

(Please note this excerpt contains spoilers to *The Pledge*, book 1 of the *Worth the Wait* series.)

CHAPTER 1

Squeaking sneakers and the hustle and flow of the basketball players across the gymnasium floor charged me as I waved my arms, signaling I was open so my teammate could pass me the ball.

She bounced it to me, and I snatched it before focusing on the goal and sinking it in for three points. Nothing but net.

It was the final game of the summer basketball league's season, and I was giving it my all. Since deciding at the end of my junior year to give up my spot as cheerleading co-captain to play ball, I had thrown myself into each game. I had learned a lot over the summer, both about basketball and myself, and I was looking forward to my senior year, which was only a few weeks away.

Coach Miller called a time-out with only three minutes left in the game, and I jogged off the court, glancing up in the stands when I heard my dad yell, "Go, Courtland."

He had been at all my games along with my mom, my nine-year-old sister Cory, my best friend Sabrina Davis and a few members of my purity group, *Worth the Wait*. Knowing I had so much support had me feeling better than I had in all my seventeen years.

Coach went over our final play, then my teammates and I gathered in a huddle, pumping each other up before we went back to the court and played to win. When it was all over, we lost by one point, but I was grinning like we had won the NBA championship.

I guzzled down a cup of Gatorade before going to congratulate the other team. As I was heading to the locker room, one of our opponents stopped me.

"Aren't you that girl who pressed charges against Allen Benson?" she asked, squinting at me behind a pair of sports goggles.

I groaned inwardly. It had been a couple of days since someone had last asked me about Allen, my ex-boyfriend who was rumored to be going pro at the end of last school year.

Allen was fine and charming. He was my first boyfriend, and I loved him. I thought he loved me too—until I snuck out to meet him one night. Not only had he tried to force himself on me, but he had also admitted he'd started dating me so he could get me to sleep with him to win a ten-dollar bet that he'd be the one to make me lose my virginity.

He had done a lot of messed-up things while we were together—putting his hands on me and fooling around with other girls, one of whom was also pressing charges. I'm not sure who the girl was, but word had it she was from a political family.

It wasn't until after my aunt Loretta Danielle Dennis ended up in the hospital that

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I learned he'd been seeing her too. She claimed she was pregnant for him, and he'd gotten so mad he'd run over her with his car. Allen claimed it was an accident, but I saw the video my sister Cory had managed to shoot that night, and I believe it was intentional.

I finally decided to press charges against Allen for what he had done to me after my little sister Cory witnessed what he did to Aunt Dani. I felt like I had to set a good example for her and not let Allen get away with what he'd tried to do to me, but I had changed my mind about a month ago. I just wanted to move on with my life.

My charges had been the least of Allen's worries. He was also being investigated by the NBA for accusations he'd accepted gifts from two coaches.

"Well, are you?" the girl repeated, using a forearm to wipe a trail of sweat from her forehead. I briefly wondered why she was sweating so much since she had been riding the bench the whole game.

A couple of her teammates gathered around waiting to hear my answer. I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could, Daddy rushed over and wrapped me in a bear hug.

"Good job, Courtland. I'm proud of you," he said. He slung his arm around my shoulders and led me away from the girls, and I smiled. Mostly I was glad he had rescued me, but I also had to admit that it felt good to get a hug from my daddy and hear he was proud. It had been a while since he had done it, but it was starting to happen more often.

"You okay?" he whispered as we walked over to where Momma and Cory were waiting.

"Yes," I said. "Thanks for rescuing me."

Daddy and I had come a long way in the last few months—our whole family had. Daddy had finally admitted he was an alcoholic, and he was attending AA meetings every week. He was going to church with us, and he and Momma, who had never gotten married, were planning a big wedding for the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, the weekend before school started. Momma was so excited she was getting the wedding of which she had always dreamed, and so was I.

"You hungry?" Momma asked after congratulating me on a good game.

"Yep," I said before turning to my little sister. "Hey, munchkin."

"Hey," she said, frowning at my use of the nickname she now hated. "Can we go to Applebee's?"

"You're reading my mind," I said, already tasting the steak and shrimp parmesan and blondie dessert I was going to order.

"We'll walk over. I snuck out during the game and put our names on the waiting list. They'll probably be calling us soon," Momma said. "You can head over once you get dressed."

Our game was at the CrossPlex in Birmingham, Alabama, and we'd had a nice turnout. I knew a lot of people were probably going to be headed to Applebee's, which was

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right across the street, so I was glad Momma had thought ahead.

