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The Introduction

The breakup was bad. I mean the kind of I-can't-help-but-gasp-at-the-mere-passing-thought-of-his-name-much-less-an-entire-intentionally-cultivated-thought bad. Yep, that kind of bad.

There was no solace from the breakup. None. My ex had fully left his stamp on my Washington State-located heart. From sharing Pike Place doughnuts to taking the ferry for day trips across the cool waters of the Pacific, he had toured the village of my life and inexplicably had the nerve to find it lacking in amenities, like a spa that forgot to have a cold plunge pool yet had everything else under the sun, and that in the highest of qualities, but greedy consumers still gave it three and a half stars. You know the reviews: *While it has everything one could want in a spa, it lacks a cold plunge pool.* Really? That's what he said. I was the kind of woman he wanted because I was everything a man could want, but...I wasn't?

We met at one of those odd intersections in Seattle with a coffee shop at each of its four corners. I was looking for a shorter line—they were all long—and had decided to take my not-so-coffee-shop-loyal self and go wait with the folks at Seattle's Best. That caused a problem for me, though. Their hot chocolate with that stick of chocolate on top would derail my very loosely developed weight loss campaign. You know, I was sorta-

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kinda trying to lose a pound or maybe two when I needed to lose maybe 20? Well, I hopped myself in line behind a perky Latina beauty yakking on her phone early in the morning, doing my mental jumps between hot tea and hot chocolate. While I was busy trying to convince myself of the health benefits of tea versus the antioxidant, hip-building benefits of chocolate, someone walked up behind me, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "Excuse me, Ma'am? Is this the end of the line?"

"Yes, it is," I said without turning around. I'm not really a morning person and did not want to convince the man with the sexy drawl to start a conversation that I knew I wasn't mentally prepared to navigate. The only reason I was up so early that morning was because I had a flight later that day and needed to finish something for a client before leaving for a much-needed vacation.

Another tap. "How long have you been waiting?" he asked.

"A minute or two," I said, turning around, deciding to call on the manners taught to me by my parents and further cultivated through many client interactions.

"Thank you," he smilingly replied, showcasing a set of pearly whites that even my orthodontist would have envied. He was darned good looking, too. Even my half-asleep mind took note of this.

"You're welcome."

"Do they have good coffee?"

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I'm really not swayed by good looks early in the morning. My brain spends a bit too much time waking up for looks to be something to consider. Yet, this particular morning, my brain seemed to be cranking up a little sooner than normal.

"I don't know. I'm a tea drinker."

"Oh. Tea, huh?"

Yes, he was going to keep talking.

"Yep."

"I'm new to Seattle. How long have you been here?"

"Hmm. I've been here for seven years."

"I gathered from your accent that you were not local."

"No, I'm from Florida," I responded. The line was moving, but I was still about ten people deep from clearing the shop's entrance door. This conversation was going to continue. *Why can't he be good looking and quiet?*

"I'm from Alexandria, Virginia."

"The DMV. Nice." That's the abbreviation given by those who live in DC-Maryland-Virginia metropolitan area.

"Yes, it is."

"Well, I hope you enjoy Seattle."

"I will, if I meet some friends."

"I'm sure you will."

"My name is Dexter Reed," he said, holding out his hand for a shake.

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Inwardly, I took a deep sigh. “My name is Aubrey Sanders.” I shook his hand, releasing it quickly.

“Ms. Sanders, a pleasure,” he responded.

“Likewise, Mr. Reed.”

“My friends call me Dex or Reed.”

“Okay.”

He raised an eyebrow at me, like I was supposed to reciprocate and tell him to call me something besides Ms. Sanders. *No, you need to call me Ms. Sanders, thank you very much!*

“Well, Ms. Sanders. It looks like they have opened another register, and your time is near.”

“Thank God!”

“Not much of a morning person, huh?”

“Does it show that well?”

He laughed. “Only when you squint your eye before speaking, like you’re trying to squeeze out a thought.”

“Really? Did you just make a joke at my expense? It’s going to be hard to meet those friends you’re whining about, if you keep that up.” Honestly, my family and friends had told me that about a million times, so the fact that he had picked up on that was interesting. *An observant brother*, I remember thinking.

