

The Pledge by Chandra Sparks Splond

Chapter 1

Adrenaline fueled me, and I sucked in a calming breath before running at full speed toward the Astroturf, clapping and grooving to the beat as I got into formation for our homecoming halftime show.

I quickly scanned the crowd, searching for my own personal cheering squad—my mother; my little sister, Cory Murphy; my best friend Sabrina Davis and some of the members of my celibacy club Worth the Wait. As usual, my dad was nowhere to be found.

“Go, Courtland,” someone yelled, and the grin I had pasted on my face grew wider, even though I didn’t think that was possible. I threw them a wink since I was forbidden from waving then blocked everything out in order to do our routine.

The music started, and I did a mental countdown, then we launched into a series of flips and stunts unlike anything our school had ever seen.

It was my junior year, and as co-captain, I was determined to show the student body of Grover High School in Birmingham, Alabama, this year’s cheerleading squad was going to be different. In the past, squads did these regimented, boring routines that had people in the stands yawning and looking at their watches, ready to get back to the game.

After we had been elected co-captains, my teammate Candy Harris and I along with our new squad advisor, Coach Wilkins, had agreed it was time for something new. In addition to funky routines, we had decided to compete in regionals, and if we won there, we were gonna try and make it to the national competition in Orlando. We were gonna bring it like it had never been brought before, just like that black squad on that movie *Bring It On*, only better.

When the beat of Chris Brown’s latest remix featuring Timbaland filled the packed gymnasium, Candy and I grinned at each other when we saw the audience members look up in surprise.

We started breaking it down, and the crowd jumped to its feet, cheering us on. The song faded out, and we launched into the cheerleading portion of our routine, doing chants and toe touches that had people slapping high-fives at our creativity.

I mentally prepared myself for my backflip, which would land me on top of a five-person pyramid. When a roar ran through the crowd, I made the mistake of looking up just as my secret crush, basketball phenom and star forward Allen Benson, started working the stands, slapping hands and bumping shoulders with everyone within his reach.

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I took in his neat cornrows, the sexy tattoo on his bicep and dimpled smile just as I took off running. Before I could stop myself, I tripped and went rolling like a bowling ball into my teammates, toppling the well-constructed pyramid.

Oooh, the crowd groaned.

By the time I was helped up from the bottom of the pile, laughter surrounded me and my brown face was tinged with embarrassment. I had never been so mortified in all my sixteen years.

I tried to smile and keep eye contact with the crowd, but my face was flaming, and it seemed like Allen was looking right at me.

I tugged at my short cheerleader skirt, trying to cover my thighs, then reminded myself I wasn't the overweight girl I had been two years ago, which still didn't help my embarrassment.

As we were heading back to the locker room, I immediately started apologizing.

"I'm sorry, guys," I said. "I don't know what happened."

"You should be," Rene White said. She was my least favorite squad member because she always found the negative in everything. "Obviously you didn't know the routine as well as you thought you did. You had us out there looking crazy. I can't believe you're gonna be co-captain. You can't lead yourself. How are you gonna help lead a squad?"

I started to roll my eyes at her, but changed my mind when I saw our team adviser, Coach Wilkins, headed our way.

"Give her a break," Candy said. "Accidents happen." I knew she was just trying to be nice. I saw the disappointment in her eyes, even though she looked away to try and hide it.

"Yeah, you'd have messed up too if you were about to do a back flip and Allen Benson walked in," one of the other squad members said.

A few of the girls laughed, and I tried to join in, but I knew I was faking.

We made our way back to the sideline just as our archenemies, the Baldwin Eagles, finished their routine. I took a few minutes to glance at Allen again. He was looking really sexy in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that revealed his muscles. He smiled at someone, and my heart sped up when I saw the dimple in his right cheek. One of his friends said something to him, and he looked in my direction.

My heart skipped a beat. I smoothed my hair and tried to play it cool until he burst out laughing. I tugged at my top, trying to cover my belly, knowing he was laughing at me.

"You guys were terrible," a voice said, and I stopped focusing on myself long enough to stare at her. It was Emily Arrington, a member of the Baldwin squad.

"It was just a homecoming show," I said. "We'll beat you at regionals."

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“Don’t count on it,” she said, tossing her shiny blond hair. Her butt was bigger than a lot of black girls, and she didn’t have any problems shaking what her momma gave her whenever she had the chance.

“Is that a threat?” I asked.

“No, it’s a promise,” she said, getting in my face like she was going to do something then walking away.

