

LOVE
DON'T
CARRY
IT ALL

A NOVEL

DENISE A.

Love Don't Carry It All

© 2026 Denise A. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, scanning, digital sharing, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without prior written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations used in reviews or permitted by copyright law.

This eBook is licensed for personal use only. This book may not be copied, resold, uploaded, shared, or distributed in any format without express written permission from the author.

Unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this material is strictly prohibited and may result in legal action.

Published by
Her Empire House Publishing

Author: Denise A.

For permissions, licensing, or media inquiries:
contact@herempirehouse.com

Website:
Her Empire House

First Edition — 2026

This file may contain purchaser-identifying information. Unauthorized sharing or distribution is prohibited.

Prologue

Someone who hasn't walked a mile in my shoes can never truly grasp the highs and lows of what it means to be two things:

A woman

A mother.

Those who feel entitled to their own opinions often exit through the door of opposition. But true growth begins when a person starts taking accountability and becomes cautious with their steps—because that path often leads to the internal struggle of ego, reasoning, and the mental oppression we create for ourselves.

When people feel like they're losing the battle they once thought they were winning, they are often forced to confront the judgments shaped by their own perspectives.

What may appear as comfort or stagnation is often rooted in fear—fear of growth, fear of challenges, and fear of understanding experiences they haven't lived through.

This fear can lead to...

false beliefs, burdensome responsibilities, and the illusion that change is impossible.

But life has a way of humbling you. When it truly weighs on you, and you face what it means to be human, you begin to see your journey with clarity. You start to recognize the value in your struggles, the lessons in your pain, and the structure in your experience that shaped who you are.

When one person carries the majority of the weight, it's only natural that they begin to falter. And when managing opportunities turns negative, reflection sets in. It's in that moment of clarity that a person begins to understand the bigger picture, accepts accountability, and embraces the role they play in their own story. There are three parts of the mind we must learn to balance: the past, the present, and the future. Understanding that suffering and resistance are often just products of our imagination can free us from mental captivity.

Falling short of our truth may cloud our vision, but aligning with our reality opens the door to seeing life from a broader and more honest perspective.

In the end, we're all faced with a choice—whether to dwell on what might happen, or to face what will. Either way, there will be consequences, explanations, and lessons. But once you allow yourself the mental space to think clearly, that's when you finally decide to move forward—with purpose.

CHAPTER I
A Simple Hello

Maybe it was his undeniable charm—or maybe it was the ache of too many lonely nights without a warm body beside her. He was nothing like her ex-husband. And that alone made him tempting.

Still, she'd found something rare and whole within herself lately: peace. She was learning how to hold herself, love herself, and sit in silence without feeling empty. For the first time in years, that was enough. But tonight? Tonight, she allowed herself the possibility of feeling again.

She sat at the edge of vulnerability and curiosity, dressed in elegance and intention. A high-end restaurant surrounded her with the scent of money and the murmur of meaningful conversation. She was waiting. Poised. Hopeful.

Until the honk of a message arrived, abrupt and careless. "Can't make it."

That was it. So, she stayed.

She sipped her \$28 glass of wine slowly, savoring every note of it.

Not because she was heartbroken. But because she was beautiful.

And deserved to be here.

The date continued—with herself.

Her final bill was \$85. She left a \$20 tip for the waitress who

treated her like a queen, even without a king beside her.

Because sometimes, a simple hello is meant for the woman in the

mirror.

Midnight Connections

The night carried on longer than she expected—and truth be told,

she didn't want it to end. The freedom tasted too good. The kind

that only comes when you've broken free from something that

once caged you: a loveless marriage, years of quiet sacrifice, and a

partner who never really saw her. She was a hardworking,

successful Black woman. Accomplished, resilient, and whole. And

still, she was a woman first—deserving of softness, of adventure,

of the right to be wanted without explanation.

And tonight, she claimed that softness.

With no kids pulling at her, no deadlines pressing, and no man giving empty excuses, she sat in her peace like a queen on her throne. Nothing and no one could discourage her. But that didn't mean no one could reach her. Not entirely.

Even on her journey of self-care and rediscovery, she hated her time being wasted like it had been tonight. A last-minute cancellation. A no-show man with no real substance. Yet... she still found joy in her solitude. The night pushed toward midnight. The city outside softened, the wine within her warmed. Her options thinned—but not her spirit.

Then her phone rang.

Him.

Not the one who stood her up.

Someone else.

The one who used to be just a name. A vague thought from two years ago. A simple hello. That's all they ever exchanged back then. Nothing more. Nothing deep.

Curious, she answered.

“Hey, how you doing?”

“I’m fine. What about you?”

“Just out... treated myself to dinner.”

