The sliding glass doors parted to reveal the passenger pickup zone just beyond the terminal. Miami's humidity wrapped around Sage like an old friend—warm, heavy, and rich with the scent of jet fuel, sea salt, and blooming tropical flowers. The air buzzed with the clatter of rolling luggage and the sharp, impatient honks of drivers unwilling to wait for crossing pedestrians.

She took a breath. *South Florida.*

The chaos of the airport made her silently grateful she'd let Jace pick her up instead of her aunts. They were getting older, and the idea of either of them weaving through airport traffic stressed her out more than it should've. She opened their group chat and quickly typed:

"Made it. Waiting on Jace."

She adjusted her sunglasses and stepped outside, her carry-on trailing quietly behind her. This trip wasn't for holiday dinners or a few days of rest. This time, it was real. Permanent—or so it was supposed to be.

Just as she was about to check her phone again, a black SUV screeched to a halt in front of her. The passenger window rolled down.

Jace dipped his head, his signature grin already in place. "Looking for me, darling?"

Sage chuckled behind her Chanel shades, tilting her head. "Yeah… that sounds about right."

"Then I'm at your service," he said with a teasing lilt, flipping back one of his jet-black locs before stepping out. He rounded the SUV, arms wide. "C'mere, girl."

She didn't resist. The hug was warm and familiar. Jace's nearly six-foot frame, lean and athletic, wrapped around her with both affection and something unspoken. It lingered just long enough to stir something—nostalgic and gentle.

She let herself lean in. She'd needed this hug more than she realized.

The sharp trill of a car horn—and a traffic monitor's wave—broke them apart. They both snickered like kids caught sneaking something.

"Let's go before I get arrested my first day back," Sage joked, sliding into the passenger seat as Jace held the door open.

He tossed her luggage in the back and climbed in, then eased the SUV into traffic.

"Do you want me to GPS the Loews Hotel?" Sage asked.

Jace raised his left eyebrow the way he did when he thought what you said challenged his intelligence. "You do remember I run Miami?"

Sage chuckled and rolled her eyes playfully, "Ok, Rick Ross."

"That's Mr. Boss to you." They both laughed out loud and sat in the familiar moment.

For the next few minutes, the only sound between them was the soft hum of the road and the faint jazz floating from the speakers. Sage watched the city scroll by—palm trees, glossy billboards, and cranes stretching toward the skyline like ambition incarnate.

“So…” Jace broke the silence, stealing a glance her way. “How’s it feel to be back?”

She caught the sideways scan in her peripheral. He was still taking her in. She didn’t respond to the gaze—just sighed and kept her eyes on the road ahead.

“I don’t know yet.”

Her voice was soft but final. That answer carried weight, and Jace seemed to pick up on it. His tone sobered.

“Yeah. I’m sorry again, Sage. I know Dr. Grey meant a lot to you. I’m sure this isn’t how he planned for you to start your new chapter—Principal Partner and all. But… he believed in you. We all do. I know you’ll kill it.”

Jace offered her a gentle smile, full of sincerity.

Sage gave a faint nod. She appreciated it—more than he knew—but doubts clung to her like the humidity outside. Harper’s death didn’t feel real.

They’d just spoken two days ago.

On the Teams virtual call, he looked well. Sharp suit, clear eyes. Nothing in his voice or face portrayed heart failure. Nothing that hinted he’d be gone before the week was out.

And yet, here she was—back in Florida, not just to start fresh, but now to attend his funeral.

Her eyes drifted to the city through the tinted glass. New developments crowded the horizon, flanked by half-finished towers and rows of renovated homes tucked between still-crumbling ones. Miami was always building—always reinventing itself with loud ambition and hidden cracks. Sage instinctively noted the lines of a particular corner house they passed—flat roof, clerestory windows, midcentury bones with a Mediterranean facelift.

Hadid would’ve hated that mix, she thought dryly, a flicker of herself returning.

It was muscle memory, really. Spotting facades. Imagining layouts. She'd done it since she was a teenager—walking through open houses, collecting blueprints in a binder long before she'd ever opened a term sheet. Even now, tucked inside her carry-on, was the same sketchbook she’d been marking up for years. A dream floor plan for a home she might one day build. Or not. Lately, she kept erasing rooms.

Sage didn't know what she wanted anymore. But she knew what peace looked like—and it always started with a good foundation.

The SUV cruised down I-95, past bursts of color in the form of murals and the squat silhouettes of old warehouses. Sunlight streaked through the tinted windows as Miami unfolded around them—alive, but slower than outsiders imagined. Despite its glossy reputation, the city moved at a medium pace, especially in the southern stretches where Black families had rooted themselves for generations. It was vibrant, yes—undeniably hot in every sense—but to Sage, Miami had always felt like a city trying to rival big cities like New York and its tempo, mostly for the sake of tourists who didn't know its true rhythm.

