

## CHAPTER 1

No matter how many times I had played the scene out in my mind, stepping through the doors of FIRE 107.1 radio station for the first day of my summer internship didn't compare to even my wildest dreams.

Radio and I had history. We went together, kind of like peanut butter and jelly—where you saw one, you saw the other. Although maybe that's a bad analogy since I'm allergic to peanuts. Regardless of that, I hope you get my point. Radio is my thing. It has been since I was a kid and my momma and I used to listen to The Boss in the mornings and *Vera's Village* in the afternoons as we drove to and from school in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. Vera Chapman was like radio-turned-TV talk show host Wendy Williams on steroids.

Those drives seemed to be the only time when I saw my momma happy. We would listen to the old-school jams as she called them, and I fell in love with music from the eighties and nineties. We would sing along to all the songs. I wanted to be able to make her smile that way, and I had declared on my tenth birthday after Vera had done a shout-out to me on the radio, "Momma, when I get big, I'm gonna be on the radio just like Vera."

Momma's eyes had lit up as she looked at me and smiled. "I believe you'll do it too, baby."

That day had stuck with me, and those words had fueled me for most of my sixteen years, and I had been working hard, determined to make my dream come true, especially now that nothing seemed to make Momma happy. The last time I had seen her smile was when I had told her about the internship at FIRE. She had been so excited, she had agreed to go out shopping for a new first-day-of-work outfit then gone to eat with us when my daddy had suggested we celebrate.

Just so we're clear, I have the skills to be on the radio. I was the go-to person to speak at my church whenever the kids had programs. For a long time, I thought it was because my daddy was the pastor, but my freshman year, I had auditioned for the radio station at Grover High School. The program director, Mr. Foster, had said I had a voice made for radio, then promptly asked me to read the morning announcements. I was a little offended at first, but everything in me loved radio, and I wanted to be around it any way I could, even if that meant mopping the floors of Grover's state-of-the-art studio. Luckily for me, I didn't have to do that. Instead, Mr. Foster, who I found out was the radio personality known as The Boss at FIRE back in the day, had become my mentor. At the start of sophomore year, he had promoted me to on-air personality at Grover and strongly encouraged me to apply for the FIRE internship. How had I not known about it?

Once I found out about the internship, there was no question that position had my name on it. I had beat out more than three hundred students for one of two slots.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked, looking at me and rolling her eyes. Something in her tone told me it wasn't the first time she had spoken.

I gave myself a mental shake. *Get it together*, I thought. *Don't blow this chance*. I pasted on my best smile. "Hi. I'm Reagan Davis. I'm the new intern," I said, extending my hand.

She looked at it like I had some kind of disease, rolled her eyes again and grabbed a clipboard with a pen attached. "You need to fill this out," she said.

I swiped my sweaty palm across my curly bun, trying to dry it on the sly, then took the

board and glanced at it, realizing it was the paperwork I had been emailed when I had received my welcome packet. “Oh, I’ve already filled this out,” I said, reaching into my bag and pulling out the huge manila envelope that held my papers. I had made a point of not folding them because Mr. Foster told me it looked more professional if there were no wrinkles on the pages.

For a brief second, I thought I saw respect fill the receptionist’s eyes, but it happened so fast I couldn’t be sure.

“Someone will be with you in a minute,” she said.

I adjusted the skirt of my new khaki suit before I sat down, telling myself to breathe as I took in the huge posters on the walls of all the radio personalities whose faces I recognized from their various social media platforms and the events they did around the city.

Mr. Foster had left FIRE years ago because he said his true passion was teaching kids about radio, and he had been replaced by a guy named Rizzo Burns, who I personally thought was pretty boring. Although I still enjoyed Vera in the afternoons, I had started listening to the FIRE’s rival station, FAN 99.1, most mornings when I drove to school in the black Nissan Sentra I had gotten a few months ago for my sixteenth birthday. They tended to play more current hits, but the morning host was really good.

I thought about checking my phone to see if I had gotten any messages, but Mr. Foster had told me when I stepped through the doors at FIRE to be professional because whether I knew it or not, everyone was watching me.

