**CHAPTER THREE**

*Thinking Out Loud*

I was very scared and stared to panic. “Come here, please.” Michael whispered as he pulled me towards him. “Um, sir? I can’t see anything.” “I know. I don’t want you walking around in the dark. There are lots of sharp objects everywhere and you could fall and hurt yourself.” “What do we do now?” “Just stay where you are.” He then turned me around. “Don’t move. I’ll put this down for you.” I thanked him as he took the tray from my hands and placed it on the floor somewhere next to us.

“Stay here. I’m going to get a candle.” “Sir, don’t leave me here alone.” “I have to but I’ll be back.” “I’m scared.” “I know, but we don’t know how long this blackout is going to last and it’s dangerous to be here in the dark. I have all kinds of things on the studio floor that could really hurt you. I need to get a light.” “Does this happen often?” “No, but it has in the past.” “I wonder if the lights are out in the house too.” “They are. All of the electricity is run by the same circuits throughout the whole property.”

I heard his footsteps as he left me standing alone in the dark. As terrified as I was, I knew I had to stay calm and in the same spot. After a long while, I heard footsteps behind me. “Sir? Is that you?” I then realized those weren’t actual footsteps. It was the beginning of Michael’s song Thriller. “SIR! That’s not funny!” I heard his laughter in the background. I wanted to make him laugh so I started singing his lyrics:

*“It’s close to midnight and something evil’s lurking in the dark…”*

Michael seemed very impressed. I saw him coming towards me with a candle in his hand as he joined me in singing his own song:

*“Under the moonlight, you see a sight that almost stops your heart, you try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it, you start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes, you’re paralyzed, ‘cuz this is thriller, thriller night…”*

He then started doing his signature dance moves from that film with the candle still in his hand. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. He looked unbelievably cute in the dark giving me a live performance.

After the main part of the song was over, he turned it off and sat on a bench. “Come join me please.” “I think we should head towards the house where it’s safe.” “It’s dangerous to try and leave this room in the dark. We won’t be able to see our way out.” Being in the dark alone with Michael made me tense. I wasn’t afraid of him trying something, but was more concerned about the fact that if something were to happen, I wouldn’t have the strength to refuse him. After all, he was VERY irresistible. Lucky for me, he wasn’t aware of that…for now anyway.

We both sat on the bench and talked about all kinds of things. Michael seemed very interested in my life and how I became a home care worker. I told him I didn’t have much of a choice since I needed to do something that paid the bills and didn’t take me years in school to finish. He also told me about his life and the sacrifices he made to be successful.

“It looks like we both put our lives on the line for the ones we love most.” I said. “Yes, and I don’t regret it.” “Me neither.” “Are you comfortable?” He asked. “Yes, thanks.” He wanted to lie down so I sat on the floor next to him while he stretched out on the bench. “Michelle, you don’t have to sit on the floor.” “It’s ok. I don’t mind.” “If I could see, I’d get you a blanket to sit on.” “That’s sweet but I’m ok. Are you comfortable?” “Yes.” Michael started humming a tune that sounded amazing. “Is that a new song?” “No, it’s just a beat that came to mind.” “It sounds lovely.”

“Do you sing or dance?” “I used to dance, but not as much as Aria. She’s been performing ever since she was a baby.” “Sounds a lot like me.” “I used to call her the female version of you. Her dream was to meet and perform for you one day.” “Really?” “Yes! She always said ‘I’m going to dance with Michael one day!’ I thought she was crazy for having such a big dream but she proved me wrong.” You made that happen for her.” “It was all God’s work.” “You don’t take credit for the things you do.” “You don’t either.” “It’s funny how we just met and you already know me so well.” “I guess that’s the spark we have between us.”

After a while, I was starting to feel tired and put my head against the bench next to Michael and leaned closer towards him. His eyes were closed and all I could do was watch him as he lay there looking incredibly peaceful. The light flickering from the candle against his face made his reflection look unbelievably ravishing. His aura was so inviting. He had me wanting to get closer to him. I finally understood what it was about him that made people lose their minds. Michael was definitely one of a kind.

