

THE MIRAGE OF ADREAM

A Written Creative Work submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree

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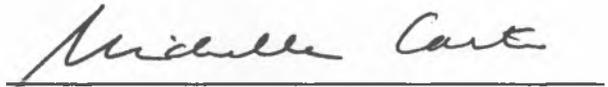
Master of Arts  
In  
English: Creative Writing

by  
Alexis Tyler Austin  
San Francisco, California  
May 2017

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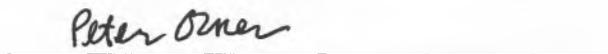
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Mirage of Adream* by Alexis Tyler Austin, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Art in English: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michelle Carter".

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Michelle Carter, M.A.  
Professor of Creative Writing

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Orner".

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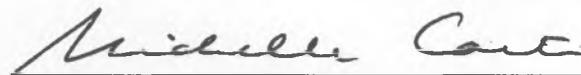
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# THE MIRAGE OF ADREAM

Alexis Tyler Austin  
San Francisco, California  
2017

I just wanted to create something that I would want to read. This work is character-driven. Adream, Mirage, Femi, and Joy have equally unique voices and experiences; their single commonality is their being unforgettable. The utilization of distinct voices and tones are what pushes the work forward as opposed to plot. I found myself discovering new things about the characters as it was being composed. As the writer, I was surprised, thus surprising the reader is achievable. The work addresses an array of issues (e.g. mental health, alcohol/drug/physical abuse) that can certainly weigh a novel down; however, humor is used as a strategy of “keeping it light.”

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Thesis Committee

5-22-17

Date

## PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Cindy and Mrs. Moore for seeing the light within me that others tried to put out. My undergraduate professors, Drs. Eckard, Taylor, Hardin, Crouther, and Mrs. Miller, who planted and fostered the seed that sprouted an immense love of literature and language cannot go without acknowledgment: thank you. Endless gratitude for the Ragland and Bergesen families for their generous and unwavering support. Michelle and Matthew whose passion for writing encouraged me to hone my craft and pursue it diligently. And lastly, to my friends who can only be described as the family I wish I was born into. Your kind words and inquiring curiosity about my work means more than you will ever know. Tammy, you gave me a push on the count of two because you know I wouldn't leap on three, thank you. It is with great pleasure that I dedicate the completion of my first novel that is disguised as my thesis to those mentioned. To my relatives: you provided me with enough material to ensure that if I desire to do so, I can be prolific.

## Chapter 1

*Phone rings.*

“Thank you for calling Paradise Free Public Library, how may I help you?”

“Why ain’t ya’ll open?”

“Because we’re closed.”

*Click.*

Line two is internal, how did she get the number? I hate people. Naturally, it’s only fitting that I work with the public. I am so sick of this place. Can’t quit. I’m less than one paycheck away from selling ass *and* crack. How did I get myself into this? Oh yeah, I majored in General Studies which translates to a degree in Nothing. I just needed to graduate. Here I am, 14 years later dealing with people whose parents have to be brother and sister.

We are officially open. I have to remind myself hourly of my manager’s motto, “I would rather lose a book than a patron,” but how am I supposed to smile at stupid? The Information Desk is the Island of Ignorance: idiots migrate here. As certain as I am that Friday comes before Saturday, a dumb question is walking directly toward me. Not that I’m clairvoyant, but I know nothing good can come from a man wearing a flip-flop and a house shoe. What is that red liquid swishing around in that two-liter Coke bottle he’s carrying? I can smell the pine tree air freshener that’s hanging around his neck.

“Hey ma’am, ya’ll got free wee-fee?” This fool passed two of my co-workers before he got to me. They’re wearing name tags. I don’t wear mine because I don’t want anyone to

ask for my help. Yet, here he is. “Yes sir. We have *Wi-Fi*. No password is needed, just turn on your device and it should connect.” I even curled my lips into something that almost looks like a smile. Of course, my manager is never around when I’m being professional and shit. The instant I throw someone’s library card at them or snatch money from their hand, she’s Joanie on the spot.

“Oh my god! I won! I won!” The woman is jumping up and down so hard her rollers are flinging from her head. The baby in the stroller is too enthralled with his Cheetos to give a damn. I stop abusing the Employee’s Internet policy of not using facebook long enough to inform her that she has to be quiet. “Shhh.”