“You know she’s right,” Rene said. I saw her mouth moving, but I didn’t hear the rest of what she was saying because at that moment, Allen Benson was walking toward me.

“Hey, Courtland,” he said, giving me a sexy grin.

I gulped, shocked he knew my name.

“Hey,” I squeaked out.

“Are you okay? I was really worried when I saw you fall.”

“I’m cool,” I said, glancing at the floor and hoping my cheeks weren’t as red as they felt.

“Hey, I was wondering if you wanted to get together sometime.”

I looked up at him in surprise then gulped and tucked my hair behind my ear.

“Okay,” I said.

“Why don’t you give me your number, and I’ll call you later?”

He had just reached for his cell phone when suddenly a stray football came flying toward me. I tried to catch it, but I stumbled over someone’s football helmet and landed on my butt.

My life just couldn’t get any worse.

“Courtland, Momma said get up so we aren’t late for school,” my eight-year-old sister Cory said, shaking me awake. “Why are you on the floor?”

“What?” I said. I glanced up at my messy bed then down at my pillow, which was clutched in my arms like a football. I had been in the middle of the best and worst dream of my life, and Cory had just ruined it.

“Come on,” she said. “We don’t want to be late.”

I groaned, until I realized what day it was.

It was the first day of junior year, and I was so excited it had taken me forever to fall asleep the night before. I had been waiting for this year for what seemed like all my life.

In a few short months—Christmas Day to be exact—I, Courtland Murphy, would turn seventeen and be able to date. Most of my friends had started dating when they were fifteen or sixteen, and although I had begged my mother, she insisted I had plenty of time for boys and that I had to wait until I was seventeen.

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Since I had started Grover High School in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, I had become pretty well-known, but I was still getting used to my popularity. I had been overweight the entire time I was in elementary school, and the summer before freshman year, I had decided to make a change. I had started working out, and by the time school started, I had lost twenty pounds and grown a couple of inches.

There were only a handful of kids at Grover who had attended elementary school with me, and a couple of them didn't even recognize me on the first day. I hadn't expected that or for guys to be checking me out. Honestly, I still wasn't used to the attention, although I'm not gonna lie: I enjoyed it. Who wouldn't want fine guys speaking to them?

A couple had asked me out, but since I couldn't date, I had to pretend I wasn't interested. I had gotten a reputation of being stuck-up, but I had decided all that was going to change this year as soon as my birthday rolled around.

Being a cheerleader had given me a chance to meet a lot of the hottest athletes at school, and being co-captain this year was just the thing I needed to get me one step closer to hooking up with Allen Benson, the finest guy at Grover—actually in Alabama.

I had landed a place on the varsity cheerleading squad two years before—the only freshman to do so—and our squad had come a long way over the last two years.

Cheerleading wasn't really my thing. I had been a member of the peewee squad when I was little, and even though I was overweight back then, I was good at it. I had stopped when I started junior high, but once I got to high school, Momma encouraged me to try out, saying it would help me make friends.

I didn't really think I had a shot at making the squad since it's pretty competitive, but to my surprise I had. It wasn't until we were halfway through the season that our cheerleading adviser, Mrs. Caldwell, let it slip in front of everyone she and Momma used to be best friends in high school, and that's how I had ended up on the team. Thank God she had moved to Michigan at the end of last school year.

I started to quit, but instead I figured I had to show my squad members I deserved to be there. I spent the whole summer before sophomore year training, and my hard work had paid off. Not only was I an even better cheerleader, thanks to my workouts, I was sporting six-pack abs that put the singer Ciara to shame.

My father didn't like the fact that I wore those short cheerleader skirts and that we had a couple of guys on the squad who often had to lift me, but I figured that was his problem. It's not like he had ever seen me cheer. He was never home—usually working at the police precinct—but Momma and Cory were at every game.

I checked my purse to make sure I had the essentials—pen, lip gloss and money—then grabbed my backpack, pom-poms and a change of clothes for cheerleading practice, and I headed downstairs. As always, Momma had a hot breakfast waiting for

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me and Cory. She was the secretary at our church, First Baptist, Morning Heights, and it kept her busy as did running around with me and my sister. Cory wasn't as involved in extracurricular activities as me. She had tried sports for a while because Daddy wanted her to, but she quit after the first soccer game. She hated the way Daddy yelled at her from the sidelines, and I guess I couldn't blame her. It had been horrible. People were staring at Daddy like he was crazy, and at one point the referee had even threatened to kick him out. He had calmed down a little, but Cory had still been embarrassed, and she refused to play again. Momma had signed her up for tae kwon do, and she was active in Girls Scouts, so she was happy.

