was growing. The hotel was booked for the coming weekend, so we had a full staff to ensure the kitchen ran smoothly. I waved to Bri and Chad as I made my way through the lobby, stopping briefly to take in the tree. As I entered the kitchen, I exchanged my coat for my chef jacket and headed to the refrigerator. I was feeling inspired by our mysterious African guests and thought I'd add something to the menu deciding on Jollof rice with fried beef. It was a go-to meal for me when I visited Nigeria while in culinary school. My sous chef, Jasmine, glided in and joined me at the prep station.

"What are you coming up with now?" she asked while slipping into her chef coat and washing her hands.

"If you haven't heard, we have some interesting guests staying here this weekend, so I thought I'd add something different to the brunch menu."

"Of course, I've heard. Bri called me at home last night just to discuss who she's now referring to as the prince of Zamunda." I laughed at the *Coming to America* reference as I'd thought the same thing upon seeing them. "Are they as handsome as she says?" Bri continued, and I nodded and smiled as I added the beef stock to a pot. "What are you making?"

"When I stayed in Nigeria, I fell in love with Jollof rice and thought it would be a great addition to the brunch menu."

"What's in it?"

"I'm using some beef stock to add flavor to the rice. Once the rice is almost done, I'll add some crushed tomatoes and allow the two to simmer. While that's cooking down, I'll fry the beef I used to make the beef stock and add it. Throw in some of my secrete seasonings, and you have Jollof rice and fried beef."

"That sounds easy enough, and it smells amazing."

"I can't wait for you to try it. Breakfast starts at 6 AM. It will be done in no time. Can you check the front to make sure everything is prepared while I finish?"

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Sure thing.”

I watched as she scurried away before bringing my attention back to my rice dish. Once the dish was done, I headed to the front line to add it to the hot buffet. As usual, the staff had everything displayed beautifully with delective fresh fruit, steaming trays of fried eggs and truffles, frittata with potato and prosciutto, and a ton of other savory dishes.

“Everything looks and smells amazing as usual,” I said as I stood next to Jasmine.

“We have an amazing staff.”

“It looks like the guests are starting to arrive. Let’s head back to the kitchen.”

The kitchen quickly came to life as the restaurant began to fill with hungry guests. An hour into the opening, Jasmine rushed in requesting more Jollof rice.

“It’s been a major hit, and our African friends haven’t even arrived yet.”

I had no idea something so simple would become so popular. “Alright, I’m almost done, and I’ll bring it right out. Jasmine disappeared as I finished my second batch of rice and walked it to the front line. The line was already forming as they waited for me to replace the empty dish.

“Excuse me,”

My gaze shifted at the sound of the male voice that interrupted me. My eyes searched for the owner within the crowd, but I wasn’t sure to whom it belonged.

“Excuse me.” I heard the voice again. “Are you responsible for this dish?”

His voice held just a hint of an accent, but it was almost unnoticeable. Our gaze met across the steam table as he stood with full broad shoulders. He had an air of authority surrounding him that was palpable. His mouth held a crooked smile as he held his lips close together. His eyes were covered by dark-rimmed glasses that gave him an earnest, intense look.

“Um, yes. I’m the head chef.” His smile grew to display a set of beautiful white teeth. “Is everything ok?” I asked, suddenly feeling uncomfortable in my chef coat. It hid any indication that I was pregnant, and for that, I didn’t remove it. I was only fourteen weeks and not quite showing, but I was always insecure about someone finding out before I had the chance to tell them. I hadn’t even gotten the nerve to tell Trent, and he was the closest person to me in Taylor Mill. He only knew that Kingston and I ended our so-called relationship, but he didn’t know the specifics. I was honestly too embarrassed to tell anyone.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“No, nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to compliment the chef.”

I couldn’t place the accent, but I knew that he wasn’t from Kentucky. “Are you familiar with Jollof rice?”

“Very much so. It’s one of my favorite dishes. I was pleasantly surprised to see it this morning.”

“I just added it to the menu,” I said, smiling.

“Job well done,” he said, lifting his full plate to me. He offered me one last beautiful smile before heading back to his table.

“Who was that mama?” Trent asked as he quickly approached. He’d slipped into his Latina persona he often used when people questioned him about his race to throw them off, or when he just wanted to be nosey, today being the latter.

“Just a guest paying compliments to the chef,” I answered coyly.

“Judging by the drool falling from your mouth, he complimented more than just your cooking.”

“I am not drooling,” I said, grabbing the empty pan I’d abandon and headed back to the kitchen. Trent trailed behind me, taunting me with each step.

“Oh, grow up, will you.”

“I’m just pointing out the obvious. I think it’s great that you’re showing interest in someone. You haven’t looked at a man since...”

“Don’t you dare,” I warned, and Trent threw his hands up in defense.

“I wasn’t going to say his name, mama, calm down. I’m just happy to know my friend still has a pulse.”

“You’re too much. I’m wrapping up here. Grab a plate, and let’s sit down so you can tell me about your date.

“Let’s. I have to try the rice that has handsome strangers falling at your feet.” I laughed as he covered his plate with rice.

Moments later, I sat across the table from Trent and listened to him, tell me about his latest conquest. The conversation is utterly hilarious as he continues to speak using his Latino persona, which sounds very feminine. “So, like, she was beautiful and all, she had legs for days, but I wasn’t feeling her, you know?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“So let me guess, it was something random like one of her feet were bigger than the other?”

“Close. One of her nostrils was definitely wider than the other. Like mama, what’s going on right there? And her mouth was too thin. I like lips like yours, full and pouty like Megan Goode.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Trent was ridiculously picky when it came to the women he dated.

“It’s true. You have the most enticing mouth I’ve ever seen on a woman. I’m sure that’s one of the first things your new friend noticed about you. Hell, it was one of the first things I noticed about you: that, and those beautiful Locs. You are the only person I’ve seen in Taylor Mill with those Locs. Because of those lips I knew early on either I was going to date you, or we would become great friends, those were my options.”

“I’m glad we became great friends.”

“Only because you refused to date me.”

“I could never date a man more high maintenance than I am.”

“You would if you knew the benefits,” he said, winking at me.

I laughed knowing there had to be something to what he said because the women loved him: not just average women, but gorgeous, model type, women.

“Hello again. You’re the chef, right?”

Trent and I looked up to acknowledge the stranger who’d joined us.

“Yes, Noelani, and this is my friend Trent,” I said. I’d removed my chef coat and allowed my Locs to flow freely. I was wearing a loose-fitting sweater dress with knee-high boots that made me feel a little more comfortable speaking with him. I noticed his accent sounded a little British this time, but it was a bit odd.

“Nice to meet you, Noelani, Trent,” he said, reaching out his hand to us. I’m Kendi Ibrahim, visiting from London.”

I was able to see him full-on now that the steam table didn’t separate us. He was handsome with skin the color of Nutella chocolate. His facial features were defined and chiseled, the kind that one would imagine on the cover of a romance novel. He had high cheekbones, large direct eyes hidden behind black-rimmed glasses, with lips that caused me to lick my own. His beard wasn’t fully grown in, although a hint of facial hair snuck through. It gave him a sense of ruggedness

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

with his distinguished look. There was a scar over his left cheek that made me wonder how a guy like that could earn such an ugly mark. He wore a black coat over his broad shoulders and a red scarf around his neck that filled the space left open by his jacket.

“All the way from London. What brings you to the small town of Taylor Mill?” Trent asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you I was here to see the wonderful town of Christmas?”

“I’d say you wouldn’t be the first, but it’s highly unlikely,” I teased.

Kendi laughed, and it sounded as controlled as he appeared to be. “Well, it’s not entirely my reason for being here. I’m here on business, but you guys know how to do Christmas.”

“You have no idea. Just wait until Christmas Eve,” Trent countered.

“I’m not sure I’ll be here for that, but I’d like to get out and see what else the town has to offer.”

“You should do that. No one does Christmas like Taylor Mill. Downtown there’s local vendors, ice skating, and even a merry-go-round. It’s pretty amazing around here during this time of the year,” I rambled.

“And no one loves Christmas as much as Noelani,” Trent added.

“I see. You sound like you would be a great tour guide. Would you like to join me later for a tour of downtown, my treat?”

I wanted to say yes, but getting involved with anyone was out of the question. I was pregnant with another man’s baby. Bringing someone into that would be distasteful.

“She would love to,” Trent answered before I had a chance to decline. I looked at him with bulging eyes and then back at Kendi, who was smiling at us.

“Yeah, sounds great. I can meet you in the lobby, let’s say, around six?”

“That would be great. I look forward to it, Noelani.”

I waited for Kendi to leave before turning to Trent and pretended to strangle him.

“You were not about to let that man go out in this town alone. I couldn’t let you do it, mama.”

“Trent, you know I am not ready to date anyone right now.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Well, don’t date him just be his tour guide like he asked. He’s from London for goodness sake, Noelani. I doubt he’s here looking for a relationship. You need to get out again, and this is the perfect way to start with no commitment.”

