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One and Done

by

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Chapter 1

Taylor

Dustin McMillan poured into my life as effortlessly as the top-shelf tequila going into the first margarita of the afternoon Markell was shaking up for me.

I was sitting alone in my usual seat adjacent to the bar at Beaux where I could chat with my best friend Markell, who was mixing up drinks for the Sunday drag brunch crowd. The DJ had just lowered the music a bit for hostess and performer Miss Coco Hydrate to get the drag brunch going. She'd asked us to get our singles out for the queens performing their interpretations of Beyoncé's *Renaissance* album—still a favorite of all the Black and Brown gays, even after all the time the album had been out, even after most of the gays had been to one of the *Renaissance* world tour concerts. And as I always did on Sunday afternoons, I reached into my chocolate Telfar bag and took two twenties out to change into singles for the drag performers.

“Only forty dollars?” this guy asked as he sidled up near to me and sat in an empty barstool two seats over. “*Renaissance* has sixteen tracks. And you’re tipping barely two bucks per performance in expensive ass San Francisco?”

I swung my face toward the somewhat raspy baritone voice commenting on my tipping. For a second, I thought I was looking at myself in the mirror.

He was a Black guy, way too attractive, wearing a blue fitted suit that looked Armani and a salmon-colored button-down dress shirt with a light blue tie. Reminded me of that Nate Burleson newscaster on *CBS Mornings*. Confident looking, too, like he thought he was the shit. Definitely overdressed for day drinking in the Castro. But then again, Markell often said the same about me.

Not that I was sizing him up for anything beyond curiosity, we shared the same mid-to-dark brown complexion and smooth skin that looked taken care of by an aesthetician. And whereas I kept my hair in more of a clean cut, tapered low ‘fro, with a small mustache and chin goatee, Two-Seats-Over guy was a little more rugged looking, wearing a high top natural with a fade, full beard, and mustache. His edge up was sharp and crisp.

Beyond superficial looks, that’s where our similarities seemed to end. He showed some nerve. I’d never think to intrude or impose my opinion on a stranger in a bar. Work life, yes. Sunday Funday, no.

“Who asked you?” I said. Maybe I should have retorted in a nicer way, he thought, given that the number of gay Black men in the Castro, especially those who talked to other Black men in the Castro, was generally low to none. But the way he approached me, I thought my response was warranted.

“I’m just saying,” Two-Seats-Over guy said. “You’re the only other guy in here, like me, overdressed, suited, and booted. The girls are going to expect more from you... and from me.”

“That’s funny. I’ve never seen you in here before. I’m here pretty much every Sunday.”

“Oh, you’re a regular then?”

“You could say that,” I said. “My best friend works here.”

“Oh, so everybody in here knows you’re a frugal tipper? In this expensive ass city? And what’s up with this city, by the way? Is it even the destination city anymore? I mean the homeless, the mental health, the drugs. Hell, y’all even pushed Keith Lee to cancel his food critic tour. This how y’all be living in San Francisco now?”

He punctuated the questions with an arrogantly radiant smile filled with Hollywood-perfect teeth. Enamored and at a loss for words at the moment, I looked down while thinking of a response, noting the stainless steel Chopard watch on his wrist and what looked to be a Tiffany link bracelet on the right wrist. I peeped the Armani white leather sneakers and concluded his suit definitely had to be the same label as the shoes. These brands I knew by look, not because I bought them for myself, but because my parents often gifted me things I never thought or wanted to acquire for myself. Clearly, his taste and income for exorbitant goods were behind his opinions about San Francisco, a city I’d called home for about five years after leaving my family and a job I loved in Los Angeles for a better professional opportunity in the Bay Area.

I’m generally quick-witted and ready with a response for everything, so rarely does someone come for me in my professional or personal life. People who know me know winning a debate with me was hard. Except for maybe Markell’s attempts to poke emotional holes in my reasons for remaining single.

“Well, what I’m *not* gonna do is buy into anything that critiques our Black woman mayor, her agenda, or her performance,” I said, not really wanting to get into politics at a bar. I just wanted to talk to Markell on his Sunday shift, have my one and done cocktail, and watch some drag. But here we were. “Black women already treated as less than, and buying into that thinly veiled sexist and racist negative talk about her is a slippery slope meant to set the stage for conservatives to try and take back the city. They’ve already pushed enough of us Blacks out of San Francisco, Oakland, and all the Bay Area. We not doing this now. And it’s not just San Francisco. It’s all major cities.”

“Point taken,” Two-Seats-Over guy said. “I ain’t even had my first drink. And I have had a day. Still don’t get you off the hook for cheap tipping. Ha. Thought I forgot.”

