

Excerpt from *The Bum Magnet*

New Year's Eve 2007

The crackling wood echoed in my Milano tile fireplace betraying the emptiness of my expansive colonial. I thought about adding another log to the dying flames, but in my depressed state, the five feet from the chaise to the fireplace was about four feet longer than I could bear to walk. I refused to budge for at least another two days. By then, the holidays would be over, and I could leave my house without suppressing the urge to rapid fire BB pellets into the spectacle of inflatable Christmas decorations adorning every front yard in the neighborhood except mine.

My house looked like Gale-force winds blew the windows out. I hadn't cleaned in over a week. The furniture exposed enough dust to grow crops, and the kitchen sink had all but disappeared beneath a mound of dirty dishes with a tilt reminiscent of The Leaning Tower of Pisa. Worse, I vegged on my chaise for so long the leather cushion resembled a foam memory pillow. But getting up was pointless, and I only had enough energy to R&R . . . rotate and reach for my snacks.

Critical life-sustaining provisions were positioned within an arm's length—one fresh box of Kleenex, a trash can, remote controls for all of the electronics, two bags of Ranch Doritos, one half-eaten bag of Cool Mint Oreos, approximately twenty-five dollars worth of Godiva truffles from a fifty-dollar box, an unopened bag of miniature Reese's Peanut Butter Cups (Hershey's versus Godiva? no contest), and an ice cold bottle of Grey Goose, also half empty. My electric cooler parked near the chaise stored water and the

cranberry juice that accompanied my Grey Goose. The bathroom was just off the kitchen, so I pee'd during my trailblazing journeys to the Sub-Zero.

The remote to the fifty-inch plasma suspended above the fireplace became adhered to my hand, as I surfed for a benign comedy to watch without being reminded how pathetic and lonely I'd been. Fan-freaking-tastic. When Harry Met Sally, While You Were Sleeping, and Bridget Jones' Diary. Jesus Christ. Once beacons of hope, those movies became sources of excruciating pain not unlike natural childbirth. If I endured one more boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back, joy of Christmas, and all live happily ever after fairytale, I might have slit my wrists and yelled, "Take me now!"

I flipped from channel to channel and paused to watch a Catholic Mass. In a true testament to my mental funk, only after ten minutes did I realize the priest was conducting mass in Latin. My exhaustive Latin vocabulary consisted of Semper Fi (Always Faithful) and Caveat Emptor (Buyer Beware), so I wouldn't find much consolation unless he mentioned one of the two.

At last, I settled on a rerun of Rudolf the Red-nose Reindeer and the Island of Misfit Toys. Now, that was a happy thought, my only happy thought of the day—an island somewhere between East Jabib and West Cucamonga to send my defective and unwanted shit. If only an Island for Misfit Boyfriends existed, I'd next-day-air Marcus's sorry ass there.

Before Marcus—and after my heart got stomped, trampled, and kicked for the umpteenth time—I prayed to God and asked Him, "Please send me a man who'll love me so much he'll never let me go." Ironically, I forgot to pray that he would make me happy. I forgot to pray that he wouldn't be a selfish, lying, cheating bastard. Oh, but God has a

sense of humor, doesn't He? He answered my prayer with comical precision and sent my "blessing"—Marcus Matthews. A man who never made me happy, a man who always cheated and lied, BUT a man who wouldn't let me go. God mocked me, saying, "Don't tell Me how to do My job."

Score one for Him.

When God has a sense of humor, floating random prayers up there is risky business.

On Christmas Day, I snatched the small, well-deserved Tiffany & Co box containing Marcus's most recent guilt offering from his paws and told his dumb ass for the trillionth time our relationship was over, finished, finito, buh-bye, move on. His reply? "So, where do you want to go for dinner?" I wanted to scream, "Fool, is something wrong with your hearing? It's over!!"

Instead, I made him take me to Maggiano's for Italian.

I'm a full-figured, size fourteen; I don't pass up free meals.