I brushed my hand lightly against his forehead. I could hear his steady breathing. He looked like an angel. I touched his hair ever so slightly. It felt like silk was running through my fingers. I didn’t want to wake him up, but couldn’t resist touching him at the same time. His scent was alluring. I knew I should stop but didn’t want to. I gently touched his legs, kissing his toes as they twitched slightly. I wished for all of his pain to fade away as I sat there with my hands placed on his feet.

I made my way over to the side of his ear. I was tempted to kiss him but didn’t. I whispered the words I never thought I’d say to him. “Michael, I think I love you.” A smile came to my face as I said his name. I didn’t know what it was, but he was pulling me towards him without even trying. I tried to convince myself not to get too attached but couldn’t help it. He was very special and I knew I wanted to make him mine.

But then I realized what I was feeling was only a fantasy and could never be real. I tried to snap out of it then sat back down on the floor next to him. Eventually, the lights came back on. I woke Michael up and he opened his eyes. “I’m sorry. I had no idea I was so exhausted.” “It’s ok. I didn’t want to wake you but the lights are back on. I’ll take your tray to the house now and meet you there.” He suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down on the bench next to him.

“Stay with me, please.” “I’d like to but I really should go. I don’t want your parents thinking I’m being unprofessional.” “Don’t worry about them. I love having you close to me.” His words were starting to get to me. “That’s sweet, but I think we should join the others. Why don’t you finish what you were doing before the lights went out and I’ll see you there?” “Ok. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable around me.” “I’m not. I just don’t want to get in the way of your work.”

I grabbed Michael’s tray and walked towards the door. He turned on his music and started stretching. As much as I wanted to watch, I knew I should head back to the house. When I did, Mrs. Jackson saw me and took the tray from my hands. “Thank goodness! I thought something bad happened to you. We weren’t able to leave the house when the power went out to check on you and Michael. Is he alright?” “He’s fine. He ate and said he had to finish one more routine then he’ll come here and join everyone.”

“Michelle, why don’t you ask your sister to join us?” Janet said as she came over to me. “I would but she’s busy practicing for the lead.” “That girl sure doesn’t waste any time.” “She’s got determination like your brother.” “Looks like you have a female Michael in your family.” Katherine said. “I guess that would make her Michaela.” Janet said as we all laughed.

Janet took me to the living room and introduced me to her siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. I had no idea the Jacksons were such a huge family. I could see why Katherine needed a care aid. It must be difficult for an elderly woman to look after so many people. I was glad she didn’t have to worry anymore now that she chose me to help look after her family. Especially one in particular.

I sat in the living room talking with everyone but the one that stood out to me the most was still on my mind. I couldn’t stop seeing his angelic face as he was lying on the bench in the dark. Moments later, the front door opened and Michael entered the room looking as gorgeous as ever. He immediately went and greeted his mother first then his father and then the rest of his family. I could tell he loved them all his but I also sensed he felt uncomfortable around them, especially his father.

He then came and sat next to me. “I didn’t take long, did I?” “No. I’m glad you’re here.” “I missed you.” He whispered in my ear. I couldn’t help but giggle like a little girl. “Me too.” He winked at me and I did the same. We were behaving like two kids who had a crush on each other. I suddenly realized his mother was in the room and I was her employee. I straightened myself out and got back into work mode. Meanwhile, Michael was kicking my feet and trying to distract me as everyone was trying to speak to me. He even casually put his arm around me thinking I wouldn’t notice.

“I don’t think you should do that with everyone in the room, sir.” “They won’t notice. They’re too busy talking to each other.” He then removed his arm from my shoulder and starting tickling my back. As amazing as it felt, I was uneasy knowing his mother was in the room and didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. “Stop it. Your mother is going to think I’m sleazy.” “No, she won’t. She likes you. Just not as much as I do.”

He kept doing little things to keep my attention on him. Every time I’d get up to talk to someone, Michael would randomly walk by and pinch or poke me somewhere. It seemed like we were in elementary school and he was the bratty boy who wouldn’t leave the innocent girl alone.