“Do you want me to wait for you?” Daddy asked, looking worried as he glanced around the almost empty arena.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. I tried to be casual about looking around to see if the girls who had asked me about Allen were still there, but Momma busted me.

“You sure?” she asked.

“You’re treating her like a baby,” Cory said, and I smiled my thanks.

They all watched me head toward the locker room to make sure I got there safely, as usual, then I watched them walk over to one of Daddy’s police officer friends.

I didn’t hear what Daddy was saying, but I was sure he was telling him to keep an eye on me.

I was in and out of the locker room in fifteen minutes. As I was headed for the exit, a girl waddling past caught my attention.

“Emily?” I said.

Emily Arrington was a rival cheerleader for the Baldwin Eagles. She had also come to a few Worth the Wait meetings, but that had been months ago. She was a white girl, but she had plenty of booty, and she didn’t mind shaking it.

My eyes widened when she turned around. I was pretty sure that wasn’t a basketball she was sporting under her shirt.

“Hey Courtland,” she said, sounding tired. She rubbed her stomach, and I found myself feeling sorry for her.

“How are you?” I asked. I thought about saying congratulations, but I wasn’t sure if that was the right thing to say to an unwed mother. I glanced at her ring finger to make sure she hadn’t gotten married since the last time I saw her, but it was bare, and it looked like there had never been a ring on it.

“Sick all the time,” she said. “Every time I turn around I’m throwing up.”

I nodded sympathetically. “When are you due?” I asked.

“October 25,” she said.

I calculated and realized she was about seven months pregnant, which meant she was pregnant at the last Worth the Wait meeting she attended. She had been talking all this craziness about having a baby before she got married so she’d be able to hold on to the guy forever. I guess she had gotten her wish.

I adjusted my gym bag, trying to think of something else to say.

“How are things with Worth the Wait?” she asked.

“Good.” I filled her in on the purity conference, which would end with a ball we were planning for the spring. Fathers and daughters were both going to take an oath, promising to be pure in thought and deed. Our Worth the Wait adviser Andrea Mitchell had read about the ball online, and most of our members loved the idea. It would give us

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a chance to dress up and have some fun.

After I was elected president of our chapter, I had come up with the idea to do an entire conference, hoping we would get some new members.

A cell phone rang, and Emily and I both glanced at ours, which meant we both had Beyoncé's latest hit as our ring tone.

A big smile broke across Emily's face, and she snapped open her phone.

"Hey, baby," she said, sounding like a contented cat. She talked for a few seconds, and I figured it was the perfect chance for me to get away and meet up with my family. I had just put one foot out the door when Emily's words stopped me. "I'll see you later tonight. I love you, Allen."

Chapter 2

I couldn't even enjoy my steak and shrimp parmesan at Applebee's because I was so busy thinking about Allen and Emily.

There were a million questions racing through my mind. Was Emily really talking to Allen—my Allen? That raised the question of whether he ever really was mine.

If she was talking to Allen Benson, was she carrying his baby? I thought back to what had happened last school year. It was rumored the girl who had accused Allen of rape was pregnant. Was Emily that girl?

I finally decided to get a to-go box for my food.

"You okay?" Momma asked, looking at me strangely when I turned down dessert.

I nodded and took a sip of my watery Sprite.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you that someone from the Harbert Center called and said there was a cancellation, so we have it for the reception." Momma looked like she was about to bounce out of her seat she was so excited.

"That's great, Momma," I said, mustering a smile.

She pulled a notebook from her purse and jotted something down. "I'm glad the summer basketball season is over. I'm going to need your help. We only have about a month left before the wedding, and we still haven't picked out your dress."

"We can go tomorrow," I said without really thinking. Cory stopped playing with her iPad long enough to kick me under the table. I had promised her I would hang out with her the next day. I had been so busy with practices and games all summer that I really hadn't spent much time with my little sister, which I had been trying to do more of.

I looked at her, silently telling her I was sorry.

"We can make it a girls-only day," Momma said then turned to look at Daddy. "You have to work tomorrow, right, Corwin?"

"Yes," Daddy said, his gaze never leaving ESPN, which was playing on the television in the bar.

"We can be at David's Bridal when it opens," Momma said.

I groaned to myself. That meant I wouldn't be sleeping late, and since Momma was in total wedding mode, we probably wouldn't get home until late the next evening. So much for a relaxing Saturday.