“My apologies then. I wouldn’t want the half-sleepy Ms. Sanders to mark me off her list of potential friends before I could ask for her number.”

“You ain’t even slick.”

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“I’m not trying to be “slick”. I’m trying to ask for your number. May I have your number, please? One shouldn’t be sleepy or lonely in Seattle.”

I rolled my eyes, while reaching into my handbag for a business card. I may have been sleepy, but I wasn’t crazy. Reed was good looking, funny, well-dressed, and apparently, good at what he did if the tailored suit and hand-stitched shoes were anything to go by. Again, I was sleepy but not so sleepy that my mind did not wonder about this fine chocolate brother!

“Thank you,” he said after accepting my card. He pulled out his telephone, tapped in the numbers on the card, and immediately called my telephone.

I slipped the phone out of my handbag’s side pocket, looked at his number, and saved his contact info.

“I’ll call you later, okay?” he said.

“Okay.”

“Please. Let me purchase your tea since I woke you up.”

“Are you kidding me? So, I’m not a morning person. Some people shouldn’t talk so much in the mornings. Have you ever thought about that?”

“No. I’m a morning person. So, what will you have?”

“I’m having the largest hot chai tea latte, with a cinnamon roll.”

“Okay.” He placed my order with his. We retrieved the drinks when they were ready and walked to the corner.

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“Thank you for breakfast, Reed.”

“Ms. Sanders, you are most welcome. I’ll call later today.”

“Hmm. Have a great day.”

“Don’t say “Hmm” like that. I will call you.”

“Bye!”

“Have a lovely day, Ms. Aubrey Sanders.”

I walked away in the opposite direction from him, sipping my delicious drink, and thinking about the very unusual start to the day.

Around 2PM, my phone rang while I was reviewing a file. I looked at my phone, and it was Reed. I smiled. He had called. While I had been quite busy that day, I had still thought about his promise to call. I answered on the second ring. That began something that I thought was beautiful, but apparently, it was only the three and a half stars kind of beautiful.

Aruba

Before leaving for blue skies and the clear-to-the-bottom oceans of the Caribbean, I double-checked with my cell phone provider to confirm that my international plan was active. While I was going to be out of the country on vacation, I was really going to be out of the country while working.

My business partner and I owned an architectural firm. We both left the groups we had joined upon arrival in Seattle and started our own business. It was growing like the weed selections in a Colorado pot café—all sundry kinds of clients with all sundry kinds of reasons for needing our services. The growth was good, but like weed, it had its side effects, too. We worked lots of hours. Our internal team and contractors worked lots of hours. I simply needed to get out of town and breathe for like an entire ten seconds without someone saying, “Aubrey, can you...?”

Patricia “Trish” James (née Jarrett) is my business partner and best bud, all rolled into one. We met at a local mixer because each of our previous employers thought it would be good for the “new” team members to meet other architects in the area. I went. She went. We were the lone two black women at a Pacific Northwest mixer for architects. So, we exchanged numbers, met up for dinner one evening, and became fast friends. When we both grew tired of professional

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immobility in our respective firms, we decided to start our own firm. That's how we got JS Architects & Design.

At first, it was "interesting" to get folks to understand that Two Black Women (TBW is our code for when we see the look of surprise on folks' faces when they meet us) knew a bit of something about architecture and design. We excelled at both. We were AIA members and proud card-carrying members of NOMA – the National Organization of Minority Architects.

We got the break we needed when a pediatrician in Bellevue loved our proposed design. We got it done on time and within budget. He spread the word about the excellent service he received, and it's been busy since then. Helped a whole lot, I admit, that his pockets were deep, so his offices were in a prime viewing location, and we were able to be creative. Great advertisement for us, for sure.

Well, Trish was finally back from maternity leave, so it was my turn for a break. Yes, she worked from home during leave. We limited her hours by hiring a senior architect who could hit the ground running, but she was the primary on a couple of major projects, so baby or not, she had to be available for at least part of the day. Her husband, Gregory, ran a lucrative software development business from home. She had help, so it wasn't too bad.