But now? Now the tempo was shifting.

Miami was finding its own beat—and beyond the beaches it's known for, the city was beginning to redefine itself. The drums of transformation pulsed from the heart of the city, echoing ambition and possibility. These days, if you wanted to matter, you had to show up in Miami.

And Sage intended to show up.

She wanted to be part of this new rise—this generation's wave of legacy-building, economic power, and generational wealth. But even more than that, she wanted to help the communities often left behind in these surges. The overlooked. The underfunded. The parts of the city that held just as much promise but were too often treated like footnotes in someone else's success story.

Just thirty minutes south of where Grey Ventures headquarters were, her aunts were likely preparing sweet tea and setting out slices of pound cake for their evening chat with her. Fort Lauderdale was her actual home—sun-soaked and familiar. But even with being only a skip and a hop away, in Miami, the stakes were higher. And this time, she wasn't just visiting. She was building something. Supposedly.

She was coming to contribute—to build something lasting. To be a part of something meaningful. *That is… if she was even staying.*

Sage pressed her fingertips lightly to the dark tinted glass window of Jace's SUV. Then brushed her freshly painted, naked colored nails through the thick natural, loose curls about her deep brown face.

What now, Father?

Jace reached over and turned down the jazz just a notch.

"You've been real quiet," he said.

"I'm always quiet when I'm thinking."

“Then thinking must be a new thing for you,” he laughed. That jab tickled Sage and she hit him playfully on his arm which felt rock solid.

"Shut up, J."

"I'm just saying…" After a quiet beat, Jace added, "You sure you want to start work tomorrow? The funeral’s not until Saturday. I’m sure the office won’t expect much before then. Besides, who actually starts a new job on a Friday?”

Sage gave a tired smile. “I just… maybe if I start, it’ll help. I don’t know, and I won’t know until I try, you know?”

Jace nodded as she turned back toward the window, watching the city shift around her. She felt herself relax a bit, thinking about the long bath she'd take after checking in at the hotel.

Then she saw it.

A massive billboard hovered above the expressway exit. **NEW HOPE CHURCH — PASTOR ADONIS TATE***"FAITH THAT BUILDS FUTURES"* Sundays at 10AM & 12PM

Adonis’s face—confident, commanding—gazed down with an intensity that almost made her flinch.

Her chest tightened.

There he was.

Still looking like he had all the answers.

Still out here, shepherding souls… while hers felt like it had wandered off somewhere, quiet and unsure.

They hadn’t spoken in nearly two years. And even then, it was vague. Surface-level. Intentional.

Jace noticed her shift.

“You know he’s eulogizing Mr. Grey,” he said—half statement, half question, nodding toward the billboard now fading in the distance.

She blinked and kept staring ahead as if she hadn't just gawked at the billboard through the side window. “Who?”

He lifted one brow, again, with the same mock offense. “Your boy. The illustrious Pastor Reverend Doctor Adonis Tate,” he said in an announcer's like voice, chuckling through it.

Sage forced a chuckle back. “Oh," she said. Then straightening, "That’s good. Harper deserves a strong eulogist.”

Jace nodded slowly and kept eye the highway. “My family’s known him forever. Since before I was born.”

Sage turned, suddenly realizing the weight of what she *didn’t* say.

“Oh, Jace—I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sure you would’ve done an amazing job too.”

Now almost fully facing him, she searched his expression, hoping to undo any hurt. She knew how hard it had been lately—how every declined opportunity to lead a church had worn on his confidence. She didn’t want him thinking she didn’t believe in him too.

“I just meant that—”

“It’s okay, Sage. I know you love me.” He glanced at her and smiled, softening the blow with a familiar grin.

“But real talk… it would’ve been nice to be considered, you know?”

She nodded, the guilt settling heavy in her gut. Even though she didn’t have the energy to manage anyone else’s disappointment, she didn't want to see her longtime friend hurt.

“I understand, J. Your time is coming.” Sage reached over and rubbed the top of his free hand with assurance. It was all she could offer at the moment.

Her mind was already full—swirling with logistics and uncertainty. The plan to move was happening sooner than expected because of Harper’s untimely passing. In California, she’d been in the middle of planning the transition, and now she was suddenly expected to have everything decided at once. The story of her life.

When would she ship her things from California? What about the new Lexus she’d just financed that was still sitting at a friend’s house in LA? Should she stay in the hotel in Miami as she’d planned, or with one of her aunts until she found a place of her own? Would she even stay now that Harper was gone? What would the office feel like without him as the buffer? And the funeral…?