He had a good point, one date or tour and he’d be on his way back to London, and would never need to know I was pregnant.

“Fine, but you have to help me get ready.”

“Can’t, I have another date.”

“With nostrils, girl?”

Trent shoved me. “No, not with nostrils, girl. I have moved on.”

“Well, fine, I guess I’m on my own.”

“And you’ll be perfectly fine. Just relax and have a good time. Remember, once Kendi is gone, he’s gone, so don’t hold back.”

“What does that mean?”

“Make sure you tour his guide and do everything, and I do mean everything, that I would do.”

“Bye, Trent.”

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Three*

At six o'clock, I walked back into the Blake and stopped in my tracks at the sight of Kendi standing in front of the Christmas tree in a red double-breasted wool coat that hit right at the knees. The coat covered his black on black shirt and pants, allowing it to stand out as the focal piece. The look let me know he didn't lack style, although the sunglasses he wore threw me. He looked rugged chic with his facial hair trimmed to perfection close to his face. He held two cups in his black leather-covered hands as he waited. The sight looked like it could be on a Christmas card.

"What do you have here? I asked as I approached.

"Well, someone may have told me that you like peppermint mocha lattes, so I thought it would be a good way to start our journey."

I took the steaming cup from his hand. "Thank you. That was very thoughtful of you." I took a sip and closed my eyes as the peppermint flavor danced on my tongue. "It's so good," I said, opening my eyes. Kendi was watching me intently, and I laughed a nervous laugh before bringing the cup back up to my mouth. I watched him follow the cup to my lips and stifled a smile, thinking of Trent's words from earlier.

"I like your Locs," he said, reaching out and touching one. "And you're dressed perfectly for this cold weather." I'd chosen to change out of my dress opting for jeans, an oversized black sweater, and black knee boots. I placed a white toboggan over my Locs and chosen a pearly white double-breasted dress coat that complimented my hat nicely.

"Thank you."

"Should I request a car so that we can get out of here?" He asked.

"Oh, no, no, no. If you want to get the full Taylor Mill at Christmas experience, we must walk."

"Noelani, it's freezing outside."

"It's a good thing you thought to bring these," I said, holding up my cup. Kendi looked at me, skeptically. "Trust me; we'll be fine."

"Well, after you, my lady."

I liked the sound of that and smiled to myself as we walked through the door that landed us in the heart of Taylor Mill.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“We are currently standing in downtown Taylor Mill.”

“What, this is it?”

“Yes, and in about thirty minutes, this will all light up, and Christmas will be upon us. It’s a good thing you’re wearing those shades.” Kendi laughed, and again I noticed it was a very controlled laugh like he was afraid to let loose. “All of the shops you see across the street are family-owned mom and pop shops that have been here for years. Taylor Mill knows how to take care of its own.” We began to stroll across the street as we spoke. “You said you were in town for business?” I asked, and he nodded. “Are you at liberty to say what that business is?”

“My company takes businesses that are struggling and helps to make them stable,” he said, removing his shades and placing them in his breast pocket.

“That sounds like a noble business.”

“It can be.”

“Since Taylor Mill is full of small businesses, it could be just about any of them.”

Kendi nodded in agreement. “It could be. You know my company’s also built on discretion,” he teased, and I covered my face.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. It’s a small town thing. Everyone knows everything about everybody.”

“It’s ok; I just don’t want to disclose anything before it’s time. Enough about me tell me about Noelani, the pretty, small town, phenomenal chef with fiery red Locs?”

“Well, it sounds like you know me pretty well,” I teased.

Kendi chuckled. “That’s just what I know about you on the surface.”

“Well, you would be surprised to know I’m not from Taylor Mill. I’ve only been here for a few years. I’m originally from Nashville, Tennessee, which is not very far from here.”

“That does surprise me. How did you find yourself living in Taylor Mill?”

“My parents are Christmas on steroids. When they found out about their spectacular Christmas displays, we started to visit year after year. We built friendships, and friends became family. I went away to culinary school, traveled a little, but always came here for Christmas. While visiting one Christmas, Mr. Blake told me he needed a chef, and I’d always loved it here, so I took the job.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Sounds storybook. It’s one thing to visit year after year, but how do you like living here?”

“I honestly love it,” I answered.

“I can see that. It seems a little small, but it’s very charming.”

“Yeah, lots of charm and character, and the people. We have amazing people in our town.”

“And hospitality. I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to show me around.”

We continued to stroll sipping on our peppermint lattes in silences as the vendors put the finishing touches on their booths.

“What’s the meaning of your name?” Kendi asked.

“It means, mist of heaven, but it’s not the reason my parents chose it.”

“No?”

I shook my head. “No, they love Christmas so much they chose it because it had the word Noel in it.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “Yes, it’s that serious. Noelani Harris, the Christmas princess. Just ask my dad.”

“Oh, that’s amazing,” he said, and I noticed the smirk on his face as he tried not to laugh.

“Go ahead and laugh.”

“There is absolutely nothing to laugh about. I love it.”

“Liar.”

We stopped in the middle of the street just as the lights from every building within a mile came on. The massive tree in the center of the town lit up from top to bottom and shimmered in blues, reds, and greens as the star beamed at the top like the star of Bethlehem. As if queued by the lights, snow began to fall around us. We both looked up to the sky in sheer amazement.

“Now that is magic,” Kendi said as he held out his hands to catch the falling snow.

“I told you,” I said, winking at him. I watched in amusement as he surveyed his surroundings. It was the look that most first time visitors gave the moment the Taylor Mill Christmas magic touched them. Families made their way to the ice skating rinks. Parents watched as their little ones circled round and round on the merry-go-round. Couples posed for pictures in front of the tree, and carolers sang O Holy Night.

“I feel like I’m in a snow globe.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“You haven’t seen anything yet. I think the first thing we should do is roast chestnuts over an open fire.”

“That can’t be a thing?”

“Oh, but it is.” I pulled him to our first vendor that was run by a local teacher.

“Hey Shelly, I’d like two cans, please.” We watched as she dipped two cans into a large box of nuts and handed them to us. “Thank you.”

“No problem Noelani. It’s good to see you again. We have two open seats ready for you,” she said, pointing us in the direction of the open fire. There were two other couples already seated, and we joined them, attaching our cans to a stick and placing it over the open fire. I looked at Kendi, who held his stick awkwardly but didn’t miss the smile he was trying to contain.

“So, what do you think?”

“I honestly have no words. I never knew this was something people did.”

“Wait until you taste the nuts after they’ve been warmed. They’re delicious. Shelly’s family owns chestnut trees and came up with the idea. They do all of the prep work, and we get to enjoy the benefits.”

“How will we know they’re done?”

“The shells will pop, and all we have to do is peel and eat.”

I shook the can allowing the nuts to move around and nudged Kendi to do the same.

“Your turn.”

“For?”

“What does your name mean?” I asked as we waited.

“It means the loved one.”

“Nice. Is there a story behind that?”

“Thank you, and yes. My parents are very traditional, as well. I am an only child and the one that they both loved above anyone else. Their words, not mine.”

“How touching.”

It made me think of my baby. I would make sure he or she had a name with meaning like that.

“How do you celebrate Christmas in London?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“When I have time to celebrate, my family comes to visit, and we have our traditional meal and exchange gifts. We usually do this on Christmas Eve and attend church on Christmas day.”

“That sounds nice. It doesn’t seem like you have the opportunity to do that often.”

“Not really. Work keeps me pretty busy.”

“Saving companies all over the world, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“I know that Taylor Mill is a bit much, but in the best way possible,” I said, popping open a chestnut and handing it to Kendi. He placed it in his mouth, allowing himself to taste the warm nuttiness of the chestnut.

“You’re right, that is good, and it smells amazing.”

I followed suit, popping open a chestnut and popping it in my mouth. “So good,” I said. I felt a dull pain in my belly that caused me to stop chewing and place a hand over the pain.

“Are you ok?” Kendi asked, and I quickly removed my hand from my belly. It was instinct that kicked in, but I quickly recovered.

“Yeah, I guess eating the nuts reminded me that I haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“These nuts are not going to hold you over until dinner. Let’s grab something a little more filling.”

“I have a perfect idea.” I pulled him along the booths allowing him to stop when he saw something that caught his interest. When we got to the vendor that served grilled ears of corn, my eyes lit up, and I inhaled the scent of butter. I was having early cravings, and my mouth watered at the thought of taking a bite of the buttery corn. Kendi ordered two handing me one. We pulled back the husk and dug in. We began walking in silence as we both enjoyed the corn too much to talk.

“Noelani.”

I heard someone call my name, and Kendi and I both turned to see Kingston approaching. I hadn’t seen him since I told him about the pregnancy, and the sight of him sickened me.

“Kingston. Hi.”

He was with a woman I’d never seen before, and they were holding hands. I noticed he was looking at my stomach, but I was sure the coat hid any tell, tell signs that I was pregnant. I

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

scooted closer to Kendi, who was observing the awkwardness between us. He grabbed my hand and warmth flowed from my fingertips throughout my entire body. I looked up at him, and he offered me the most comforting smile.