“I am so sorry. But I just won a thousand dollar gift card to Best Buy! It just popped up on my screen out of nowhere. I’m gonna get me a flat screen, a computer, and a iPod. Wait ‘til I tell my baby daddy. He ain’t gonna believe this shit.”

With the enthusiasm of a slug, I respond, “I am thrilled for you. However, it is our policy that you not disrupt other patrons and that you refrain from using inappropriate language. Would you mind picking those rollers up off the floor?” I could have told her the gift card wasn’t real. But my pigs need to be fed. I’m serious about Farmville. As soon as I turn back to my computer to tend to my crops, here comes another one.

“Scuse me. Ya’ll got *Pride and Pre-Justice*? You know the one I’m talking about? It’s got Colin Firth in it.” I look in our database to see if we have the DVD. It’s in. I find it and give it to her.

“This ain’t what I want. I want the book,” she says as she rolls her good eye. Her eyebrows are overly plucked and she looks permanently surprised.

“Ma’am, you asked for the one with Colin Firth. Last time I checked, he did not have a starring role in a novel. But, I will look and see if the book is in.” Meanwhile, my land is being neglected. It needs to be plowed so the seeds can be planted. The book is at another branch; I reserved it for her.

“Well, when will it get here?” She asks.

“When it arrives. Is there anything else I can help you with?” She rolls that eye again and walks away. The rest of the day is like all the others. “I’m looking for this book and it’s part of a tree-ology. Can you help me?” “Um, I don’t know the name of the book or who wrote it. Think you can find it?” Regardless of the question, I plaster that car salesman smirk on my face, get my ass out of the chair, and waddle to the section they need.

I’ve got to get this weight off me. I haven’t been little since the late 70s; I was six pounds, eight ounces. Hmph. There’s a lot of sand in this hourglass. These are the days of my thighs. I only wear dresses because my pants don’t fit. And I can’t leave the house without a pair of shorts underneath. Friction. My blood type is cheesecake and I break out in a sweat just from blinking. Doc said I should start walking more. After that, work my way up to running. If anybody ever sees me running, they should call 911. Someone is chasing me with a knife. I used to be a nice and juicy size 14. Currently, I fall somewhere between an 18 and a 26. Even at this size, I’m still pretty. Plump, but pretty.

My skin is Hershey's-milk-chocolate-smooth except for a few scars from that vicious battle with acne. I have a head full of kinky hair that betrays its actual length. Nice lips. They're blunt-stained, but nothing that a coat of crème sheen lip gloss can't conceal. I have nice teeth; none of them are missing. I'm bottom heavy, though: wide hips with an ass to match and a smallish waist. My eyes are so dark they're intriguing and intimidating. At least that's what I've been told. I've never had a problem getting a man. It's the art of keeping him that I haven't mastered.

I get hit on all the time at work. What you won't do is ask for my number after you ask for assistance (while scratching your private parts) with finding a clinic because you think you have gonorrhoea. Fools named Amos, Mister, Alfred, Homer, or Rufus need not even ask my name.

## Chapter 2

I counted every single one of those 28,800 seconds that I was in that place called Paradise. I call it Pair of Dice; every-fucking-day is a gamble. It feels so good to be back in my beautiful dungeon. Lights are never turned on and the blinds never opened. The television is usually off. It works, but the rare few who have been in my home are not so sure. They wouldn't know I paid my electric bill if that dusty ceiling fan wasn't spinning. Lavender wafts through the air as if it's seeping from the wall paint. Candles are everywhere. The 70s chic theme suits me and my many personalities well. The burnt orange sofa is cute, not comfortable. It's perfect for letting people know they've worn out their welcome. When your ass gets numb, it's time to go. Depending on the person's weight, that

usually takes no more than 30 minutes. The pea green chair is plush and can cajole anyone into a slumber. That's where I usually chill to ensure that my guests have almost no choice but to sit on the couch with the concrete stuffing. A zebra print throw is draped on the back. The temperature is set to 60 degrees all year round. I hate to be hot.

Flea market end tables can only be described as different. The lamps on top are simply odd. Absolutely nothing in my apartment matches, but it does go. The deep-brown swivel chair can provide hours of entertainment. There's nothing like a sit and spin after a stiff drink or six. The pile of shoes at the door has become part of the décor. I have a shoe fetish, but don't like wearing them. In front of the window is a desk. It, too, is quirky. I love a good deal and it was only six bucks at the Peddler's Mall. How it fit into my hatchback, I'll never know. Eggplant purple and turd-green curtains hang wrinkled and unevenly.

My phone vibrates.