We smiled. Eyes lingered on each other. Romance was definitely not in my plan.

“I tip the girls very well, thank you,” I said, hesitantly. “With cash and in other ways they need help.”

“Mmmhmm, help.” He looked me up and down. “That kinda help? You get down with the performers like that?”

“You don’t even know me.” I scanned the bar area for an empty seat, even though I hated the idea of leaving my usual place at the bar because of an annoying stranger. The nerve of him to imply help meant sex work. Not that anything was wrong with sex work. Rent’s gotta be paid.

What he didn’t know, not that I needed to explain anything to him, was that a lot of my professional work and community service was dedicated to helping non-binary, trans, and genderqueer people, especially Black and Brown. These groups were the ones highly likely to make up a large number of unhoused youths in the Bay Area and elsewhere. My volunteer and advocacy work were to get them connected to the services they needed. Whether their needs

were food, shelter, physical health, mental health, educational, or legal, I'd volunteered on-the-ground and on advisory boards with organizations dedicated to the uplift of those most invisible within the LGBTQIA+ and Black communities.

And when drag queens and Black trans youth got put on the political bingo card out of the blue, I'd double-downed my support by joining the local NAACP chapter, Castro District Arts Council and the Food, Bar, and Beverage Council to advocate for their rights. Along with giving cash and tips directly to the performers, that demonstrated my support was beyond the sex work box many tried to confine them to.

I wasn't too sure I wanted to give energy to Two-Seats Over guy, a who came across as conceited, opinionated, and full of himself. The kind whose good looks got him his way in his personal and professional life. I didn't really like that kind of energy in my world.

"Man, just joking," he said. He put a fist out to bump, so I extended mine back to signal a truce and, hopefully, to end the conversation. "You ain't gotta move or change seats. I just flew into San Francisco, luggage ain't make it, car service was late, and they're going to text when my hotel room is ready. It's up the street. I'm just passing time."

"All that to say you're a tourist?" I said. "Welcome, I guess. If you can play nice. And stop talking shit about my city."

"Thanks for welcoming me, man. I'm familiar with the area somewhat, so I'm entitled to talk shit. I'm D.J."

"Oh, I see. I'm Taylor."

"Taylor? As in 'beautiful gowns' Taylor?"

"You got jokes like Aretha Franklin, huh?"

"So, what's behind your name? What the hell kinda Black family names a kid Taylor?"

“The kind that named me Taylor, I guess.”

“*Doctor* Taylor, if you want to be more specific,” Markell interrupted, thankfully, as he made his way back to the bar, vogueing quickly past the performer who was in the middle of doing Beyoncé’s “I’m That Girl.” For a thick and muscular guy who had formerly done drag in his twenties and early thirties before giving up entertaining, Markell could still easily jump in and around the current girls performing at Beaux during his bartending shift.

In between making my margarita, mixing others’ drinks, and delivering mimosas and food orders to the various Sunday Funday groups at tables around the club, Markell had grabbed some casual clothes out his locker in the back—a green t-shirt and light blue denim jacket he’d wanted me to change into, as I was, as usual, overdressed for Sunday Funday. He sat the clothes in the empty seat between me and Two-Seats-Over guy.

“Here’s your drink you ordered from the app,” Markell said and sat something dark on ice in front of D.J. “Doc, I can get you into the staff lounge if you want to change clothes.”

“You changing, *Doctor* Taylor?” D.J. said, looking me up and down again. “You look fine as you are.”

I hated when Markell, or anyone else outside of the university, emphasized my academic title. I knew they were proud. I was proud, too, knowing I’d accomplished something less than two percent of the population had achieved. But now wasn’t the time for formalities. Not among bar friends and strangers.

“Aww man, look at you... another suited and booted kinda guy,” Markell said to D.J. “I swear y’all act like you’ve never been to a club for day drinking before.”

“And you’re?”

“I’m Markell. I’m a bartender, mixologist, sometimes deejay, barback, whatever they need here, and best friend of doc.”

“That’s what’s up,” D.J. said. “I’m D.J. And yep, the kinda Black family that names people D.J., C.J., B.J. and all that... based on who the daddy is. Not that you asked, doc.”

“I didn’t, and please don’t call me doc.” I turned to Markell. “He’s visiting San Francisco. But didn’t say from where or how long. Right?”

“What’s with all the questions, Gayle King?” D.J. said. He laughed and poked at my rib to see if he’d get a reaction out of me and flashed that million dollar smile again. “Just joking.”

“Get him away from me, Markell,” I said, trying not to smile but realizing I was. I don’t drink much, so the one margarita already had me on the edge of giddy. Not my intention.

