**The**

**Alderman**

by

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**CHAPTER 3**

Volunteering at the Rec-Center had become a part of Gayb’s life that he truly adored. The kids favored him heavily. Gayb’s awareness to what music was hip, his knowledge of street life, and outgoing personality were just a few factors which drew the teens to him. Whenever he wasn’t formally dressed in a blazer, slacks, and Clarks, Gayb wore a lot of urban designers that the teens immediately recognized as stylish. This additional factor also earned him cool points.

Kelly and Belinda were impressed with how well Gayb had fit in. It had only been two weeks since his first day of volunteering, yet everyone accepted him wholeheartedly, Belinda included. Of course she antagonized him here and there, saying he had a heart the size of a chicken’s when it came to running for public office. But Gayb would just let her have that. He knew Belinda was only teasing. He also knew that that was her favorite subject to hide behind whenever she felt like flirting. Kelly recognized the chemistry between Gayb and Belinda on the first day they met. Although Belinda downplayed having any interest, Kelly didn’t hesitate to rub the truth in her face: *“Tall, huh? And that’s the only thing going through your mind right now?”*

*“Yeah, why?”*

*“Stop lying. You know you wanna wrap your legs around his waist and hit that.”*

*“Not everybody is thinking dirty thoughts of sexin’ him up like you are, Miss Married Woman. So don’t accuse me of wanting to give him some of my cookies just because he’s good looking.”*

*“I don’t have to accuse you. You just said it yourself. And the difference between me and you is yes, I’m happily married, and ain’t nobody penetratin’ this cubby but hubby! But you, on the other hand, are single, free to mingle, and know he’s a good option to have.”*

*“Maybe he is. But I’d rather keep it professional.”*

Belinda in fact kept it professional between her and Gayb for the most part. But as they both were attractive, available, and developing a close relationship, keeping it professional was becoming an everyday challenge. Although they had an eye for each other, they never interacted outside of seeing one another at the Rec-Center. That is, until today.

“Yeah, tonight I’m free,” said Gayb, alone in the office while speaking into his cell-phone. “We can meet up around seven at the Lux Lounge on State Street. I wanna kick-it with you over a few drinks.”

While entering the office and catching the last of Gayb’s words, Belinda announced, “I’d like to go out for drinks. Can I come?’

For a split second Gayb froze, then spoke back into the phone, “I’ll see you at seven.” Now turning his attention to Belinda, he let out, “I didn’t know you drink.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Well, maybe we can have a good conversation and get to know a lot about each other. Meet me down there at eight.”

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As Tone sat down at a table observing the nice interior of the bar/restaurant, he came to the conclusion that this spot was a hidden gem. He’d never been to the Lux Lounge before today but promised himself that he was definitely coming back. Taking a second to glance at his watch, Tone saw that it was seven on the dot. Yet when he raised his head, he noticed Gayb walk through the door right on time.

“What’s good?” Tone let out as he stood up to shake Gayb’s hand.

“I’m alright, just taking it easy,” Gayb replied. “Did you have a hard time finding the building?’

“Yeah,” Tone admitted with a smile. “It kinda threw me off by how far tucked away it is from everything else on the street.”

“I know,” Gayb agreed. “But it’s a nice spot to relax and have drinks. Anyway, what I wanted to talk to you about is gettin’ this money. I know you got the Ave. boomin’ right now, but what I bring to the table can help you step it up, times ten!”

Tone paused for a minute, caught off guard and unable to respond. He came to the Lux Lounge expecting that Gayb wanted to partner with him on some sort of legitimate business endeavor. Now Tone knew different. It truly took time for him to process what was happening because he honestly thought that Gayb was done with the game. But as he collected his thoughts, he remembered hearing rumors that the reason why Gayb had the drug-game in a chokehold back in the day was because of a thorough connect he had in the Dominican Republic.

As Tone’s confusion faded it became abundantly clear to him that the across-seas connect was what Gayb was bringing to the table.

“Listen,” Gayb exclaimed, staring straight into Tone’s eyes. “In order for this to work, I’m gonna need you to trust me one-hundred percent!”

“You got that,” Tone replied.

“And that’s your word?!”

“That’s my word!” Tone agreed, while trying to contain his excitement.

“Alright. How much money can you come up with? I mean everything?!”

“Right now I got a little over seventy thousand. But when I finish my load I’ll have at least a hundred and twenty.”

“Okay,” Gayb replied. Then he scribbled an address on a piece of paper. “I want you to come to my house on Friday night at eight. Bring the money with you and we’ll talk about all the details there.”

After a brief conversation in regards to their private matter, Gayb and Tone yielded toward sports talk and other casual guy conversation. They had two drinks over the course of 45 minutes and then Tone was on his way.

“Over here,” Gayb chimed as Belinda stepped through the entrance with her eyes searching the room like she was lost.

“Look at you,” said Belinda as she approached Gayb. “Up in this place like you’re hiding from somebody.”

“Maybe I am,” he said, returning her smile.

“Whatever,” Belinda laughed. “You be killin’ me because you’re so much in the public eye, but at the same time just as secretive and reclusive as you wanna be.”

“You like that, huh?”

