

Unforeseeable Beauty

Birmingham Preparatory Academy, Homecoming 2008. The day we first met.

I pushed through the large crowds of dancing high schoolers, holding my arm as I attempted to minimize my appearance. Well, as much as I could. My dark skin made it impossible to fade away completely; it stuck out too much.

My hair was flat-ironed, nearly burnt to a crisp. Mama's necklace adorned my neck, a long silver chain with a pearl pendant that rested on my collarbone. My dress was navy blue, the sleeves hanging off my shoulders and my midsection slightly exposed. The dress lightly brushed against my ankles, where I wore white church shoes that were laying around in my closet. I had borrowed the dress from a boutique near my house for the price of a restaurant meal. I had to return it by Monday.

I found a quiet corner of the gym to stand in, where I would go mostly unnoticed. I hid in the shadows, watching how the other students smiled, danced, and laughed with their friends.

I had only begun attending the school last week, way later than the majority of these students. I'd received a full-ride scholarship, one I couldn't turn down. I wouldn't have stepped within a five-mile radius of that school if I had.

So, there I was. In a large school building that I wasn't quite familiar with, surrounded by rich kids that whispered about me, my ears aching from the loud music they played that I didn't enjoy; and to top it off, I was all alone.

I wasn't sure what Mama thought I would miss out on.

Deciding that I didn't want to stay in the gym with all these sweaty bodies, I walked out of the huge gym, about three times the size of the gym at my old school. The size of this school was unreal.

I clutched my purse tightly and kept my arms in front of me as I wandered down the crowded halls, passing by the cliques and couples loitering around the corridors and leaning on the walls. It didn't take much to notice how their eyes lingered on my figure before returning to their conversations, probably wondering why on Earth a person that looked like me was here. I couldn't blame them, I had only seen a handful of people that looked like me so far.

As it turned out, I was so focused on what was around me that I hadn't been paying attention to what was in front of me. Which led to our fateful collision, literally.

I bumped into his tall figure, nearly tripping over my feet. The student acted quickly. His large hands grabbed my arm, stabilizing me.

I waited for the retribution to come as he held onto my arm, assuming the words would be harmful and hurtful too, like the students who whispered and glared.

But he had simply just let go.

I was confused.

"Sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going, my bad," He ran his fingers through his brown strands.

I shook my head. "I wasn't either. I'm sorry."

"I guess we're both clumsy."

His grin was bright and infectious, causing my lips to quirk in a slight smile.

"Yeah." Not wanting an awkward silence to pursue, I quickly thought of something to say. "You have a... pretty smile."

His grin broadened with an underlying emotion that I couldn't quite place. "Really?"

I felt flustered. "Yes."

"Well, you don't look too bad yourself. Your dress is nicer than I expected.."

I completely ignored the last phrase. “You think so?”

The boy shrugged. “Yeah. You look... good.” He seemed to struggle with the last word.

I was appalled though. “...I do?”

“You do.”

I blinked. There were so many other girls at this event; with expensive designer dresses, skin as white as snow, and bone-straight hair. But I, the girl with a homey set of earrings, fried hair that kissed her shoulders, and a dress that was due within 48 hours was pretty.

It was too good to be true.

“I’m Jesse.” He introduced. “And you are?”

I cleared my throat. “Jasmine.” I managed to get out. “My name is Jasmine.”

We stayed together for a while, getting to know each other as the night continued. By the end of the event, we’d exchanged numbers.

Meeting Jesse made me so happy, even if it was temporary. Someone that considered deep-mocha skin pretty was rare. So, I kept in close contact with him, hoping he would give me the affection that I craved.

Looking back on it now, it was the worst decision I’d ever made.

Zach’s party. November 2008.

We’d been together for about two months now. After Homecoming, Jesse and I started to hang out more. We started dating around the beginning of October after he surprised me by asking through text. It was quick, but I was desperate, so I agreed.

The first few weeks of our relationship had been sweet. We’d gone on a few dates, shared a few hugs here and there, and even ate lunch together. That phase didn’t last forever though.

He'd changed for the worse. He started demanding more from me, that I 'wore this' or 'didn't say that'. He even convinced me to lie to Mama and sneak out with him to go to his friend's party. He always said that if I followed his instructions, I'd be prettier and more people would tolerate me. I desperately wanted that.

"It was already a risk bringing you here," Jesse stated, the two of us sitting in a dark and unoccupied corner, making it hard for most party-goers to see us. "Don't do anything stupid."

I wanted to ask him to elaborate, but instead, I swallowed and nodded. Mama had taught me that; sit quietly, only speak when spoken to. Especially when around policemen. Jesse had said something along those lines as well, only his version was more universal. He didn't want me to be seen as aggressive, which was also coincidentally less desirable. For people that looked like me, anyways. The pale girls could be as loud as they wanted.