I never understood the term full-figured. Are skinny women are empty-figured? I guess full sounds better than fat. I stuck it to him though. I ordered two of the most expensive dishes: the manicotti for my right butt-cheek and the filet mignon for my left. Despite my size, I believed eating a balanced diet was important. Once upon a time, a yummy dinner would have earned him a coochie coupon, but those days were long over. Marcus was my most recent "the one"—you know, the title all we desperate-to-be-loved women give to the one-in-a-million, once-in-a-lifetime, love-of-my-life superhero guy we hope God sent to rescue us from our miserable, single existence.

Yeah, I'd had five of them.

My best friend and sorority sister, Denise—well I call her Nisey (she calls me Risseey)—she introduced us.

Bitch.

I still loved her though.

Nisey's more sister than friend; we met over twenty years ago. She's my down-for-whatever partner-in-crime. You know, the friend that keeps you company at two a.m. outside your boyfriend's house because you suspect another woman is sleeping over. She's also the friend that'd let all the air out of his tires and dump five pounds of sugar in his gas tank on your behalf—despite your half-hearted protests—when you discover you're right.

She'd shared a box of Godiva with you when you were depressed so you didn't have to get fat by yourself—although cruelly, she never gained an ounce. She had the metabolism of a super model on Fen-Phen, but she maintained a respectable size eight figure. (Respectable for African-Americans in D.C., I should say. For us, a size eight is equivalent to a Hollywood size two. What can I say? Black men liked women with fat asses.)

She'd give you her last dime if she had one.

But more often than not she didn't.

She was always broke.

You wouldn't have a clue based on her Filene's Basement-sized closet though; she had more Chanel, Dolce & Gabbana, Marc Jacobs, and Prada than New York during Fashion Week. My wardrobe—mostly close-out buys from Knock-Off World—consisted

of bona fide Channelle (a la ghetto), Dolcie & Gabbie, Marc Jacobson, and Tada!, a reflection of my hefty mortgage, Beemer payment, and non-existent benefactors.

Hey, I looked good too, just not quite as “authentic.”

We were both real estate agents, but she was one of those high-fashioned, luxury-car driving Realtors who subscribed to the image over substance theory. She might not find you the right house, but damn it, she looked fabulous trying. I had to be fair though, about fifty percent of her inventory was guilt gifts from her boyfriends, lovers, and sugar daddies; she called them sponsors, whatever.

Anyway, I'm sure she meant well when she introduced me to Marcus. But, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Marcus and I worked for competing companies, and by all appearances, we were a match made in heaven. I was cute; he was handsome. I was a highly-successful top producer; he was a highly-successful top producer. I was tall; he was tall. I was honest, caring, and devoted to satisfying his every need; he was . . . tall.

Among our friends and family, he played the role of “doting boyfriend” who couldn't shower me with enough love and attention. And that was true, at least for the first six months. Then, like Jekyll to Hyde, he transformed into the self-centered jackass who didn't shower me with enough love and attention.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I told myself to walk away. But I'd been in so many dysfunctional relationships that I thought suffering in relative silence with an asshole was normal, kind of like Stockholm's Syndrome for love. In reality, we were a match made in hell, but I loved my jerk. In my mind, decent men only existed in movie scripts and romance novels. He had three boys from a previous marriage—twins Mark

and Mikey (age six) and the oldest, Malik (age eight)—whom I adored so. . . little cretins. Don't get me wrong, I loved them to death, but they were bad as hell, like three little Tazmanian devils whose diets consisted only of crack and Red Bull. Oh my God, they used to run my ass into the ground, always running, jumping, diving into something—often something rock hard, fussing over stupid stuff, constantly working my nerves until they couldn't work them anymore. And they knew it too. They'd ramp up the rowdiness anytime I was in the vicinity, which was quite often as Marcus worked non-stop . . . or so he said. But they quit giving me a hard time after I introduced them to mom's best friend—the switch.

Yeah, I went old school, made them pull the switch from the tree and everything. The fifty-foot walk from the deck to the Dogwood in my backyard was the longest of their little juvenile delinquent lives. They got to the point where they would straighten up if I even looked in the direction of a tree. I don't care what anyone says; a good, old-fashioned ass whoopin' has lots of power.