“It’s been a while. How are you?”

“It has, and I’m doing great. How have you been?” I knew he wanted to ask me about the baby, but wouldn’t dare in front of his female companion.”

“All is well. Let me introduce you to Meghan. Meghan, this is Noelani, Noelani; this is Meghan. I reached out to shake Meghan’s hand, as did Kendi.

“And this is Kendi. Kendi; this is Kingston.” I noticed Kingston size Kendi up as he shook his hand.

“I haven’t seen you around here before,” Kingston said.

“No, I’m from London.”

“From London? Are you here for business or pleasure?”

“A little bit of both,” he said, looking down at me.” The look made me blush and squeeze his hand.

“How long are you here for?” Kingston asked, and I shifted my gaze to meet his. Now he was asking questions that were none of his business.

“I’m not sure yet. I think I’ve found something that has my attention for a while.”

“Well, if I don’t see you again before you leave, safe travels. Noelani, I’ll be in touch.”

I didn’t respond, and I’m sure he didn’t want me to.

“Thank you for that,” I said, once Kingston and his date had moved on.

“For what?”

“You know, pretending to be interested so that I didn’t look bad.”

“Who said I was pretending?” I looked up to find him smiling down at me. “And besides, I doubt you could ever look bad.” Kendi held out his arm to me, and I looped mine in his. “Now, what’s next on our agenda?”

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Four**December 1st*

Kendi stayed in Taylor Mill for five days, and we'd spent all but one of those days together. We'd explored every inch of what the town had to offer. I'd even convinced him to try ice skating for the first time. It had been one of my favorite moments of our time spent together. He was always so poised and in control, so seeing his wobbly legs on ice skates had me in hysterics. I, on the other hand, have been skating since the age of three and was comfortable on skates, although the pregnancy had me a little more cautious. Kendi had checked out of the Blake the day before, causing an unexplainable tug at my heartstrings. I enjoyed spending time with him. He made me laugh with his wit, he made me feel safe with his commanding presence, and he calmed my spirit with his softness. The things that I liked most about him were the same things I'd seen in Kingston at one point. I fell for Kingston too fast and too hard, and he'd left me pregnant and alone. I wasn't going to travel down that road a second time.

It was becoming increasingly harder to cover some of the early symptoms of pregnancy, although physically, I hadn't changed much. My belly didn't have a hint of a baby bump yet, but I knew my petite frame would not allow me to hide it much longer. I was experiencing mild morning sickness that I was finding harder to keep from the staff. I was always making excuses to run to the bathroom, and the different smells coming from the kitchen were torturous. I found a physician outside of Taylor Mill just so that I could keep the secret until Kendi was long gone. She'd prescribed something to help with nausea that had been extremely helpful. His absences made it easier for me to breathe because I no longer had to be so guarded about my pregnancy, but I missed him.

"I bet I know why you're smiling." I rolled my eyes, ignoring Trent's taunting. That man has you glowing, Noelani."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"I'm talking about this honey-kissed glow that has taken over you. It looks good on you, mama."

I was glad that he thought my glow was from Kendi and not from the baby. I knew it was a little bit of both, but I wasn't going to admit either to Trent.

"Maybe it's the new bronzer I'm using," I said, smirking at him."

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Not even Fenti bronzer will give you that glow. That’s the look of a woman in lust with a handsome man,” he said as he circled me. “You were supposed to take him on a tour of the town, but it looks like you’re trying to take him on a tour of your heart.”

“Stop right there. It’s nothing like that. I enjoyed Kendi’s company and spending time with him. It’s nothing more than the lights and the magic of it all. It’s easy to fall in love while in Taylor Mill, at Christmas.”

“Did you just say fall in love?”

“You know what I mean.”

“If you say so, but I think you’re lying to yourself, and I can’t understand for the life of me why? What do you have to lose?”

Everything, I thought to myself. “I know you didn’t come here to question me about Kendi.”

“That, and to ask why you haven’t mentioned that you ran into Kingston and his new girlfriend.”

“Because there was nothing to tell. How’d you hear about that anyway?” Trent cocked his head to the side. “Never mind.”

“So how did she look? How did Kingston respond when he saw you with Kendi? Was it awkward? Trent rattled off his questions.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal. His date was cute, I guess. Kingston behaved in true Kingston fashion, and Kendi took it all in stride.”

“Noelani, your tea is cold and unsweetened. You’ve got to learn how to spice up the conversation, darling.”

“I’m sorry, but the thought of Kingston doesn’t give me much to get excited about.”

“Get excited about running into him while you’re with a handsome, British God. What better way to show him that you are doing just fine without him.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” I said, giggling. “Kendi did come to my rescue, letting Kingston think there was more to us than just friends.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“I can’t lie; It felt so good to see Kingston squirm. Kendi has this sense of authority about him that covers you when you’re around him.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“There you go. Go with that feeling. How can you not want to see at least where things go with someone like that?”

“He lives in London.”

“Anything can happen at Christmas.” He winked at me, and I shook my head.

December 11th

After ten days of missed phone calls and short text messages, I received a text from Kendi that he would be returning to Taylor Mill. To say that the thought of seeing him again didn't excite me would be untrue. I'd missed him more than I wanted to admit. I missed the energy that came with being near him. I missed how he made me feel protected and warm in a way that I never had before. Kendi was easy. He made people take notice by just being present. He made you feel like being near him; you were near someone important. I liked his energy even if I could only have it for the moment. If I could, I'd bottle it up to bask in it later. I liked the rare moments when I would catch him relax and be in the moment with me. Those were the times I felt my heartstrings pull because I knew that it was just he and I, no putting on for the world.

He'd said he was returning to follow up on business, but wanted to see me while he was here. He was unsure how long this trip would last, so I'd invited him to my home for dinner. I planned to keep things casual between us. Anything more would pull me closer to him, and that could only end in sadness. I dressed in reindeer print leggings and a fuzzy sweater, hoping to keep things light and amusing. I placed a chicken with garlic and herb butter in the oven for dinner, setting the timer for an hour. I'd prepared parmesan asparagus and white wine to go along with the chicken. I did one glance in the mirror when I heard him tap on the door. When I swung it open, he was a sight for sore eyes. He stepped in and hugged me before I could think if hugging was the proper greeting for us. He handed me a bottle of red wine and a beautifully wrapped gift box.

“Thank you,” I said, shaking the box.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.”

I stopped mid shake. “What is it?”

“You will have to open it and see, but not until after dinner.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“So, you’re a gift tease?”

Kendi threw back his head, laughing as he removed his coat. “A what?”

“A gift tease,” I said, placing his coat on the coat hanger. “A person who buys you this gorgeous gift only to tell you that you can open it right away.”

“If that makes me a gift tease, then yes. Not until after dinner.” I rolled my eyes and placed the gift on the table. “I feel like I may have overdressed for the occasion he said, looking down at my pants. He was wearing a tan sweater with a white button-down beneath it and chocolate brown slacks. As always, he was impeccably dressed.

“Well, I have a surprise for you as well, and you won’t have to wait until after dinner to enjoy it.”

“I’m not easily surprised.”

“I bet I can surprise you with this.”

“Try me.”

I grabbed his hand and led him to the back of the house. I opened the back door to reveal my Christmas tree. It was bare and laying on its side, waiting to be taken in and decorated.

“A tree?”

“Not just any tree, a Christmas tree. I typically decorate my tree on the first day of December, but I waited for you. I wanted to be the one to break your tree trimming virginity,” I teased.

“You did that for me?”

“Yes, are you surprised?”

The smile that gathered at his lips let me know that he was indeed, surprised.

“I am.”

“Good, now grab the tree and bring it into the living room. I will help you put it on the stand.”

“I didn’t know that manual labor was part of the deal.”

“We’re just getting started.”

An hour later, the tree was just about complete as I sat folded up on the couch, feet tucked snugly beneath me as I watched Kendi place ornaments on the tree. The expression he wore throughout the evening was like that of a child on Christmas morning. He was putting his all into

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

making it look perfect. I tried helping with the ornaments, but he was adamant about doing it himself. Occasionally he asked how it looked, and I'd give him a thumbs up, letting him know it was perfect. He'd come out of his sweater and now only wore the button down loosened at the top. The sight of such an important-looking man decorating my tree was heaven on earth.

"The only thing I have left is the star."

"Will you do the honors?" I asked.

He grabbed my hand, pulling me from my comfy place on the sofa. "Why don't we do this part together?" I placed my hand next to his on the star, and we set it atop the tree. I plugged in the lights, and the tree lit up, the rays radiating throughout the house.

"It's absolutely perfect."

"It does look nice," he beamed with pride.

"I think someone's been bitten by the Christmas bug," I teased.

"It was fun. I'm enjoying myself."

"Are you hungry? Dinner is just about done, but I can grab us an appetizer."

"Yeah, that would be great."