I didn't sleep well that night thinking about Allen and Emily. As much as I tried to tell myself not to be bothered by it, I was. I knew he had been cheating on me, but I was still finding it hard to believe he was doing it with people right under my nose. Emily was bad enough, but my Aunt Dani was worse. She had told Allen she was pregnant too, but it turned out she was lying.

I found myself thinking back on all the time Allen and I had spent together. I mean,

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we were always together, but for him it had all been a joke. I couldn't believe he had been faking his feelings for me, all for a lousy ten dollars.

I woke up the next morning in a bad mood, and the last thing I wanted to do was spend the day looking at bridesmaid's dresses and talking about weddings. I threw on some jeans, a Worth the Wait T-shirt and my Converse and headed down for breakfast. Momma was in a really good mood because she had cooked all Daddy's favorites: sausages, home fries, cheese eggs and pancakes. I helped myself to a little of everything, making a mental note I needed to start cutting back since the basketball season was over. I was planning to try out for the school basketball team, but until then, I really wasn't going to be exercising as much since I had quit the cheerleading squad. The last thing I wanted to do was put back on the twenty pounds I had taken off the summer before freshman year.

After we said grace, Momma got busy working on her wedding list and Cory shoveled down her food so she could become engrossed in her iPad as usual, so I didn't have to worry about making conversation. The silence started getting to me, so I found myself asking, "Where's Daddy?"

"He already left," Momma said, not looking up from her list. "Remind me to stop by the Dollar Tree to buy some of those little bottles of bubbles for the reception."

I wanted to roll my eyes. What was the point of her making a list if she was just going to ask me to remind her of things?

"Did you decide what color we're wearing?" I asked.

Cory and I were both going to be bridesmaids along with Momma's best friend from high school who used to be my cheerleading coach. I hadn't seen her since she had moved to another state right before my junior year, and I was glad because she had told everyone the only reason I made the squad was because she and Momma were friends.

"I'm still trying to decide," Momma said. "It might just depend on what dresses I like."

"What else do we have to do today?" I asked.

Momma rattled off a list of things, and as I expected, it looked like it was going to be an all-day event.

"Can I just follow you to David's Bridal? I promised Cory I would spend some time with her today, and you really don't need us for that other stuff."

I knew she was going to say no, but I figured it was worth a try.

"I really need your help," she said. "I didn't realize all that went into planning a wedding. It's giving me practice for when you girls get married, though." She smiled at me, and I fought the urge to say, "Like that will ever happen."

Instead, I stood from the table, grabbed my empty plate and placed it in the sink.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Momma asked, frowning.

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I looked down at my clothes. “Yes. What’s wrong with this?”

“Don’t you need to wear some heels to try on with your dress?”

“Momma, you want me to walk around all day in heels?” I complained.

“You do it all day at school.”

“That’s different,” I said, not able to think of anything else to say.

I finally talked her into letting me keep on my sneakers and just taking the heels with me.

David’s Bridal hadn’t even opened by the time we made it there. I caught Cory gazing at Toys R Us, which was a few doors down, and I knew she was going to figure out a way to get a new toy out of the deal. I saw Momma eyeing LifeWay Christian bookstore, and it made me realize I’d forgotten to bring a book with me. It had been a while since I read a good one, but I had been seeing a bunch of them for kids my age in Wal-Mart and at the West End Library lately, and my best friend Bree had been talking about them nonstop for weeks, so I figured I’d read one.

When David’s finally opened, we almost got trampled by all the women trying to get inside. I looked around in amazement, wondering where they’d all come from since the parking lot had looked really empty. Momma, Cory and I headed to the bridesmaid dress section, and Momma immediately reached for this countrified gown. It was red with big white polka dots all over it and the skirt looked wide enough for me to hide Cory and about three other kids underneath.

“What do you think?” Momma asked.

I just looked at her and shook my head.

“What?” she said. “You don’t like it?”

I watched her, trying to see if she was serious, and relief filled me when I saw her crack the slightest smile.

“You had me worried for a minute,” I said. “I thought you were losing taste in your old age, or maybe you just wanted to make sure you were the best-looking one at your wedding.”

“Old?” Momma said.

We laughed and continued looking through the dresses, finally deciding on a lavender one for me. I really wanted a strapless one, but Momma wasn’t having it, so we settled for one with spaghetti straps. I liked the way it flowed and imagined myself walking down the aisle to my future husband. When Allen’s face popped in my head, I jumped a little, not believing I was still thinking about him after all he’d done.