"Jesse?"

"Hmm?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Why do you like me?"

Jesse suddenly lifted my chin to look at him, I couldn't meet his gaze. "You know I only want the best for you, right?"

I turned away. "Right."

"So don't ask stupid questions."

"Hey, Jesse!" A blonde boy called, soda can in hand, running over to the dark corner where we both sat.

Jesse smiled. "Zach!"

"Jeez, I was wondering where you were! It's so dark over here." When Jack's friend finally made it over, he paused. "I see you brought..."

“..Jasmine, yeah.” Jesse finished the sentence for him. He reached behind my back, discreetly pinching my arm. I quickly put on my best smile and waved.

“Nice to see you again..” I greeted.

“You’re a senior too?”

I shook my head. “I’m a Junior.”

“Huh,” Zach raised an eyebrow. “I could’ve sworn you were older, anyways...” He turned to face Jesse. “You digging the party? I can’t believe we haven’t gotten the pool dirty yet.”

Jesse smirked, seemingly at ease. “Yeah.”

Zach’s house had a huge pool at the back, with a purple glow and oasis shape. From what I could see through the glass back door, no one had entered it, the teens choosing to congregate around the pool instead.

I didn’t understand why the pool was open in the first place. It was the end of November, Christmas songs already beginning to play on the radio. It wasn’t bitterly cold in our area, but it wasn’t warm either. Anyone who stepped into the pool would probably get sick. It was a disaster waiting to happen. I wasn’t going to say anything, though.

“Are you going to head to the pool any time soon?” Zach asked.

“Nah.” Jesse shook his head.

I internally sighed in relief. Not only was it a little chilly, but the water would instantly curl up my freshly flat-ironed hair, exposing my nappy curls for the whole world to see. Then I’d *really* be in trouble.

“Well, I’m about to go get something to drink, this one is finished.” The blonde carelessly tossed the soda can to the side. “Wanna come with?”

“Sure.” He stood up, turning to face me. “I’ll be back,” Jesse stated. “Stay here.”

I nodded, watching both boys walk away.

With Jesse not around to scold me and my figure hidden in the darkness, I let out a breath and allowed myself to relax. While basking in the anonymity and protection of the darkness, I looked at the party around me.

The music felt louder now that I was alone. I saw girls that were talking with a bunch of different guys. Pretty girls with straight, long blonde hair, slim physiques, pale skin, and designer outfits. Girls that looked straight out of a magazine. I wished that I looked like them. Maybe then, people would look at me with more love than hatred.

I saw many teens conversing among themselves; laughing, dancing, drinking. I wondered what would happen if the police showed up. They were white and rich, they'd probably get a slight slap on the wrist.

A boy at my old school got shot and killed driving away from a party like this. The cop said they felt threatened. Although, I knew it was the area's demographic that threatened him, not the boy himself.

I shouldn't be here.

"Oh hey, it's you."

I looked up. Another blonde. Great. "Um, hello."

"You're Jesse's new chick right?" The new blonde smirked. "Never thought I'd see the day where there was a blackie at an infamous Zach Party, but here you are."

I frowned, narrowing my eyes. But, I didn't say a word.

"You're kinda pretty for a black person though, I could see why Jesse tolerates you." The boy licked his lips. "But it's probably the dim lighting, I can barely see you. I don't even know why Jesse brought you, no one that looks like you should be here."

“I’m aware.” I responded.

He didn’t like that. “You know what?” The boy’s demeanor changed quickly, his smile sinister. “Are you hungry, I think there’s some fried chicken somewhere around here. Let me show you.”

He grabbed onto my arm, yanking me from my seat. I resisted. “Let me go.”

Ignoring me, he pulled me away from the safe corner, dragging me through the party and drawing attention towards us. “Or, should we go swimming? The pool looks really nice at night.” He laughed. “Or wait, can you even swim?”

Before I knew it, we were outside. “Oh well, I guess I’ll find out.”

And then, I fell in.

When I reached the surface, I coughed up the chloride water as my lungs burned. I felt my hair already beginning to shrink as my tight curls became visible. People had crowded around the pool, watching me with eyes filled with anything but sympathy.

“Oh, so I guess you can swim. My bad.” The blonde laughed, causing the crowd to laugh as well, the teens all looking down at me.

My eyes began to water. The remnants of my confidence were in shambles all around me, and I couldn’t piece them back together. I didn’t have the energy or the motivation. I felt broken.

Among the crowd, I could see Jesse standing with Zach inside the house. As his eyes met mine, I felt a shiver run down my spine. He was mad at me.

I had embarrassed him.

I sneezed, holding the towel closer to my skin. As I shivered, I sat between Mama’s legs, allowing her to detangle and twist my wet hair.