How was she going to sit in a room with Adonis Tate? And his wife.

And lest she forget—Harper’s daughter. Entitled. Sharp-tongued. Impossible to please. Sage had always tolerated her from a distance, but now? With this new role? There’d be no more hiding behind Harper.

Worse still… her husband.

Harper knew how uncomfortable the whole arrangement made Sage. They’d discussed it at length. Her hesitation was never about the work—it was about *them*.

Now he was gone. And everything she feared she might have to face was suddenly very, very real.

Then it hit her.

The billboard. *"Faith That Builds Futures."*

That was the same phrase Harper wrote in the margin of the community investment proposal. She remembered laughing about it—how it sounded like a cross between a sermon and a startup slogan.

But that proposal wasn't a joke. It was real. And it included *New Hope Church*—Adonis's church—as one of the anchor campuses for the pilot redevelopment project.

And now Harper was gone.

And she was left holding something that might still have legal weight—but no roadmap.

She reached for her bag and pulled up Millicent's contact in her cell phone.

"I need a favor," she said out loud.

Jace looked over. "Who are we calling?"

"Millicent."

"Milly, as in Millicent Monroe?"

Sage nodded. "Can you drop me off downtown?"

"You sure you don't want to check in to the hotel first?"

"No. This can't wait."

Jace pulled up to a sleek glass building near Brickell, where the architecture screamed high-stakes litigation and startup money; like it closed six-figure deals and fired toxic clients in the same breath.

Sage gathered her bag. "You don't have to come up, Jace."

He shrugged but cut the engine anyway. "I'm not leaving you in the clutches of Millicent Monroe without a witness."

Sage raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "She's not that bad."

"The woman once told me my entire theology needed therapy." Sage chuckled, silently agreeing with Millicent.

“And?”

“And what does she know about theology?! Besides, she didn’t have to say it with her whole chest.”

Sage smirked and rolled her eyes as she allowed Jace to open her door to let her out.

The energy on the third floor felt nothing like the sterile vibe she gathered from outside. As soon as they stepped off the elevator, the scent of coconut oil, cinnamon tea, and Black woman brilliance wrapped around her. The glass plaque read:

MONROE STRATEGIES + LEGAL DESIGN

Millicent’s name wasn’t just on the door. It was everywhere. The framed magazine features. The motivational wall quote—“Your strategy is weak if your lawyer can’t wear leopard print and win.” The legal awards proudly displayed beside a signed Maya Angelou print. It was all unapologetically her.

The receptionist stood up, beaming. “She’s ready for you!”

Sage followed the sound of trap music faintly playing from behind a frosted glass door, and a moment later, it flung open.

Millicent Monroe stood in the doorway—6'1" without heels, all bold curves and presence. She wore a canary yellow blouse that cinched at the waist and flared dramatically over wide-legged slacks. Her thick afro was perfectly shaped like it had its own publicist, and her hoop earrings were big enough to double as bangles. Her lipstick was red. Not subtle red. *Statement.* Red.

“Well if it isn’t Ms. Legacy herself!” Millicent threw her arms open like Sage was returning from war. “Come on in before I lose all my good sense and kiss you on the lips.”

Sage laughed, letting herself be pulled into the hug. Millicent smelled like soft vanilla, spices, and a little too much confidence—but in the best way.

She let out a slow whistle. “You brought him? Lord, when you texted you were coming, I didn’t know *good and fine*company was joining us."

“Hi, Mil,” Jace said dryly.

“Don’t ‘Hi, Mil’ me like you ain’t walk in here with forearms like God was showing off that day.”

Jace’s face didn’t move, but Sage swore she saw the corner of his mouth twitch into a smirk. Jace and Millicent briefly hugged; Millicent softly and playfully squeezing his left bicep as they parted. She winked. Jace smiled and shook his head.

"Still preaching?" Millicent asked.

"Yep," Jace replied. "Still…suing?"

"Like the D is long." She looked him up and down with a playful smirk; Jace smiled back and shook his head in defeat. "It's good to see you, Jace."

"Same here, Milly." Jace looked at Sage, who was enjoying this exchange. He sobered a bit. "I think I'll wait in the cafe downstairs. Just let me know when you're ready." Sage nodded.

When Jace was out of sight, Millicent stepped closer, looped her arm in Sage's, and whispered in her ear, “Tell me you’ve tapped that at least once for the culture.”

Sage rolled her eyes with a smirk. “Why do I feel like you were already halfway through a Ted Talk before I got here?” Sage teased.

“Because I *was,*” Millicent replied, letting her go and closing the door behind them. “To myself. About how I’m gonna stop falling for fine men who say they ‘don’t believe in labels’ but somehow believe in borrowing my Netflix.”