I headed to the kitchen and pulled out a tray from the refrigerator, removing the saran wrap uncovering a platter of fruits, cheeses, nuts, and meats.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course, but first, I don't have a mate, wife, or children. I know we've never discussed that."

I smiled nervously. "That's good to know, but not the question I wanted to ask."

"Well, ok, what is it?"

I sat down next to him on the couch and placed the meat and cheese tray next to the wine he'd brought with him. "Go ahead, ask me anything."

I reached up and removed his glasses and placed them on the table. The smile that he was wearing disappeared, and his mouth parted. I could tell he wasn't expecting things to turn serious as I watched him. His gaze became lust-filled as he looked deeply into my eyes as if searching for something. I touched the scar on his face, fingering it lightly. I didn't miss the stiffness that came over his body, but he didn't break my gaze. "How'd you get this?" I asked. He swallowed hard, and I felt like an ugly truth was about to be told. He looked away from me.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“When I was a boy, I stood up for something that I believed in, and this was the cost of that.”

His words were cryptic and unclear, but I felt the harsh realities of what he’d said. There was something about Kendi that was different. His worries didn’t seem the same as most. He carried himself like he was the owner of the world, but not in a self-centered kind of way. I was lucky to see the side of him that, roasted chestnuts and ate corn right out of the husk. I was almost certain no one else had gotten the pleasure of seeing that side of him.

“I’m sorry that happened to you. Something so ugly should never happen to someone so wonderful.” Kendi finally turned his eyes back to me. “I’m talking about the action, not the scar. It gives you character.” Kendi smiled, and the tenderness behind it made me kiss him. He didn’t stop me; instead, he kissed me back, and the light touch of his lips sent shivers throughout my body that made me tremble. It was the kind of kiss that steals your breath, rendering you in blissful unconsciousness. The type of kiss that makes you throw all caution to the wind and melt into it, the kind you have to think about to recover from it. I sensed that he was struggling to maintain control, but the energy surrounding us couldn’t be controlled.

“You taste like what I imagine Christmas would taste like,” he said, just before kissing me a second time. All I could do was moan because I hadn’t quite regained my breath. He pulled away from me, and we took a moment to savor each other. In the glow of the Christmas lights, I saw Kendi uncontrolled and wanting. “How is it that I’ve traveled all over the world, yet have never felt this way until I reach the small town of Taylor Mill, Kentucky?”

“It’s magic.”

“I’m starting to believe that.”

The sound of the oven timer pulled me away from him and to the kitchen. The heat and smell of garlic from the garlic herb butter roasted chicken assaulted me as I opened the oven door. I instantly felt the wave of nausea overcome me and tried not to make a mad dash to the bathroom. I managed to remove the roasting pan from the oven and place it atop the stove before walking quickly to the bathroom. I bypassed the guest bathroom and rushed into the master bath. The vomit spewed out before I could close the door. It hit me three times back to back as I gripped my stomach with each tightening of my stomach muscles. When I was sure I had nothing left in my belly, I brushed my teeth and rinsed with mouthwash before resting on the toilet to regain my

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

energy. This had to be a sign. What was I thinking allowing myself to get so close to a guy I knew I couldn't have? Kendi made it easy. He was kind and attractive and mysterious. He made me feel centered and content when he was near, and when he looked at me, I felt desired. I stood quickly when I heard a tap at the door. Maybe a little too soon as I started to feel dizzy. Kendi rushed to my side, holding me up.

"Are you ok?" he asked with concern etched into his face.

"Yes, I'm fine. I think I'm just coming down with a stomach bug or something."

"You've been saying that for a few days now." I walked to the sink and patted my face with water. "Maybe it's time to see a doctor."

"Yeah, I think you're right."

"I understand if you don't feel up to finishing dinner." I didn't want him to leave, but tonight had proven it was time for me to distance myself from him. We'd crept passed the friendship phase and were now easing into the phase where feelings stood to get hurt.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I get it."

His empathy made me feel horrible. Why did he have to come into my life when things were so complicated?

"At least let me fix you a plate before you go."

"Noelani, it's ok. You're not feeling well. Let me help you get settled into bed. I will fix my plate and lock up behind me."

"No, I couldn't let you do that."

"You went through all of the trouble of cooking for me while sick. It's the least I can do."

"Well, if you insist."

"I do. Now get cleaned up and ready for bed, and I'll be back in a sec."

I did as I was told and changed into my pajamas, pulling my Locs back into a loose ponytail. I climbed in bed and waited for Kendi to join me. It didn't take long for him to return. He held a small plate with a piece of toast and a cup of what smelled like tea. He handed me the cup and plate and took a seat on the bed. "I hope this makes you feel just a little better."

"I'm sure it will. Thank you."

"You had a ton of Chamomile tea, so I assumed you like it."

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“My favorite.”

“I’m going to get out of here and let you get some rest. As much as I will miss seeing you at the Blake, I don’t want to see you working tomorrow. Get some rest and call your doctor first thing in the morning. I will call to check on you later.” Kendi leaned close and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes, allowing his kindness to cover me.

“Good night,” I said as he left the room. Moments later, I heard the door open and close, and I knew he was gone. I rubbed my belly and sipped on the tea. If only things were different.

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Five**December 15th*

Per Kendi's request, I stayed home the next day and went to the doctor. While I knew I didn't have a stomach bug, I did want to check in on the baby and make sure that everything was ok. My doctor was very pleased with my progress, and I was back at work the following day. Kendi had to leave for business again but assured me that he still had unfinished business in Taylor Mill. The way he'd said that made me wonder if he was speaking of the business alone. We hadn't talked about our kiss, although I thought of it often.

Bri greeted me with a hug as I entered the hotel to help prepare for the dinner crowd. We not only fed our guests, but the families that came downtown for the holiday festivities. "It's been so busy around here I hardly get a chance to talk to you," Bri said, walking me back to the kitchen. "How are you feeling? I heard that you came down with the stomach bug," she said, wrinkling her nose at me.

"I'm much better now. I just needed some time to allow it to run its course, that's all," I lied.

"Well, we're glad to have you back, but I'm sure you were very well taken care of," she said, nudging me, and I knew what she was insinuating.

"It's nothing like that."

"He had the front desk send you flowers. I'm pretty sure it's like that."

I'd awaken the next day to the sound of my doorbell. When I opened the door, there was a beautiful bouquet of red carnations, white alstroemeria and white cushion chrysanthemums arranged with variegated holly, flat cedar, noble fir and red berries all in a red vase. I'd been able to point out every flower in the beautiful Christmas bouquet. The card read *Get well soon* and was signed by Kendi. I took the flowers into the kitchen and noticed it was spotless. Not only had he put away dinner, but he made sure the sink was free of dishes. I placed the bouquet in the middle of my living room table, and it matched the decor perfectly. It was then I noticed the unopened Christmas gift he'd gotten for me. I sat back on the couch and pulled at the ribbon and opened the box. The inside held a gold necklace with Noel in the center. It was simple and sweet, just like our relationship.

"Look, you can't even keep your mind off of him."

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

I blushed when I realized I was daydreaming while fingering the Noel necklace.

“Because you won’t let me.”

“Um-hm, but enough about Kendi. I found out some more information about our African guests.” With all the time I’d spent with Kendi, I’d completely forgotten about our royal guest.

“Do tell,” I said, washing my hands before shrugging into my chef coat.

“Well, they checked out this morning. During check out, I met one of the gentlemen named Dafari. Our conversation led us to why he was visiting, in which he disclosed he worked for a development company out of Nigeria. I did a little bit of research and found the company is a multimillion-dollar company.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you found all of that out.”

Bri winked and smiled at me. *Why would corporate developers have business in Taylor Mill? All of the businesses here were family-owned*, I thought.

“I think that they’re bringing some big fancy company here,” Bri said.

“You think so?”

“It has to be. They all want a piece of the ever-growing pie.”

“I don’t think we need any big corporate companies here. Taylor Mill is fine just the way it is.”

“I agree with that. I have to get back out here to check on the front desk. I will talk to you later.”

“Ok, I will see you later.”

“Oh, and Noelani?”

“Yeah.”

“They loved the Jollof rice.”

I smiled as I watched her exit the kitchen.

December 24th

Christmas Eve in Taylor Mill was nothing short of amazing. The town truly came to life as people of all ages gathered downtown to enjoy the carolers, the food, and the biggest party the

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

town could imagine. The Blake hosted its ugly Christmas party in the hotel lobby, where the staff and guests gathered adorned in hideous Christmas gear. The uglier, the better, of course. I'd prepared a spread of delicious Christmas treats, pecan pie brie, candied walnut Brussel sprout bites, sweet potato crescent bites, and the town favorite cranberry cheese balls. The lobby flowed with spiked eggnog, apple cider, hot cocoa, and various merry Christmas tunes. Kendi was back in Taylor Mill to enjoy the festivities. He'd said he felt invested and didn't want to miss out on the most significant day in Taylor Mill. I was used to having Kendi in my life now, and I wasn't sure how, when the time came, I was going to let him go. While we often spent time together when he was in town, we hadn't put a label on what we were to each other. I was to blame for that, ignoring any attempt he made to make sense of us. I knew my time was limited, and in time all would be revealed, but tonight I just wanted to enjoy the magic and the man.