I made a mental note to remember everything that happened so I could tell my momma who had been so excited, she had come out of her room and made me pancakes and sausage for breakfast, knowing they were my favorites. She had even packed me a sandwich for lunch before kissing me on the forehead and telling me she would be listening for me on the radio. I didn’t bother telling her that wasn’t going to happen—at least according to Mr. Foster.

Thinking about my momma these days only made me sad. For the last few months, she spent more time locked in her room than she did anywhere. I sighed and reached for my phone out of habit, and my cheeks started to burn when I realized I had been staring at the receptionist—at least I think I had been staring at her based on the way she was rolling her eyes and neck at me like I had stolen her last dollar. Before I could apologize, the glass door leading to the radio studios opened.

“Reagan Davis?” a guy in khakis and a blue polo shirt called.

Since I was the only one in the room, it was pretty obvious who I was. “Here,” I said and cleared my throat. I couldn’t believe this was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I sounded like I was answering roll call in class. Talk about a horrible first impression. I had messed up with the receptionist and now with someone else. I grabbed my belongings and quickly walked over to him, my mind racing as I tried to figure out how to make a better second impression.

“Good morning,” I said, giving him a firm handshake and looking him dead in the eye. “I’m Reagan Davis. It’s nice to meet you.”

He looked at me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and grinned at me while I tried my best not to grin back. Did I mention he was fine? Now wasn’t the time for me to be paying attention to that. As much as I tried to tell myself not to, I couldn’t help but check him out as he

spoke into a wireless headset he was wearing. I figured he was the other intern. He looked maybe about sixteen like me and was about five-ten, a few inches taller than my five-five height, and his skin was the color of hot chocolate with just a hint of milk.

I have always loved hot chocolate...

I shook my head. *Get it together, Reagan.*

“So you’re not here for the internship?” he asked me, looking confused.

I frowned, wondering what he was talking about. “I’m not?” I’m sure my expression mirrored his.

He laughed. “Why don’t we start over?” he said, extending his hand again. “I’m Jayden—Jayden Culpepper.”

I shook his hand. “Nice to meet you, Jayden.”

“I’m surprised you’re here so early. You’re not supposed to be here until nine.”

“I know,” I said, “but I wanted to make sure I was on time.”

“You definitely are,” he joked.

I felt my cheeks heating up in embarrassment. Lucky for me my brown skin was dark enough to hide it. “Sorry,” I mumbled, wondering if I looked too eager.

He smiled at me, and I thought I would melt. He had the straightest white teeth I had ever seen and this cute dimple in his right cheek. “Nothing to be sorry about. Just take a deep breath and relax. You’re going to be fine.”

“Thanks,” I said, hoping he was right.

We made our way through the corridors, passing a lounge area on one side and a radio studio on the other where I saw a couple of people sitting around talking. I assumed it was Rizzo Burns, Fire’s early morning host, and his crew. He looked different in person, but the way his mouth was moving matched the words I was hearing from the overhead speakers throughout the building.

We finally stopped in front of what looked like a break room with a snack and soda machine as well as a table and a few chairs, a microwave and a Keurig coffee machine on a counter and several sleeves of Styrofoam cups.

“You’ll be meeting with our operations director, Ms. Nelson, who oversees the interns. I think the marketing director, promotions manager and maybe the programming director will also be there,” he said. “It might be an hour or so before that happens. I can hang out with you for a little while, then I have a few things I need to do, but the other intern should be here soon.”

“Oh, you’re not the other intern?”

He laughed. “No,” he said.

I waited for him to say more, and when he didn’t, I nodded, trying to think of something to say. I was saved when a few people came in back to back to make coffee and warm up stuff in the microwave. I said hello, asked Jayden where the bathroom was, then headed out to get myself together before I met with the big bosses.

When I came back, Jayden was talking to someone different. Based on what they were talking about, I figured Jayden had worked at the station for a while.

“So how long have you worked here?” I asked when the room was finally empty.

“Only a few months,” he said, “but I’ve been around this place for as long as I remember.”

“Really?” I asked. “How?”