She didn’t mention being stood up. She didn’t need to. Her voice didn’t carry hurt—it carried grace. She had no shame in being alone. She enjoyed it. She owned it. She would do it again. But something about him—his voice, his timing—lingered in her spirit.

Maybe it was coincidence. Or maybe the universe was stitching them into the same thread, on this very night, at this very moment.

And just like that, something old became... interesting.

Maybe even new.

The First Sight, Again

*If she flipped a coin—Heads meant she'd won. And the prize... was him.
But even if it landed on tails, she might still choose him. Not because he was flawless,
but because he stirred something in her no one else ever could.
Something deep. Something real. And that—win or lose—was worth the toss.*

She pulled up to the bar and parked.

Then—butterflies.

What the hell?

Her mind raced, trying to brush it off. It's just a drink, she told herself. Just a night out. Nothing more.

But her spirit whispered something different. It was as if the air itself shifted. Like her soul was standing at attention, ready to meet someone it already knew.

Her phone buzzed.

Jackson: Where are you?

She exhaled and stepped out of the car, smoothing her dress with hands that were suddenly unsure.

And then—she saw him.

Tall. Rich brown skin. A beard that framed his face like poetry. Glasses sitting low on his nose. And behind those lenses—eyes that looked like they'd seen war and survived it. He was standing in the glow of the streetlight, and for a moment, everything around him blurred.

God, he's fine, she thought.

And this can't be the same man from two years ago... can it? As if on cue, he spotted her.

Their eyes locked.

It felt... unreal.

Like déjà vu soaked in something brand new.

He started walking toward her, hesitating just slightly before saying, “How you doing?” His voice wavered with a hint of nerves.

She blushed, unexpected warmth rising in her chest. Her lips curved into a smile, and in the most sensual tone she could manage, she replied, “I’m well. And you?”

He reached out his hand, a little unsure but intentional. “Jackson.”

She blinked. “What?”

He chuckled softly, correcting himself. “Sorry. My name’s Jackson.”

She laughed—soft and flirtatious. “Hi Jackson. I’m Shelly. Nice to see you again.”

And then came a line she’d never forget.

“Nice to finally be seen again,” he said.

She paused. Heart catching. Spirit stirred.

Because somehow, in that moment, she understood exactly what he meant.

The Quiet Calm

Walking into the bar, Shelly felt like she was stepping onto a runway—every eye catching a glimpse, but her focus stayed on the man beside her. The finest captain of the ship. There was something commanding yet graceful about the way he moved. As if it came naturally, he stepped slightly ahead. She looked down and saw his hand reaching for hers. Without hesitation, she took it.

He led her confidently to the bar, and in hindsight, it was clear—he wanted every man in the room to know: this is his woman.

And he wore that truth effortlessly, side by side with her.

“That’ll work for me. I’d like to show you off.”

That line sat with her. Still did. And now, in this bar—hand in his, eyes catching the glint of his smile—she wondered if this moment had been quietly building ever since.

The Text That Touched Her

She had been in her own little cell for so long—emotionally locked away, guarded and reserved. The idea of sharing her number had come in a rush that day. She did it quickly, almost instinctively, as if to bypass her own second-guessing.

And afterward, she’d drafted a message—raw, honest, but never sent.

“Again, I’ve been in my cell for so long. I literally just felt the need to share my number because I was in a rush. I don’t want you to think this is anything more than it is.”

She never hit send.

Instead, she wrote something simpler, safer.

“Maybe one day we could go on a date.”

Now, back at the bar, the hum of casual conversation filled the space—but Shelly’s mind was elsewhere. Mesmerized by Jackson. Watching him. Feeling him.

Even in his slight awkwardness, in the way his nervous energy buzzed just beneath the surface, there was something endearing—something that didn’t repel her but pulled her closer in.

She saw past it. Past the small talk and playful banter.

She saw the man.

A father. A dedicated one.

A son. A proud one.

And most of all... a gentleman.

Something told her she wasn’t the only one healing. But maybe—just maybe—they were supposed to meet here, in this moment, where healing looked like hand-holding and hope dressed in calm smiles.

Where Healing Begins

In the most idealistic reality, healing begins the moment one soul whispers, enough is enough.

It happens not when the past is fully forgotten, but when the spirit no longer longs for what once was. It begins when the soul starts to crave something it's never truly felt—something unfamiliar, yet destined. Not brand new, but not yet created. It's a longing for a love that exists in possibility, in promise, in presence. Healing, real healing, is not just about moving on—it's about becoming. Becoming whole. Becoming aware. Becoming better than you were before. It's touching all five senses with the intention to grow. It's holding space for love while letting go of what no longer serves you.

