

This was meant to be an additional chapter, but would have required the follow up chapter and made the book even longer. So I just took bits and pieces from them and added it to the story to give more context to the relationship between James, Ryan and Stephanie.

James
August 1989

As soon as I stepped on the campus of Tuskegee University, I inhaled deeply trying to catch my breath and my bearings. And it wasn't just because of the warm and humid Alabama air. Looking around at the historic buildings, I suddenly felt overcome with emotions thinking about the history that surrounded me. All of the Black men and women who had attended this same college and made their mark on the world. My mama would have loved it here.

“You all right, son?” my father asked, placing a hand on my shoulder.

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“Oh, yeah—yes, sir,” I remarked smiling.

Today was freshman move in day and my daddy was dropping me off.

“I was just thinking ‘bout Mama.” I said, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from getting weepy.

My father gave me a firm pat on the back.

“I know she lookin’ down from Heaven smiling. Her baby enrolled in college. She’d be so proud.” He remarked as his voice cracked.

My mama passed away the spring before I started eleventh grade. She died of pneumonia. For as long as I could remember, she’d always been sick. In and out of the hospital or bedridden at home. But whenever she was feeling okay or in a good mood, she was a lot of fun. Our favorite thing to do was trivia games and crossword puzzles. Mama was really smart, she never got the chance to go to college, but she always talked about me going. It sucked that she wasn’t here to see it happen. I had applied to three other colleges—all HBCUs—and also got accepted, but only Tuskegee came through with a full academic scholarship for all four years.

I couldn’t imagine attending a college where I was a minority. A HBCU was a place where I didn’t have to explain myself. Freedom from being the "only one" in the room. The freedom to be unapologetically myself: smart, ambitious, creative, outspoken. A place where black excellence was not the exception; it was the expectation.

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Opening the door to the White Hall freshmen dormitory, a chill went through my body thinking about all the young black men who came before me opening this same door. I held the door open for my father as he wheeled in boxes of my belongings on a dolly. He had refused my help.

“I only get one chance to move my son into college for the first time.” He said as he stacked the boxes on to the dolly. “Just don’t forget about your old man when you get your fancy degree,” he laughed.

“Never,” I promised.

We made our way through the maze of excited freshmen and their parents until we made it to my assigned dorm room. The door was already open.

“No, you should put that on that wall,” I heard a woman’s voice.

I suppressed a groan. I’d hoped to beat my roommate here.

“Jimmy! Wassup! Hello, Mr. G!” RJ yelled, waving to my father.

“Ryan Thaddeus Jones! You were not raised in a barn,” RJ’s mother, Miss Lillian chastised him.

Ryan Thaddeus Jones also known as RJ, was my best friend. We’d met in high school during the beginning of our junior year. My father’s job transferred him to Chicago and he felt it would be a good change for the both of us after losing my mama.

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“Sorry, hey man ‘bout time you got here. Check it out,”
He waved his hand around the dorm room.

It had been wallpapered with a metallic gray wallpaper, and there was a new black loveseat, a TV, and a Pioneer stereo system. My mouth dropped open. It looked more like a bachelor apartment than a dorm room.

Further back in the room were two twin beds on opposite walls. They both had black and gray sheet sets, but different patterns. There were also shelves on the walls. And on one side in was a big wooden letter J and the other side a big wooden letter R.

“Oh boy! Looka here! This is mighty fine. You do all this Lillian?” My father asked, Ryan’s mother.

She smiled and crossed over to give me and my father hugs.

“I was just the supervisor. Ryan told me how he wanted everything to look and we had some people come in to help. Thought it would make it a little more homey, since they’ll be so far away,” she said and her voice cracked.

I’m sure both her and my father would be crying before they left.

“What do you think?” Ryan asked, staring at me.

I nodded. Even though my first thought was *you could have asked for my input*. But since I didn’t pay for anything, I just smiled.

“This is dope!”

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"Where's Raymond?" My father asked Miss Lillian. Raymond aka Pops was Ryan's dad.

"He had to go make a call. That man is always working." She sighed.

I helped my dad take the boxes from the dolly and organized a some of my things. A few minutes later, Ryan's dad returned.

"Hey Jimbo!" His dad laughed, pulling me in for a bone crushing hug. I didn't miss the way RJ rolled his eyes. My father's jaw clenched.