“You want to go look for your dress now?” I asked Momma who was trying to talk Cory into actually trying on the dress she had picked out for her. My little sister didn’t wear dresses often, and although the dress Momma had chosen was cute, I knew Cory was going to complain that it made her itch, even if it wasn’t true. It was like she was allergic

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to dresses. I couldn't really blame her. I had gone through my dress phase too. Even now, I only wore them on special occasions. Momma had stopped making us wear skirts and dresses to church when she realized it wasn't as big a deal anymore as it was when she was growing up.

At the mention of a dress for her, Momma beamed and forgot all about her conversation with Cory who looked relieved to have the spotlight off her. She parked herself in a chair that someone was just vacating right outside the fitting room, and we piled all the stuff we had gathered on her before heading to the bride's dresses.

Momma spent about an hour looking at all the different styles before she finally settled on about five of them. The place seemed to be even more crowded, if that was possible, so we waited half an hour just to get a fitting room. It didn't take Momma long to try on four of the dresses. She was really discouraged because none of them looked right or was "the dress" as she described it. When she tried on the last one, our eyes met in the mirror, and we grinned at each other and started jumping around like we were in fifth grade.

"This is it," she said.

I had to agree. The dress was off white with sleeves that fell slightly off the shoulders. There were tiny flowers around the fitted waist and full skirt, and Momma really did look like a princess.

"You look beautiful, Momma," I said.

"I feel beautiful," she admitted. "I haven't felt this beautiful in a long time."

She stood admiring herself in the dress for a few more minutes before Cory interrupted us.

"I'm hungry," she complained.

I looked at my watch and realized it was almost noon, and my stomach growled as if it knew what I was thinking.

Momma laughed. "Okay, okay, I get the hint," she said, slipping out of the dress. "You girls still need to try on yours."

Cory widened her eyes, looking as scared as she did whenever Momma told her she had to go to the dentist, and I felt a little sorry for her.

"It's not that bad," I said. "Once we're done in here, maybe Momma will take you to Toys R Us."

Cory immediately started grinning, and Momma just shook her head.

"Fine," she said. "I can't believe my own children are trying to bribe me."

An hour later, we were sitting in the middle of the Galleria, chilling over lunch. Cory had gobbled down her food and was really into her iPad, and Momma had her head stuck in her wedding notebook, muttering something about ordering napkins. I was just checking people out, trying to see if there was anyone I knew hanging out.

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I was just about to ask if I could go into Forever 21 when I spotted this fine guy. He looked like he was about six-two, and he was the color of milk chocolate. I gulped when I felt my mouth start to water. I tried to keep myself from staring, which was easy for me to do when I saw the girl next to him. She hit him on the arm and started laughing at something he said. I found myself wondering if they were happy—really happy. Allen and I had gone to the mall together a couple of times, and I wondered if that’s the way we looked to other people, happy and in love.

I shook my head, determined not to think of Allen anymore.

“Momma, I’m going in Forever 21. I’ll be right back,” I said. She nodded absently, and I just shook my head. I dumped the trash from my Chick-fil-A lunch then headed into the store, stopping right inside the door when I spotted a really cute outfit that would be perfect for the first day of school.

I looked around the store, eyeing a few more outfits I liked, before coming back to the first one. It was really just a pair of pants and a top, but something about it was different than any other outfit I owned. I figured it was mature, yet sexy, which was exactly the image I wanted to portray for my senior year. I found myself in the dressing room trying the outfit on. It looked even better on me. The black pants were tight, but not too tight where they had me looking nasty, and the black-white-and-fuchsia top was fitting me in all the right places. I came out so I could look in the three-way mirror, and I was sold. Now I just had to talk Momma into it.

“That looks really good on you,” someone said from behind me.

I looked up in the mirror and realized it was the girl I had seen in the mall with her fine boyfriend. “Thanks,” I said, admiring the dress she was trying on. “Yours looks nice too.”

“Could you help me with the zipper?” she said, turning so her back was to me. “I would ask my brother, but I didn’t want to walk through the store with my clothes all unzipped.”

“That fine boy was your brother?” I asked and blushed. I didn’t know if I was embarrassed I had actually spoken what I was thinking or if it was relief that the guy wasn’t her boyfriend.