People often say healing must happen before you enter a relationship—but the truth is, healing is constant. It moves through time like breath: quietly, endlessly, day by day. Like a scraped knee, the process is already in motion the moment the wound is made. You don't have to wait to heal. You just have to allow it.

Healing happens before love.

Healing happens after heartbreak.

And yes—healing can happen inside of love, too.

Because sometimes, healing begins not when you're alone... but when someone finally reaches for your hand, and you let them.

Tommy's voice came cool and clipped. "I'm a bit busy right now. Got a lot going on."

She didn't wait for more.

She hung up and stared out at the dark stretch of road, the rain smearing the windshield like a slow tear. And in that moment of disappointment, she muttered to herself with a bitter chuckle, *Thank God for AAA.*

Ghosted

Snapping herself back into the present, Shelly blinked away the memory. The bar lights flickered softly around them, and the first sips of the martini were beginning to settle in—smooth, bold, and just spicy enough to loosen her guard. That \$28 wine from earlier still lingered on her tongue, adding to the warmth blooming in her chest.

The space between her and Jackson was thick now—charged, almost electric.

She watched him sip his drink, something dark and masculine, the kind of cocktail that made you want to ask questions you never planned to ask.

So she did.

“What exactly happened with us?” she asked, her voice casual, but her heart anything but.

Jackson laughed quietly, low and familiar. “You ghosted me,” he said, a playful smirk curling at the corner of his mouth.

Shelly’s cheeks flushed. Her eyes dropped for a second, and then she smiled—because he was right.

Her mind drifted again, uninvited but unstoppable, to that text message. “*I’d like to show you off,*” he had said. And instead of leaning in, she had pulled away. She’d disappeared. Faded out. Ghosted.

Not because he wasn't good enough. But because he might've been too good. Because this—this bar, this drink, this stare across the table—was exactly what she had been afraid of.

Falling.

Tripping.

Sliding into something real.

And not feeling guilty about it.

Because, for the first time in a long time, it felt like he might just be the man she once dreamed about...

The one she never believed actually existed.

Everything began to feel... normal. Too normal. The drinks.

The conversation. The energy. It all flowed so naturally, like they'd done this a hundred times before. Time slipped past unnoticed, and one moment blended into the next until they found themselves standing in the bar parking lot, the night air thick with possibility.

“Whoa—are you good to drive?” Jackson asked,

eyeing her with a mix of concern and curiosity.

Shelly let out a light laugh, brushing a curl from her face. “Yeah, yeah, I’m good,” she said, though she knew it didn’t take much for her to hit her limit. Still, she had to get home—babysitter time was ticking.

“You sure? I can trail you,” he offered.

That’s when it hit her—the duality.

Do I let this man know where I live?

Is he a stranger, or is he possibly... the kind of protection I’ve been praying for?

She hesitated, but then something inside her whispered, trust it.

“Alright,” she said, almost under her breath. “Cool. Trail me home.”

And just like that, she was behind the wheel, watching him in the rearview mirror—his headlights steady behind hers.

But she didn't move too fast. Not tonight.

"You're fine," she said gently. "I appreciate you trailing me home. I just wanna make sure I don't go over my sitter's pay. If you could give me a minute, I'll come back out and properly say goodnight."

Jackson nodded, leaning back in his seat. "Okay. No problem."

He waited, patient and steady—just like he had in the rearview mirror.

That short walk to her front door felt like the longest ten steps Shelly had ever taken. Every step was filled with thoughts—wild, tender, conflicted thoughts—about the man sitting just yards away in her driveway.

Lord, she thought, this man is fine.

Tall—6'5, athletic, that broad-shouldered build that made her remember stories of him being a standout athlete in

high school. And he carried it still, effortlessly.

I'd climb that tree and give him every bit of me, she smirked in her mind. Every. Single. Bit.

But as quick as the heat rose, it cooled with another wave of reflection.

What if I don't want this to just be a one-night thing? The thought crept in like a soft warning. Maybe—just maybe—not giving in tonight would mean something more. Maybe if she didn't let desire win, he'd still be here in the morning. And maybe even the day after that. Maybe we could actually build something real.

All of this raced through her head, a storm of emotion in less than ten paces to her front door. She exhaled, keys in hand, heartbeat trying not to echo too loudly in her chest. Back in the car, Jackson sat still, eyes following her as she disappeared into her doorway.

She's beautiful, he thought. Unapologetically so. And maybe
even more than that.

It had been three years since he gave himself fully to
someone. Three years since the last time he said, this is it,
this is the one. And when that promise fell apart, so did his
faith in love.

But tonight, something was different.

Shelly was different.

And she didn't know it yet—but tonight cracked something
open in him.

A door. A window. A possibility.

One that Shelly wouldn't even begin to understand until
months later.