"Aubrey," Trish said from the doorway as I was packing up my laptop.

"Yeah, Trish?" I didn't look up because if I did I

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would lose track of time and miss my flight.

“Aubrey, do not turn on that laptop for at least two days. Get some sleep.”

I peeked at her from underneath my lashes, clear disbelief on my face at her suggestion.

“Trish, you know that I can’t take off two whole days.”

“Yes, you can. We’ve got this. Get some rest. This will all be here when you get back. It’s not like you’re going to be completely unavailable the entire time. We can manage a couple of days, though, to at least allow you some time away from work.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t “hmm” me. I’m serious.”

“All right. I’m taking you up on that. I’ll be on Wednesday’s staff call, though.”

“Sounds good. Have a great time. Text me when you get in.”

I grabbed my belongings, gave her a hug, and hightailed it out of there.

Oh? You want to know about the phone call that I had with Reed, don’t you? Okay.

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“This is Aubrey,” I said, answering his call.

“Ms. Sanders, this is Dexter Reed.”

“Yes, I see that on my phone. How are you?”

“I’m doing well. I take it that you are having a

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great day?"

"I am. A very busy day, though. Of course, each day here is busy."

"Your card shows that you're an architect. Impressive."

"Hmm."

"What's the "hmm" for?" he asked.

"Thinking about your "impressive"."

"Well, it is impressive. I understand that the exams are rather comprehensive. That is impressive."

"Thank you. I definitely earned the title. So, how's your day going?"

"Well. I'm adjusting to my new role."

"What's that?"

"I'm the new VP for West Coast Operations for a railroad consulting firm."

"Sounds interesting."

"But not impressive, huh?" he joked.

"Aren't all consultants impressive?" I countered.

"Sass, too?"

"Wouldn't be any fun otherwise, would it?"

"Most definitely not, Ms. Sanders."

I said nothing, deciding to let him take this where he wanted since he made the call. No need to get ahead of myself or of him.

"Ms. Sanders?"

"Yes?"

"I'd like to take you out. Are you available later this week?"

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“Actually, I am getting ready to leave the country for vacation.”

“Oh, where are you going, and when will you return?”

“I’m going to Aruba. I’ll return in a couple of weeks.”

“Well, I would love the pleasure of your company for lunch or dinner—your call—upon your return?”

“Why don’t you text me next week, and we’ll see how things are?”

“I most certainly will.”

“Check the time difference, and be sure it’s after 10AM.”

“Ms. Sleepyhead, I will do that.”

“Reed?”

“Yes?”

“Please. Call me Aubrey.”

“Well, Aubrey. Have a great vacation. I’ll message you next week.”

“Okay. Have a great weekend.”

“You, too. Be safe, and have fun.”

“Thank you.”

I tapped the red button my phone, spun around in my office chair, and wiggled my toes.

“Well, that ain’t bad, Ms. Sanders. Not bad at all,” I told myself.

“What ain’t that bad?” asked Trish, walking into my office, dressed to the nines in a gray light wool dress showing all her post-baby hips, which she is absolutely

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enjoying since she was tall and thin before the baby. Now, she is tall, and not quite so thin with curves. Curves, that according to her, were keeping “Greg up all hours of the night working on baby number two.” Sometimes, she tells me too much.

“Your girl met this fine, delicious, tall, chocolate man while in line this morning for tea. He called and asked me out.”

“What did you say?” she inquired.

“I told him that I was going out of the country and that he should text me to settle the details for when I return.”

Trish leaned over, lifting her hand to high-five me.

“Played well, my girl. Played well.”

“Ah, there really was no other way to play it? I *am* going out of the country.”

“Yes, but how very convenient. That’s instant anticipation.”

“You are right,” I smilingly told her. “You are definitely right, my friend.”

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My villa was spacious and faced the ocean. It was a joy to wake up and walk out on the balcony and take in the clear waters. It was also nice to be in dry weather. While I had adjusted to the Seattle climate, I missed the sunshine of my native Florida. Aruba was just what the

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vacation doctor ordered.