Daddy wasn't. He was a total athlete in high school and college, and he didn't like the fact that he only had girls. I was supposed to be a boy, and Momma said he was so excited when he found out she was pregnant.

My aunt Dani had told me once that Daddy was sad for days after he found out I was a girl. He still wanted to pretend I was a boy for a long time. I remember he used to spend time with me, taking me to play basketball and doing other stuff together, but that had all changed when I entered junior high school. He would promise to spend time with me then never show up, so after a while, I stopped expecting anything from him. I really liked basketball, and when I was little I used to dream of playing for the WNBA. I got so sick of Daddy riding me that I pretended to lose interest so he'd leave me alone. I figured cheerleading would at least get me close to sports, but really it wasn't the same.

When Cory came along, I got to witness for myself how excited Daddy was about having a boy. When she turned out to be a girl too, he was depressed for weeks, and I started to realize being a girl wasn't good enough. He made it seem like Cory and I were such disappointments to him, all because we were girls, something we had no control over.

Daddy still couldn't understand why we weren't interested in all things sports.

Momma was the total opposite. Although she was strict, she wanted us to pursue whatever interested us, and she supported us wholeheartedly, shuttling us back and forth to practices and meetings and attending all our events. The only thing she insisted upon was that we be active in church, which I didn't mind because First Baptist has a fantastic youth department. We are always doing something—plays, dances, trips to Six Flags in Georgia or Alabama Adventure amusement park—and I really enjoyed bible study every Wednesday night as well as our celibacy club, Worth the Wait, which met every other week.

“Good morning, Momma,” I said, planting a kiss on her cheek. She was standing at the stove flipping pancakes, and she turned to me and smiled.

“Hey, Miss Junior,” she said. “How does it feel?”

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“Good,” I said, taking a seat at the table next to Cory whose eyes were glued to her GameBoy—did I mention she’s addicted to it? “It will feel even better when we win regionals and after my first date.”

Momma rolled her eyes. Every chance I got, I mentioned dating so she didn’t forget her promise I could start going out once I turned seventeen.

“What time does cheerleading practice end?” she asked, sliding pancakes, bacon and cheese eggs in front of me and my sister. She put a plate in front of her seat then grabbed the GameBoy from Cory who protested loudly, but Momma ignored her as she turned it off and sat across from us. She grabbed our hands, which was our signal to say grace.

After blessing the food, we dug in.

“Where’s Daddy?” I asked.

“He had to leave early,” she said a bit too quickly.

I nodded, but something told me he hadn’t come home the night before, which had been happening more and more often lately. I saw a sadness in Momma’s eyes, so I tried to cheer her up.

“Practice ends at five,” I said, “but once you get me my Volkswagen Beetle, that won’t be a problem since I’ll be able to drive myself wherever I need to go.” I had gotten my license, but it was rare Momma let me drive. She said she worried too much with me behind the wheel.

As expected, Momma smiled. The Beetle was my dream car, and although we both knew I wasn’t getting it for my birthday, we liked to joke about it anyway.

“I probably won’t be there until five-thirty since your sister has Scouts after school today. Don’t you have Worth the Wait meeting tonight?”

I nodded as I swallowed a mouthful of eggs. “That’s cool,” I said. “By the time I shower and change, it will be about that time anyway. Worth the Wait meeting is at six-thirty.”

Our church had started Worth the Wait last year, and Momma had insisted I join. There were actually more members there than I had expected, but I quickly learned half of the girls were there because their moms made them join too. Only a handful of us were virgins, and although I planned to save myself for marriage, I had started off thinking that was my business, and I didn’t make a point of advertising it, but over the last year, hearing all about the AIDS epidemic, the rise in syphilis outbreaks in Alabama and seeing all these baby mommas had made still having my virginity something I was proud of. I made it a point to recruit people whenever I could. I wanted other kids to know that still being a virgin was nothing to be ashamed of.

Our advisor, Andrea Mitchell, was cool. She was only twenty-eight, but she offered good advice, and she wasn’t ashamed to let the world know she was celibate.

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Notice I said celibate and not a virgin. She told us she had had sex once and had decided it wasn't worth it, and she had been celibate ever since.

After prayer and bible study, we spent a lot of our meetings role playing how to stay out of heated situations, but eventually we always ended up talking about sex. We all made a point to bring articles and stuff about abstinence and second virginity for those who had slipped up, had sex and wanted to reclaim their virginity.