Anyway, I thought we'd marry and Presto! Instant family. The marriage buzz among our friends spread like the flu; we'd even investigated a three-stone, platinum engagement ring at Jared.

So, can you imagine my shock and surprise when I caught that jackass lip-locked with some silicone-gorged, weave-wearing heifer in a parking lot? Oh, and did I forget to mention he kissed her in my car, parked in front of our restaurant? While I Christmas shopped for his gifts with his kids?

He had me, and I'd been had.

Looking back on the wasted three years of our farce of a relationship, he always looked for what I've termed the "BBD"—the Bigger and Better Deal.

Why? I don't know.

I brought home the bacon, served it up, and washed the dishes; spread eagle faster than a hooker on a countdown and licked the "lollipop" on-demand; knew the difference between a touchdown, homerun, goal, and a board; washed his dingy drawers, even the ones that looked like a nuclear fart blew a hole in them; left the toilet seat up; watched more football than John Madden; and quoted The Godfather.

I was a man's dream.

But Marcus, he was never satisfied. He wanted everything he didn't have and had everything he didn't want, including me.

His problem? He set the bar way too high, deluded himself into believing a Halle Berry/Martha Stewart/Oprah Winfrey/Virgin Mary/Vanessa Del Rio-type woman actually existed. He further conned himself into believing that—if by some miracle she did exist—she would want his sorry ass.

I, on the other hand, set the bar way too low. All a man pretty much needed was a pulse and a job—at least in the beginning. I admit the list lengthened as the qualities I billed as optional in the beginning - like considerate, thoughtful, trustworthy, honest, ambitious, respectful, big dick - became mandatory.

Hindsight's always twenty-twenty though, isn't it? After I kicked him to the curb, Marcus realized he didn't have it so bad after all. His constant, annoying calls and refusal to acknowledge our break-up were some futile expression of regret about his indiscretion, maybe even a deep-seated wish that I'd just play along, forgive and forget.

Well, he could hang that shit up.

I could never trust him again, or any of my ex-boyfriends for that matter.

Seemed a little scary when I looked back on my past relationships. I'd dated five versions of the same man, and married one . . . all bums. That clearly made me a bum magnet, and my bum detector was malfunctioning like a mother.

My heart became a revolving door, men in and out, in and out, because I couldn't trust them as far as I could throw them. You know how most women have “a type?” Well, I did too. They were usually of the cheating kind, every single one of them. All mouth-watering handsome, charming to fault, and, bedded more women than Sealy Posturepedic-before, during, and after our relationship.

During moments of quiet reflection, I often wondered which quality I possessed that drew “ho” men. My dilemma? A variation on the “which came first-the chicken or the egg?” question. Was I attracted to them? Or were they attracted to me? Did I come off too nice? Was my financial success intimidating? Couldn't be the sex, I'd all but installed a pole in my bedroom—it's on my list. Maybe I needed to tap into my inner bitch. Bitches always had the best husbands.

I left Marcus not long after I'd spent over half a million dollars on my dream home—a large, four-bedroom colonial in Woodmont, one of the more well-to-do subdivisions just outside of D.C. in Mitchellville, Maryland. After so many years of hard work and sacrifice, I'd arrived. I hobnobbed with the social elite in the nation's wealthiest majority-black county. I bought it, you know, thinking it wouldn't be long before I'd have a husband with whom I could share my life, the house, and the mortgage.

The joke was on me.

Ha ha hell.

Nobody could've told me I'd be walking around a year later with this big ass house, a big ass mortgage, no instant family, and heartbroken by this, this amnesiac who refused to leave me alone. My friends and family kept asking me why a single woman with no children would purchase a McMansion in high-and-mightyville with no family to put in it. To them, it seemed a bit excessive, show-offish. But the answer was simple. I didn't buy the house for the life I had, I bought it for the life I wanted.

Cold winter nights snuggled by the fireplace with my ever-adoring husband, grilling burnt hot dogs on the deck in the summer, the pitter-patter of little feet from my boys getting into something that would lead to the fifty-foot walk out to the tree in the backyard. That's the life Marcus and I almost had.

I was robbed.

Or so I thought