They both laughed as Millicent gestured to the chair in front of her desk. “Sit. Tell me why you’re here before I launch into a monologue about my uterus’s fading optimism.”

Sage opened her bag and pulled out a slim manila folder. “Harper gave this to me about six weeks ago. It’s a draft agreement for a church-based land redevelopment initiative—starting with New Hope Church and two others.”

Millicent’s posture shifted slightly. Still open. But now laser-focused.

“You’ve mentioned this before,” she said, taking the folder and flipping it open. “You said he wanted it to be part community investment, part private equity fund, right?”

“Yes,” Sage nodded. “But informal. Just between us. He wanted to launch it under Grey Ventures’ community development arm, but keep it separate from Phoenicia’s oversight.”

Millicent’s eyebrow arched. “A Black man trying to build legacy outside an entitled woman’s reach? Color me shocked.”

Sage smirked.

Millicent scanned the first page, then started muttering to herself. “Mmhmm… named beneficiaries… repurpose clauses… partial control… ooooh, now *this* is messy rich-people goodness.”

“You see anything actionable?”

Millicent set the folder down and tapped her freshly manicured, pink nails against the wood grain of her desk. “You realize this document gives you proxy authority over three acres of underused land owned by the churches?”

Sage blinked. “Wait, I thought that language was just preliminary…”

“It was. But then Harper initialed it. Twice. And if I’m reading the timestamps on these attachments correctly, this wasn’t just a passion project. This was his *plan B.* If anything happened to his leadership—or the board tried to block him—he was setting you up to execute it outside the firm’s control.”

Sage sat back, stunned. “You’re sure?”

Millicent nodded slowly. “I play with a lot of things; but not paperwork, babe. You have dormant power. And you’re sitting on a redevelopment deal that could shift the economic future of those neighborhoods *if* you can keep it from being swallowed up by board politics.”

She leaned forward.

“But I’m telling you now—Phoenicia will fight this. And not because it’s a bad idea. Because it wasn’t *hers.*”

Sage rubbed her temple. “I just wanted to honor Harper’s intentions. I wasn’t trying to… start a war.”

Millicent smiled, softening. “Legacy *is* a war, babe. Especially when you’re the one the old man actually believed in.”

Then, suddenly light again, she stood up. “Now come on. Let me walk you out before I accidentally ask you to marry me just so I can hyphenate our names and double my real estate holdings.”

Sage laughed and stood. “What about Floyd? Wouldn't he be jealous?”

They didn’t talk every day, and they hadn’t lived in the same city since college, but they kept up often enough over the phone and their yearly vacations for Sage to know all about Millicent’s adventures—including the latest installment, Floyd.

“Chile, that's over. I'm once again, single, sexy, and selectively delusional. But I got a full 401(k) and a working knowledge of estate law, so I’m not entirely hopeless.”

They embraced again at the door.

“Send me a scanned copy tonight,” Millicent said. “And Sage?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t wait for anyone’s permission to carry out what Harper trusted you with. You don’t need to prove you belong. You’re already in the room.”

The sun was beginning its descent, casting a golden hue over Miami Beach as Jace pulled into the circular driveway of the Loews Miami Beach Hotel. The Art Deco façade stood tall, its pastel tones reflecting the city's vibrant energy.

Sage stepped out of the SUV, eyes scanning the hotel's grand entrance.

"Thanks for being my unofficial driver today," she said with a smirk, sliding her sunglasses from her face to the top of her curls.

Jace gave a lopsided grin. "Wouldn't have it any other way." He nodded toward the plush seats in the lobby. "I'll wait while you check in."

"Oh, you don't have to do that. You've already done enough, really."

He shook his head. "Nope. Your aunts entrusted me to see you settled *all the way through*. I'm more afraid of answering to them than to God himself."

They both laughed. Sage nodded, adjusted her bag, and walked toward the check-in desk while Jace strolled toward the waiting area.

Inside, the lobby was a perfect blend of modern luxury and classic Miami flair. Terrazzo floors gleamed under the soft lighting, and a grand chandelier poured light across mid-century furniture and curated tropical florals. The hotel smelled like citrus, wealth, and sea breeze. Sage loved a fresh smelling and lush looking hotel. She felt relaxed already.

Sage stepped up to the front desk and slid her ID across the counter. The concierge, a polished young woman with a crisp blazer and an even crisper smile, greeted her with warm professionalism.