"Hello."

"You have a collect call from a correctional facility inmate. 'It's Femi.' Press '1' to accept the call or '9' to disconnect." I accept.

"What's good, baby girl?" I can still smell him and the Black & Mild cigar that dangled from his Carmex-coated lips. His boots are still by the door.

"Nothing." I say, in a come-fuck-me voice that's wearing my southern drawl.

"I been thinking about you. A lot. What you wearing?"

I lie, "Nothing, but lotion." My nightgown has a big hole in it; my bonnet is holding my hair hostage and my socks have candy canes and stupid-looking reindeer on them. It's June.

"That's what's up. You sound like you doing good. Probably looking good, too. So uhh, I know it's been a while and I ain't got much time, but I was wondering if you could look out for me. Shit's kind of bad for me in here."

"Did you ask your wife or your girlfriend?" The sexiness in my voice has dissipated.

"I see you still got that slick ass mouth. But, really, Ma? You gonna play me? How you gonna act like that?" He sounds seductive and shocked.

"Who played who? You had a bitch. Your ass lied."

"I didn't lie, but I thought we was better than that. I ain't never met nobody like you, Dream. You know I love the stink outta your shit. I ain't mean for none of this to happen. I put that on my mother," he said.

"Femi, don't ask me for shit. Your ass been gone for seven months and I haven't heard from you until today. Fuck you and that bitch who birthed you."

#### **Almost a year ago...**

I've never been one to believe in love at first sight, I mean, what about blind people? But then there was Oluwafemi Diallo: Femi to his friends and enemies. Skin so black ink would drip with envy. The only thing a yellow brother can do for me is show me which way the dark one went. Dreadlocks tip-toed down his spine and found a resting place just above the small of his back. His wife beater was crisp and white. Tattoos looked like

graffiti splattered on his neck and arms. His left ear sparkled with what I knew was cubic zirconia. Baggy jeans made a pitiful attempt of concealing his bowed legs. His Timberland boots were scuff-free and unlaced. Not tall, but would not classify as short either. Dimples dented his cheeks when he looked at me and smiled. The swagger that flowed from his pores clearly derived from the Bronx. Maybe Harlem. Just looking at him, I needed to repent. Lust is my favorite sin. *The Lord is my shepherd, He knows what I want.* And if it was going to send me to hell, then this vision before me was certainly worth the punishment.

I gulped my iced chai to lower my body temp and continued to observe him as he stood in line. He placed his order and confirmed my suspicions. The instant I heard him talk, I knew he was a New Yorker. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out his wallet, and retrieved some cash. It was leather. There is no bigger turn off than a grown ass man with a nylon and Velcro wallet. The barista asked his name and he responded coolly, "Femi." As he waited for his order, he looked at me. He winked. I smiled again. His name was called and he retrieved his coffee. I just knew he was going to make his way over to me. Had I bet on it, I would have been one broke bitch.

He walked right by and sat down at another table. I refused to turn my head to see where. So, I continued to sit there and sip. Lust and repent. I needed napkins. Not that I was eating anything or had made a mess. I just needed a reason to get up and walk. If my smile alone didn't lure him to me, my sexy strut could. I sashayed toward the napkins and could feel his eyes focused on my ass. I wiggled it just a little. With the napkins in my hand, I headed back to my table. Our eyes did a meet and greet. Just as my legs found the rhythm

of my hips... I fell down with the grace of a 10-ton dump truck. The floor broke my fall. Napkins flew all over the place and a lone one landed right on my face, it stuck to my lip gloss. Somehow, my shoe came off, went up, down and clucked me on my forehead. The last thing my crazy ass needed was a head injury. If I had died right then, it would have been okay. I welcomed it. This mishap was not in vain. Femi came over wearing a sympathetic smile that drowned out the chuckles of the other customers. He offered his callused hand to pull me up and I allowed him to do so. I smoothed down my dress and put my shoe back on. Hopefully, the hole in my pantyhose was unseen.

“You good, Ma?” I nodded. He removed the napkin from my lips and guided me to my table. Without asking permission, he sat down. My eyes drank from the abyss of darkness in front of me. I admired the mustache that trickled downward into his goatee. He shattered the silence by asking my name.

“Adream Giselle Williams. The pleasure is all yours. And you are?” Nope, my confidence did not go down with me.

“I’m Femi. Femi Diallo. Adream, huh? Nice. Sounds like you slide down a pole for a living though. Is that what’s on your birth certificate?”