Shortly after being pushed into the pool, I left the party and called Mama to pick me up since I had ridden in Jesse's car. She'd arrived in half an hour, the rich neighborhood not too far from the poor one that we lived in. We hadn't spoken in the car, but once we got home and started washing my hair, she'd gone off on me. I deserved it.

It seemed like I couldn't say the phrase enough. "I'm sorry."

"I know," Mama sighed. "I was young too once, I went to parties but..." Mama shook her head. "Those kids are something else."

We sat in silence for a while.

Getting my hair done without heat being applied was one of the most calming things I'd ever experienced. I basked in the feeling of Mama's fingers on my scalp, her wrists rotating from twist to twist. But, even though it was less damaging, it was simultaneously less pretty.

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"Am I pretty?"

"Are you serious?" The woman momentarily paused the movement of her fingers. "You are *my daughter*, Of course you'd be gorgeous like me! What is there not to like? "

I wish I believed her. "No, I'm not."

Mama sucked her teeth but said nothing more. Instead, she worked on detangling the many knots and finishing my individual twists. I pulled the towel closer to my body, the rough fabric not doing much to warm me up.

"Voila, I'm done." She got up, walking into her bedroom. Shortly after, she came out of her bedroom with a small mirror. She handed it to me.

“Woah...” I looked at my hair in the small mirror. It was a bit more shrunken than normal, but I thought it was adorable. Whenever I slightly moved my head, the twists moved, probably more than my straightened hair ever did.

“Doesn’t your scalp feel better too?”

I nodded. Normally, when I finished straightening my hair, my scalp felt tense and uncomfortably warm. Now, it felt a little tense, but it also felt cool and healthy in a way. The relief I felt was indescribable.

“Our hair is beautiful... especially when it’s healthy and not altered with those horrible chemicals...” My mother stated. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Jesse’s house.

He hadn’t spoken to me since that night; I was getting anxious. The way his eyes shot daggers at me that day, I knew I had really pissed him off. But, I wasn’t sure what I had done wrong. Yeah, my hair had reverted to its natural state, but was it truly my fault?

The worst part of it all was that I didn’t know when he would strike, or how hard.

So, when he’d texted her to come over to his place after giving her the silent treatment for a week, I was shocked. I’d only ever visited his place a few times, but now, when he was angry at me?

It seemed like a trap. Nonetheless, within a few hours, I found myself standing at his doorstep, my hand trembling as my fingers brushed against the doorbell. It took all my willpower to push the button down. I didn’t want to be here, but there was something I needed to get done.

Jesse answered within minutes. “Come in.”

I walked silently through the halls, noting the many pictures hanging on the wall of the staircase. One picture in particular stood out to me the most. Young Jesse was there, his dimples well-defined and curly hair ruly. His green eyes weren't dull and cold as they were now, but bright and welcoming. He only looked about five. A man on the left shared his green eyes and pale skin. The woman on the right however wore curly brown hair like his, only her skin was visibly darker.

"You embarrassed me last weekend." His rough voice interrupted her thoughts, causing her to jump at the sudden tone.

"I'm sorry."

He didn't acknowledge me, instead opening his backdoor. "Come on, it's nice out."

I reluctantly left the image behind, walking past him through the back door. I felt the warm rays hit my skin, my complexion glowing in the golden light. He wasn't lying.

I felt the wind blow through my newly done twists. After Mama had done them, I refused to take them out. For once, my hair moved with the wind, my scalp at ease and tension-free.

Jesse stared at me, no, at my hair. I could tell he hated it.

I would've hated it too.

"That." He growled. "Is the problem. It's too ethnic looking, and not in a good way."

My voice was firm. "I can't help what happened. That's what happens when my hair gets wet. I didn't-"

"So get a perm," He rolled his eyes. "I've seen other blacks do it."

"I.." I looked away. "I can't. Mama won't allow it."

That was true. After suffering a harsh chemical burn, Mama forbade me from ever considering getting a perm. It was why I just straightened my hair instead. Even seeing the harsh

effects, I had still wanted one. If I had a perm, I wouldn't have to worry about moisture making my hair frizzy, or flat-ironing it so frequently. Besides, it wasn't like the constant heat I had applied was so much better anyways. But, something changed after the night of the party.

“So just lie.” He shrugged. “You've lied to her before.”

That was true. But recently, I'd only lied to her to spend time with him. I didn't want to suffer with that feeling of betrayal anymore, especially over a guy I had only known for a few months.

Jesse held his face in his hands, muttering incoherent words to himself. He eventually sat up and shook his head. “Black girls aren't cute. They're loud, aggressive, their hair always looks a mess..”

“But you,” He put his hand on my cheek. “You could've been different. With my help, you won't be like those other blackies. I *always* make sure you act more desirable; submissive, quiet, neat hair. I can't change your skin, unfortunately, but I did the best I could with what I was provided.”