"This is some party."

"I warned you."

"You did, but I don't think anyone could have warned me about this. This is on a whole other level."

"I hope you're not too overwhelmed."

"Believe it or not, I'm getting used to being here. There's a lot about Taylor Mill that I'm growing to love." His words made me look away and sip the cider I held in my hand. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Avoid anything that may remotely be about us."

"That's not what I'm doing at all."

"Don't you think it's about time we have that conversation."

"Kendi, we're at a Christmas party. Do we have to have that conversation now?"

"You're right. I just know the time is nearing for me to go back to London, and I'm not sure when I'll be back this time."

Those were the words I was dreading. I know he'd spent more time here than he was supposed to, but I knew there would be a time he would leave and not come back. This was not his home. The thought of never seeing his handsome face again brought on a wave of sadness, and my emotions got the best of me.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Are you ok?” Kendi asked.

“Yes,” I said, waving him away.

“Noelani, Kendi,” Bri said as she embraced each of us.

“Kendi, that’s one ugly sweater,” she teased. Kendi looked at me as I covered my mouth to stifle a giggle.

“You’re laughing at me?”

“It’s funny. Your sweater is hideous.”

“But, you gifted it to me.”

“I know,” I said, and Bri and I laughed until tears formed in our eyes.

“You two are horrible,” he said, smirking.

“I’m sorry it was pretty funny. I’ll be right back. I need to check on the food.”

“I’ll be right here.”

I headed to the kitchen to pull out a tray of hors d’oeuvres to replenish what had been eaten. I unwrapped three dishes and lined them on the counter for the servers.

“Shouldn’t you be enjoying the party?”

“Yeah, I just needed to check in for a minute.”

I turned around and took in Kingston as he stood in the entryway. He walked into the kitchen, stopping a few feet in front of me.

“Kingston, what are you doing here?” I asked in a tone that let him know that I was displeased. He stood in front of me with that air of authority that he always held. I couldn’t help but notice how it paled in comparison to Kendi. I thought that I would hate him if he were ever this close to me again, but the smell of his cologne, and the way that he looked at me with that coca skin, and deep, dark, reddish toned hair, made me want to run and jump into his arms. *But why?* This man had crushed me. He tried to destroy me and walked away from his child.

“I told you I would be in touch.”

“You’ve also shown that your word holds no merit.”

“I deserve that.”

“I need to get back to my guest.” I tried to walk passed him, but he stepped in my way, blocking me. “Kingston, what do you want from me?”

“I just want to check on you to make sure you’re ok.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Why, why now?”

“Because,” he stammered his eyes glued to my belly covered by the oversized top I wore. I could tell he was trying to figure out if I were still pregnant, but I wasn’t going to make it easy for him.

I shook my head back and forth. “Because what?” I said, feigning ignorance.

“I wanted to check on you,” he paused briefly, “and the baby.”

“You don’t get to do that. You walked out on the baby and me, so what happened after that is none of your concern.”

He quietly stood as if trying to process what I’d just said. He stepped closer to me, and I noticed a hint of anger touch his eyes. “What do you mean, what happened after that, Noelani? Tell me you’re not saying what I think you’re saying? Tell me you didn’t hate me enough to do that,” he pleaded. The torturous look he held in his eyes made me tear up. He always did this to me. He always handled me in a way that made me want to bare my soul to him, but not this time.

“You made your decision about your child and me the day you walked away from us. What I do with my body is not your concern Kingston.”

He reached out and grabbed me before I could move away. “What did you do to our baby, Noelani?”

“Let me go Kingston.”

His hold on me was firm but didn’t frighten me. I knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t hurt me that way, but I didn’t want him touching me.

“Answer me?”

“I didn’t do anything. I’m still pregnant,” I said between clenched teeth. Kingston released me immediately and stepped away. I wiped at the tear that I didn’t know had fallen and stepped farther away from him. I placed a protective hand over my belly as he glared at me.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” he asked. I pulled my shirt back, exposing my small but visible baby bump.

“Is this proof enough?” His eyes were glued to me. “I’m still pregnant, now what?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Kingston's eyes shifted past me, causing me to turn around. My eyes locked with Kendi, who looked at me, confused. His eyes fell to my belly that still exposed my baby bump. This was not how I wanted him to find out. He deserved so much more than this.

"Kendi, I can explain."

"Explain what, Noelani? You've kept something pretty important from me. You didn't think I deserved to know that you were having a baby. Is this why you've been pulling away from me?"

"No. I mean, yes. I didn't know how to tell you." I tried to explain it to him, but my words were stuck.

"And what role does he play in this?" he asked, pointing at Kingston, who'd placed himself at my side.

"I'm the father of her child," he said, placing his hand on the small of my back. The look of hurt and disappointment displayed in Kendi's eyes stung. "It seems I have misjudged you, Noelani. Here I thought you were one of the rare finds I never even thought to look for." His eyes were piercing. "I knew that you were hiding something from me, but I never thought this. I was ready to help you through anything, but this? I didn't see this coming." I felt like the wind was being released from my lungs. His words drained the life out of me. "It's unfortunate that things had to end this way."

"Kendi, please let me explain!" I stepped toward him, but Kingston held me back. I looked down at his hand that was gripping my arm, and he released me. When I looked up, Kendi was gone. I ran toward the lobby in search of him, but he was long gone.

"Let him go," Kingston said, and I turned around and slapped him before I could think twice about it.

"You bastard! This is all your fault. He didn't deserve to find out like this." My chest was heaving with anxiety.

"I'm sorry." I pushed him hard in the chest as tears began to fall. "Noelani, stop you're going to hurt the baby." I was finding it harder to breathe with every shove, but I needed to hurt him as much as I was hurting.

"You left us! You can't just waltz back into my life because you want a family now!" I yelled.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Noelani, what’s going on?” It was Trent approaching, and I noticed party-goers looking in our direction. I turned to Trent falling into his arms, wrapping my hands tightly around his neck and sobbed. He stroked my hair, soothing me as pain filled me.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong? He asked.

“She needs to sit down,” Kingston said.

“How would you know what she needs? You walked out on her, remember.”

“Because she’s pregnant with my child.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Chapter Six

I felt Trent stiffen beneath me as Kingston's words registered. I was too afraid to let go. I was fearful that he would leave me the way that Kendi had, the same way that Kingston had when I first told him about the pregnancy.

"You need to go Kingston. You are the sole reason she is upset. If you care anything about her and the baby," he added, "you would leave and continue this another time." Trent held me while he addressed Kingston so that I didn't have to face him. "I'm leaving, but I will be back, Noelani. I'm the father of that baby, and I'm not going anywhere." I knew that he was gone when Trent gently pushed me away. I glued my eyes to the floor, not wanting to face him.

"Hey, I'm up here," he said, forcing me to look at him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you."

"Me too. Now come, sit, talk," Trent said, leading me to one of the hotel lobby chairs.

"The night Kingston ended things with me. I found out I was pregnant. He called me a liar and walked out on me even after I gave him a pregnancy test to prove that it was real."

"How far along are you?"

"I'll be eighteen weeks tomorrow."

"Noelani!"

"I know. I was embarrassed that Kingston didn't want me that he didn't want us. I didn't know how to tell anyone."

Trent touched my hand, squeezing it tightly. "He's the one that should be embarrassed."

"He's not embarrassed in the least bit, and now he wants to be a father. Kendi was here tonight when Kingston asked if I was pregnant. When I showed him my baby bump to prove that I was, Kendi walked in and saw everything. Kingston didn't make things easier by acting as if something was still between us. Kendi left, and I'm not sure if I will ever get to explain."

"I'm sorry. I know that you were starting to feel something for him."

"Why is it that every man that finds out about this baby decides to leave me?"

"I won't leave you." I lay my head on Trent's shoulder. "But you should have told me. We're friends."

"You're right. I should have told you."

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“And because we’re friends, I can ask this question.”

“What?”

“How did you think this was going to end with Kendi?”

I shrugged my shoulders because I didn’t know the answer. I just wanted to enjoy what we shared for as long as I could. “A Christmas miracle, I suppose.”

Trent laughed out loud. “Not even Santa could pull this off.” He hugged me. “Sorry, he wasn’t your African prince.”

“No, but he was close.”

I pulled into the driveway of my home and noticed Kinston sitting on my porch. He stood when he saw me and walked over to the car to open the door for me.

“I thought I told you to leave me alone,” I said, walking passed him and placing my key into the door.

“You know we need to talk, Noelani. We are having a baby.”

His words angered me, and I turned my attention to him. “We’ve been having a baby for eighteen weeks now. The same amount of time that you’ve been absent from my life. Keep that same energy.”

