

Prologue

To

An Apology Gone Horribly Wrong

The small soundstage has two chairs placed in front of a black curtain, with a third facing the two. On the curtain is a logo for *Entertainment Tonight*. Cameras and sound equipment are at the ready. Seated in the chair on the left is a distinguished looking Caucasian man in his mid-sixties.

A young intern wearing a headset approaches him. “Good afternoon, Mr. Milton.

We are just about set. Are you doing okay? Would you like another bottle of water?”

The man shakes his head no.

“Okay, then. Miss León is finally here and is just finishing in makeup. Oh, here comes Miss Michaels; she will be taking it from here.”

Sam gives her a nervous nod.

“Hi, I’m Jessica Michaels,” the anchorwoman says, walking in and taking Sam’s hand. “I will be doing the interview today. Oh, but why are you so nervous? You must have done this many times before.”

“Many times? Yes. Gotten used to it? No.”

“But I thought you were a preacher.”

“Miss Michaels, there is a big difference between God speaking through me and me speaking through me. Besides, I am just the associate pastor, one of four, so preaching is a rarity.”

“Oh, please call me Jessica, and if you don’t mind me asking, how does a shy white man become an associate pastor of an all-black church?”

“Well, as for my shyness, Miss Chantell León kicked that out of me, as you are about to hear. Prior to meeting her, I had always been shy around pretty girls. It became amplified tenfold with my PTSD that I acquired from being involved in an industrial accident. It’s a strange thing. I could walk up to a microphone and speak to a thousand people and be only slightly nervous. But, if I have to introduce myself to some pretty woman, I completely freeze up. That’s why my lovely wife has never had to worry about me straying. What woman would want an affair with someone who acts shell-shocked at a simple introduction?

“As far as me pastoring an all-black church, someone invited me to this church once, and I loved the music and the preaching so much that I kept coming back. I would always sit up front and sing loudly. Well, what do you do when you have a white guy with no voice and no rhythm in the front row of a black church?

You have him preach. It's been said I sound a lot better speaking from the pulpit than I do singing in front of it." When Sam Milton sees Jessica and the crew break out in laughter, he calms down.

The intern puts her left hand to her headset and says to Sam and the crew, "Miss León is coming out now." Sam and Jessica look to the right and see a beautiful black woman walk in. Though she never quite got her figure back after her fourth child, her beautiful face and skin make her look ten years younger than fifty-five, the age on her driver's license.

"Good afternoon, Miss León," Jessica greets her guest.

Chantell answers in a strong, clear voice, "It's good to see you again, Jessica."

Since Sam is still getting the final touches from a makeup artist, the only acknowledgment he gets from Chantell is a quick squeeze of his hand.

Jessica quickly asks Chantell, "Is it okay to use your maiden name?"

"Actually, I would prefer using my married name—" Chantell quickly glances at Sam and then changes her mind. "Chantell León will actually be fine."

Jessica sees Sam look away and acknowledges the brief exchange. "I guess it's been awhile since you two have seen each other. Have you had a chance to catch up?"

Sam responds with, "We had dinner together last night."

"Oh good. I guess the next thing I should be asking is how is Dwain doing."

Chantell lights up. "He's doing very well, thank you. Bless you for asking."

"I would presume being out of the country for the past three months makes things difficult for you, Miss León."

An attendant is now touching up Chantell's face and has her looking away. Chantell manages to answer, "Yes, being on tour for three months can make it very difficult to keep connected with anyone, including my husband."

"Well, I know each of you has a lot going on, so let's get to it. As you know, we are doing a follow-up to your story from thirty years ago."

Sam looks skeptical. "Jessica, my dear, that means either you are thirty years late getting the story, or it is a very slow news day."

As Jessica laughs, Chantell answers, "Sam, you have to admit, we were the biggest news story thirty years ago, and we are still making news with our joint foundation. I know you have never been comfortable talking on camera, so just imagine you are telling one of your famous stories to the kids at Children's Hospital."

Sam reaches over and takes Chantell's hand and kisses it. "You know, Chantell, for thirty years now, you have been the most compassionate person I

know.”

Chantell smiles softly and says, “That isn’t what you were saying about me thirty years ago.”

“Neither was the rest of the world—especially when I proposed to you.” Still holding Sam’s hand, Chantell looks down and says, “I kind of shredded you that night, didn’t I?”

“Kind of! Oh yes, you did—and on national TV, no less, with Johnny Carson standing next to us.”

“But I had a very good reason for doing it, didn’t I?”

Sam looks at the floor. “I suppose, but I was never the same after that.”

Chantell looks at Sam and says, “And that was exactly my intent. I was just making a slight surgical adjustment to your personality.”

“Yes, but did you have to use a sledgehammer?”

“Are you complaining about how things turned out? You were the shyest person on the planet. What I did, at the very least, allowed you to get married, didn’t it?”

Chantell and Jessica watch Sam shrug.

Chantell answers his gesture with, “Yes, it did, Sam. I know it did. I was there, remember?”

Sam, still holding Chantell’s hand, squeezes it hard, and while looking at her, he tells Jessica, “I had it all set up so she could apologize to me after I tried to apologize to her. But, you should have seen what this lady put me through that night!”

Jessica smiles and answers, “Oh, but I have! It was all filmed on tape thirty years ago.”

“Yes. The events were filmed that night, but did you know that she almost got me killed three times prior to that?”

“Really, three times?”

“Oh yes. First, I came way too close to committing suicide; then, I was in a coma for three weeks after getting my head bashed in. And, as if that wasn’t enough, I got shot—all for trying to apologize to her!”

Jessica smiles. “That’s why we are here, Mr. Milton, to revisit that night and what led up to it. And, Mr. Milton, it will all be from your perspective.”

Sam looks at Jessica with surprise. “Really?” Sam then looks at Chantell with a mischievous grin and says, “Finally, the world gets to see the other side of Chantell León.”

A reserved Chantell looks back at Sam. “Careful, Mr. Milton. Remember what I did to you thirty years ago.” Sam’s smile only intensifies.