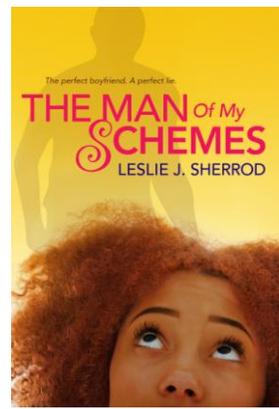


.....Excerpt from
THE MAN OF MY SCHEMES
by Leslie J. Sherrod



From Chapter 8....

“Berry Martini Jenkins, we need to talk. Now.”

“Mom!” I almost dropped my tablet and spilled the sweet tea I was drinking as I scrambled to shut my handiwork down. “What are you doing here and why did you use the key? I gave it to you for emergency use only.”

“This is an emergency, Berry. I can’t play around with this anymore.”

“What are you talking about? Did something happen? Is Davis okay?” I noticed for the first time that the tote bag hanging off of her shoulder was brimming over with hair products and cosmetics. My alarm level went up even higher. “Wait a minute. What’s going on?”

“An intervention.” She marched over to where I sat and began pulling out bottles and jars and containers and cases and lining them up on my desk, pushing my papers and knickknacks out of the way.

“Hold on, Mom, what are you doing? You said there’s an emergency.”

“Yes.” She pulled out a package of hair and eyed it before giving me the eye. “Did you know that Victoria Smallwood just got engaged?” My mother’s eyes were on fire.

“Uh, yes. I talked to Vickie and the other girls at Wednesday night service. She showed us her ring and talked about some of her wedding plans.” I looked down at the tub of unmixed relaxer, the fake hair package, and the flat iron my mother had lined up on my desk. Her eyes darted frantically over the three. “Ma, what is the emergency and why do you have these things on my desk?”

“Victoria Smallwood just got engaged. Victoria Smallwood, Sister Evangeline Willow’s daughter, is getting married.” She paused between each word and glared at me.

“I know that. What I don’t know is why you are here yelling about an emergency, and thinking that you’re about to do something to my hair.” Now my eyebrow was raised.

“Victoria Smallwood? That little homely looking, buck-toothed grapefruit is able to pin down a good man and you’re sitting alone in this apartment on a Friday night? Are you serious? You really don’t see the emergency in this situation?”

“Ma, that is totally uncalled for. Vickie is a sweetheart and she is not *that* ugly.” I shook my head, ashamed. “What am I saying? Ma, you know as well as I do – because you raised me this way – that looks don’t mean anything. It’s all about who you are inside. She is a lovely lady who has found the love of her life. I’m happy for her. Aren’t you?”

“Oh, bull crap, Berry.” My mother plugged up the flat iron. “You’re not in second grade anymore. Leave the fairy tales and feel good phrases alone. We need to fix you up so you can get a man. The last thing I need is Sister Willow frowning down at us at Victoria’s wedding reception. She’s probably looking up a scripture right now to rub in our faces that you ain’t been blessed with a man yet.”

“Ma, listen to what you’re saying.” I pulled out the plug from the socket. “Why are you harping on my relationship status? We’re in the twenty-first century. Why are you so worried about me getting married anyway? What if I’m happy being an independent woman? I’m single and satisfied.”

“Are you really?” She opened the hair pack, closed it, and then began measuring out the relaxer ingredients, pulled out a rattail comb to mix it. I glanced over at my phone. The snapshot of “Malikai Carter” was still on the screen. That was a different issue, though, I told myself. I just wanted to prove that...that what?

“Well?” My mother put down everything and crossed her arms.

I...didn’t know what to say. “I’ve got Jesus? And He’s all I need?” The words felt empty on my lips. I felt as real as the fakery I’d witnessed at my church on Sundays; as genuine as the parade of charades I’d seen on Wednesday nights.

Something was wrong with all of us.

Did it take my realization of loneliness to awaken to that conclusion?

“It’s okay, baby. We are going to do something to that unruly bird’s nest on top of your head and everything will be alright. We can lye it, fry it, or buy it, whichever way you choose, but we are getting rid of those naps tonight so you can get a man tomorrow.”