“Noelani, don’t do this. I was scared and didn’t know what to do. I know I made a poor decision, but I’m here now. Let me be there for you and the baby.” I backed into the door without answering. I wanted his words to be genuine, not for me, but for the life that was growing inside me. I wanted to believe in him, but the last time he’d turned his back on me. I knew that he was only there because he’d seen me with Kendi. I left the door open, and Kingston followed me inside, closing the door behind him. I didn’t have to allow Kingston back into my life, but I wouldn’t keep him out of our child’s life.

He helped me out of my coat before removing his and placing them both on the coat hanger. Kingston looked right at home, making himself comfortable in my small living space. His presence seemed to fit right in, unlike Kendi, whose presence had taken over., but provided me with a sense of security. The thought of Kendi made me ache.

“What happened in the last eighteen weeks that made you suddenly want to be a family man?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“The thought of having a son or daughter in the world without a father. I wasn’t raised that way. My father was a great man, and I want to be that for my child.”

“Why’d you run in the first place, Kingston? Did you think that I was the type of person that would lie to you about being pregnant?”

Kingston grabbed my hand. “I know that you would never do that. I just wasn’t prepared to be a father. I wasn’t even prepared to be in a relationship. I felt like I was being cornered into being both of those things. I was wrong about both, and I’m sorry. I want a life with our child and a life with you.” I removed my hands from his and made my way to the kitchen. I didn’t make good decisions when I was close to him.

“Kingston, I don’t want a life with you. The only thing I need from you is for you to be present in our daughter’s life.” I noticed a grin start from the center of his mouth before stretching across his face reaching his cheeks. “What?” I asked, not knowing what had caused his sudden jovial mood.

“Daughter? We’re having a girl?”

I hadn’t realized I’d disclosed the baby’s gender. It was the first time I’d said it out loud since the doctor had given me the news at my last appointment.

“Yes, we’re having a girl.”

Kingston entered the kitchen, still smiling from ear to ear. The look was so endearing I couldn’t help be to mimic him.

“Can I?” he asked as his hand loomed above my belly.

I nodded, and he placed his large hand over my belly. The spark from the instant connection between daddy and daughter warmed me to tears. My hormones had heightened my emotions, but the thought that my daughter would now have her father in her life was overwhelming.

“We created this? He whispered.”

“We did.”

“I don’t know why I was ever afraid this is truly amazing. I think I love her already.” As crazy as it sounded, I knew all too well how easy it was to fall in love with someone you’d never met, and in a single instance. I’d felt that same connection the moment I’d found out I was pregnant. Kingston removed his hand from my belly and faced me. “I am sorry, Noelani. You didn’t deserve what I did to you, and I’m ready to make it up to you. I’m ready to make our

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

family work.” I looked away from him. I needed to make it clear that while I wanted him in the baby’s life, I had no place for him in mine.

“Kingston, I’m glad that you want to be here for your child, but I’m not interested in rekindling what we had.”

“Is it because of the guy at the hotel? I know that the two of you have been getting pretty close.”

I didn’t have to ask how he knew. When you lived in a town as small as Taylor Mill, news traveled fast.

“No, it’s because I don’t trust you not to hurt me again.”

“I see.” He looked away as if he was about to concede. “Well, I thank you for allowing me back into the baby’s life. I will have to work on earning your trust again, and I’m up for the challenge,” he continued. “I’m going to get out of here. Make sure you text me all doctors’ appointments from here on out. I don’t want to miss another one.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Kingston bent down to kiss my belly before returning to the living room and shrugging into his coat. “It’s never felt more like Christmas than it does right now,” he beamed. “Good night Noelani, and good night Kingsley.”

I smiled, “Kingsley?”

“Our daughter,” he answered as he walked out the door throwing me a smile over his shoulder.

“Kingsley,” I repeated, “Not bad.”

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Seven*

I walked into the Blake early the following morning with my agenda in place. I was not on the schedule to work, but I needed to talk to Kendi. I'd called and texted him all night with no response. It was unlike him to not at least respond even if the responses were short. My sleep was interrupted with the feelings of love, and a sense of loss, all at the same time. I was happy that my daughter would get the love that she deserved from Kingston, but I was feeling the loss of Kendi's warmth and affection.

"Noelani, what are you doing here?"

"Hey Bri, I came in to talk to Kendi. I'm on my way up to his room."

"Kendi? He checked out last night. He didn't tell you?"

"No. Did he leave a note for me?"

"I can take a look, but I haven't seen anything here for you." While Bri searched the front desk, my head started to spin. What if he'd went back to London and I never saw him again.

"I'm sorry Noelani, I don't see anything."

"Thank you for checking, Bri."

I turned to walk out the door, but Bri stopped me. "You know the African guys who have been staying here?" She whispered.

I turned back to her, "Yeah."

"I told you they were from a multimillion-dollar corporate development company."

"Right."

"Well, I hear they are here to buy the Blake and tear it down."

"What? The Blake is a family-owned business, that can't be true."

"They have been in meetings with Mr. Blake for days. And Noelani?"

"Yeah."

"I hear Kendi is the head of the company."

"What?" I was confused. How could Kendi be head of a multimillion-dollar company, and I not know about it? How could he be in Taylor Mill to take over the hotel and my job in the process? That didn't make sense.

"He's the head of the company that's buying the hotel from Mr. Blake?" I asked, trying to make sense of it all.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Yes. Those guys work for him.”

We’d spent a good portion of the last month together, and it had never come up in conversation that he was here to take my job. How dare he be upset with me for keeping my pregnancy a secret, when he had one of his own?

“Have you seen Mr. Blake?” I asked. He was the one person that could verify what Bri had just told me.

“He’s in his office.”

I rushed to the back of the hotel, where Mr. Blake’s office was located. He was sitting behind his desk, thumbing through some paperwork. He was old school and hated using computers. He looked up when I walked in and gifted me with a subtle smile.

“Noelani, what brings you by today? I thought you’d be out enjoying the hustle and bustle of the season.

“Yeah, I’m on my way to do that. I just stopped by to talk to Kendi, but I heard he checked out last night. Do you know anything about that?”

“We have people check-in and out daily, Noelani. What would be so special about that?”

“I know that Kendi is here to take over the hotel. If he’s checked out, then that would mean that business is done, and I’m now out of a job.”

“This town is way too small,” he mumbled.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Mr. Blake? Why didn’t you tell any of us? This is the only hotel within a fifty-mile radius, and it means something to Taylor Mill.”

“I understand, but there was nothing to tell until we sorted everything out.”

“So, is it true that the hotel is gone?”

“You will have to talk to Kendi about that.”

“Oh, my goodness! You sold the hotel to Kendi and his company? It just doesn’t make sense. The hotel is your family’s business.”

“You’re right; it’s my family’s business, and we did what was best for us and what we felt was best for Taylor Mill. You have to trust me on that, Noelani.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Kendi before now?”

“Because he asked me not to.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“And you felt your loyalty was more to him than me?” I was hurt. Mr. Blake was like family to me, and his words stung.

“It wasn’t like that, Noelani.”

“I wish I could believe that, but as your actions have shown, I can’t.” I left his office as he yelled out to me. I was not interested in speaking to him any longer. I rushed through the lobby to the revolving doors with purposeful strides. I heard Bri calling out to me, but I was in no mood to talk to anyone.

I sat in my living room, feet tucked beneath me sipping hot cocoa and looking at the Christmas tree. I picked up my phone and texted Kingston my doctors’ appointments, and he sent me a thumbs up emoji in return. It felt impersonal, but that was Kingston. I clicked on the picture icon on my phone and thumbed through stopping at the one of Kendi and me standing in front of the Blake Christmas tree. There were so many things that I loved about that picture, but sadness filled me as I thought of all the things that I was losing. What was I going to do without a job in Taylor Mill? What was the town going to do without the hotel? I was losing it all because of Kendi. He’d manipulated me the same way Kingston had. The tap at the door startled me. I wasn’t expecting anyone, and I knew that Trent was out on one of his dates.

“Who is it?”

“Noelani, it’s me.” It was Kendi. I glanced around the house, and everything appeared to be in order other than the blanket I was just under. I wished I had time to check my appearance, but the subtle knocks that continued let me know that he wouldn’t wait. I quickly twisted my Locs into a knot on top of my head and swung the door open.

“Hi.

“Hello.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you were back in London?”

“No. I just had to take an emergency meeting and had to fly out quickly. Can I come in?” I moved aside and allowed him to enter. He took off his coat and lay it on the back of the couch before turning to me. I noticed his eyes linger on my stomach that was no longer hidden by oversized clothing. I was nervous, but I was glad we no longer had that secret between us. I was angry with Kendi the same way he was angry at me, but the sight of him lessened the anger and

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

increased the longing, just a bit. I needed to explain to him why I hadn't told him about my pregnancy.

"I see you opened your present," he said, and I touched the necklace that I wore around my neck.

"Yes. I never got a chance to thank you. It's beautiful."

"It made me think of you when I saw it. The Christmas princess, right?"