As the day went on, I tried to help Katherine with the cleaning and general house duties and Michael kept on pestering me and followed me everywhere I went like a puppy dog. “Why are you following me?” I asked as I saw him dancing around me. “Because I want to.” “Don’t you have to rehearse?” “I’d rather be here with you.” “Boy, you are CRAZY.” “About you, girl.” “Don’t worry about him, dear.” Katherine said. “Michael is just being silly. He’s a big kid.” “I can see that.” Katherine showed me the sections of the home I’d be working in and I made up a list of chores that were to be done each time I came to the house.

The chores weren’t very extensive and there was just enough to keep me busy for at least a few hours per visit. I also knew that if I did my work early, I’d have someone else around to keep me occupied. After much fun, the family get together was over and I asked Katherine if I could stay and help her. She said I didn’t have to but I wanted to get familiar with my duties since I was going to be there at least 3 times a week.

I went to the closet by the front door where Rebbie had put my things and went to the bathroom to change into my work clothes. When I came out dressed in my uniform, Michael grabbed me and shoved me into a room locking the door. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” “Shhh, someone might hear you.” “I have to help your mother.” “I know, but I wanted to be alone with you.” I was frantic. I wasn’t comfortable locked in a room alone with him. “Sir, this is bad. If someone catches us it’s going to look horrible and I don’t want to lose this job!” “No one is going to find out and even if someone saw us, believe me I’d know what to say.” “Why are you doing this to me?” He came closer and backed me into a corner. “I really adore you. Can’t you understand that, girl?” I was slowly melting inside but had to resist his charm.

“That’s very sweet but—“ “I know you like me too.” “I do, but not the way you think.” “I see the way you look at me. You even changed your hair to get me to notice you.” “That’s not true. I did it for myself.” “You like to play hard to get, don’t you?” “I’m not playing. I’m really afraid of getting caught with you alone like this. “Tell me you don’t feel the same way and I’ll leave you alone.” He then bit his bottom lip and ran his fingers through my hair.

“Sir, I really can’t do this. My sister works for you. I work for your mother. I can’t get caught up like this. You have no idea what my life is like. You’re an amazing singer and dancer but as far as I’m concerned there can never be anything between us.” He backed away from me allowing me to leave. “If that’s how you feel, I have to respect your wishes. I’m sorry for coming onto you like that. It won’t happen again.” He walked towards the door and left.

I stood in that room wondering if I had made the right decision. The thought of me being with someone as famous as him seemed completely unrealistic. I took a deep breath and left the room looking for Katherine to find out what things I needed to do before going home. Once my duties were finished, Katherine thanked me and gave me my work schedule which was to begin in a week’s time.

As I headed to my car, I noticed Michael was sitting by himself outside near a fountain. I wanted to sit with him but was afraid he wouldn’t want me to because of what happened earlier. I thought it wouldn’t be very nice of me to leave without saying anything. After all, he was very sweet to me from the very beginning. I owed it to him to at least be nice and say goodbye.

“What are you doing here all by yourself?” “Just thinking.” “About?” “A lot of things.” “I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m leaving and wanted to say goodbye.” “Thank you for coming and helping mother. I know she appreciates it.” “It’s my pleasure. I’ll see you again soon.” “Wait, Michelle.” I turned and faced him. “Come here, please?” Not wanting to be rude, I did. “This is a beautiful home you live in.” “Do you live far from here?” “Not really. About 30 minutes.”

“Have you lived here your whole life?” “Yes. Born and raised in LA.” “Can I ask you something?” “Sure.” “What were your parents like?” “From what I can remember of them they were good people. Hard working, genuine, good people. My dad was really funny. He could never go a day without telling a joke. What are your parents like?” “My mother’s wonderful. She’s always been the biggest inspiration in my life. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her.” “And your father?” Michael was silent.

“I don’t talk about him.” “I noticed. Do you two not get along?” “Not really. I just don’t know him the way I’d like to.” “I’m sorry. I wish I could fix that for you.” “I think it’s better this way. Joseph has always been difficult to understand. He’s not exactly father material but we all love him because he’s still our father.” “I’m glad you respect him. I know it can’t be easy, but at least you have your music and fans to help you cope with your struggles.”

