

CH.2 MY HEART BELONGS TO ME

Oni made her way on legs of jelly back to the locker room. “What the hell just happened out there,” she asked herself? All she could think about was leaving the gym right away and getting back to some semblance of reality.

No man had ever made her respond to him in as an electrifying manner as she had to Tunde. “Get a hold of yourself girl, this is just a professional relationship.”

In fact, he had just begun speaking to her about investing in Africa as he was helping her with her upper body workout. “Think on it Oni,” slid off his beautiful sensuous lips like sweet cool water dripping from the fountain of pure black love, “We gotta help heal the Lan..” “As people of African descent, we’re morally obligated to do whatever we can to make this happen.”

Tunde’s hands had come to rest on her waist as he was helping her with her reps. The last thing she could think about was healing anybody’s land. “Damn!” She had to think about healing herself after his hands sent a jolt of electricity coursing through her body boldly awakening all of her body’s sensitive spots. She tried but failed to remember the last time she had been so affected by the nearness of someone from the opposite sex.

In the locker room Oni stripped off her clothes and rushed to the shower. Turning the temperature to cool she stood there letting the water pulse over her body and tried to collect her wayward thoughts. “This is just crazy” she thought. “I’m not some school girl getting all worked up over her first crush.” “Umm, but it sure feels like it” she thought, closing her eyes and imagining Tunde’s lips brushing across her own with warm velvety softness.

Oni allowed her fingertips to trail across her lips which felt like they had just been passionately kissed by a sweetness that would make the angels in heaven cry.

Shaking off this feeling once more, Oni tried desperately to make her mind think in the cool logical way in which she knew she was capable.

She deeply breathed in the eucalyptus aroma that Tunde’s staff provided as part of the cool-down phase at the center; “nice touch,” she thought.

“Woman,” she said to herself, exhaling until she felt as if most of her breath had been stolen from her body, “you can’t possibly be thinking of this man in such a starry-eyed school-girl way.” “You know it ain’t goin’ nowhere, she whispered out loud. “They never do,” she said, with an emotion akin to regret.

In fact, Oni had not been in any very serious relationship since her senior year in high school. Oh, she dated in college alright; and really liked some of the brothers she had met over the course of those years at Oberlin College and grad school at Alabama State.

But Oni never allowed herself the luxury of falling for any one of those brothers. She chuckled remembering that Alpha brother who thought Oni didn’t want him because, “you like them Q-Dogs better than you do us serious brothers’.”

If they only knew she had no plans to become involved with any of them very seriously, they probably would never have approached her in the first place.

Her best friend Mimi, used to tell her she was worse than “some of these doggish men; just going after that ass.” “Well I hope you’re keeping it safe at any rate,” Mimi would say.

When she was deep in thought Oni had the “cute little habit,” one of her college boyfriends pointed out, of biting the corners of her “full, kissable lips,” he’d continued.

Oni was so deep in thought when she left the fitness center that her trip home passed in a blur. She had raced to her car and thrown her things unceremoniously into the backseat and jumped behind the wheel and raced off, almost burning rubber as she sped away.

She’d hoped Tunde had not seen her speedy retreat. Oni selected Angela Winbush on her iPod and skipped to “Your Smile.” Oni loved herself some Angela, especially after she had gotten rid of Rene. “It’s just like a man, trying to keep you from pursuing your dreams to the fullest,” she thought. “Good you got rid of the dead weight my sister,” she said.

Oni supposed her looks were passable. She was five feet seven inches tall and almost five-ten when she wore her sexy stiletto high-heels. One of her first boyfriends at A-State told her she looked like “sex on heels” when she wore those shoes.

Her girlfriends called them her “come-fuck-me” heels. In reality; however, she was not a sex vixen and she didn’t see herself as some kind of sex-‘em-and-leave ‘em heartless kind of woman, although she had been accused of being such a creature by more than one former flame.

By simply allowing the relationship to fizzle out, Oni believed she was sparing the man the dysfunction she had come to understand awaited anyone who chose to seek a serious relationship with her. She realized, after a great deal of soul searching and self-reflection, that she didn’t know how to let a good man love her and she spent way too much time with those with whom she was not compatible.

As Oni drove along the East Shoreway heading to her condo in the Downtown Warehouse District, she thought more about her looks. At five-seven some men actually thought she was too tall. “How ridiculous,” she thought. “Five-seven is a healthy height for a woman.”

One man told her she had “the pow! in all the right places.” Personally, she felt her butt was a tad too pronounced. She’d always had trouble trying to find jeans that fit. They either fit her behind, but not her waist, and vice versa.

Oni’s aunt Nug told her she was a striking beauty with her long neck, bedroom eyes and that “big boom-boom of yours,” she’d say. Oni always responded by saying, “oh auntie you’re just saying that ‘cause you’re my Nuggie and you love me,” while cuddling on the big comfy sofa with her favorite aunt.

When she came home from college on breaks she made sure she spent at least one evening with Aunt Nug at grandma Nana’s house just shooting the breeze and watching late-night T.V.

They had spent a lot of time talking philosophically, trying to solve the problems of the world, and relationships between black men and women in particular.

“You know you can’t take your mama and daddy as an example of a normal relationship,” said aunt Nug. “I would talk with you about them now that you’re grown, but, girl it would take entirely too much effort,” she’d said.

“Auntie you don’t have to talk to me about them at all.” “Remember me and Drake were there to witness all the craziness.” You’re right,” said Nug. “I guess I’m preaching to the choir, and they already know the sermon,” she said.

“Sho’ ya’ right auntie,” Oni said, as the two hooked their pinkie fingers together in a show of solidarity that they had perfected over many years of bonding as family.