I smiled. "My dad seems to think so."

We sat in silence for a moment as we both searched for the right things to say. I was the first to speak. "I'm sorry you had to find out about my pregnancy the way that you did. You didn't deserve that." I walked passed him and motioned for him to take a seat before reclaiming my own. "Kendi, I didn't expect for anything to become of you and I. My pregnancy was something that I kept from everyone because I was embarrassed. The man whose child I was carrying didn't want me." I paused feeling a piece of that same hurt saying it out loud. "Kingston left when I told him I was pregnant, and I didn't know how to deal with that. As you and I grew closer, things started to get complicated. Then we kissed, and it was amazing, and suddenly I had this huge secret that I didn't know how to tell you. Kingston humiliated me, and I couldn't take rejection from you as well."

"You had no reason to feel humiliated."

"That's easy for you to say."

"I wish that you would have trusted me enough to tell me."

"So do I, but I didn't know how to trust anyone with this." I pulled my knees close to my chest, adding another layer of protection between us. "I'm just glad that I don't have to hide it from you anymore." I shifted toying with my fingers, trying to figure out how I was going to ask him about what I'd recently learned. "Now it's your turn to free yourself of secrets." He looked at me, and I could tell he knew that I was aware of his company. "Tell me it's not true that you came here to buy the Blake and tear it down?"

"Yes and no."

"It can't be both Kendi. It's either yes or no."

"I came here to buy the Blake, but we had no plans to tear it down. We only wanted to help Mr. Blake."

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“How? By taking his family's business and taking jobs from the workers, including my own? How does that help anyone?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss the details of our business deal.”

“Was I apart of this deal?”

“What kind of question is that to ask me?”

“Where did you think I would end up in this deal? If you’re here to take over the hotel or tear it down, where did you see me landing at the end of it?”

“That’s not a fair question. You don’t know the details of my business.”

“Yeah, and you can’t tell me, right?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure Mr. Blake will tell you all the details soon.”

“That’s funny because that’s what he said about you.”

He placed his hand atop mine in a way that I felt reassured.

“Kendi, please tell me if I have a future at the hotel?”

“I can assure you that the plan was never to put anyone out of a job. We were looking for a hotel that we could purchase low, with potential for high earnings, and the Blake landed at our feet.”

“How would anyone know about Taylor Mill? We’re barely on the map.”

“It’s my job to know about places just like this. It’s touristy, and people are starting to talk about it. The business district is growing, and there’s not another hotel for another fifty miles.

With some major renovations, updating, and promotion, the earning potential is there.”

“Did you force Mr. Blake to sell?”

“We never force anyone to sell. We make offers they can’t refuse.”

“We?”

“Yes, my family owns the Royal Mazhani hotel chain.”

I had to force my mouth to stay closed. The Royal Mazhani hotel chain was a Nigerian based, high-end hotel chain that had hotels in Africa, London, and, most recently, the US. “Your family owns the Royal Mazhani,” I repeated.

“I was born in Nigeria and moved to London when I was just a small boy. My dad moved our family from Nigeria to London after I received this scar.”

“How’d you get that scar?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Not everyone in Langus liked my family because of our wealth. Just like other places all over the world, you have good people, and you have bad people. A group of men used me as a bargaining tool to gain money from my family. My dad gave them what they wanted, and after beating me, they left me to die. I was found, nursed back to health, and my family quickly moved from Nigeria to London and made a life there. We opened two hotels in London, and then I moved to the United States. I kept my home in London, which is where I spend most of my time. I recently opened a hotel in California, and now I’m looking to open second in the states.” He paused long enough for me to take in everything that he said. “I’ve lived all over the world, learning the business, and now the business belongs to me.”

I didn’t realize I was squeezing his hand until he brushed his thumb across my knuckles. “How old were you when that happened?”

“I was eight.”

I wanted to cry for him, but I held the tears back. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“Yeah, me too, but it made me stronger.”

“No eight year old should ever have to be that strong.”

“My dad always says there’s a price that comes along with fortune.”

Kendi released my hand and stood up. “I’m glad that we got the chance to clear things up before I have to leave for London tomorrow.”

I wanted to ask him not to go, but I knew I couldn’t stop him. Our secrets had tarnished the purity of what we had. The magic had worn off, and we were now just two people with scars. I was pregnant with Kingston’s baby, and he had cost me my job. We’d done a major number on this relationship before it even had a chance to get started.

“I am too, and I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I will always think of you when I see the word, Noel.” I laughed through my tears.

“Just promise me you’ll never forget the magic of Christmas.”

“I don’t think I ever will.”

“Goodbye, Noelani and congratulations,” he said, placing a protective hand over my belly.

“Goodbye, African prince.”

*I FOUND LOVE IN YOU**Chapter Eight**February 14th*

As promised Kingston accompanied me to my next doctor's appointment. The news of my pregnancy spread as fast as the fight between Mr. Blake and I. As hard as it had been, I was glad to have it out in the open. The news of the Blake being bought out had the town in a frenzy, but Mr. Blake had to lay those concerns to rest.

My parents had been over the moon about their first grandchild. I held the sonogram in my hand as my hands trembled. The love I felt for this angel was overwhelmingly life-changing. It was that moment that I knew I would go to any length to protect her. I felt Kingston rub my back gently.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" I asked.

"Just like her mom."

"I'm sure she's going to look like both of us."

"I'll be ok with her looking like you."

I smiled at him. I'd missed his charm, the way he made me feel like the most beautiful person in the world. But, that was the thing with Kingston; I knew it was all charm, unlike with Kendi, who said it with his soul, and it poured into mine.

"Are you hungry?" I nodded, and Kingston led me next door to Ms. Nettie's sandwich shop. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of tomato soup. I was having severe cheese cravings. Kingston watched me closely as I devoured my food while he toyed with his turkey club.

"Please do not judge the way I'm making love to this sandwich," I teased.

"I would never. I just wished it was me, that's all."

I laughed as I licked my lips, capturing a piece of cheese with my tongue and pulling it into my mouth.

"Those days are long over for us."

"Don't be so sure about that." Kingston took our trash and disposed of it in a nearby garbage can before ordering me a chocolate-covered bacon cupcake and returning to the table to present it to me. It held a little plastic Valentine's Day heart on top.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Happy Valentine’s Day. Thank you for allowing me to spend it with you and our daughter. It couldn’t be more perfect.”

“How sweet. You, sir, know the way to a pregnant woman’s heart.” I took a bite and closed my eyes as the moist cake melted in my mouth. The sweetness of the chocolate and saltiness of the bacon married in my mouth to form a delicious union.

“You have a way of making the simplest things look enjoyable.”

“It comes with being a chef, and she has allowed me to enjoy so many things I never even thought to try. Like who knew olives and chocolate worked?”

Kingston wrinkled his nose at me. “Nobody, and you won’t either in a few months.”

“You’re probably right.”

“You can stop referring to the baby as she and her. We agreed on Kingsley,” he continued.

“No, we didn’t agree on anything. The jury is still out on that.”

He chuckled, and I could tell he had something on his mind. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“To me, it is, now spill it.”

“You know that I’ve wanted to expand and grow the firm for some time now.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ve finally gotten the opportunity to do just that.”

“Wow, congratulations. That’s a pretty big deal. You’ve always talked about your expansion goals. Why aren’t you more excited?”

“Thank you, and I am. It just comes with some things I didn’t anticipate.”

“Some things like what?”

“There’s a firm in Houston that’s interested in merging with me. To complete the merger, I would have to leave Taylor Mill.”

I placed the half-eaten cupcake down on my plate as he continued to explain.

“Taylor Mill doesn’t have the potential clientele that we need for growth. The crime rate here is next to none. While it’s great for the town, it’s not good business for a lawyer. My company is suffering here.”

My mind was racing. Had Kingston come back into our lives only to bail on us yet again?

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“I know what you’re thinking, and it’s not like that. I want you and the baby to move to Houston with me.”

I laughed hysterically. It was a humorless laugh.

“Kingston, I’m not uprooting my life to follow you and your dreams. We’re not even in a relationship.”

“I’m working on that.”

“Well, it takes two, and I’m not interested.”

“What if I asked you to marry me?”

I looked into his eyes to gauge his seriousness. He didn’t blink. “Look, Noelani, I know I messed up before, but I’m doing everything to make it right so that we can be a family.”

“Make it right by asking me to leave my job, and everything I know and love to follow a man who doesn’t love me to a place where I don’t know anyone?”

“That’s just it; I do love you, Noelani.” He pushed the ring box across the table. It rested in front of me in a tiffany blue box, and I knew the content would be something exceptional. He was doing it again, and this time I was furious. I stood quickly, causing the chair to fall with a crash to the floor. I felt my eyes began to blink rapidly. All eyes were on us as Kingston raced around the table and picked up the chair. “Please sit down,” he said, quietly but firmly. I took a seat not wanting to make a scene. “Don’t,” I said coldly.

“Don’t what?”

“Try to manipulate me to get what you want.”