He stared at his shoes, then glanced at me. “My dad is the programming director,” he admitted.

“Your dad is Samuel Wright?” I asked a little too loud.

Mr. Foster talked about Samuel Wright all the time. They had been best friends since college when they had pledged Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. together at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, and Mr. Foster joked all the time that if he told me some of the trouble they had gotten into back then, he would have to kill me to make sure I didn’t tell anyone.

“Yeah, he is,” Jayden said.

I frowned, thinking back to when he had introduced himself. “But I thought you said your last name is Culpepper,” I said.

He shrugged. “My mom gave me her last name too. On my birth certificate, it’s hyphenated Culpepper-Wright. I never use that because it sounds weird,” he said. “Besides, I can hide the fact that my dad and I are related if I don’t use Wright.”

“Oh,” I said, not sure what else to say. Being around him suddenly had me nervous again. Would he tell his dad about my first conversation with him?

“There’s nothing for you to worry about,” he said.

I gave a nervous laugh. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Has anyone ever told you your face shows your emotions?” he asked. “You were just wondering what I was going to say to my dad about you.”

“Was I that obvious?” I asked, looking at the floor and blushing.

He grinned, and the dimple showed up again. “Yup. Like I said, your face shows your emotions. Seriously, Reagan, you don’t have anything to worry about. I’m not the kind of guy who goes running to his daddy about every little thing. I work hard around here. I think I’ve done a good job of earning people’s respect. Just come here and do your job. That’s something my dad told me a long time ago, and since I’ve started working here, I’ve found that it’s true. A lot of people probably don’t even realize we’re related. It’s not like I go around broadcasting it.”

“So why did you tell me?” I asked.

He looked at me, and I couldn’t help but blush. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I just felt like I could share it with you and you wouldn’t judge me because of it.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” I said.

“So now you have to tell me a secret,” he said, turning a chair around and straddling it.

“Boy, I don’t know you like that,” I said.

“Oh, come on. You know you want to tell me something.” He grinned, and I couldn’t help but grin too. I couldn’t explain it, but there was something about Jayden that made me want to tell him everything.

“Well,” I said, dragging the word out like it had several syllables.

He leaned in closer, his gaze just taking me in. It felt like we were the only ones in the world.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he said, and I blushed. No one had ever said that to me before.

I looked at my eyes in the mirror every day, and there wasn't anything extraordinary about them. I mean they were dark brown, the same color as lots of people I knew.

"Thank you," I said. "So do you." His eyes really were great. They were this color I really couldn't explain because it changed depending on how the light hit them. At the moment, they were the color of caramel. "I—I thought you had work to do." I felt the need to change the subject.

"I can hang out a few more minutes," he said.

"So what school do you attend?"

"I'm about to start my junior year at Tate Academy," he said.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "I should have known you were one of them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Tate Academy was a private school off Lakeshore Parkway in Birmingham, and the kids who attended had a reputation of being rich and spoiled.

"You know the reputation y'all have," I said.

"Not everyone there is that way," he said.

"Of course you wouldn't think so. You're one of them."

"You really can't talk, Miss Grover High School."

It was no secret Grover was a school for the top smart kids in Birmingham. We actually had to pass a test to get in. We were also rivals with Tate Academy.

"I guess you're right," I said. We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"I won't hold the school you attend against you if you don't hold the one I attend against me," he said.

"Deal," I said, sticking out my hand for him to shake.

I tried not to focus too much on how good his hand felt in mine and how well our hands fit together. I ignored this as something struck me.

"How did you know I attended Grover?" I asked.

"You just had that look," he said.

I stared at him, refusing to blink so he knew I didn't believe a word he was saying.

"Fine," he said. "Maybe I snuck a look at your paperwork while you were in the bathroom."

I popped him on the arm. "So you're nose too," I said.

"I wouldn't have to be if you talked to me. Speaking of which, you haven't told me your secret," he said.

"I was hoping you had forgotten about that," I said. "Are you sure you don't have work to do?"

"I will as soon as you tell me your secret," he said.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope," he said.

I took a deep breath, not believing what I was going to admit. "My teacher at school is best friends with your dad. He recommended me for the job," I said.