They both had a problem with the way RJ's dad treated me, including his insistence that I call him *Pops*. I think RJ was jealous because he was technically his only child. But the only reason my father didn't like Pops was because he was rich. Like stupid rich. He was the CEO of a company in Chicago called Jones-Beecham. They sold tools and equipment to oil companies. Pops had started the company almost twenty years ago, when he came up with a drill bit design that apparently revolutionized offshore operations.

"Hey Pops!" I grinned. Despite whatever problem my father and RJ had with his dad, I liked Mr. Jones. He was cool as hell.

"Hey, there Earl. How's it going?" Pops held out a hand to my father. My dad shook his hand and gave Pops a closed mouth smile.

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After we were settled in the dorm, our parents took us out to lunch before leaving the campus. Ryan's parents had a moving company drive his stuff down and they would be flying back home. My dad and I had driven down from Illinois. We broke up the drive up into two days instead of driving the entire twelve hours. I drove one day and my father drove the next day. I was worried about my dad driving back by himself.

"You sure you're okay to drive by yourself?" I asked once we made it back to campus.

He laughed. "You know, I used to drive trucks for a living. I'll be fine."

I sighed deeply. "Okay, well make sure you call me. When you get home. You have the dorm phone number?"

"I think you might be forgettin' who the parent is." He glanced at me and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I got the number. I'll call. Now, I know I don't have to tell you this because you're a good boy, you always have been. But you got a good opportunity here, son. Don't mess it off. Keep your head down and work hard. Don't get caught up in no foolishness with Ryan. I ain't got the kind of money his daddy got, to get you of trouble."

"I'm straight, I promise you I won't get into no trouble." I said and I meant it. I had a plan and RJ and no one else would keep me from it.

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I hugged my father, and he held on a little longer than usual before getting into his 1986 Oldsmobile 98 and pulling away.

When I made it back to the dorm room, Ryan was dancing around the room and listening to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power". He stopped the cassette when I entered.

"Jimmy! Can you believe this? We out here with *no* supervision. We can do *whatever* we want!" he cackled. "Let the fun begin!"

RJ was wild, but I knew when to pull him back from the edge. We complimented each other because he made sure I had fun, and I made sure he knew when fun time was over.

The next day, I woke up early and took a walk. Tuskegee was a beautiful campus. The huge, ancient oak trees formed canopies over the lawns. Even the beautiful brick buildings told a story: they were bricks made and laid by actual students of the university under the guidance of the founder. Speaking of the founder, I made my way over to the statue of Booker T. Washington, "Lifting the Veil of Ignorance." It wasn't just a monument, it was a mission statement. It was a promise of what the university would do for free men. The sheer weight and significance of that mission filled me with awe.

Down the way was the George Washington Carver Museum, a testament to a genius who saw endless possibilities in a simple peanut. I couldn't believe I was also walking the

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same paths where the legendary Tuskegee Airmen walked before they took to the sky.

Ryan, was right, we were at school with no supervision. Out from the shadows of our parents on our way to adulthood. But I had no plans of wasting my time at Tuskegee. I wanted to help people, especially black people, who didn't always get a fair chance. That's why after Tuskegee I'd be heading to law school. I wanted to make sure *my people* had reliable, knowledgeable and affordable representation, if they needed it.

The campus started to come alive as more students poured out from the buildings and on to the grounds. I turned a corner and collided with someone. The papers they held fell and fluttered to the ground. We both leaned down at the same time to pick them up, and bumped heads.

"Ow! Why don't you go stand over there, and I'll get the papers," I suggested.

"Well, since it is your fault." It was a girl. Her stiff, annoyed voice confirmed it although the pink high-top Reeboks she wore was my first clue.

My eyes widened as I gathered the papers, noticing U.S. Government and Civics was on her schedule. I couldn't believe my bad luck. I was enrolled in the same course as this rude, bougie ass. . .my inner rant was cut short, when I stood, leaving me speechless (and a little stunned) staring at her beautiful, smiling face. My mouth opened slightly, and she laughed.

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She was several inches shorter than me, a complexion the color the Brach's Chewy Caramel candy my mama used to love. Her hair was shorter on one side than the other, reminding me of the Salt-n-Pepa style. She wore an oversized sweatshirt with the Tuskegee logo and a pair of black leggings.