“No, I don’t—like that,” Belinda mocked him, in a playful manner. “Emmm, that smells good,” she confessed as a waitress walked near their table with the aroma of garlic and fresh basil wafting off of a sizzling dish of shrimp scampi and rice pilaf. Belinda was surprised to see the waitress place the dish in front of her. “This is for me?!”

“Yep,” Gayb replied smoothly. “And all you did was verbally assault me from the minute you walked through the door.”

“You know how I like to tease you… You forgive me, though, right?”

“I guess I can forgive and forget…depending on how much more you beat me up before the night is over.”

“I’ll play nice,” Belinda joked. Then, smiling while looking at her food, she added, “Wow! I can’t believe you remembered what I like.”

Belinda was seriously impressed with Gayb remembering her love for shrimp scampi. She only mentioned it one time in his presence, and even then it was just a casual conversation between her and Kelly. She didn’t even know Gayb was paying attention.

Gayb and Belinda had a nice dinner followed by drinks and a few good laughs. As they settled down, feeling comfortable with each other, Belinda brought up her favorite subject, but with a very serious demeanor.

“Gayb, why won’t you run for office? You could do a lot for New Haven. You have an enormous amount of supporters and significant people within your reach who won’t hesitate to back you. In other words, you could run an unstoppable campaign.”

“You do know I’m a convicted felon, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“So what makes you think I can run for Mayor?”

“You could apply for a pardon for the purpose of having your record expunged so that you may run for office. That’s what pardons are for. These are the circumstances where pardons are usually granted! Given the path that you’re on, of course they’ll grant it. Just think about it… You’re the guy who had his time in the street, received a lot of time in prison, changed his life while inside, got out, is doing well for himself in business, advocates hard for enhancing the quality of African-American life, and also volunteers with at-risk teens on the side. Even without the pardon you could run for first Ward City Alderman and express just as much influence and say-so to the people as a Mayor. What you’ve done is you created a unique connection with law-abiding citizens, community activists, and those on the wrong side of the law as well…individuals who currently walk in the shoes that you once wore. They all like you. They all care to hear what you have to say, Gayb! Sky is the limit when it comes to all the good you can do with your influence. Forgive me for saying this, but sometimes I feel like the only reason you don’t step up to the plate is because you still dabble in things that you shouldn’t. I know it’s wrong for me to say, and I feel bad for thinking like that, but…”

“What is it that makes you think that?” Gayb curiously inquired.

“For starters you gave the Rec-Center money for new pool tables, as an anonymous donor! Why would you do it like that when you could’ve easily donated from one of your companies? And beyond that, if you’re actually legit, I know you have to see how much of a perfect fit you’d be in office.”

“Maybe I would,” Gayb confessed. Then he truthfully explained his reason for staying away from politics. “I’m just not a fan of all that comes with it. Whenever you enter the arena of politics, you automatically forfeit your right to privacy. Your friends, your associates, your family, your religion, who you sleep with—everything becomes fair game to be judged and vilified by the public on a large scale. Naturally, we as people have an appetite for scandal and negative headlines. But what makes things is the media, who feed that hunger with innuendo, twisting facts and details in order to come up with juicy stories…I mean—” Gayb paused, then added, “I get it! I know we have to advocate, vote, and run for office. I know we have to back campaigns in order to put good people in office for the purpose of striking a balance in government to represent the voice of the people. I understand that. But being absent from my children’s lives for fifteen years has already caused them enough pain to last a lifetime. I can’t see myself causing them further stress as my opponents run smear campaigns in fear of how much a threat I am.

“Running for office would be nice. In fact it would be huge for me. But there’s just too much that comes along with it. It’s not my lane. That’s why I do what I do from the sidelines.”

“Ahhk,” Belinda sighed in defeat. “Alright…okay. Since you put it like that I’m gonna let you be. But you can’t blame me for all the nagging I plagued you with. Because after seeing how you exploded on the scene fresh out of prison, I wanted to put my degree in political science to good use. Knowing that you struck a chord amongst the city’s people, I had visions of running a campaign for you and getting you into office. Then suddenly, out of the blue you popped up at the Rec-Center.” Belinda covered her mouth as she began laughing. “I swear to God, I almost pissed my pants. I didn’t know *what* the hell was happening! I thought Kelly was pranking me. I couldn’t even talk,” she admitted. “But when it became clear that you were there on your own and applying to be a volunteer, I pulled myself together, realizing now I’d have an opportunity to convince you to run. However, now that you’ve explained your position on the subject, I’m gonna respect it.”

Gayb and Belinda continued to have good conversation about many other topics throughout the rest of the night. Before they knew it, it was 11:30. After becoming aware of the time, Gayb asked for the check and offered to walk Belinda to her car.

“Thanks for the food and drinks,” Belinda said as they reached her vehicle. “I really had a good time.”

“Me too,” Gayb concurred.

For the next three seconds they stared at each other in awkward silence, both yearning to end the night with a romantic kiss, yet resisting the urge because of their work relationship.

“Alright,” Gayb let out, finally breaking the silence. “I’ll see you Wednesday at the Rec-Center.”

“Yep…Wednesday at the Rec-Center.”