This is a compelling and well-structured scene with strong pacing, subtle suspense, and natural dialogue. You've set up the intrigue surrounding Phoenicia beautifully. Below is a refined version that improves flow, rhythm, and clarity—while keeping all your key beats and tone intact:

"Welcome to Loews, Ms. Mackey," the concierge greeted with a polished smile, glancing down at Sage's ID before confirming, "Checking in under Grey Ventures, correct?"

"Yes," Sage replied with a nod.

The reservation had been made under the company's corporate account a week before Harper died. Back then, it was just supposed to be a quick visit—shaking hands, attending a few meetings, then heading back to California to finish her move.

Now, everything was different.

The concierge—a mid-twenties woman with shoulder-length blonde hair tucked neatly behind one ear—typed briskly, her tone upbeat but measured, clearly well-trained. “I don’t know much about your company,” she said with a practiced smile, “but it seems like you all have retreats every other week. I imagine that really helps with morale.”

Sage raised a brow, offering a polite, noncommittal nod. Retreats? That was news to her. Harper never mentioned anything like that. Then again, there was a lot he didn’t get to say.

She let it go. Small talk wasn’t her thing—and she needed time to get herself together before dinner. Millicent’s meeting had already thrown her schedule off.

The concierge handed over a sleek welcome folder and a key card. “You’re in a deluxe ocean-view suite for five nights. Everything’s prepaid, and in-room amenities will be refreshed daily.”

Sage accepted the items with a smile and turned to leave.

Then the concierge hesitated. “Actually… one more thing.”

Sage paused.

The woman reached under the counter and lifted a slim black folder—smooth leather, scratched faintly along the edge. “Housekeeping found this earlier today. No name or room number inside, but…”

Sage tilted her head, accepting it carefully. “You think it belongs to someone from Grey Ventures?”

The concierge shrugged. “Maybe. There was a company brochure tucked in the back pocket, so we figured someone from your team might recognize it.”

Sage gave a slow nod, checking her Apple Watch. She was already late. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Elevators are just to your right,” she said, gesturing politely.

Sage made her way back to the lobby where Jace stood, waiting. He rose when she approached.

“Need a hand?” he asked, eyeing her collection of folders and bags.

Sage smirked. “Yeah, I think I do.”

Jace grabbed her carry-on and the larger luggage he’d been rolling all day. Together, they made their way to the elevators.

Inside the cab, Sage pressed the button for her floor, then leaned back against the wall. She glanced down and opened the black folder. Inside, tucked behind the Grey Ventures brochure, was a single business card—crisp, cream-colored, and expensive-looking.

She picked it up. Her fingers stilled as she flipped it over.

There it was. The signature.

Phoenicia Grey-Stevens.

No phone number. No title. No note. Just the name—elegant, arrogant, and utterly unmistakable.

Sage's mouth went dry. Seeing her name was one thing. *Being* this close to it? To *her*?

It made her skin crawl.

She tucked the folder quickly into her tote and composed herself.

"You okay?" Jace asked, noticing her shift.

"Yeah," she said with a faint shake of the head. "Just tired."

But her thoughts raced.

Why was Phoenicia's name on that card?

Why was it left behind here?

And what retreat was the concierge even talking about?

Sage stared straight ahead as the elevator climbed. She had a bad feeling but her brain had no more room for concern tonight. She made a mental note to investigate later.

The elevator chimed softly as it reached her floor. Sage stepped out first, her heels quiet against the plush carpet, with Jace close behind wheeling her suitcase.

The hallway was hushed and cool, lit by understated sconces and the soft hum of air conditioning. Room 1924 was at the far end—her temporary sanctuary.

She slid the key card through the door.

The suite greeted her with modern warmth—floor-to-ceiling windows framed the golden sweep of the ocean, and inside, elegant neutrals balanced clean lines with coastal calm. A large bed with crisp white linens faced a sleek entertainment center, and in the corner, a round glass table with two leather chairs overlooked the balcony.

Jace rolled her luggage in and parked it neatly near the bed. “Wow,” he said, letting out a low whistle. “They don’t play about deluxe.”

Sage chuckled, stepping in fully and letting the door close behind them. “You know I don't play about my hotel stays. Relaxation in luxury or nothing at all.” Sage dropped the folders and key on to the table, folded her arms under her breast and sighed as she looked around the quiet room.

She could feel Jace's gaze—not flirty, not teasing. Just… present. “You good?”

Sage nodded slowly, her eyes drifting from the view back to him. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “It feels like I should be more sure about everything by now. But I’m not.”

Jace shrugged, gently. “No rule says you have to be.”

There was a pause. Shifting of gazes.

Sage turned fully towards him with her hands still folded. This was the first time she'd actually looked at him all day.