We all had these necklaces with one pearl on it to symbolize our virginity was as precious as a pearl, and Andrea was talking about having a purity ball next year where we would be presented with rings and sign pacts, vowing to stay celibate until marriage. She had also been encouraging us to invite people of different races to our meetings, and she said it would be nice to invite some guys too.

I thought about inviting Allen to a meeting and started laughing so hard I choked on a piece of bacon.

"You okay?" Momma asked, whacking me on the back and looking concerned.

I nodded, took a sip of juice, then turned to my sister who had been really quiet. "So, munchkin, you happy about starting third grade?"

"I guess," she said, shrugging as she played with her food. Cory was only eight, but she was small for her age. She wore glasses, and they seemed to take up most of her face.

"What's wrong?" Momma asked, frowning.

"What if I don't know any of the kids?" she asked.

Momma put down her fork and grabbed her hand. "Oh, honey, I'm sure it will be most of the same kids who were in your class last year."

"Yeah, and if not, you'll make new friends," I said.

Cory looked at her plate. "But I don't make friends as easy as you," she said.

"That's not true. You forget I'm shy too," I said, feeling sorry for her. "It just takes you a little longer. It's going to be fine, okay?"

"Okay," she finally said.

My little sister was really shy, and she was right, she didn't make friends easily. She liked to sit back and observe people. I used to be the same way. I still saw myself as the fat kid, and when I saw people staring, I always secretly wondered if they were thinking I looked like a cow or something. Being a cheerleader had given me more confidence, so I was just reaching the point where I could walk into a room and just start talking. Regardless, Cory is the sweetest girl I know. Even though she's my little sister, I enjoy spending time with her. She is really pretty hilarious once she gets going, and not many people know it, but she can dance her butt off. I think by the time she's my age and fills out a little, guys are going to go crazy over her.

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Momma glanced at the clock. “You guys ready?” she asked, taking a final sip of coffee.

I took another bite of my pancakes and pushed back my chair. “I am,” I said.

Cory just stood without saying anything.

We scraped our plates, rinsed them off and put them in the sink, then we grabbed our stuff and headed out to Momma’s Honda Pilot.

“Can I drive today?” I asked.

Momma looked like she was going to say no, so I quickly said, “Daddy won’t let me drive his car, so the only time I get to do it is when I’m with you. Please.”

Momma sighed and handed over the keys. “Be careful,” she cautioned.

I nodded and ran around to the driver’s side. After we were buckled in, I adjusted the rearview mirror then slowly backed out of the driveway. As I stopped at the sign at the end of our street, Daddy turned the corner. I glanced over at Momma, and she was frowning.

I blew the horn and let down the window. “Hey, Daddy,” I said.

“Hey,” he said gruffly. He looked like he had just rolled out of bed, and from the looks of it, he had on the same shirt he had worn the day before.

We sat there in silence for a few seconds. When the awkwardness finally got to me, I said, “Well we’re going to be late.” I rolled up the window before he could respond and drove off.

I glanced over at Momma again, but she was staring out the window. Cory was busy playing her GameBoy, which she had grabbed off the counter before we left, so I turned on the radio. I really wanted to listen to 95.7 Jamz, but I knew Momma liked gospel, so I turned it to Heaven 610 for her. They were playing Birmingham’s first *American Idol* Ruben Studdard’s version of “Amazing Grace,” and Momma looked at me and smiled.

We dropped off Cory at Epic, which is a school for really smart kids, then Momma and I headed to Grover, which was a few blocks away on the southside.

“What do you have planned today?” I asked, just to make conversation.

“Just working and taking care of you kids,” she said with a shrug.

She just looked so sad to me. “Why don’t we have a girls-only day on Saturday? I only have two more free weekends before football season starts. We can go get manicures and pedicures,” I said.

Momma brightened a little. “That’ll be fun,” she said. “Dani will be here—”

“Aunt Dani’s coming to town?” I asked, getting excited.

My aunt Loretta Danielle Dennis, is twenty-one, only a few years older than me, so she’s really like my big sister. She and Momma are half-sisters, and they are nothing alike. Momma is all about church and taking care of us kids, Aunt Dani wouldn’t be

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caught dead in a church. She spends every weekend partying, and she has no problem living off all the men she dates. Daddy says she's a bad influence, but I love hanging with her whenever she comes to town. She's been living in LA the last few years, pursuing modeling and dating this music producer named Triple T. Before that, she lived in New York with her mother.

She emails me every now and then telling these crazy stories about hanging out with celebrities and all these modeling gigs she's gotten.