“It is on my birth certificate. I’ve never slid down a pole before, but I’m not opposed to it. My momma’s name is Mirage. So you know I wasn’t going to be a Tameeka or Shanay. You smell really nice, what’s that you’re wearing, Come Get Me?”

He laughed. Femi just didn’t know that I was missed-my-period serious.

“Enlighten me, though. Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Nah, I’m single. Taking applications, though.”

“Really? I’d love to know the benefits of having such a position. You probably got a chick. Let me ask you this: is there any woman on this planet who *thinks* she is your wife or girlfriend?” Momma raised me to believe that anytime something with a Y-chromosome is speaking, it’s lying.

“I’m telling you, shorty, I ain’t got nobody. I’m rolling solo.”

I studied his face and looked for any indication that he was hiding something. Anything. I watch *CSI*: every week and have been formally trained on how to spot a liar. He revealed nothing.

“That’s nice to know Mr. Diallo. Look, I’ve got some errands to run, but would love it if you called me sometime.”

“That’s cool.” He pulled out his phone and flipped it open. The duct tape holding it together had turned black in some spots and the edges were curled upward. He caught me assessing his phone.

“I know it’s raggedy. I’m getting a new one next week. Cricket be tripping. I’m thinking about leaving these pre-paid phones alone and getting a contract.”

Cricket? He really has a cricket phone. And he’s on one of those pay-as-you-go plans? The puddle in my panties just dried up. Still curious, though. I know curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought that bitch back. I gave him my number despite his phone. Yes, I judge men by their phones among many other trivial things: missing hubcap, uneven fingernails, or chapped lips. I have never once claimed to have any depth.

Femi called a little after one in the morning. I was pissed that he was calling me during crackhead hours. But he's so fine that he could murder me and I'd forgive him. We got the particulars out the way. His full name is Oluwafemi and it means *God loves me*. No kids. Pisces. March 14, 1978. Got into some trouble as a teen, but nothing too serious. He doesn't eat pork, but he isn't Muslim. I asked him if he knew what FICA was and he did. Employment is a nice quality. It's been awhile since I talked to a man with a job. I opened the drawer in my nightstand and pulled out Raheem. Hopefully, his vibrations will remain unheard. Femi was still talking about himself and I gave him sprinkles of "Uh huhs" and "Yeahs" to make him think that I was listening. All attention was focused on Raheem. My battery-operated beau is never a disappointment. Stupid here got caught up and yelled, "I'm coming!" Femi ain't too bright either because he asked, "Who's knocking on your door this late?" I giggled and told him my sister works the late shift and sometimes stops by. We said our goodbyes and I cleaned Raheem and myself off.

It was 7:30 in the morning when my alarm rudely interrupted my sleep. I don't feel like going in today. I'm not. As long as I have a doctor's excuse, they can't do anything to me. I called my dentist and asked for a note. She told me to come and pick it up whenever. I always waive her daughter's late fees, so she looks out for me about once a month. I called my supervisor and told her I wasn't coming in and went back to bed.

A little after two is when I finally pried myself away from my see-through 1200 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets that were made in China. Another flea market purchase. My room could use a thorough cleaning. The cure for AIDS is probably

somewhere on my bedroom floor. I decide against that and make my way to the bathroom. Constipated. It's taking everything in me not to practice Lamaze breathing to get this out of me. About 20 minutes later, a tiny ball the size of a penny plops into the commode and splashes toilet water on my ass. So much for taking a shower later. After completing my bathing ritual, I decide to get out of the house. My attire could be better. I look as if I've been reincarnated as a dust rag, but I am clean.

I packed my bag, grabbed a snack and a water that I probably won't drink, and headed out the door. I got shit to do. Movies cost too much, so I have ways to entertain myself for free. I parked under a tree and got out to find a bench in the park. I pull out *Mourning Becomes Elektra* and pretend to read. *Wait for it. Wait for it. Bingo.*

A group of four joggers, petite and blonde, sit on the bench across from me. Their bodies are thin and toned. The mosquito bites they are passing off as breasts are really the only proof that they're females. They are chatting and completely oblivious to me. *It's time.* I reach into my bag and pull out my mayonnaise jar. I get my spoon, twist off the cap and proceed to scoop and shovel the contents into my mouth.