“Eighty-six him. D.J.’s been coming for me since he got here. He don’t even know me like that.”

“What’s going on?” Markell asked. D.J. and I squinted eyes at each other and said nothing. “I’mma need y’all to get a shot and loosen up the tension.”

“I ain’t tense,” D.J. and I said at the same time, with the same raised voice pitch. Laughed.

“Since you’re obviously not changing then, let me take these clothes back and I’ll let y’all work out whatever’s... um, whatever.”

“There is no whatever,” D.J. and I said, again, in unison.

And then again, “Whatever.”

“I’ll be back,” Markell said, heading to the back of the bar as Miss Coco Hydrate announced a short intermission before she’d be back to perform “Alien Superstar.”

D.J. scooted over a seat and was now directly next to me. A waft of sandalwood floated toward me. Smelled nice on him.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he said. “I ain’t a kid anymore. I don’t feel like yelling over the music while talking to you.”

In my mind, D.J. was getting a little too comfortable and too fast with me. Casually chatting with some of the Beaux regulars sitting solo around and across the bar was more my style. Anything more intimate—not.

Weird as it may sound, I enjoyed my solo outings on Sunday at Beaux, rather than being with large groups like I used to do back in my twenties. Beaux was one of the more popular spots in the Castro District, the predominantly queer neighborhood of San Francisco, among many that people hung out in for Sunday Funday. As Markell described from this work there, and I observed for myself when I’d stop by to visit Markell, Beaux was a spot with three distinct personalities: the nighttime dancing club for twentysomethings; the happy hour and chill hangout after work bar for those skewing thirty, forty, fiftysomething; and the drag brunch crowd which brought together the young and the young at heart of all demographics.

I loved Sunday in general because it was the one day of the week I set aside *not* to do any work. Or, at least, not to do *much* work, besides glancing at my Monday meetings schedule to make sure I was mentally and professionally prepared for the week ahead. Sunday morning and afternoon was my time to splurge and to spend time on myself doing whatever I wanted. Mostly, a day of rest.

Usually, the day’d begin with a video chat with my parents in Los Angeles before they left for services, which I would then Livestream so I could feel connected to my family and to our long-time church, Faithful Central. Sometimes I’d skip the Livestream and head over to Third

Baptist, the oldest Black church in San Francisco. Then, a late morning or early afternoon gym trip and massage while the cleaning person tidied up my apartment and did my week's laundry. And if I felt like it, maybe I'd do a farmers market visit and some meal prep before catching a Lyft over to the Castro District in the late afternoon to see Markell during his Sunday bartending shift and catch the Sunday Funday drag show.

It was the one day of the week I allowed myself to have a drink, see my best friend, and join the other bar friends and acquaintances who sat solo, like I did, near the bartenders' wells. Unlike the groups of straight women, gay men, and genderqueers of all persuasions sitting at tables around the perimeter of the club or the glass-front and street-side windows, the solos and I were planning to be on our way home by five, maybe six at the latest, in order to wind down and get ready for the work day on Monday.

Knowing Markell couldn't spend all his work shift entertaining me, sometimes I'd bring my tablet and glance at work to pass time. I'd lie and say I was gaming, though Markell knew I was not good at lying or playing video games.

A Monday state holiday coming, César Chávez Day, I'd spent a little more time preparing for my upcoming Tuesday work just before that day's Sunday Funday outing.

Tuesday, I knew, was going to be a doozy.

It was our first meetings, with an "s," with the academic accreditation team visiting the campus where I worked—California University Lake Merced. That day, a team of a dozen or so educational leaders were on the way for a few weeks to audit the report I had spent much of the last year and a half writing. Now, after leading several hundred hours of work, writing the report, and coordinating dozens of campus work groups, all while navigating the egos of academia, I knew this visit was a make-or-break moment for my career.

For if successful with the university accreditation process, I was on the verge of crossing a hurdle to my next career aspiration—to advance from my vice president role and become a university president. Not only a president, but the first Black, openly gay, and relatively young-for-the-profession college president I knew of.

Prior to heading out that day, I smiled, thinking about my parents and how I'd made them happy and proud with my achievements. I scrolled the tablet one last time reviewing the Tuesday agendas. Everything looked set. Perfect. *Virgo* perfect.

Apparently, I'd been daydreaming and gotten distracted in the moment. D.J. pointed to my drink and asked, "What you drinking?" As if he couldn't tell it was a margarita, even with the salt and tajín on the rim. I snapped back into the present.

"I'm a tequila person. A margarita."

D.J. smiled and laughed. "You're not one of those Casamigos gays, huh? I know about y'all. The stories I've witnessed and heard from my friends."