Her last email a few weeks ago said she had gotten the lead in a national hamburger commercial. I stayed up three days trying to catch it, excited to see my aunt on TV. It wasn't until I saw this ad for like the tenth time that I realized Aunt Dani was in it. I didn't recognize her because she was wearing a hamburger costume.

"She said she'll be here later today. I'll call her when I get to work."

"Okay," I said, really looking forward to it.

We rode the last few minutes to school in silence. I wanted to ask Momma if everything was okay with her and Daddy, but past experience had taught me it was none of my business. When we finally arrived, I leaned over and gave Momma a kiss. "Have a great day," I said. "I love you."

Momma looked at me and smiled, and her espresso-brown eyes lit up. "I love you, too, baby. You're a really good daughter," she said.

"And you're a great mother."

"Thank you. I needed to hear that," she said.

I wanted to ask her what she meant by that, but before I could, my best friend, Sabrina Davis, ran over to the driver's side and called out, "Courtland, come on." She looked past me at Momma. "Hey, Mrs. Murphy."

"Good morning, Bree," Momma said, and just like that, the moment was gone. "Have a good day, baby."

I nodded and grabbed my things from the backseat.

Momma walked around to the driver's side and quickly got in and drove away. I watched her, wondering if she was really okay since she normally waited until Cory and I were safely inside a building before she drove off.

"You coming?" Bree asked.

"Yeah," I said.

We hurried to the auditorium where we sat through the boring first-day orientation where the principal reviewed the dos and don'ts of the school. Since I had heard the same speech the last two years, I tuned him out and gazed around the auditorium, wondering if I would spot any new faces. I checked out the other juniors and seniors first, since I had no interest in dating freshmen or sophomores. A few people waved, and I waved back, amazed at some of the transformations that had taken

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place over the summer. Girls had gotten breasts, and some had to have bought some hair because there is no way they had grown all that in a few months. Some of the boys were now sporting facial hair, and a few of them were looking kind of good. I wondered which would have the pleasure of being the first guy to date me, and as though in answer to my thoughts, a commotion started at the back of the room.

Bree and I turned to see what was going on. Walking down the aisle as though he was right on time was Allen Benson, and he was much finer than I remembered—he looked even better than he did in my dream. He had been on television a couple of times during the summer, but I hadn't seen him face-to-face since the last day of school. Just the sight of him made a chill run down my spine.

Allen was a senior, and he was the star basketball player at Grover. Word had it he was going pro rather than going to college, and I had to admit he had skills. Allen could play some ball—and he looked mighty good in that blue-and-gold basketball uniform.

I felt Bree nudging me, and I nodded, indicating I had seen him. How could I miss him? Allen was about six-two, at least six inches taller than me, and he was fine. He had brown skin, kind of like the color of caramel, and he had exchanged his cornrows from last year for a low-cut fade, which made him look even sexier.

As he got closer to our seats, which were about a fourth of the way from the front of the room since the juniors sat right behind the seniors, I smooth my hair, which I had in a bob that touched my shoulders. For cheerleading practice, I could just throw it up in a ponytail, which was great. I straightened my white lace tank top and checked my feet, which were encased in high heel sandals, to make sure they weren't ashy, and thankfully they weren't. There was a piece of lint on my purple Capris, and I quickly picked it off, wondering why I was going through all the trouble since Allen couldn't see the bottom half of me anyway.

When Allen made it to our row, I thought about speaking, but before I could, our principal called, "Mr. Benson, thank you for gracing us with your presence. If you could kindly take your seat, I would appreciate it."

Allen lifted his chin in response, but he didn't move any faster, and the students continued to whisper in awe. After he was finally settled, our principal continued his presentation, introducing all the teachers, the cafeteria workers and maintenance staff.

I grew bored again, so I pulled out my schedule, which Bree and I had picked up on our way in, trying to make sure I knew where I was supposed to go after homeroom.

I glanced at the paper and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Bree asked, leaning forward to peer at the schedule.

"They have me listed in the wrong English class," I said. "I'm not supposed to take African-American lit until next semester."

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Bree shrugged. "It's probably just a mistake," she said. "Do we have any classes together?" We had been so busy catching up with our friends before coming into the auditorium that we hadn't even bothered to check.

It turned out we had lunch and dance class together, which I found funny since Bree was definitely not the dance type. She tripped over her own feet with every other step she took.

"Why'd you sign up for dance?" I asked, noticing our principal was finally wrapping up.

"The only other options were Band, PE or ROTC. Can you see me doing any of those?" she asked.

"Good point," I said. "Well, I'll just help you with the dances."

"Of course you will," she said. "Just like I'll help you with math."