She laughed. “Aidan always gets that reaction. We just moved here from Atlanta, and he and his girlfriend broke up, so he’s free. Do you want me to introduce you?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder as I zipped her up. “He’s a really nice guy, and I’m not just saying that because he’s my twin.”

As much as I wanted to say yes, I ended up shaking my head. I wasn’t ready to get into another relationship. “That’s okay,” I said.

“You sure?” she asked, looking at me curiously.

“Yeah.”

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She shrugged and walked over to stand in front of the three-way mirror. The dress she had on looked really good on her, but she didn't seem to be convinced.

"Are you going to get it?" I found myself asking.

She shook her head. "I think it's a bit much for the first day of school. I don't know how kids dress at Grover, but at my school in Atlanta, this would be considered overkill."

"Did you say Grover?" I asked.

She nodded.

"That's where I go," I said.

She turned around and looked at me. "Are you serious?" she said. "Wait until I tell Aidan. I'm Nadia Calhoun, by the way."

"Courtland Murphy," I said, extending my hand so she could shake it. We stood there awkwardly for a few seconds before I turned to head back to my dressing room to get dressed.

"Are you a senior?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, turning back around.

"So am I."

"That sucks having to change schools your senior year."

She shrugged. "My mom got a new job, so we didn't have much choice. Do you mind giving me your phone number? Maybe you, Aidan and I can hang out before school starts."

I looked at her suspiciously. "Why do you keep trying to hook me up with your brother? I told you I'm not interested."

She looked at the floor, embarrassed. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that we saw you in the mall earlier when you were sitting in the food court. Aidan mentioned how cute you were—"

"He did?" I interrupted.

"Yeah. His last girlfriend really broke his heart, and I was hoping I could find someone really nice for him. At least let me introduce you."

I didn't want to admit how much I wanted to meet Aidan. "Let me think about it while I'm changing clothes," I said.

"Okay."

I had already made up my mind before I had my clothes back on that I was going to at least meet Aidan. Since we were going to the same school, it couldn't hurt to at least introduce myself. Who was I fooling though? I wondered as I slipped my jeans back on. From a distance, Aidan Calhoun was fine, and I couldn't wait to meet him.

Nadia was waiting for me when I walked out of the dressing room.

"So what did you decide?" she asked.

"I'll meet him," I said.

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She started bouncing around. “He’s going to be speechless when he sees you,” she said, grabbing my arm and dragging me behind her.

We walked out of the dressing room, and Aidan was standing patiently near the front door of the store.

“Aidan,” Nadia said.

He turned to look in our direction, and I saw his eyes widen, but he tried to play it off.

“What’s up?” he said. I assumed his words were for his sister, but his eyes were on me.

“This is Courtland. She’s a senior at Grover. We’re going to be going to school together,” she said.

He stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Courtland,” he said in this nice baritone voice.

I tried not to think about how much our meeting reminded me of the first time I’d really talked to Allen when we’d ended up in English class together last year.

“Nice to meet you too,” I said, shaking his hand, which was soft and warm. I looked away, not wanting him to see how much a handshake was affecting me. “Your sister said you guys moved here from Atlanta. I don’t know what I’d do if my parents made me move my senior year.”

“It’s not that big of a deal for me,” Nadia said, “but Aidan is worried because he doesn’t know what he’s going to do about basketball. He was expected to be the top recruit this year in Atlanta, and he really wants a full scholarship to the University of Alabama.”

He cut her a look like he was telling her to chill, and I wondered if I was experiencing déjà vu. This guy was starting to have too many similarities to Allen.

“Well, good luck with school,” I said, realizing I needed to get out of the store. I knew I probably sounded rude, but I didn’t care. There was no way I was about to walk back down the road I had just traveled.

He looked stunned at my tone, and Nadia looked kind of confused. It wasn’t until I was halfway out of the entrance and the security alarm started blaring that I realized I still had the outfit I had tried on in my hands. Suddenly feeling like I was about to cry, I thrust the outfit into Nadia’s hands and took off toward the table where Momma and Cory were still sitting.

“Wait,” I heard Nadia yell. “You didn’t give me your phone number.”

I didn’t even have the energy to respond. I couldn’t believe God was messing with my head the way he was. Here I was trying with everything in me to get over Allen and move on with my life, and He sent a guy who was just like Allen. I didn’t even want to think about falling for Aidan only to have my heart broken again. There was only so much hurt one girl could take.

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