Jace was undoubtedly handsome. The kind of Black man who made people do a double take in the most respectful way. His style was understated but intentional—a crisp white button-down, sleeves casually rolled to the elbows, paired with dark, tailored dress slacks and pristine loafers. His locs, longer than the last time she saw him, were neatly retwisted and pulled back into a low ponytail, a few wisps falling across his temple in a way that felt effortless. He stood just a couple of inches taller than Sage, but his lean, athletic frame made him seem bigger than he was. Not bulky—just solid. Like someone who took care of himself without needing to announce it.

And yet, it wasn’t just his looks. Jace had always been that rare blend—sharp-witted, compassionate, spiritually sound on paper, and usually the funniest person in the room. The kind of man women *wanted* to trust but not sure to follow.

Jace was charming, but Sage knew better than to be moved by charisma alone.

She loved Jace. Deeply, even. But not in a way that made her imagine Sunday mornings in matching robes or a hyphenated last name. It wasn’t sibling love either. It was somewhere in the murky in-between—a space they both knew existed but had learned not to name. A comfort zone. A friendship padded with history, inside jokes, and emotional near-misses.

Still, his interest was obvious. Had always been. The way he looked at her when he thought she wasn’t paying attention. The way he never quite closed the door on possibility. The flirtatious comments.

But possibility required effort.

And Jace—God bless him—was all warmth and words, but rarely the follow-through.

Not once had he visited her during all those years in California. Not when she launched her first fund. Not when she spoke on that national panel in San Francisco. Maybe if it was convenient—like two years ago, when she flew home for Aunt Netta's retirement party. He'd shown up then, smiled for pictures, made promises to visit. That was the last time they crossed paths. Until now.

But, it wasn't spite she felt. It was... clarity.

Maybe that was part of the problem. He talked a big game about calling, about visiting, about what "could be." But he never quite followed through. That pattern—of enthusiasm without execution—was something Sage recognized not just in his friendship, but in his calling too.

Jace had talked about becoming a pastor for as long as Sage could remember. He had the voice for preaching, the presence to hold a room. But preaching and pastoring weren't the same—and that distinction mattered to Sage. Charisma could light up a pulpit, sure. But pastoring required leadership, humility, and discipline—qualities Jace hadn't fully grown into. His confidence often came off as arrogance, especially with older pastors who expected a certain reverence. And his peers? Half the time, they weren't sure if he was being insightful or just full of himself.

Then there was his dating life.

Jace loved women. Unapologetically. And while his charm drew them in easily, it did little to endear him to Miami's religious circles. Too many flings, too many rumors. The kind of headlines that made church mothers shake their heads and deacons whisper during board meetings. He brushed it all off, of course—grinning, deflecting, speaking on David and Samson as if Scripture could excuse a reputation.

Sage didn't judge him…not really. She knew Jace in ways most people didn't. She saw past the charm and the ego, past the smooth talk and the swagger. But even with all that understanding, she couldn't ignore what others saw. In ministry, image mattered. And the truth was, Jace's didn't quite line up with the calling he claimed to carry. Not yet.

Worse than the charm, cockiness or the women was the fact that Jace still hadn't finished seminary—not because he wasn't capable, but because he simply didn't want to. And to Sage, that was the real issue. It wasn't about credentials; it was about reverence. Anyone eager to lead but unwilling to deepen their understanding of the Word had no business in a pulpit. You couldn't claim the fruit of a calling you refused to cultivate.

Sage sighed as she scanned him briefly.

She adored him. But she also didn't have time to mentor a man who wasn't mentoring himself.

And that's what it came down to—her heart wanted safety, yes, but her spirit needed certainty.

And with Jace? She wasn't sure there was enough of either.

“Thanks for today—for all of it.” Sage said eyeing him directly.

“You know I got you,” he said, his voice softer now. Deeper.

They stood in silence, the buzz of the city muffled by thick glass.

Jace stepped closer. Sage didn't miss his glance at the bed.

“You’re really doing it, huh?” he said. “Back in Miami. Grey Ventures. The whole thing.”

She nodded, her expression unreadable.

“I always knew you’d end up back here. Just didn’t know it’d be like this.”

Sage gave a small smile and looked towards the ground. “Me neither.”

Then, without warning, Jace pulled her into a hug—tight, steady, and sincere, his arms clamped tightly around her waist.

For a second, she didn’t move.

Then she sank into it, letting her head rest briefly against his shoulder.

He smelled like cedarwood and clean laundry. Familiar. Safe.

But not *home*.

When they pulled apart, he looked at her a little longer than she was ready for. “You know if you need anything...”

“I’ll call you,” she finished for him. “I promise.”

Jace nodded and stepped back toward the door. “Alright. I’ll let your aunts spoil you in peace. I'll probably pass them in the parking lot.”

