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From the #1
Box Office Hit
THE
BEST MAN
—

The **BEST MAN**

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

“Fans of *The Best Man* are in for an absolute treat. . . . Soulful, sexy, fast-paced . . .
Unfinished Business is an utterly propulsive, stylish read with so much heart.”

—TIA WILLIAMS, bestselling author of *A Love Song for Ricki Wilde*

MALCOLM D. LEE *with* Jayne Allen

Praise for
The Best Man: Unfinished Business

“Fans of *The Best Man* films and Peacock series are in for an absolute treat with this soulful, sexy, fast-paced new read! What a delight, catching up with beloved fan favorites Harper, Jordan, and Robyn (and a dazzling supporting cast) as they navigate relationships and their careers all around the world—only to discover that some bonds can never be broken. *Unfinished Business* is an utterly propulsive, stylish read with so much heart.”

—Tia Williams, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Love Song for Ricki Wilde*

“This felt like catching up with a group of beloved friends I hadn’t heard from in a while. The complicated relationships, angsty passion, and doses of humor I’ve come to expect from *The Best Man* franchise...it’s all here! Such a treat! This new story is just as cinematic as the movies themselves, maybe even more so.”

—Farrah Rochon, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pardon My Frenchie*

“When you’re as close to the characters as I have been, you think you can predict what’s coming around the corner, but this kept even me on the edge of my seat. *The Best Man: Unfinished Business* dives deeper into the lives of these characters, revealing what has made them who they are, the good and the bad. From a second-chance romance to wrestling with heartbreak and purpose, Malcolm D. Lee and Jayne Allen have given the best men and

women new life. Emotionally engrossing. Seductive. Impossible to put down. It's the perfect summer read, full of heat!"

—Taye Diggs

"Not only are fans of *The Best Man* films going to fall in love with this book, which goes deeper into the emotional lives of characters we have loved for decades, but readers new to the canon will be swept up in the interpersonal dramas between Harper, Jordan, Robyn, and their crew in a story that spans from Brooklyn to Ghana. I believe in second acts—in life and in love. *The Best Man: Unfinished Business* gives us a front-row seat to the challenges of grown folks' love and the sometimes bumpy ride to becoming your most authentic self."

—Tembi Locke, *New York Times* bestselling author of *From Scratch*

"When I met these classic characters twenty-five years ago, no way did I think they'd have the longevity that they've had, but Malcolm D. Lee keeps elevating the storytelling. *Unfinished Business* is the characters you love like you've never seen them before! You will laugh out loud and possibly shed a few tears, so read this with your crew. A must-read for new and old fans alike. You will keep wanting more."

—Morris Chestnut

"*The Best Man: Unfinished Business* contains every element that we love about this franchise. It's full of heart, vulnerability, and most important, love, mixed in with a few delicious surprises. These characters continue to deliver new dimensions as they navigate the tricky process of real growth."

—Jemele Hill, author of *Uphill*

The
BEST MAN

— Unfinished Business —

Malcolm D. Lee

with Jayne Allen


STOREHOUSE
— VOICES —
NEW YORK

STOREHOUSE VOICES

An imprint of the Crown Publishing Group

A division of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway

New York, NY 10019

storehousevoices.com

penguinrandomhouse.com

crownpublishing.com

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ISBN 9780593974254

Ebook ISBN 9780593974261

Editor: Chelcee Johns

Production editor: Craig Adams

Print text designer: Andrea Lau

Print production manager: Heather Williamson

Copy editor: Shasta Clinch

Proofreaders: Pam Rehm and Robin Slutzky

Publicist: Gwyneth Stansfield

Marketer: Chantelle Walker

Ebook production manager: Vincent Mancuso

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland,

<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

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About the Authors

To my late mother, Nancy Jean Reid Lee, who loved to read. An aspiring writer, she was proud of me, and she would be proud of this one. She would have read it immediately. Love you, Mommy. I know you're with me every day.

My cousin Donald P. Stone, who was one of the first writers in the fam, and my great-grandfather, William James Edwards, who laid the foundation with Snow Hill Institute and twenty-five years in the Blackbelt.