"Oh, you must have a messy crew? Wherever you're from, D.J.?"

"I don't do messy," he said. "Though I've been messed over."

"Oh, have you? Wanna talk about it?"

"Are you a therapist, doc? Because I ain't wasting time talking about heauxs, exes, almost fiancées, or anyone else at the moment."

“Fine, just offering to lend an ear,” I said. “Black men are rare in this city. Just here to help. If you need.”

“Like you offer help to the drag performers?” D.J. said, inquisitively cocking his head to the side. “I’m just kidding. You don’t look like a heaux or like you been ran through your friend circles.”

“And if I was ‘ran through,’ as you say, that would be okay,” I said as I finished the last of my margarita. Definitely sure I’d be one and done and out soon, given the company. “Sex positivity. Accept people as they are.”

“Yeah, until you get fucked over,” he said, looking anxiously around the bar and then at his phone. “Anyway, you want another one? On me?”

“I’m just a one and done kinda guy.”

“Your friend Markell offered us shots.”

“And like I said. One and done is enough for me.”

“Monday’s a holiday, doc. I’m not working. I hope you ain’t working.”

“I’m not.”

“Then sit and have a drink with me,” D.J. said, nodding his head and raising his glass. “I mean, it’s not a good look being a solo guy sitting at the bar alone.”

“I do it every Sunday.”

“This ain’t no ordinary Sunday,” he said, smiling and winking. His voice took on a playful and flirty tone. “You sitting with me today, doc.”

“You kinda conceited, huh?”

“Kinda? Yeah.”

“I don’t do conceited. Nor cocky. Nor ego.”

“But you *do* do mature, I hope.”

“Depends on how mature, D.J.” I looked him up and down to try and figure out if we might be in the same age range. With surgeries, fillers, dye jobs, hair plugs, and other procedures more and more common, these days it was hard to figure out by looking at someone how old they might be, despite the gift of melanin and Mother Nature on the side of Black people.

“Monitoring your blood pressure mature? Metabolism slowing down mature? Getting your first colonoscopy mature? Shingles vaccine mature? Erectile dysfunction mature? Shall I go on?”

“Aaaah. Very clever, doc. Using your medical knowledge to guess my age.”

“Not a medical doctor, but that’s for another time and place.” I looked at his empty glass and wondered how long it’d be before Markell returned. “So, how mature? Does your birth year start with nineteen or twenty?”

“Ha. You got jokes, doc. I know I don’t look like someone born in the two thousands.”

“You never know.”

“I’m a bae, but definitely not a baby gay.”

“So, how mature then?”

“Somewhere around that first colonoscopy mature,” D.J. said with a laugh. “But only because my father... anyway. Not even close for shingles mature. And as Black people, we all gotta keep track of blood pressure no matter what age.”

“Gotcha. Same here. Except my father didn’t...”

“Oh, mine didn’t either. He still around somewhere. He was just a rolling stone, and all I need from him is to know how his DNA is gonna impact me. You feel me?”

“Sorry to hear, D.J.”

“Back to the topic at hand. Black obviously don’t crack.”

“That’s the truth.”

“I got a good doctor who keeps me young,” D.J. said, and he gave me the up-and-down glance once again, as if he were savoring one of the brown liquors stacked in front of the mirrored wall behind the bar. “Just kidding.”

I smiled. Flattered. But not taking the bait from D.J. Relationships were not part of the personal or professional plan. Not when being a potential college president one day was on the line. That career move required focus.

Before intentionality was a part of my personal and career plans, I’d had my share of those moments, situationships, and one-night relationships that added nothing to the overall trajectory of my life. My days of one-and-done bar hookups were a lifetime ago, when I was a young, slender, tender ingenue on the scene, and they were easier to attain and do.

“But anyway, to answer your question, D.J. I don’t have to work tomorrow,” I said. “So, I’ll have that shot Markell offered. I’ll take care of my own drinks and tab, though, thank you.”

“I wasn’t offering. Yet.”

“That’s okay, D.J.” I turned to Markell, who had returned to his bar station. “Hey, Markell. I’ll take that shot now. You know my brand, and then another of my usuals, on my tab. And on his tab, D.J. is having...?”

“Hennessy Sidecar for my drink. And another Hennessy, chilled, for my shot.”

“Speaking of heaux tales,” I said and grimaced. “You and that dark liquor. I’m not judging.”

“Yeah, you are judging, doc, and that’s all right, given the way I came at you,” D.J. said.

“You’re cool people. Too bad I’m just in and out for a quick consulting job in San Francisco.”

“How long you here, did you say?”