I shivered. Was that really what he saw me as? A girl in need of fixing? A small after-school project? Was this the care he was talking about?

“And here's how you repay me, you embarrass me further.” He shook his head. “I should've known. I can't believe I called you pretty.”

Those words made my heart twist painfully in my chest. I had wanted so badly to believe that Jesse had cared for me, but this small rant had confirmed it. He never cared for me.

“I gave you a chance, and you blew it.”

“The woman...” I interrupted.

He lifted an eyebrow. “What woman?”

“In the picture... your mother..” I said slowly, gauging his reaction. When he didn’t seem angry, I continued. “Was she like that?”

“Like what?”

“What you just said, submissive and quiet?” My brown eyes bore into his green ones. “She obviously didn’t have straight hair.”

“She straightens it now.” Jesse snarled. “She understands how unprofessional it is, although your hair is worse than hers. My Dad taught her that because he cares for her.”

I nodded. My curls were way more nappy and frizzy than the woman in the picture, even with my curl pattern distorted from heat damage. However...

“You know, *my* Mama said that our curls are beautiful...”

Jesse scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Your mother is blind.”

“Even if she was,” I retorted. “..she could still feel the texture of my hair with her fingers. Without all the heat I apply to please you; it would be so soft, more curly.”

“That night,” I sighed. “When I was at my lowest and I wanted someone to comfort me, Mama was there. She scolded me, yes; but she gave me a towel to dry off, detangled my hair, wiped my tears....”

“Mama *truly* loves and cares for me,” I turned to face Jesse, his body rigid. It was the first time we had made eye contact since Homecoming. “More than you *ever* could.”

Jesse shot up. “Watch your tone.”

Sensing that I had pissed Jesse off, I knew that I had to get out of there quickly. I sprinted inside, dashing through the hallway that led to the front door. I heard loud, angry footsteps behind me.

As my fingers brushed the brass doorknob, I felt Jesse grab my arm.

“So you’re just gonna leave, huh.” He chuckled. “After everything I did for you. Do you think I actually wanted to date a black girl?”

I shifted in his grasp, trying to break free. “This is my hair, Jesse! It’s not straight. It’s not like the white girls that you see at your school. It’s extremely curly-”

“It’s a rat’s nest, that’s what it is.” His nails dug into my skin. “But you know what? Wear it if you want. I mean, you were already the laughing stock of last week, with your medusa hair.” He scoffed.

I stopped trying to escape, instead opting to look into his eyes. They were bulging and dark, his jaw tense, and his expression filled with rage. He was livid. I needed to leave.

I closed my eyes as I took a deep breath, mustering all my courage to look Jesse straight in the eye. I was only going to say this once.

“I’m breaking up with you.”

It all happened so fast. One second I was looking into his eyes, the next I was looking at the floor, my cheek stinging. It took a minute to register the abuse.

Jesse got angrier. “Oh really? You really think you’ll find someone that’ll treat you better than I have? You won’t! You’re nothing without me! You owe me, you can’t leave!”

I gritted my teeth. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

Before he could do anything else, I kneed him hard. He let go as he howled in pain. I took it as my chance, throwing the door open and running away.

I was free.

January 2009. The Monday after Winter Break.

I cut my hair off.

As much as I liked the natural feel, it was damaged beyond repair. My aunt recommended that I chop it off and start anew, which I decided wasn't a bad idea. Besides, Jesse had always had a problem with my hair. I felt like I was kinda getting back at him for all the trauma he caused. It was liberating.

I wasn't quite comfortable showing what was left of my hair, so I used a headscarf from the local beauty supply store instead. The administration nearly made me take it off for 'security reasons', but they'd been more lenient once I had shown them my situation. It was a step in the right direction.

The stares were still there, but I didn't pay much attention to them. The stares had caused me to hate myself. I didn't want to hate myself. Jesse and his friends were a part of those stares, their eyes the harshest. I didn't care, though. I wanted nothing to do with them.

I told my counselor about what Jesse did before winter break. I even showed photo evidence of the redness that covered the right side of my face. That was a few weeks ago. No action had been taken. I wasn't surprised.

I told Mama everything. She'd cried and held me close. I cried too. But as bad as it was, she wouldn't let me leave the school. The opportunity was too great. I understood, but I was distraught. Walking into the building now was way harder than before.

As I looked around me, I realized that these people had caused me so much pain. They'd endangered my sanity, my wellbeing, my self-image, and even my hair. Even with all the trouble that they'd indirectly caused, I don't believe that they'll ever see the impacts of their actions.

I was fine with that. My biggest priority was overcoming my trauma, and finally seeing the beauty that Mama was so convinced that I had.

Then, everything might be okay.