The displaced citizens of the Altadena and Palisades fires.

ACT I

CHAPTER ONE

Harper

Harper Stewart stood in the mirror of the generous room labeled TALENT and squared the tailored wool of his Brioni blazer across his shoulders. The fit was immaculate, giving “Pulitzer Prize–winning author” for days. He was freshly shaven, and the smooth chocolate of his chiseled face looked just right in the reflection ahead as he mouthed the practiced words he’d soon speak before the television cameras. He’d made it a point to look his best, color-matching the blazer to his form-fitted turtleneck underneath in just the perfect dark navy blue to complement the deep brown of his skin. The mirror validated his decision. *The blazer-turtleneck combo was the right one*, he thought.

“Five minutes to air, Mr. Stewart.” A headset-wearing production assistant ducked his head through the doorframe and just as quickly was gone down the hall in a blur of all black and a quiet squeak of rubber-soled shoes against the floor. The behind-the-scenes bustle of the show was a beehive of dozens of producers, technicians, and cameramen rushing past Harper’s temporary oasis of calm. Every one of the passersby reminded him of the enormity of the opportunity—national broadcast television. He was at the tipping point of becoming a literary tastemaker. Harper took a deep breath and ran his palm across the top of his perfectly smooth head, careful not to disturb the light dusting of face powder applied by the station’s makeup artist. Harper hated makeup, all that fuss, but the high-definition

camera would tell no lies, especially this early and yes, at his age. Even the best Black can crack eventually, but today was the day to look his finest.

“You good?” Cassidy, Harper’s longtime publicist, entered the room. Harper turned to her, nodding with an “Mm-hmm” and a smile. It was Cassidy who’d booked this appearance on the second hour of *CBS Mornings*, maneuvering him out of TV bookers’ first suggestion of the “natural fit” during Black History Month. Cassidy did not play. Harper was a Pulitzer Prize winner now, so any month was a “natural fit.” She was always advocating for her talent to get face time in prime slots. And today it was Harper’s turn to make book recommendations to a national morning audience. Cassidy got shit done and made sure that when it came to Harper Stewart, everyone came correct.

“It’s almost time,” she commanded. Her nod toward the door meant that they needed to begin their walk to the soundstage. Harper wanted everything to flow perfectly. And so far, it had. He’d spent too long as a literary afterthought—present but still invisible. *Everything is under control*, he reminded himself. He was prepared. And when the cameras hit, he’d be charming, memorable, and, most important, worthy of a return invitation.

A short walk and they arrived. The morning show set looked warm, like someone’s living room, with cozy yet generic décor of creams, oranges, and yellows and flowers that were so perfectly placed on the table they seemed fake. The station signage for *CBS Mornings* glowed in the background, a reminder that this was a place for important conversations. America would be up and watching, catching him making tastefully considered book picks over their morning coffee and eggs.

Harper heard the anchor call his name from the other side of the room in a polished female voice that made him sound official. “And coming up after the break, Pulitzer Prize–winning author Harper Stewart joins us with his must-read books for spring and to maybe get into some *Unfinished Business* while we’re at it. Stick around....” Harper smiled and sighed with pride and relief. *Pulitzer Prize winner*. He still hadn’t quite gotten used to that being attached to his name. He had been a *New York Times* bestseller

before—his debut work, *Unfinished Business*, placed him on “the list”—but it felt asterisked. The novel was too easily dismissed as *Black **and** successful*, an anomaly, a fluke. Not even a box-office-smash Hollywood adaptation of his work gave Harper the kind of cachet that he now owned.

His Pulitzer Prize–winning *Pieces Of Us* put Harper on the map. No longer the unknown, under-acknowledged Black author—Harper had been fully Christopher Columbused now. The “literary elites” had “discovered” him, only twenty-five years into his career, and made him a household name. Finally, he had the world’s attention. And that alone drove him to another deep breath. *Great...right?* It wasn’t so clear. In fact, nothing this morning was. He didn’t get nervous at interviews, but for some reason, he was...off. He hadn’t slept well. Bailey had kept him up.