"Whatever," I said, and we laughed. We were both straight-A students.

Bree and I had known each other since fifth grade, but it wasn't until freshman year we really clicked. We had both gotten stuck taking band for some reason, and we spent a lot of time talking about ourselves and our families. We got to know each other really well, and I told her pretty much everything. Whereas I was into sports, Bree was more creative. She was on the yearbook staff, and she was a regular contributor to the school newspaper and creative writing magazine.

"Where are you headed after homeroom?" she asked as kids began to gather their things so they could leave.

"I'm supposed to go to English, but I have to straighten out my schedule first," I said.

"Cool. Well, I guess I'll see you at lunch," she said.

I nodded and waved.

I almost didn't make it to homeroom on time because kids kept stopping me to say hello. I slid into my seat just as the bell rang, then listened to another long list of instructions before our teacher Mrs. Ross passed out cards for us to fill out our emergency information. Once that was done, I asked her if I could leave early to get my schedule changed, and she agreed.

It turned out to be a waste of my time since all the other classes were full.

English class was just about to start when I walked in, so I dropped in the first seat I saw, which happened to be at the front of the room. I grabbed a pen from my purse, and just as I was uncapping the pen, the top flew off. I reached down to get it and bumped heads with someone who was also reaching for it.

"Thank you," I said, looking up for the first time. My heart went into overdrive because staring back at me was Allen Benson. "What are you doing here?" I asked before I could stop myself.

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He laughed, and I blushed.

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” I said. “It’s just that this is a junior class, and you’re a senior.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” he joked.

“You don’t like being a senior?” I asked. That’s all Bree and I talked about. The seniors ruled the school, and with that title came a world we could only dream about—dating, driving, prom, applying to college.

“Not when I have to double up on my English classes since I failed this one last year. If I want to graduate, I’ve got to take them both.”

“Why didn’t you just go to summer school?” I asked, not believing I was talking with Allen Benson—the Allen Benson.

“I was in basketball camps all summer,” he said, “so I couldn’t go.”

“I wasn’t supposed to take this class until next semester, but I think it’ll be fun. I love reading.”

“I might have to get you to tutor me,” he said.

“Not a problem,” I said, hoping I sounded confident, although inside I was sweating at the thought of spending time alone with him.

I stuck out my hand. “I’m Courtland Murphy, and you are?”

He gave a little laugh and engulfed his paw around my hand. “Cute. I’m Allen Benson. Nice to meet you, Miss Courtland. By the way, I like your outfit.”

Before I could respond, our teacher started class. “Good morning, students. I hope you all had a great summer.”

Mrs. Watters glanced around the room, which was decorated in pink and green. “I see many of you remember my rules from last year.” I looked around in confusion, and Mrs. Watters explained, “Wherever you sit on the first day of school is where you sit the entire semester.”

I groaned to myself. I hated sitting in the very front of the room since it made me an easy target for getting called on. It’s not that I didn’t know the answers—usually I did—but I didn’t want kids to think I was as smart as I was. I had been teased enough for that in elementary school. I glanced over at Allen, and he was smiling at me.

“Did you know what she was going to do?” I asked when Mrs. Watters went to her desk. He nodded. “So, why’d you sit in the front?”

“I figured if I was up here, maybe I’d pass the class.”

I nodded in understanding before I focused on Mrs. Watters who had started passing out the syllabus for the semester. It was printed on pink and green paper, and I assumed she was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, which was confirmed when I spotted an AKA mug on her desk. As I took a sheet and passed the rest of the stack back, Allen slid me a piece of notebook paper.

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I tried to pretend I wasn't fazed as I waited for Mrs. Watters to get to the other side of the room before I opened it.

I GUESS YOU'RE STUCK WITH ME, it read, and I couldn't help but smile. I had never looked more forward to an English class in my life.

When I met Bree for lunch, I was still carrying around Allen's note like it was a Grammy award.

"Girl," I said the minute I spotted her, "you will never guess who's in my English class." I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the cafeteria line where Bree grabbed a burger and fries and I grabbed a salad. I didn't even get annoyed for the thousandth time that Bree could eat whatever she wanted without gaining weight.

"Are you going to tell me?" Bree asked, excited.

"I can show you better than I can tell you," I said as we made our way to our table. We put down our trays, and I grabbed my purse and pulled out my wallet where I had safely tucked Allen's note. I passed it to Bree who struggled to read the tiny writing.

"Who's it from?" she asked after deciphering it.

"Guess," I said.

"Courtland," Bree wailed, "just tell me."