“You are not touching my hair, Mom.” Now *my* arms were crossed as I ducked out of my mother’s reach. “You may not like it or understand it, but I am fine with wearing my hair the way it naturally grows from my head. It’s not always easy to manage and it may not be the status quo, and I’m not saying that there’s something wrong with altering it or wearing it the ways you are suggesting. But it’s wrong if it’s not true to who I am, who I feel myself to be. I’m a naturalista, and any man that wants me is going to fully accept me just as I am.”

In my head, I could hear all the blog and YouTube stars in the #TeamNatural world applauding, high-fiving, cheering me on.

In my head.

In my face was my mother who was not hearing or having one word of my heartfelt speech. “Girl, if you don’t tame that knotty mess, and put some more make-up on, and buy some outfits that got a little flirt to them, you will never find a man worth bragging about. Ain’t no man of quality ever gonna be drawn to you looking like somebody’s field hand, and that’s a fact you will never prove me wrong on.”

We stared eye to eye, arms crossed. I felt the corner of my bottom lip tremble. Extra wetness pooled in the rim of my left eye. My mother began to smile. Her arms relaxed. She plugged up the flat iron again, pulled out a small case of foundations and blushes, eye shadows and lip liners.

"You are wrong," I heard myself whisper as she opened a magazine to a picture of a model half my size with long, flowing hair and an airbrushed face. "You are so wrong about a man of quality not giving me a second look."

I felt numbness, complete nothingness as my hand reached over and picked up my phone. My wrist was limp as I pressed a button on the side, brought up the screen.

Brought up the picture.

I held it out for her to see. She stopped fumbling with her impromptu beauty counter and frowned and raised an eyebrow, confused.

"Him." My voice gathered strength; the whisper turned to a full voice. "He's the chief legal counsel for an international corporation, a former pro-ball player. He lives in San Francisco and has a chalet in Switzerland." I stared at the picture, pushed the phone into my mother's hand. "He saw my picture online this week. Me. Natural, no makeup, my old, gold sweater dress. And he wants to get to know me better." My lip trembled again.

I wanted this to be true.

I willed this to be true.

"We've emailed a couple of times. He wants to talk to me over the weekend. Dubai. That's where he is at the moment. He wants to know me better, Mom. I'm enough. He's quality and I'm enough." My voice cracked. Shame. Guilt. Brokenness. "I'm enough."

And it was all a lie.

My mother stared at the photo, the one I'd created in the hour before she'd come. Bronze skin. Hints of Asian, Latin, European, Black. A man who couldn't be pegged in any category but beautiful.

Delicious.

I stared at the photo anew, marveled at the perfection I'd managed. He looked real. My mother looked up.

"He...wants to talk to you?"

The surprise stung. It was familiar. But still, it stung. I shut my eyes, heard Gina's scorn. Opened my eyes again. Looked my mother dead in hers as I built my lie.

"Yes. I was preparing to Skype him just before you came busting in here."

"Oh." She frowned. "Oh." She began packing up the hair things, the cosmetics. "Well, I guess if he was fine with the way you look...we shouldn't mess with the formula." My mother zipped away the last of the containers. "Berry, don't blow this. I've got a good feeling about this one. His eyes..."

Huxley's fur. I'd used my cat to create his eye color. *Oh, God. This is so wrong.* But my mother was packing up her things, heading for the door.

"Go ahead and call him," she said. "I won't interfere. Just call me in the morning and tell me how it goes. This might be it, Berry. You are due." A smile snaked over her lips. "And there won't be anything Sister Willow can say. Dubai. Um, um, um." My mother was on the other side of the door now, about to close it. "He sounds perfect. Just make sure he's a church man and that he's not crazy or has a crazy ex or something like that."

She started to swing the door shut, but had one more thing to add. “And put a flower in your hair or something. Gives your natural hair a sultry look.” She swung the door shut and was gone.

It took all I had in me not to scream. “What have I done, Lord?” I looked up to the heavens.

Silence.

But what really was I expecting? A lightning bolt? I’d just told my mother a bold-faced lie, right to her face. I eased my phone back onto my desk and then I did something I hadn’t done all week, maybe all year

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