“Two minutes to air!” another all-black-clad producer shouted from the brightly lit soundstage, barely looking up from her clipboard. Harper thought to check his phone, and reached for it just as it started buzzing. It was already on silent mode, but also, now it was ringing.

He pulled the phone out of his jacket pocket, and seeing the number of his alarm company, he figured he’d better answer. “Hello?” he whispered.

“Hello, may I speak to Mr. Harper Stewart?” The voice on the other end was formal, a bit Southern, matter-of-fact and businesslike.

“This is he. Who’s this...?” Harper whispered hurriedly.

“This is Summit Security. There’s a fire alarm alert at your home.”

“What? *My* home? Are you sure it’s me?”

“Yessir.” The attendant on the phone repeated Harper’s address perfectly. The swell of panic rose into his chest. That smoke alarm was sensitive as fuck, but it never resulted in a call from the security company, unless...it was...*real*?

“Well, I’m—I’m not at home. I’m about to go on live television. I—I have an interview....” Harper stuttered the words, looking around wildly for Cassidy. After he finally met her eyes, she slid quickly over to his side.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

“There might be a fire at my house....” Harper imagined his four-million-dollar condo burning to ashes while he droned on about the best spring reads.

“What?” Cassidy looked perplexed and mildly annoyed. Harper noted the terrible timing. *Especially if...*

“The fire department has already been dispatched,” the voice on the phone continued. “Is anyone home?”

“Ummmm...” Harper didn’t really want to answer while this Southern dude and his all-business publicist were hanging on his every word, but the truth was...

Bailey. Harper left her sleeping as the dawn hadn’t even broken when he departed this morning. *Was she okay? Was...* The unmistakable deep tone of call-waiting pressed his eardrum interrupting his thoughts. He pulled the phone away from his head to look at the screen and saw Bailey’s name and photo displayed on the caller ID.

“Yes, I think so. Maybe...” Harper turned the phone away from Cassidy’s gaze as he went to swap the line. “Could you just hold for one sec...and maybe not call the fire department....”

“Mr. Stewart I cannot—” Harper’s finger stabbed at the screen before he heard the rest.

“Bailey—?” Harper said into the phone with an urgent whisper. “Are you okay? Is there a fire...?”

Bailey’s voice floated through the air over the screeching sound of the fire alarm. The panic in his chest had reached his throat by now, closing the passageway. “Oh, Harper! I was just making some toast—that fresh sourdough looked so yummy I just had to cut a slice...” Her explanation seemed way calmer and less urgent than he needed. Still, she continued, “But all of a sudden there was smoke from the toaster and now...your alarm...and—”

Harper cut her off quickly. “Bailey, is there a fire?”

“Well, no...no, I don’t—know, I mean I opened your balcony door to let the smoke out, but the alarm’s still ringing...I don’t know how to turn it off

and—”

“Mr. Stewart.” The clipboard holding producer was suddenly at his elbow. “We’re ready for you on set, sir.” Harper’s eyes widened as his head swiveled on its own accord to his right. “Forty-five seconds to air.”

Harper willed his feet to move. “Okay, okay, I’m following you,” he said in an attempt to reassure the producer. In step, he remembered the alarm company on the other line, waiting—and fuck! the fire department! And... Bailey. He turned his attention back to his phone. Cassidy was right in lockstep with him and all up in his convo. “Bailey, I need you to turn the alarm off.”

“Okay, sure. Where is it?” *Shit.*

“It’s a panel right at the front foyer.” He tried to remain even-keeled, but he was already starting to perspire despite the subzero temps in the studio.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry...I’m headed there now...” Bailey’s breath on the other end confirmed that she was in motion.

“Listen, the fire department is on the way—” Harper warned her.

“Oh my God, no. I’m naked in here....” Bailey gasped. Despite the circumstances, *naked* immediately made Harper recall the image of Bailey’s beautiful brown body with those round areolas and that plump firm booty hustling around his living room. What was also inopportune and certainly distracting was the sound or rather the non-sound of her movements, all breath and no rustling of clothes. *Naked, like she said.* They both needed to focus.