“That’s not what’s happening here. I do love you, Noelani.”

Kingston was unbelievably manipulative when it came to getting what he wanted. It was one of the reasons he was a great lawyer. He was able to make people believe whatever his version of the truth was.

“I see right through you, Kingston. You have already made your decision, but you’re putting up this fight so that everyone thinks you’re the good guy when you leave us for a second time. Your declaration of love is an attempt to manipulate me, but not this time.”

“Noelani, you are being completely irrational. Nothing about what I’ve done or said is to manipulate you.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“If that’s at all true Kingston, then I’m sure you can make this work with you in Houston and me and the baby here in Taylor Mill. Have a great life in Houston.” I rose from my seat and walked out of the sandwich shop, unsure if I’d ever see Kingston again.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Chapter Nine

June 10th

Trent sat rocking back and forth in the rocking chair next to my bed. “Oh Noelani, she is the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen,” Trent said as he bounced my new daughter around gently. “She has your lips for sure.” I smiled, loving that we had that in common. She had the cutest little nose and perfect hands. Her lips and eyes were all me, but the reddish-brown, super straight hair was courtesy of Kingston. “I’m sorry that her dad didn’t make it witness her birth. He wouldn’t have wanted to go back to Houston if he had.”

“Yeah, me too. Maybe that’s why he didn’t show up.”

“That’s an awful reason to miss such a beautiful arrival.”

The pregnancy had been smooth and simple, nothing at all like I expected.

“His loss, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It is time to get you two out of here and this little princess to her new home.”

“I am ready.”

The nurse walked in with a wheelchair and my discharge papers.

“Alright, Noelani, it’s time to go.” I slipped into the wheelchair, and Trent placed the baby into my arms.

“You’ll be happy to know dad showed up to sign the birth certificate,” she said casually as she pushed me out of the door. Trent and I glanced at each other quickly, but before we could question her, Kingston rounded the corner. He stopped in his tracks when he saw us. He looked disheveled and tired as he looked into my eyes, and I looked away.

“Noelani, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” I was tired of his excuses.

“I know I messed up, but you’re taking things too far.”

I glared at him. “Our child has been here for three days, and you’re just now showing up.”

“That still doesn’t give you the right to list someone else’s name on the birth certificate as the father!”

“What?” Trent and I chorused.

“I realize I was wrong for not being here, but this?”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Sir, we’re going to have to ask you to keep it down.”

Kingston looked furious as he began pacing. I looked up at the nurse. “What is he talking about?”

“I think I can explain.” All eyes fell on Kendi as he joined us in the hall.

“Kendi?”

“Noelani.”

“How’d you know I was here?”

“I was on a call with Mr. Blake, and he mentioned that you were in the hospital. I called to check on you and to make sure you had everything you needed and,” he looked down at the floor, “to make sure you weren’t alone. The nurse told me Trent was with you, so I asked them to give him my number.” I glanced up at Trent, who wore a smirk like he was proud of the role he’d played. “He assured me that you were well taken care of, but that her dad hadn’t shown up,” he glared at Kingston. “I knew I wanted to be that for her, but out of respect, I waited. I allowed this selfish bastard to step up. But by day three, I got on a plane and came for my daughter.”

“That’s absurd! You can’t do that!”

“But I did,” Kendi said, glaring at him.

“I’m a lawyer, and I will fight you on this!”

“I guess we’ll see you in court.” Kendi didn’t flinch.

Kingston looked as if he wanted to say something but chose to storm off, leaving the five of us in silence.

“Noelani, we’ll give you two a moment,” Trent said.

When we were alone, I looked at Kendi and waited for understanding. He’d signed to be my daughter’s father, but I didn’t understand what that meant for us if anything,

“I knew that you were going to be a beautiful mother.”

My heart fluttered. “Thank you.”

“You don’t seem happy to see me.”

“I am. I just don’t understand what’s happening here.”

“It looks like you, and I now have a child together.”

My heart jumped at the sound of that, but it wasn’t real.

“Noelani, you deserve to be happy, and I’m here to make sure you are.”

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“You live in London, and I live here. And despite what’s on the birth certificate Kingston is her father. He will fight you on that.”

“I hope he does.” Kendi came to kneel in front of me. “I’ve lived all over the world, but nowhere has made me feel like home as much as being here in Taylor Mill. I don’t have a house or family here, nor friends, but yet it feels the most like home, and that’s because I found you here. I found love in you, and home is where the heart is.” The baby started to whimper, and I was sure it was because mommy’s body was trembling.

“Can I?” Kendi reached out his hands to me, and I nodded carefully, handing him the baby.

“Meet Noel Kingsley.”

“She is absolutely perfect.”

My eyes filled with tears as Noel opened her eyes to meet Kendi for the first time.

“What do you say, would you and mommy like to become my family?” Noel squirmed in his arms. “Mommy, I think that’s a yes.”

“I knew she was a smart girl,” I teased. Kendi placed Noel back into my arms and kissed me.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

Epilogue

December 24th one year later

Kendi and I walked into the Blake hotel that was now the Royal Mazhani and was greeted by the familiar massive silver and gold Christmas tree. The staff and guests were gathered in the lobby toasting eggnog and apple cider as everyone displayed their ugly Christmas sweaters per the hotel's Christmas Eve tradition.

"Merry Christmas!" I yelled as we stepped in, and everyone turned in our direction. Kendi held Noel, who babbled as she eyed the large tree. I hugged Bri first, then Trent who held me tightly. We'd just returned from a two month trip to Nigeria, and London as Kendi tied up loose ends.

"I missed you, my friend," Trent said as he pulled away from me. "And look at Noel; she's gotten so big and even more beautiful."

"We missed you too. Now we are back and don't plan to leave anytime soon." Trent pulled me back into a hug.

"I have so much to tell you."

"We have plenty of time to catch up later."

"You're right. I need this time to bond with my niece," he said, grabbing Noel from Kendi after hugging him.

"The tree looks amazing," I said to no one in particular.

"We remembered exactly how you liked it," Bri said, as she made funny faces at Noel.

"Bri, that is one ugly sweater," Kendi teased.

"Thank you. I try," she countered between laughs

"Is that Noelani, I see?" Mr. Blake asked as he made his way to us.

After speaking with Mr. Blake, he'd explained to me that the younger Blake family members had no desire to take over the hotel business. Mr. and Mrs. Blake were getting older and wanted to spend more time traveling and less time working. When Kendi made him an offer he couldn't refuse he'd discussed things with his family, and they'd decided that it would be the best move for them all. Mr. Blake had agreed once Kendi had explained that the hotel would become part of the Royal Mazhani chain and would provide more jobs for the town.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“Mr. Blake, what are you doing here? I thought you and the Mrs. would be off vacationing somewhere warm this Christmas.”

“There is no place warm or cold that could keep me away from Taylor Mill at Christmas,” he said, shaking Kendi’s hand.

“We couldn’t agree with you more.”

My eyes widened in shock at the sound of my dad’s voice. “Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?” I asked as I ran to hug them both.

“Did you really think we would miss our granddaughters first Christmas?” My dad asked.

“Your dad has been planning this trip since we found out you were pregnant.”

I hugged my dad tightly. “This is the best Christmas ever. Kendi, I’d like to introduce you to my parents. This is my mom Delores and my dad James.”

Both Parents hugged Kendi as Noel bounced into my mom’s arms. The image made me feel complete.

“It feels like we already know you,” my dad said. They’d talked and faced time since we’d started dating. They wanted to make sure that Noel knew who they were, and it appeared to work as she bounced around in my mom’s arms.

“I’ll be right back,” Kendi said as he took off toward the front desk.

“How are things with you and Kingston?” My mom asked.

“You know, things are good. He’s still in Houston, and he sees Noel when he can.”

“I’m glad he came to his senses. It’s just too bad it took Kendi stepping up to make him do it.”

“I’m just glad for Noel’s sake that she has her dad and Kendi in her life. She’s one lucky girl.” The blurring sound of Christmas music cut our conversation short as everyone looked around to see what was happening.

“I don’t want a lot for Christmas.”

“There is just one thing I need.”

“And I don’t care about the presents.”

“Underneath the Christmas tree.”

I gasped when I heard Kendi and Trent singing off-key, my favorite Christmas song. It was pure perfection as they danced around the Christmas tree and the crowd cheered.

I FOUND LOVE IN YOU

“I don’t need to hang my stocking.”

“Thereupon, the fireplace.”

“Santa Claus won’t make me happy.”

“With a toy on Christmas Day,” they continued.

“I just want you for my own, more than you could ever know, make my wish come true, all I want for Christmas is you. You, baby,” Kendi ended, pointing at me. “Noelani, princess of Christmas, will you marry me?” he asked, getting down on one knee in front of the Christmas tree. I covered my face with my hands laughing hysterically.

“He’s your African prince Noelani!” Trent yelled.

I ran to him and fell into his arms. “Yes!”

“Merry Christmas, baby.”

The Christmas Princess & The African Prince

The End