"Mmm. This is so good. Would you like some? I have another spoon." All conversation has ceased. There are eight sets of eyes watching me. Mouths are agape and their sweaty faces now have a thin sheen of disgust on them. These heifers probably consume 200 calories a week and seeing my fat ass sitting here eating mayonnaise like it's yogurt has them considering anorexia. One of them, we'll call her Becky, takes out her phone and attempts to snap my picture. I give her a look to inform her that I know what to

do with a dead body. Her phone is promptly returned to her pocket. I eat another spoonful. They finally leave, but not without gagging, looking back, and whispering to one another. After a knee-slapping chuckle, I continue eating my vanilla pudding that happens to be stored in a jar with a Hellmann's label on it. This went a little better than the fiasco a couple of months ago.

I was in the bathroom stall and asked the lady in the next one for some toilet tissue. Her pale, French-manicured hand reached under the stall and gave it to me. A few seconds later, she screamed, hitting notes that even the most seasoned opera singer couldn't reach. I assumed she noticed the brown substance smeared on her hand. It was only Nutella. She didn't think it was funny. I'm banned from every CVS in the country.

I'm now driving to the dentist's office. Maroon 5's, "She Will Be Loved" came on the radio and my car is officially a mobile concert. I'm lip-synching my soul out when a van pulls up next to me at the intersection. Dude sitting in the passenger's seat says something that I can't hear. I adjust the volume and let my window down.

"What did you say?" My voice oozing with femininity.

"I said, my little brother wants to holler at you," he says while pointing to the backseat. A quick once over was conducted. He had lint balls in his hair, eyes out of alignment, and I could not ignore the green tooth next to the brown one that was next to an empty space.

I smiled and replied in my deepest voice, "I used to be a man." They ran that red light and turned the corner on two wheels. I laughed all the way to April's office. I pulled

into a spot and grabbed my purse. I love walking into that place. The décor looks more like someone's home than a place where people get their teeth yanked out. The loveseat and sofa are Italian leather. A flat screen on the wall is showing "The Young and the Restless." The counter is marble. The plant in the corner has that I-need-water lean. I bang on the bell even though the receptionist is sitting right there. She looks up and cuts her eyes.

"Hello Adream."

"April here?" I have no time for pleasantries with her. I want to get my tweezers and yank those chin hairs from her face. Are those bangs? It looks like she trimmed them with a butter knife.

"She's in her off—", I head in that direction. April is my girl. She always gets me in when I have an emergency. Last week, I was convinced I had gum disease. It was a cut from my new toothbrush.

*Tap-Tap.*

"Come in."

"Hey, April. How are you?"

"Busy. How are you? I have your doctor's excuse. You need anything else?" She says with a smile. She's cut her hair into layers. It's streaked now, too. I just wish she'd learn to moisturize before applying foundation. Her skin looks like pleather.

"I'm good, thank you. I was wondering if I could get a prescription for Vicodin."

"What do you need it for?"

"Cramps."

“You have a toothache, Adream. A toothache. I’ll get you a ‘script.”

\*\*\*\*\*

En route to the drugstore, Femi sends me a text:

Tumbleweed?

I don’t do chain restaurants. Besides, the way I’m dressed, I should be going to the soup kitchen. His short text messages are getting on my nerves. He needs to hurry up and get that new phone. It doesn’t have to be a smartphone, but one with a keyboard would be nice. I don’t expect him to leap into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he can baby-step it.

When I get to a stop light, I respond:

What about Indian or Thai?

I’m in Walgreen’s to get my prescription filled and frown when I see the pharmacist. She has the personality of a dial tone and is just nasty. You’d think she’d be more pleasant having access to all those drugs. Working in customer service has turned me into the ultimate critic. I believe in service with a fucking smile. A greeting would be nice, too. Anything less would be un-southern. Not that any of this applies to me. The library is free and you get what you pay for. I have asked patrons, “Would you like a refund?” I hand her my prescription and she tells me that it’s going to be 15 minutes. I still haven’t gotten a response from Femi. If I make it home and take my bra off, I definitely won’t be going. Once “the girls” are flopping and free, I don’t go anywhere. Never did have perky ones.

They grew in aimed south. I thought about getting a breast lift, but it cost too damn much. I'd be better off hiring a couple of midgets to hold them up. Still...no response from Femi. I pick up my 'script and head home.

### Chapter 3

She still sending me to voicemail. Adream is my strawberry child. Sweet or bitter, it just depend on the season. Her sweet side is for strangers and anybody who ain't me I reckon. I did the best I could with the little I had. I try to make it right. She like to focus on what's wrong. *Wrong* is probably her nickname for me. She only call me Momma though. I ain't gonna tolerate nothin' else. Hell, I might let her call me anything she want if she just call. Or at least answer when I do. I know I can't undo what I done. But I can try to do different.