“Most likely, they'll be discussing the latest drama from their friend circle.”

He laughed. “Be sure to catch me up on the details.” Sage chuckled and nodded.

With a final look—and a half-smile that didn’t reach his eyes—he slipped out the door.

Sage turned the lock behind him and exhaled.

The sun had fully dipped beneath the horizon, casting a deep indigo glow across the ocean just outside Sage's window. She'd changed into something simple but elegant—wide-leg linen pants and a cropped cream blouse—comfortable, but still "first day back home" appropriate.

A sharp knock at the door pulled her from the mirror.

She opened it to the sound of clinking bangles and sweet, unfiltered laugher that sound like home.

"Girl, this is fancy! I feel like I'm about to meet Michelle Obama!"

Auntie Netta breezed in first, carrying a shopping bag and her signature scent of White Diamonds and freshly pressed curls. Her silk wrap dress swayed dramatically as if she'd practiced the entrance. She gently kissed Sage on the cheek and hugged her neck. She breezed by to get a better few of the room.

"We are meeting Michelle Obama! She's right here! Sage Mackey is what we call her though!" Auntie Belle's spunkiness greeted her with a huge smile, arms wide open. She pulled Sage in for a long hug and an extended kiss to her jaw.

"Hey, my baby!" Belle said. Sage beamed. "Hey, Auntie!"

Eyeing the décor after releasing Sage, Auntie Belle began looking around the room, "Ooo, you know this place charging fifty dollars just to *look* at a menu!"

Sage burst into laughter and pulled them both in for a hug again. "Y'all didn't have to come all the way up here."

"Girl, yes we did," Netta said, setting her purse down. "Had to make sure L.A. ain't melted all your sense. This room already halfway convinced me."

"It smells like moisturizer and money," Belle added, spinning slowly in place.

"And generational wealth," Netta said, inspecting the minibar. "This must be what good credit feels like."

Sage flopped down on the edge of the bed, her chest warming at the familiarity of it all. Her aunties didn't just raise her. They poured into her when her own mother couldn't. They celebrated her when she couldn't see herself. And in this moment—on the edge of a whirlwind return—they reminded her of who she really was.

"This is why I missed y'all."

Sage looked around, realizing someone was missing. "Wait—where's Anastasia?"

Netta rolled her eyes. "Out with that boy."

Sage stifled a laugh. “*That* boy?”

“The one with the braids and the music dreams and the wrinkled shirt,” Netta said with disdain. “I told her if she catch a future in that boy, she better be wearing gloves.”

“Oh, stop,” Belle chided gently, already unpacking Tupperware from her bag. “I like him. He’s got manners. Real sweet spirit.”

Netta scoffed. “You like everybody, Belle. You’d invite Judas to Sunday dinner if he showed up with pie.”

“And if the pie was sweet and the man repented, yes I would,” Belle said with a shrug.

Sage laughed until her stomach ached. “I swear I miss ya'll.”

Belle chuckled and handed her a warm container. “Here, baby. We got you some of your favorites: smothered chicken, cabbage, and mac and cheese. I prayed over it too.”

Sage clutched it to her chest. “My God. I could cry.”

“You should,” Netta said, sitting near the window. “That cabbage was seasoned with love and two hours of gas.”

The three of them sat down at the small bistro table, plates open, steam rising.

After a few bites, Netta leaned in. “Now, let’s get to it.”

Belle nodded knowingly. “We heard about Harper.”

Sage set her fork down. “Yeah…”

“They said the funeral’s gonna be something,” Belle murmured, glancing toward the dark window. “Half the city’s planning to come out.”

“Well, you know how close-knit blacks in Miami are,” Netta said. “Everybody knew Harper, even if they didn’t like him.”

Sage looked over at her Aunt Netta. “Auntie, I know you knew him a little.”

Netta hesitated. “Yeah. We… crossed paths. His sister went to school with Belle. South Florida's black community is so small and he wasn’t the type you forgot. He looked out for folks in the community, including your mama once, when she needed work.”

Belle nodded and looked to Netta. “And Pastor Tate is preaching the eulogy, right?”

Sage froze for a few moments at the mention of his name. Her aunts knew everything about her—well, almost everything. They knew about most of her failed relationships, but her past with Adonis was the exception. Few people knew. And for good reason.

“Oh yes, I did hear that,” Netta said, pointing her fork. “Now, he's a good preacher. Not bad-looking either. Shoot, I'd try him if he was just a little younger.”

Belle laughed. “I *love* me some Pastor Adonis Tate. Always have. Now, *he’d* be good for Sage if he wasn’t all tangled up with that—what’s her name? Cameron? Cassandra?”