I pretended to shoot a basket, and after a second, Bree caught on. "No," she said, her eyes growing wide.

I nodded and grinned. "Yes," I said.

"Allen Benson gave this to you?" she squealed.

I didn't say a word as I added dressing to my salad.

"Girl, I am so jealous. So tell me everything, and don't leave out any details."

I hadn't gotten far before other members of Worth the Wait and some of the cheerleaders descended on the table. I gave Bree a look, letting her know I'd fill her in later. It's not that I didn't trust my other friends, but I didn't want to take any chances that people would be hating on me. I had been around enough females in general to know they were messy and always looking for something to gossip about, so I kept my business to myself. That's something my momma had always told me, that whatever happened at home stayed there.

I looked at Allen's note about a hundred times before school ended, and I thought about it through most of practice, although I nailed my toe touches and basket tosses. I guess Allen was training for basketball season because he was running around the track and looking so good in a pair of black shorts and a white T-shirt. He was drenched in sweat, which only made him look sexier. All the girls on the squad were talking about him, and I couldn't blame them.

As I was waiting for Momma to pick me up after practice, I looked at Allen's note again and smiled to myself, thinking how crazy it would be if we ended up dating. I

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couldn't help but laugh at the thought. There was no way Allen could be interested in me.

I glanced at my watch and noticed it was almost six o'clock. I realized I hadn't checked to see if Momma had left a message for me during practice, so I retrieved my phone.

Allen caught me off guard for the second time that day.

"You must have been reading my mind," he said, causing me to drop my phone. He laughed as he picked it up and handed it to me. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," I said, holding on to the phone as tightly as I could with my slippery hands. "So how was I reading your mind?"

"When I saw you while I was running, I realized I didn't ask for your number during class. I was just thinking that if I saw you I was going to ask for it."

I had stopped breathing when he said *number*. "My phone number?" I squeaked.

"Yeah," he said, "if that's okay. I figured I need to have you on speed dial just in case I have a question about class."

I tried not to let my disappointment show. He just wanted help with English.

"Sure," I said. "If you have a phone, I can program my number in for you."

He shook his head. "I'd rather you write it down. That way, if my phone breaks, I'll still have it."

"Okay," I said, trying not to read anything into what he was saying. This was strictly about school, I kept telling myself, but obviously my stomach wasn't listening because it was doing flips like it was competing for the Olympic gold medal in gymnastics. I grabbed a notebook and a pen out of my bag and scribbled down my number.

"Give me your email address too," he said.

I nodded and added it to the sheet, then tore it out of my notebook and handed it to him.

"I'll be in touch," he said, folding the paper. He grabbed a set of keys from his gym bag, which was slung across his shoulder. "Hey, do you need a ride?"

Of course I wanted to say yes, but I knew Momma and Daddy would have a fit if I got in the car with a boy, so I played it off. "Nah, I'm cool. My ride will be here in a minute."

"I don't bite," he said, and I laughed.

"I know," I said, twirling my Worth the Wait necklace, which I sometimes did when I got nervous. "Maybe I'll take you up on that offer some other time."

"Maybe you should," Allen said, stepping a little closer. I felt his breath on my cheek, and my heart sped up.

"That's a nice necklace," he said. "Did your man give it to you?"

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I laughed. “Actually, it’s my purity necklace,” I said before I could stop myself. I blushed and looked at the ground then glanced up at him to see his response.

“Really?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I shrugged. “Yeah. My mom had me join this virgin club at my church, and each of the members got one of these necklaces.”

“I’ve heard about those clubs. I know a few other girls here are members. When did you join?”

“Last year,” I said. “I recruited some of the girls from school.” Allen made me feel so comfortable that I told him a few more details about Worth the Wait, and he seemed really impressed.

“So can guys join?” he asked.

“Sure. It’s open to anyone who wants to take a vow of purity, although our group has mostly teenagers. I can get you more information if you want.”

Momma chose that moment to pull up, and spotting me, she blew her horn and waved. I was so embarrassed.

“Is that your moms?” Allen asked.

I nodded, not believing my momma was messing up my game. She pulled up next to us and looked at Allen curiously. He smiled and walked up to her. “Good evening, Mrs. Murphy. My name is Allen Benson. I was just keeping your daughter company while she waited for you.”

Momma smiled and shook his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Allen.” She stared at him for a second. “Haven’t I seen you on TV?”

Allen shyly looked down at the ground. “Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“You’re making quite a name for yourself, young man. I know your parents are proud.”

“They are,” he said.

Momma nodded. “And you’re keeping up with your studies?”