“Hey, Ms. Mirage! How you doing?”

“I'm fine, baby. And you?” Shawna is one of the good mommas. She tries. She really do. Her boy always clean. He ain't bad neither. He minds me real good. That boy love his vegetables, too. He eats all of 'em. Don't care for sweets none. Dream was like that. The girl would eat all her vegetables. But I swear, she is the only person in the world who don't like mashed potatoes. She wouldn't eat 'em. Still won't.

“Tired. I got off early, so I came to get him,” she says.

“Malachi had a good day. He messed on himself, but it was a good day. He gettin’ used to bein’ back in daycare. I know you glad you workin’ again.”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t like it, but I gotta take care of my baby. He’ll be late tomorrow. Doctor’s appointment. His ears have been bothering him. I just want to make sure he’s okay. I’ll see you when I drop him off. Oh, did you remember to ask your daughter if she’ll help me write some essays for scholarships and to get into college? I’m sorry to keep asking. But I really need some help. English class was always hard for me.”

“Baby, she been so busy. I’ll ask her today. It’s hard to get a hold of her sometimes. I ain’t know working at the library was so much work. I hardly ever get to see her.”

“I didn’t know it was a lot of work at the library until you told me. I really thought they just checked books out to people all day,” she says with a smile. “Tell her I can’t pay much. I do get food stamps and I can give her some of those if she wants them. I don’t mind at all. I’m desperate Ms. Mirage. Pleeese don’t forget about me. I’ll see you tomorrow. Thank you, again.”

“Bye, honey. I will surely ask her tonight.” I don’t like lying to that girl. That’s what I get though. That’s what I get for tellin’ everybody how good a writer she is. Adream don’t mind helping nobody. She wouldn’t charge that girl nothin’. I’m gonna leave her a message that somebody need help with writin’. She probably call me back then.

Shawna one of the best mothers that come in this daycare. She only 17. I know grown women who can’t take care of they four-year-old like she does, but she does real good. She still in school. Say she still wanna go to college. I always tell her about my

Adream. Folks here kinda jealous my daughter went to college. She ain't got no kids and got her own place. She got a good job, too. I don't tell 'em she hate her momma. That's my business. It's bout time for me to get off, I don't wanna leave. Not because I love it so much, but 'cause of where I don't wanna go. Gotta go see Teri. Catchin' the bus ain't something I like either. I gotta see her to get my license back.

It's hot out here. The bus gonna be funky. These fools act like they allergic to deodorant. The bus is gonna be crowded. And I just know I'm gonna have to stand up and be right by somebody who ain't washed they ass. Reckon I'll call her while I wait.

"Hey, Dream. It's momma. I been callin' you. Call me back, please. I got a girl who need help with gettin' into college. She a good girl. I promised her I'd ask you. Oh, and, uh, I wanna know if you wanna come over for dinner. I can fix some liver and eggs. Well...my bus is comin'....I, uh, love you. Okay, bye baby...and biscuits, too! Call me back!"

Here this fool come grinning. Every time he open them doors he just a smiling. And I frown. He don't take no kind of hints.

"How you doing Miss Lady?" Harry ask me. I don't know if that's his name, but he looks like that's what it should be. He has a Jheri curl. His name has to be Harry.

I drop the coins in the box and think of something to say. Something kinda rude. I come up with nothing. An eyeroll will have to do. And that does nothing. He just smiles at me even harder. I just keep on walking to the back of the bus. My phone ain't vibrated in my pocket, but I still check it. Nothing.

#### **Chapter 4**

“Hello.”

“Hey girl, what’s up?”

“Absolutely nothing. Just got home from the pharmacy. You know it’s time for my candy and cocktails,” I say as I line up my Vicodin and open the refrigerator door. I like my vodka cold.

“Lemme guess, Percocet and peach schnapps?” Esther thinks she knows me.

“Nope. I’m not even going to tell you. I need a favor though. Yesterday, I met this guy. Can you look him up for me? He could be the Mr. Adream Williams.” I filled my Big Gulp cup half way and put the bottle back in the fridge. After I raked the pills from the counter into my hand, I tossed them in my mouth and chewed them like Tic-Tacs. In the living room, I grab my throw off the couch and sit in my swivel chair. I make it a rule to drink my shit straight.