After landing and picking up my car the first day, I had sent the required texts to family and friends about my safe arrival. I had completed some shopping at one of the local large grocery stores before going to my resort, checking in, and crashing.

The second afternoon, I went down to spend some time on the beach. The waters of Aruba are warm, clear, inviting, and beautiful. I loved to swim, and Aruba was a swimmer's paradise. One could go far out and still stand, making it pleasurable to stroke back towards the shore.

I cooked an early seafood dinner and crashed again. My body was trying to catch up on the sleep it had missed while Trish had been out on leave. I was *exhausted*. That pattern repeated for the next couple of days.

Wednesday dawned with the required cloudless vacation skies. I puttered around in the villa's well-equipped kitchen, cooking a light, but tasty breakfast of scrambled eggs, chicken sausage, and hash browns. While eating, I took some time to review some files in preparation for that afternoon's staff meeting. Seattle was three hours behind Aruba, so that allowed me a bit of time before the two o'clock session.

Ping! rang the text message notification on my phone. I glanced down to see who was trying to reach me. Reed's name flashed on the screen.

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Reed: Good morning, Ms. Sanders.

Me: Good morning, Mr. Reed.

Reed: I thought I'd check to ensure you arrived safely.

Me: Well, I've been here a few days. And, yes, I made it here safely.

Reed: I figured you would need a few days to yourself. How's your vacation going?

Me: Going well. Catching up on sleep

Reed: That's gotta be a good thing for the squinting

Me: Oh, you gon' run the play like that, huh? Remind me to introduce you to Russell.

Reed: Russell who?

Me: Wilson. He needs a new running back since Marshawn's gone.

Reed: Ha! Know something about football?

Me: That, I do.

Reed: Favorite team?

Me: Seahawks.

Reed: Florida has three teams. Why not one of them?

Me: Don't ask the hard questions! Your favorite team?

Reed: Cowboys.

Me: What no Redskins or Ravens? And, you're from the DMV. "Fake News" and "Fake Fans"?

Reed: Whatever! ROTFL

Me: Uh huh!

Reed: So, how do you plan to spend this tropical vacation, aside from sleeping?

Me: Swimming, beach hopping, relaxing, and working.

Reed: Working vacation?

Me: Yes. We have several large projects going on, so while I'm out of the country, I'm still working. Just in a nicer spot!

Reed: Well, I must admit not a bad place from which to work.

Me: I do agree.

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Reed: Well, I'm getting ready to leave out for work.
Enjoy your day.
Me: Do the same.

I closed the messaging app, thinking about the exchange. Reed had a good sense of humor. This could turn out to be very interesting. Little did I know just how interesting things would get.

@@@@@

A couple of days later during the early evening, I heard the message notification again. Reed, again.

Reed: Hi, Aubrey.
Me: Hi, Reed.
Reed: So, I'm writing to see if you know more about your schedule upon your return.
Me: Yes, I know a bit more.
Reed: Well, what's a good day for lunch or dinner?
Me: The Wednesday after next is great for lunch.
Reed: Give me a sec to check my calendar.
Me: Okay.
Reed: Okay. That looks fine for me. How is 12:30?
Me: 12:30 is fine.
Reed: I'll let you know where. Your offices aren't far from mine. I can meet you at your building, and we can walk, if that works?
Me: That works.
Reed: I saw your profile on LinkedIn. You've been busy.
Me: Oh. Yes, I have.
Reed: I sent you a connection invitation.
Me: Okay.

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Reed: Aubrey, I've got a meeting coming up, so I'm going to have to leave in a bit. Have a good evening.

Me: I will. I think I'm going to drive into town for dinner.

Reed: Be safe.

Me: Will do.

Reed: I'm looking forward to lunch.

Me: Hmm.

Reed: Go ahead. You can say you are, too.

Me: Man, bye!

Reed: Bye, Aubrey

I opened my email. Tapped the invite, and there he was--looking sexier than Idris Elba did on the front cover of *Essence* last month. And that was some kind of sexy. I sighed. I needed to stay focused. No need to get ahead of myself, but still, I peeked at his profile pic one more time. *Dang! That's one good looking man.* I accepted the invitation, and started following Dexter Reed.

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