“Probably four weeks. Maybe five. I think. Depends on how easy the client is with this project.”

“Good luck with that. We like easy, not hard.”

D.J. and I locked eyes, and if I was alone, I would have pinched myself for being so salacious with my word choices.

“Sometimes hard is easy... and good.”

I looked away; thought I might be blushing from D.J.’s obvious flirtation. Though people had shown interest in subtle ways with me, at times, being flirted with by someone so forward was something of a distant memory. People in my circles, primarily academic ones, flirted at yearly professional conferences with each other, and that was flirtation primarily with citations, discourse, reading lists, ideas, and sizing up whose research or publications were the most current and cutting edge. Academic rockstars were the people I’d generally had as a type, if I had a type to reference when asked.

Markell interrupted and slid a tray of drinks in front of us. “Cheers fellas. To *Renaissance*. To Sunday Funday.”

D.J., Markell, and I tapped glasses, tapped the counter, made the required eye contact for shots, and threw them back. We all made that gagging sound and swallowed our chasers.

“I’m done,” I said. “No more.”

“You’ve gagged on far less and far more, Taylor,” Markell said to me and laughed. Years of being best friends since our elementary school days in L.A. behind us, we both knew the conquest and body count stories of our lives.

“Oh, you a freaky doc, hmmm doc? I like that.”

“Everybody got a past,” I said. “No shame.”

“And a present.” D.J. laughed, smirked, and locked eyes with me. “I hope.”

“No future for someone in town for just a few weeks.” I wondered why I couldn’t keep from feeling charmed by this stranger in a bar. Such a cliché. I was definitely too mature for this kind of bar flirtation, and certainly D.J. was, too.

“Oh, so a present then, doc?” D.J. smiled. “A present for me?”

I unfixed my gaze from D.J. for fear of giving any impression of being interested and turned back to Markell at his station behind the bar. “What was in that shot, again?”

“Shot,” Markell said, and laughed heartily while mixing up another round of drinks. “Want another while I got your tequila out?”

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no,” I said, shaking my head back and forth, each ‘no’ getting louder with each head nod. “I’m done with shots today. Gonna stay ‘til the show ends and then I’m out. Might even leave after they do ‘Virgo’s Groove.’”

“Cheap *and* leaving the show early,” D.J. said. “Ha. I see you.”

“Oh, do you?”

“I’m just joking with you, doc.”

Markell slid D.J. and me another round of drinks and looked at his watch.

“I’m down to do Sunday Funday with you after I’m off, Taylor,” Markell said. “You, too, D.J., if you want. Since neither of you working tomorrow and you’re new in town, D.J., we can show you around the Castro.”

After thirty -plus years of being best friends, I knew this barhopping invitation was Markell’s way of attempting to matchmake, to forge some kind of connection between D.J. and me beyond the moment. He’d been doing this since we first figured out our sexuality during our classmate days at Loyola High School in L.A. First, trying to fix me up with his closeted athlete

teammates, then through the years as we both pursued our own personal and professional goals. As if I wasn't adult enough to pursue someone of interest.

Markell mouthed the word "typo" to me, which, in our secret best friend language, was an abbreviation that stood for "take your pants off," meaning Markell thought D.J. was fine as hell and that I should go for it.

"New in town? Bitch, are you for real?"

D.J., Markell, and I turned around to see who'd interrupted our bar-side conversation. Manessa DelRey. One of the drag performers at Sunday brunches throughout the Castro neighborhood and someone I'd helped out financially and academically in their time at the university. They were tall, bold, Black, and beautiful in a yellow metallic gown, makeup and face card impeccably drawn on, and a blonde Beyoncé sew-in that contrasted and complemented their dark brown skin. They were loud. Generally, it was impossible to be even louder than the drag performers' music, but the sound barrier was meant to be shattered on this day. I'd known Manessa for a couple years since my move to San Francisco. But how did they know D.J., this tourist and stranger who was both annoying and intriguing to me?

"Let's take this outside," D.J. said and stood up, looking a little nervous, the color draining from his smooth brown skin, the baritone still baritoning in his voice.

"Everything okay?" I asked

"Everything's fine," D.J. said.

"We can keep this inside, right here, right now, Junior."

Markell and I mouthed, "Junior?" to each other. It felt like a moment made for the *Karamo Show*. Exasperatedly, I shrugged my shoulders, rolled my eyes, and grimaced at Markell. In my mind, I knew I'd been right all along to focus on my career and the possibility of a relationship at

this point. And especially now, with D.J. or Junior or whoever he was, and this loudmouth confronting him, presenting as a top-shelf kinda guy, but all along no more than a two-for-one well-drink special.

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