He then told me several stories about his childhood and the difficulties he faced as an adolescent. I couldn’t help but cry when he told me about the abuse he suffered and all the times he couldn’t go out and play because he was forced to work. It made me realize how lucky I was to be able to have those opportunities. I felt sad knowing that what others took for granted, someone else like Michael was praying for.

“I had no idea your life was like that, sir.” “I don’t usually talk about it but I feel comfortable with you.” “I feel the same way. You can talk to me anytime. My ears are always open to listen.” He seemed happy knowing he had a friend in me. “I should be going. I need to check on Aria and make sure she’s eaten.” “You’re like a mother to everyone.” “Just to the ones I care about the most.” I then winked at him as he smiled at me. “Do you really have to go?” “Would you like me to stay with you?” “Yes, please.” “I can squeeze you in for a few more minutes.” He giggled to himself.

“Are you that busy, girl?” “I can be. I’m an important person.” “Yes, I know.” “So, what does Mr. Jackson like to do in his spare time?” “When I’m not performing?” “Yes!” “I love water fights.” “REALLY?” “Yes, they are so much fun. I never lose.” “You NEVER lose at water fights?” “Never. I’m too fast for anyone to get me.” I decided to change that record of his. I stood up and slowly walked backwards towards the fountain. “So, no one has ever sprayed you with their water gun?” “They have, but not completely.”

He saw what I was doing and started to run. I quickly scooped some water from the fountain in my hands and ran after him. He wasn’t the only one quick on his feet. He didn’t even make it ten steps away before I splashed the water in his face. He couldn’t help but laugh and I was happy to be the cause of it. For someone who was so profoundly lonely, I knew I had to do something to bring some form of joy back into his life.

“Looks like you lost now!” “That’s not fair. I couldn’t protect myself.” “You won’t ever have to when I’m around. I’d never hurt you.” “That’s sweet, thank you.” “I must go now. I have to check on Aria. I know she’s been dancing all day and just like someone else I know, she hasn’t stopped to take a break.” “I’ll be sure to work on that so you don’t get mad at me in the future.” “Good. When are you shooting the film with her?” “In a few days.”

“Ok. Sounds good.” “When are you coming here again?” “Why? You want to see me again?” “Of course.” “Mrs. Jackson asked me to come back next week. “Will you be at your sister’s screen test?” “Hopefully, if I’m not here that is.” “I won’t start until you come.” “Sir, that’s not necessary.” “It is for me. I want you there.” “What if I can’t make it?” “Then I won’t do it.” I laughed thinking he was kidding. “You think I’m joking?” Suddenly, I realized he was being serious. “You’re not?” “No. I won’t start without you.”

“But why?” “Because I love having you around me.” “I thought you were just kidding.” He shook his head no and started walking towards me. I didn’t know what he was going to do this time so I slowly began to walk away from him. “I have to get going. I’ll see you again soon.” I turned around and walked towards my car when I slipped on the pavement from the water.

Michael ran and caught my fall just before I landed on the ground. “Are you ok?” “Yes, thanks for catching me.” Then it happened – we looked into each other’s eyes and he softly pressed his lips to mine. For a second, it seemed like I had died and gone to heaven. I touched his face gently as he stood me up on the ground. Our lips were still joined together. Then our hands were moving towards each other.

Suddenly, my cell phone rang in my purse which was on the bench. We stopped kissing and Michael was kind enough to bring me my purse. I noticed Aria was calling. I told her I had finished my work and was on my way to check on her. She asked me to bring her something to eat. Just as I thought, she hadn’t eaten all day. I knew she loved veggie burgers. I told her I’d pick one up for her on the way to her house.

When I hung up, I realized what I had done with Michael and felt really embarrassed. “Sir, I have to leave. I have to go to my sister’s house and give her some food. She’s been rehearsing all day.” As I walked away from him, he grabbed my waist. “I want you to know that you mean a lot to me and what happened just now was beautiful.” “Sir, I really have to go.” He kissed the side of my face and whispered “Michelle, I think I love you.”