Lately, however, gatherings with the women in her family were starting to become strained. Now when they got together on holidays and other family times the talk seemed to revolve around Oni—especially since she had reached her twenty-seventh year of life.

When they retreated to the kitchen where Nana, Nug and her mother Ollie took their “constitution,” as they called it, the dreaded conversation would begin.

“Baby, when you gon’ get married and give me a grandson-in-law and some great-grand babies?” Nana would ask as she sat on her kitchen throne sipping Kentucky Bourbon and smoking her one cigarette of the day; she was trying to quit, she assured all of them.

“You know it ain’t seemly your hanging around with all these men you claim are just friends.” “They are friends Nana,” said Oni with conviction.

“Mama,” Ollie chimed in, “my child is not a loose girl, and it’s not right for you to suggest such.” “That’s a matter of perception Osceola” said Nana; stubbing out her Newport with force. “She always hanging out with one of them men friends of hers and ain’t nobody talking about getting married.”

“Why when you and Frank starting getting close,” she said, while giving everyone the eye, “your daddy made sure he put a ring on your finger.”

“Humph, wasn’t gon’ be no three-six-nine gon’ on under our roof, no sir,” she said, making her way to the cabinet to pour herself another hooker, as she called it, of Ole’ Kentucky.

At Nana’s comment about Franklin and Osceola, a cynical, knowing look passed between aunt and niece. They would discuss that one later.

Noticing her grandmother’s slow, tired-looking gait as she made her way across the kitchen, Oni’s face registered a deep frown. She’d have to remember to make an appointment for Nana to see the Chinese acupuncturist up on Lee Road to get a full work-up.

“Baby, who was that nice young man you went to college with back at Oberlin;” “Damon, some-thin’ ‘nother?,” Nana questioned settling back at the table.

“I think he wanted to marry you,” she continued, taking a little nip from what Oni decided had better be her last drink of the evening.

“Who you talking about Nana, Desmond Jones?” “Yeah, that’s him,” she said, suddenly remember-

ing. Oni decided to make light of the moment.

“Earth to Nana Ivy Rose Baptiste,” she sing-songed while twirling about the kitchen, “Desmond is gay; didn’t you know that Nana?”

“He and I are the best of friends ya know,” said Oni. “Naw, I didn’t know that girl,” Nana said swatting her open palm after Oni as she continued to frolic about her kitchen.

As if speaking to herself Nana reflected, “Fred and me are the only couple in our friendship circle who have only one great grand.”

Then counting on her fingers she continued, “the twins Leola and Perthola have three a piece, and even that old sourpuss Cuthbert has two that he’s always bragging on.”

Oni cut in grabbing Nana’s figures to stop her endless enumeration before she ran out of fingers. “Nana,” she said with exasperation, “why don’t you go out and find me someone to marry so we can give you and Poppy your precious great grands.”

“You know what a poor judge of character I am when it comes to men.”

“If you don’t hurry up, I might just have to child,” said Nana. “A woman your age shoulda’ been married by now,” she said.

“Nana, what do you mean “a woman my age?” “I’m not old and this is not the 1960s,” Oni said with a frown.

“Women now days are putting off marriage and children until they have their careers firmly in place, and they have traveled the world and gotten some enjoyment out of life.”

“It’s called self-actualization Nana.” “You ever heard of that”? Oni asked, sarcastically while giving her grandmother a patronizing wink.

“Don’t get smart with me girl,” said Nana. “The career and self whatever it’s called, aint gonna keep you warm and secure at night,” she said winking back at Oni giving her a taste of her own medicine. Finally, looking pointedly at Ollie, Nana said, “and you and Franklin need to make that son of yours do the right thing so that child will let us see little Darius.”

“It just aint right that Melanie keeps that boy away from his blood.” “I have to say, Drake Derricotte was one young man that should have refrained from getting married until he had a little more common sense under his belt,” said Nana.

Oni looked at her grandmother with surprise thinking to herself, “so we’re operating under a double standard, are we Miss Nana?” Oni just rolled her eyes and began eating some of the grapes that Nana kept in a fruit bowl on the table.

“Frank and I have talked to him mama, said Ollie. “But you know his sporadic employment situation.” “Frank and I do what we can for Little D, but Melanie is one stubborn woman as you know.” At her sister’s comment, aunt Nug spoke up, “I’ll tell you what’s not right.” “It’s not right for Melanie to keep Little Darius away from his father whether or not he’s paying child support on the regular.” Nug was on a roll. “Most of all, it’s not good for the child.” “He needs

his father's influence in his life period dot," she said.

Signaling she was done with the entire conversation, Nana pulled out the drawer in the cabinet next to the table. Finding her reading glasses, she perched them on her freckled nose and began reading from her latest copy of the Daily Word.

Oni was still thinking about that particular kitchen table conversation as she exited the Shoreway at East 9th Street heading south to St. Clair Avenue where she made a right-hand turn and drove the few remaining blocks to West 6th Street.

Oni chuckled to herself thinking of aunt Nug's parting shot at her state of non-marital bliss. "You know Nana's right Oni, you better go on and get you a man who can grab that ass while it's still young and perky."

"I hate to tell you, but this shit," she said, gesturing at her own ample behind, "will fall before you know it." Nug laughed and said, "then you'll be looking in a mirror one day, trying to find your once perfect butt, and it will have moved to a different bodily location."

"Yeah like up to the belly," said Ollie laughing and joining in the light-hearted teasing.

"Then you won't know which is which," laughed Ollie, "the butt or the belly," she ground out, trying to hold back her mirth. Nana cocked her head to one side. Looking at both daughters she said, "my girls got jokes?"

"Me and your father should have put ya'll in show business instead of college," she said. "Then ya'll could be making us some money as we speak." The whole kitchen cracked up at that.