"That's it?" he asked, looking disappointed.

"I just admitted I had help getting this internship, and all you have to say is that's it?"

"My dad told me a long time ago that it's not what you know, it's who you know," he said,

shrugging.

His words made me feel a little better, but it didn't stop all the guilt I was feeling about how I had gotten my position. I hadn't even told my momma about Mr. Foster putting in a good word for me. I had mentioned it to my daddy, and he told me the same thing Jayden had just said, but I really thought he was saying it to make me feel better. "I've heard my dad say that too," I admitted, realizing how much Jayden reminded me of Daddy.

"It's true. Plus, once you meet my dad, you'll know he isn't going to give you a job unless he thinks you deserve it. He had to have seen some potential in you for him to offer you an internship. Even I had to interview for a position here."

"You did?" I said, my eyes growing wide.

"I know. I thought he was joking when he first told me," he said, shaking his head.

"I would have thought the same thing."

"I came to my interview wearing jeans and a t-shirt. My dad made me go home and change. He told me this was a real job, and I needed to act like I appreciated it."

I got a mental image of Jayden showing up for an interview like he was going to hang out with friends and cracked up.

Jayden's phone chirped, alerting him he had a message, and he glanced at it, which made me look at the clock. We had been talking for almost thirty minutes. "Speaking of job, I need to get to work. Someone is waiting for me up front," he said.

I assumed he meant the reception area. I hid my disappointment that the conversation was about to end by glancing at the floor and pushing a stray hair behind my ear. "So what exactly are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm mainly the office assistant. His real one is on maternity leave for the summer. I've also been helping with social media. We can talk more about it later," he said. "Seriously, don't worry about Uncle Darryl."

I scrunched my face, wondering who he was talking about. "Who's Uncle Darryl?" I asked.

"Darryl Foster. You call him Mr. Foster. He and my dad may as well be brothers, so I call him Uncle Darryl."

"Got it," I said.

"Your secret is safe with me about him giving you a recommendation," he said, almost bumping into a girl who looked to be our age as he walked out the door as she was walking in.

I wondered if she had heard, but she was so busy typing on her cell phone, I doubted it.

"Hey," she said, and when she looked up, I recognized her immediately. "I'm Avery Davis. I'm here for the internship."

"Oh, I'm Jayden. I was just coming to get you," he said. "How'd you get back here?"

"Someone let me in. Is it okay if I get something to drink?" she asked, pointing at the Keurig machine.

Jayden nodded.

I wondered if he was as surprised as I was that Avery didn't wait for someone to come get her, but he didn't seem to think it was a big deal.

"Well, I guess I can get back to work," he said. "I'll see you guys later."

“Oh you definitely will,” Avery said.

Avery would be a senior at Grover in the fall. We had taken business and finance last year, and I had gotten stuck sitting behind her because we have the same last name. She seemed pretty stuck-up.

I couldn't explain it, but there was something about her I didn't like. Despite that, I couldn't lie. She was cute. I guess most guys would call her fine. She was petite and reminded me of the actress Zendaya. I guess she was trying to change her image for the job, which wasn't a good thing. At school she always had on really nice outfits. For work, she had on some tight pants and a fitted t-shirt, both of which showed her shape a little too much, and her heels were so high, I wondered how she was able to walk in them. She had on so much perfume, scented lotion or whatever she had put on that I had to hold my breath a couple of times when she was nearby. Her hair and makeup looked really good though.

“So are you the other intern?” Avery asked.

Obviously she didn't recognize me from school, and I didn't remind her.

I nodded, reaching for my purse and pulling out a compact. She made me feel like I needed to up my hair and makeup game. Those things weren't high on my priority list since I was so focused on building my radio résumé. Besides, it's not like people would see my face when I was on the air.

“Oh, you can't talk now? You had plenty to say when Jayden was in here,” she said.

I wasn't sure if it was her words or her tone that caused a knot to form in the pit of my stomach. I looked at her, and she smiled. My worst fears were confirmed when she blew on her coffee, and right before taking a sip said, “Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me too.”

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