“Camille,” Netta corrected, casually forking some cabbage.

“Yeah, Camille,” Belle said with finality. She turned to Sage with a hopeful smile. “Baby, have you ever met Pastor Tate?”

Her tone was light, but Sage’s nerves tightened. Her aunts were always trying to set her up. They were totally unassuming when it came to Adonis, and she intended to keep it that way.

Sage offered a controlled smile. “We may have crossed paths a few times. You know, professionally. My firm manages a lot of the properties his church owns.”

Belle leaned back with a hum. “Mmmm. You ever considered—”

“No, Auntie. Please don’t start,” Sage said, forcing a chuckle.

Belle held up her hands in mock surrender. “I’m just saying! He’s tall, fine, intelligent, a few years older than you, established and senior pastor at one of the largest churches in Miami, and —”

“Engaged,” Sage cut in, firmly.

“But not married,” Netta added without missing a beat.

The sisters laughed and high-fived like they were still in their twenties.

“I know *that’s* right,” Belle said. “It ain’t real until you—what?!”

“—Sign the deal!” they said in unison.

“Can we *please* change the subject?” Sage asked, standing up to gather their plates. Her voice was calm, but her tone betrayed her. She wasn’t trying to relive this particular chapter—especially not tonight.

Netta gave her a knowing side-eye. “Mmhm. We can’t change the subject, but we *can* change the man. How was the ride with Mr. Yardley today?”

Sage sighed internally. She probably should've ordered drinks before dinner. Her aunts were going to stretch her stress more than it already had been today.

Still, nothing about this was unusual. It's what they did. She wouldn't have it any other way.

"It was fine, Auntie," she said.

"Was he on his best behavior?" Belle asked, rummaging for a napkin.

"Yes," Sage replied. "Jace was sweet. Drove me all over the city. He didn't have to, but he did."

"Girl, you know that boy would drive you to the moon if you asked," Netta said. "But still not your speed."

"Not at all," Belle added gently. "We love Jace—he's like family. But you two? You're on different frequencies."

"He couldn't handle Sage if he had that Chat-Tea-Tee or whatever they call it tellin' him how," Netta joked.

"Chat-GPT," Sage corrected, laughing.

"Whatever it is," Netta said, waving her fork. "He'd still mess it up."

They all laughed. Belle leaned in, her eyes softening.

"Honestly, though… I'm just glad you've got people lookin' out while you're home. This city's not the same anymore."

Netta nodded. "And speakin' of people with history… you heard from Kairo since you got back?"

The question landed softly but hit Sage hard.

"Oh Lord," Belle murmured, her voice dipping low. "That boy. A heartache and a heartbeat, all wrapped in one."

Sage gave a knowing laugh and shifted in her seat.

"Y'all really wanna do this tonight?"

"We already there," Netta said flatly. "All your men lined up like a prayer circle and don't none of 'em got the oil."

Belle clutched her chest. "Nette! I'm puttin' you in a timeout."

Sage shook her head in amusement.

“But Kairo,” Belle said thoughtfully. “That one was different. He looked at you the way your uncle looked at me when we were sixteen—like nothing else in the world moved.”

Netta nodded. “Even *that* phony Phoenicia saw it.” She rolled her eyes in disgust.

Just the name made Sage’s stomach tighten. She tried not to show it, but her silence was loud.

“Umhm. Miss Thang,” Netta continued. “Always rubbed me the wrong way.”

“I just pray he’s happy,” Belle said gently. “Not that Facebook happy. For real happy.”

Netta wasn’t as generous. “He don’t *look* happy. And if he is, I still don’t care. A man who’d let go of my beautiful, loyal, God-fearing niece for some discount diva like her? He don’t deserve joy.”

Sage finally spoke, voice measured. “Auntie… everybody deserves joy. Even people who make mistakes. I do hope he’s well.”

She rose and walked toward the balcony. The night air felt easier to breathe than the conversation.

Belle reached out, touched her hand. “You okay, baby?”

“I’m good,” Sage said, offering a small smile. “I just… wish him well. Truly.”

Netta sat up straighter. “Wish him well, but don’t entertain no foolishness. You’re not a pit stop just ‘cause he’s restless. Let that man lie in the bed he made—with whatever thread count she could afford.”

Sage cracked a smile despite herself. “Y’all are terrible.”

“We’re honest,” Belle said. “And protective. And proud.”

Sage nodded, grateful for both the protection and the love.

Belle smiled and tried to lift the energy again. “So we got Adonis with the church, Jace with the ride, and Kairo with the regrets… Baby, you don’t need a man. You need a documentary.”

They all burst into laughter, and for a moment, the heaviness cracked open, just enough for joy to peek through.