“Adream, you don’t need me to do nothing but get you a 1-800 number and a prayer. You keep fucking with that shit if you want to. Your ass’ll be slobbering while you’re spinning in that damn chair you love so much. Give me his name and birthday. What do you know about him?”

I can hear her stroking the keyboard. Esther is a captain for the police department. We met in college and we’ve been best friends ever since she passed me the blunt at a fraternity picnic.

“I got *some* info. He’s a New Yorker. His name is Oluwafemi Diallo. We haven’t really talked much. He offered to take me to Tumbleweed today. But I haven’t heard

anything since I suggested something different to eat. His b-day is March 14<sup>th</sup>, '78. He works. Plus, he can read. He looked at the menu before he ordered his coffee at the café and he knows how to text."

She sighs, "You're an idiot! The initials of his first and last name are A and D, right?"

"No, it's O and D."

"So let me get this straight... a pill head could possibly be dating someone whose initials are O.D.? I cannot take you seriously, Adream. What the fuck you mean he can read? He better be fine, too. 'Cause the way you talking, you would still talk to him if he was illiterate," she laughs. Not like it's funny, but because it's sad.

"Esther, you know really attractive men *never* look at me. I always get the ones who look like their neck puked. I've never seen one like this and you haven't either. I swear I'd drink his dirty bath water out of a champagne flute." With the phone to my ear, I get up for a refill, and stagger into the kitchen. The refrigerator is not where I left it. The last few ounces of vodka are poured into my cup. I should have stopped by the liquor store.

"Okay, so, I think I found him. You weren't lying, either. I'd finish whatever you didn't drink of his bathwater. His mug shot should be on the cover of *GQ*. His parents should look into marketing their genes," Esther sounds like she's entranced.

"Told you. I see he's already lied to me though. He said that he got into some shit when he was younger. What did he do? Probation or parole?" I say with a slur. I can hear Esther talking, and I want to respond. My mouth is struggling to follow my brain's instructions.

“Adream!”

“What?” I managed.

“Did you hear me? He’s a member of the slap-a-ho tribe. Leave his ass alone. Instead of focusing on him, you need to figure out your own issues. You get fucked up frequently and it’s ridiculous.” She’s quick to tell me what to do. Everybody can’t snag themselves a Darnell. Mister-perfect-score-on-the-GRE, good credit, no illegitimate children, and a certified back breaker. Hence the five kids they have together.

“Really Smoke-a-hontas! You had to use Kylie’s pee for the piss test to get into the academy. I never did figure out how you did it. Did you extract it from her diaper or put her on the pot? And who misses a week of class because of 4/20? Don’t worry about the skeletons in my closet when you have a bag of bones buried in the basement.” I’m high and heated. Me and Esther don’t argue often, just when we talk to each other. We both have a jawbone deficiency; neither of us can bite our tongues.

“Whatever Adream. I just want you to be okay. I need you to be okay. Ever since you went through that breakup *and* break down, you just ain’t been yourself. I really think you need to invest your interests into someone else. Like, maybe yourself. Seriously, you might find a good man at church. You thought about that? It might be good for you to get married and start a family. Once you get your shit together.”

“I told you, I’m not having kids. Giving birth is unnatural. And church? It’s been so long I may have to call ahead and make a reservation. Maybe I’ll just have fun with Femi. Anyway, I’m about to go to bed. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” I’m tired of talking to her.

And why did she have to bring up that breakdown? All the weed I used to smoke couldn't help me forget Princeton. I ended the call before she could tell me 'goodnight'. My bed seems so far away. I would love to call a cab to drop me off. That's obviously not an option. I get down on my knees and crawl. Just as I make it to my bed, my phone rings.

It's Femi.

"Hello."

"What's up? Yo, I'm sorry I ain't get back to you earlier. I forgot to put some minutes on my phone, but I still wanna take you out. You up for Tumbleweed?" he said.

"I told you in my last text that I don't do chains." I'm in no condition to go anywhere anyway. My sweat is probably 90 proof.

"Shorty, I didn't even get it. Something happened with my phone right after I sent you that text. I can't get text messages no more. Been trying to get a new phone, don't really have the time.

"Your mouth is slick ain't it? It's cool though. Kinda sexy. Just make sure you keep it in check. But, um, I would like to see you. Why don't I just come over? You sound kinda sad anyway. Let me come and put a smile on your face."

