

## Chapter 1

*"Just got paid...it's Friday night."*

I tapped the button on my steering wheel, silencing the booming base because even though for years this had been my jam every Friday night when I was at Spelman, I was not feelin' the musicality of Johnny Kemp right now. As I rolled into my assigned parking space, I didn't miss that irony.

In college I didn't have any money, but on Friday nights, I sang this song and hunted for parties as if I did. But now....

Maybe part of the problem was that my life was out of sync — like this song. Today was Thursday, not Friday. Maybe that's what was wrong. I was so discombobulated that I couldn't even line my music (or my life) up right.

I turned off the ignition, leaned back in the seat and sighed through my exhaustion, remembering those college days a decade ago. These days were supposed to be so much better. Ten years out, a full-time job, yet, I hadn't made any kind of real strides in my life. My J.O.B. was truly keeping me just over broke.

Leaning across my seat, I reached for my made-in-China designer tote and paused at the envelope that laid on top. Another sigh eased out of me as I slipped the check from the envelope and paused before I looked at it, as if that hesitation would change the numbers that followed the dollar sign. But when I glanced down, the numbers were the same as they'd been when my boss had given me my commission check earlier. This was money I earned every quarter over my base salary — \$1,557.19.

My best commission check yet and in the office, this was considered more than decent. Still, it was way short of what I'd hoped, so much less than what I'd worked for. This was about a thousand dollars less than what I needed.

Groaning, I slipped the check back into the envelope, then grabbed my tote and slid out of the car, trying to figure out how I was going to make this check stretch so that it could do what I needed this money to do.

If I hadn't had plans for this check, I would've been ready to celebrate. The first time my commission check broke a thousand? Yeah, there would've been a party over here. I may have even gone on a little shopping spree, which for me meant buying more than one item at Marshall's in one visit.

But fifteen hundred dollars was just not enough.

The weight of that felt like shackles on my ankles as I dragged myself to my first floor garden apartment. The only thing I was grateful for as I struggled up the path that was flanked by more dirt than grass was that I didn't have to climb any stairs.

Pushing my key into the lock, I didn't even have a chance to turn it before the door swung open, startling me. Before I could even take a breath, I was swept from my feet.

"Oh," was all I could get out before my mouth was covered — with Stephon's lips.

And when his tongue pressed against mine and we danced that waltz we'd come to know over the past three years, every single care that had tried to take me down and knock me out this week, faded away. Dropping my tote and the check and everything else onto the floor, I wrapped my arms around my boyfriend's neck as he cradled me like a baby, then carried me, stumbling over a couple of paint cans and almost knocking down his easel before we stepped into our bedroom.

By the time he laid me on our queen-size bed, I was ready. That was how it always was with Stephon. He could take me from zero to throttle up with a

glance and a kiss. That was who he was. Forget about whether a woman was black, white, brown — if red pumped through her veins, she was hot for Stephon. Because he had the best of everybody and everything: he had the smoldering eyes of Idris, the sexy smirk of Kofi, the swagger of Morris and just enough gangsta in him like M'Baku (which is the name I would forever call Winston Duke). And then, can I talk about his body? Michael B would come in second to my man. So all I wanted to do was undress him, straddle him, and love him until I forgot that we were on earth. But when I reached for his T-shirt, he pushed my hand away, then pinned my arms above my head.

He straddled me and kissed me again, just so gently. When he eased up for a moment, my breath had already been taken away.

He said, "Tonight, it's all about you. This," he paused and glanced around the bedroom, "is for you."

I followed his glance and for the first time, noticed the candles, even though the softening light of dusk filtered through our bedroom window.

By the time my eyes were back on him, he had already slipped my sweater from my shoulders and unbuttoned my blouse. I blinked twice and he was down to my bra. Just a dozen more blinks and I was naked, on my stomach and the soft

sounds of *Arabesque 1 by Debussy* (I only knew that because of Stephon) played from the dock on the nightstand by his side of the bed. My man did his best work listening to the instrumental tales told through classical music. I closed my eyes and inhaled the fragrance of the lavender almond oil (from the nightstand on my side of the bed) that scented the air.

The moment Stephon's fingertips touched my shoulders, I moaned. And if there was any residual stress inside of me, it melted beneath the hands of my man. When he kneaded his knuckles into my back, I groaned through the pleasure of the pain, breathing in rhythm with him. I had no thoughts, my senses all centered on his touch, his scent as he pressed and plied my skin and my mind to his will. I floated outside of my body, gliding like I was high — my drug: Stephon Smith.

There was no way I would have been able to say how long Stephon massaged me into submission. I slipped into that euphoric state where my body tugged me toward unconsciousness, but I was still aware.

The passage of time...and then, Stephon lay next to me. Even then, so many moments passed before I was able to flex enough muscles to roll over. When I faced him, his brown eyes, his full lips were right in front of me.

I said, "How did you know...."

"That was what you needed?" he asked, completing my thought. And before I could nod, he finished with, "Because on days that end in y, I'm in tune to your every need."

If I weren't already lighthearted, his words would have made me so. And since it *was* one of those days that ended in y, there was something that *I* wanted to do. "Hand me the oil," I said. "Your turn."

When he shook his head, I frowned, or at least, I tried to. I was still so relaxed, the muscles in my face hadn't awakened.

Stephon leaned so close to me that when he spoke, his lips grazed mine. "I don't want a massage," he whispered. "I just want you."

He had just kneaded me into a noodle, and still, I weakened from his words. "I love you," I told him.

"Beyond infinity," he said, before he sealed our love with a kiss that went on and on and on.