“Momma,” I protested. I couldn’t believe how she was grilling him like he was my man or something.

“Actually, that’s what I was talking to your daughter about. I got behind in my classes last year, and I’m trying to play catch-up, and I was hoping she could tutor me in English.”

“You realize my daughter is only sixteen, and she can’t date yet,” Momma said, looking him in the eye.

“Oh, no, ma’am,” Allen was quick to say, raising his hands and backing away like the thought of dating me repulsed him. “This is strictly about school. I was just telling her that I would call if I had any questions, and if it’s okay with you, we can meet in the library during our study period so we can do our homework.”

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Momma looked at him, trying to figure out if he was playing games. She must have believed him because she said, “I guess that will be fine. I don’t know how much you guys will be able to get accomplished during an hour, so if you need to meet with her after school, I guess you could study at our house.”

My mouth dropped open in amazement. Other guys had tried to hook up with me, but Momma wasn’t impressed. She didn’t play when it came to Cory and me.

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Murphy. I really appreciate it. I also want to say that I see where your daughter gets her beauty from.”

Momma and I both blushed. Momma recovered first and said, “Allen, you’re laying it on a bit too thick now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and they both laughed. He turned to me. “I’ll see you in school tomorrow, Courtland.”

I could only nod and wave as I got in the front seat.

“He’s cute and quite the charmer,” Momma said the minute we pulled away.

I could only nod at her as Allen waved. “Did you really just say he could come over and study—not that he will?”

Momma shrugged. “Why not?” she said. “He seems nice enough, and the bible tells us to help those in need.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her, although deep down I knew that Allen was just being nice. There was no way he would ever want to study with me, let alone visit my house.

“Hey, munchkin,” I said to Cory who was sitting in the backseat. “How was the first day?”

She looked up from her GameBoy and grinned at me. “I made a friend,” she said, and I smiled too, happy for my little sister.

“That’s great,” I said.

Cory told me about her friend Destini who she said was in foster care, then we rode to Worth the Wait meeting in silence. Several of the girls were arriving as we pulled up. A few girls had skipped meetings that summer, and apparently at least one of them had forgotten the pledge to remain pure until she got married because I was pretty sure that wasn’t a watermelon she was sporting under her shirt.

I looked at Momma to see if she had noticed, and she shook her head. “Now why would that child’s mother still make her attend these meetings?” she said.

“Maybe she’s supposed to serve as an example,” I said, fingering my pearl necklace, which served as a constant reminder to me that my virginity was a gift, and I wasn’t giving it up to anyone but my husband.

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My thoughts shifted when there was a knock on my window. I looked up into the grinning face of my aunt Dani and let out a scream as I struggled to get out of the car and hug her.

“Aunt Dani,” I yelled, squeezing her tight. I hadn’t seen her in three years—she’d come to Birmingham right before moving to LA—but she still looked the same. Her breasts were bigger if that was possible, and she had a ponytail weave that reached her butt and was dyed burgundy at the bottom. Even though it was August and about ninety degrees, she was wearing a black leather short set and black leather boots.

She squeezed me tight. “Corky, is that you?” she asked, stepping back to look at me. “Girl, I’m glad you finally lost all that baby fat. It looks like you’re out of your ugly phase too.”

She was talking loud, and people were looking at us as they entered the church.

“I don’t go by Corky, Aunt Dani,” I said. “Everybody calls me Courtland now.”

“Girl, please. You’ll always be Corky, just like I’ll always be Dani,” she said. “Ain’t that right, sis?” She looked at Momma who gave this really tight smile before she and Cory hugged Aunt Dani and headed into church.

“So how long are you in town? Are you staying with us?” I asked.

“I haven’t decided,” she said. “I’m going to take a break from modeling, so I figured I’d hang with you guys for a while. Girl, you know your house is too small. I have a room at the Sheraton near the Civic Center.”

“That’s cool,” I said, just as our Worth the Wait advisor Andrea motioned for me to come inside. “You coming in church?”

Aunt Dani kind of laughed under her breath before walking over to a brand-new BMW SUV. “Nah. I’ve got some people I need to see. Your mother told me you would be here, so I wanted to stop and say hello.” She hit a button on the remote to unlock the doors.

“Is that yours?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, looking at me like I was silly for asking.

I wondered how she’d gotten a car so fast since she had just come to town, but I really didn’t care. “I guess modeling is paying well.”

“Girl, modeling isn’t the only way to get paid.”

She must have noticed the confusion on my face because she grinned. “We’ll have to get together soon so I can explain the facts of life,” she said, then she was gone.

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