"Can I have my papers, please?" she asked. This time her voice sounded friendlier than before.

"Oh yeah, yeah. Here you go. Sorry," I handed her the papers, embarrassed to be caught staring.

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. I was kidding, by the way. It was actually my fault. I was so busy looking at my schedule." She took the papers from me, but her gaze never left mine. Her eyes were wide with long lashes like a doll and her lips...*I was buggin'!*

I cleared my throat. "I noticed you have U.S. Government and Civics with Professor Lane. So do I."

She arched an eyebrow. "So, you were invading my privacy?" She sounded like she was teasing, so I played along.

"It ain't private if it's scattered all over the quad," I smirked.

"You've got a point," she grinned. "My name is Stephanie." She clasped the papers in one hand and extended the other.

"James," I shook her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, making her blush.

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She hesitantly dropped my hand and nervously combed her fingers through her hair.

“It’ll be nice to know somebody in at least one of my classes,” she smiled.

I was about to ask for her phone number, in case she wanted to be study partners; but before I got the chance, someone punched my shoulder. He had the absolute worst timing.

“Well, hello, who is this pretty young lady?” RJ asked, smiling broadly at Stephanie.

Her eyes met mine with a confused expression. I sighed deeply.

“Stephanie, this is my best friend Ryan. Ryan this is Stephanie.”

I knew by the way Ryan hovered the day we met Stephanie, he couldn't wait to get his paws on her. There was no way I was going to let that happen. I didn't even know her, but there was just something about her...something in her eyes that left me feeling like I was under a spell. I'd never had that kind of reaction to a girl.

Later, that evening Ryan asked me about her.

"So, what's up with old girl from the quad? What was her name again?"

I shrugged and tried to act nonchalant. "She wasn't watching where she was going, and bumped into me. She dropped some papers and I helped pick them up." I intentionally didn't say her name.

"Hmm." He hummed eyeing me. "Guess what? I got us invited to a party off campus with this Kappa I met yesterday. You down?" RJ asked, excitedly.

Going to an off-campus party was the last thing I wanted to do. But I figured it was best to go ahead and get a little partying out of the way before the semester officially started next week. The party was off the chain. And not in a good way. It was hot as hell in the frat house and people were packed in like sardines.

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Moving through a crowd of drunk, sweaty people was not my idea of a good time. But I pretended for RJ, so he wouldn't think I was lame for wanting to just chill in the dorm.

The weekend passed in a blur and Tuesday morning was the first day of classes. I was excited not only to get started, but Stephanie had a class with me on Tuesday and Thursday, so I would get to see her.

The majority of my classes were in the morning. I liked getting up early, getting the day started and ended it early. The majority of RJ's classes were later in the morning or afternoon. He was a night owl and did not like getting up early. I was thankful that we'd at least get a break from each other with our class schedules. Don't get me wrong, RJ was my homie and like a brother, but he could be *a lot*.

When I walked into Professor Lane's class, I tried to play it cool looking around the large auditorium style classroom for Stephanie. When I spotted her, her eyes were already on me and she was smiling. She gave me a little wave and nodded her head towards the seat next to her. I tried to calm my thundering heart. *She's just a girl. It's just a seat.* I repeated in my head.

"Hey, James," she smiled. "I saved you a seat." She removed her bookbag and sweater from the seat next to her.

"Cool. Thanks," I smiled, folding myself into the seat. I glanced around the room noticing it was filling up.

"Looks like it's a full class," I observed.

Stephanie glanced around as well. "Yeah."

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While she was distracted I took the opportunity to look at her. *Damn*. She was beautiful. Today her hair was held back by a headband. She wore the same pink Reeboks but this time she had on a matching sweatshirt and a blue jean skirt. My eyes darted down to her knees. Her skin was smooth and shiny, and looked so soft. I laughed to myself. *Smooth and shiny? Really?* I needed to get a grip.

“What so funny?” Stephanie asked grabbing my attention.

“Nothing. So how are you liking Tuskegee so far?” I asked.

She smiled. “I love it. My dad as actually born in Alabama—,”

The rest of her sentence was interrupted by Professor Lane entering the room and calling the class to attention. Stephanie and I exchanged smiles and turned to listen to the professor.