“It’s okay. Just go over and turn it off—” Harper calmly yet urgently begged into the phone.

“It is so *loud*. Freaking me out. I don’t see any numbers....”

“Just put your hand on it to activate it.”

“We’re thirty seconds to air!” the stage manager bellowed.

“Nothing’s happening, babe.” Bailey’s voice hinted at her mounting frustration.

“Just take a deep breath and place your palm on the panel and the numbers will come up.”

“Does it matter if it’s my left or my right?”

Seriously? “No!” Harper snapped, and then tried to recover. He needed her to be calm. “I mean I don’t know—I’m right-handed—” he delivered with a change in tone.

“Well, I’m a lefty. And please don’t yell...”

“I’m sorry, but I’m in the middle of—”

“Twenty seconds, Mr. Stewart.” The stage manager was clearly losing patience.

Cassidy snapped her fingers and quickly beckoned at his ear. “Give me the phone,” she commanded. *Just one second*, Harper thought, holding up one finger and pleading with his eyes. Cassidy’s glare was incredulous, screaming, *Are you serious right now?* “We can’t show the audience an empty seat, Harper...” she said through gritted teeth.

On the other end of the phone, Bailey’s triumphant voice sailed into his ear. “Okay. it came up,” she said. “What’s the code?” *Oh damn*. Harper couldn’t help but hesitate. *If I give her my code...he thought. I’m not feeling this girl like tha—*

“HARPER!” Cassidy was full voice now.

“Okay.” Harper exhaled. “Twelve, twenty-eight, thirteen...”

“What...?” Bailey asked.

Harper’s frustration peaked. “It’s Mia’s birthday! Fuck, I gotta go. I’m giving you to Cassidy for the code....”

“Who’s Cassidy...?” Bailey asked. “And who’s Mia...?” *Is she serious right now with the jealous vibes...?*

“Fifteen seconds to air, sir.” The stage manager started the countdown from there. “Fourteen...”

“My publicist...” Harper hissed. “...Hold on.”

“Thirteen...”

He flipped the call back to the alarm company. “Listen, it’s a false alarm. Kitchen issue, toast...smoke...call off the fire department...”

“They’re already on the way, sir....” *Fuck*.

“Give me the phone,” Cassidy said, reaching for his hand. “Give me the code. *Go.*” Swiftly, she ripped the phone from his grasp and practically shoved him with her other toward the set where the show host was getting settled into her seat.

“Ten...” The stage manager then switched his countdown to a silent indication with his fingers.

Harper picked up his walking speed, laser-focused on the empty seat ahead. With a quick look back to Cassidy he said, “Mia’s birthday...twelve twenty-eight thirteen. Give Bailey the code.”

“Who’s Bailey?” Cassidy mouthed. *Who is Bailey indeed....* Cassidy still looked confused, but she put the phone to her ear. Harper spun again toward the set, to bridge the impossible distance, and started a quick step toward the producer who had already doubled back to guide him, physically now, toward the stage. He turned his head to Cassidy. “Mia’s birthday...!” he said again. And the last thing he saw in that direction was Cassidy with the phone to her ear, mouth moving frantically. In front of him were the five extended fingers of the stage manager turning to four and the contorted faces of the hosts as he, in three paces, made it to the empty seat ahead and slid into it. Three...two...one.

“And we’re back with Pulitzer Prize–winning author Harper Stewart, whose Hollywood plans for his book sequel aren’t the only excitement he’s had this morning. Welcome, Harper.”

Harper felt the sweat beads trailing down his back, past his waist, pooling at his crack. *Jesus.* He hoped he didn’t look as hot as he felt. So much for a dope-ass look. He smiled sheepishly at Gayle King, his interviewer. She was all perfectly set makeup, pristinely positioned hair, and a smile frozen on her face while her eyes looked concerned, if not a slight bit judgmental. “Did I hear something about a fire at your house?” she asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Harper managed to say. “False alarm. Evidently sourdough is very combustible. All good now.” A little more at ease, Harper turned directly to the camera and flashed a megawatt smile. “Shout out to