I am not that kind of chick. I won't front like I was *never* that kind of chick. I'm just not her any more. Who is he trying to run game on? Hell, Milton Bradley consults me for advice.

“First, I’m not sad. I’ve had me a little sip. Two, I just want to know what you had for breakfast that gave you the courage to invite yourself over to my house. We haven’t even had an official date.”

“Look here, Shorty. I didn’t laugh at you when you busted your ass in the café. That should count for something. Trust and believe that was not easy to do. Oh, and I didn’t tell you, but I saw that hole in your stockings. I can see now, I’m gonna have to get you some act right. Real talk, Ma. I like you and I really wanna get to know you. But you ain’t letting me in.”

“I do not wear stockings, they’re pantyhose, and really? I’m not even going to acknowledge that ‘act right’ statement. But how do you know you like me? We have only talked twice. Three times if you count the café. Plus, you asked to take me to Tumbleweed. The highest item on the menu can’t cost more than \$9.99. So what I had a hole. It’s free air conditioning.” This conversation is starting to sober me up. Not pleased.

“From what I can tell, you seem pretty cool. You a little on the stuck up side. I like it, though. You sexy as hell. And you got one of ‘dem onion booties.” He laughed and I did too.

“*Onion booty?* What the hell is that?”

“I know you done heard of an onion booty. It just makes a man wanna cry.” He’s cracking up now and I’m not amused. Men like my ass more than I ever will.

“Can’t say that I’ve ever heard of it. Whatever. Anyway, if you’re serious about hanging out, we can do something tomorrow.”

“Ain’t nothing on my agenda but getting to know Ms. Adream. So whatchu wanna do?”

“Whatever you want is okay with me. What are you smoking?”

“I just fired up a blunt. I want to take you some place special. I might surprise you. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Okay. I will *think* about hanging out with you. Do you have enough minutes on your phone for me to text you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I put five dollars on it. If you decide you wanna go just hit me up. I can’t wait to see you though. If you change your mind about me coming by tonight, I can come through.”

“I’m not changing my mind. But I will give you a call to let you know what’s up. I’m going to bed and if you’re lucky, you will hear from me tomorrow.”

“If I’m lucky? There goes that mouth again. Aight, Shorty. I’m gonna let you go.”

## Chapter 5

“Hello, Mirage. Welcome. Please come in and make yourself comfortable.” She smile at me. But it don’t look real. I guess she pretty. She light-skinned. Can’t believe I’m here. The judge said I had to go.

“Hi.” He say I gotta go, he ain’t say I gotta talk. What I need a counselor for? And what the hell is that smell? Smells like some weird shit Dream would like. She’s into all those oils. Why is everything white or some shade of white. She could spend 15 dollars at

the Dollar Tree and hook this room up. Hang up some pictures or something. I see those bookshelves ain't been dusted.

“Well, let's get started. I have some forms for you to read and look over. I want to explain to you how this is going to work. Your sessions are court-ordered. I've read your file. I know what you look like in black and white, but I would like to see the person. These visits should not feel like an answer and question session, but more like a conversation between pleasant strangers riding the bus or standing in line at the grocery store. I do not take notes during our visits. I record every session and listen to them later. I delete all recordings after I make the notes that I need. The client is my primary focus and I do not think it is fair to you if I am jotting things down. I do what is called client-focused therapy. The forms that I'm giving you explain my cancellation and payment policy. If there are any questions, please feel free to ask. I want to give you a few minutes to read the documents over and then we will take it from there.”

Her voice is different. It's kinda light. Gentle even. I take the papers and stop fidgeting with the creases in my jeans. Prolly used a little too much starch this mornin'. I don't know what to say to her. When older friends found out I was drinkin' they said, “Girl, gin'll make you sin.” Wonder if sinnin' and breakin' the law the same thang. I ain't mean to hit that cop. He was tryin' to put me in cuffs. If that bartender woulda gave me one more drink like I asked for, then I wouldn't have went behind the bar to make my own. I knew when he looked at me he ain't like what I was doin'. He coulda just said so. His punk ass called the police. That was outta order. I got a “theft of services” charge and another for

“public intoxication.” Now I gotta take a alcohol class and talk to a counselor. I wasn’t even driving. The judge suspended my license for fun. I’m usually a beer drinker. That hard shit tend to get me in trouble. Last time I drank some vodka, I got pregnant. Ain’t had none since that night I was with Adream’s no-good-for-nothing-ass-married-father. I skim the documents real fast and sign.

“So what do you think, Mirage?” She say when she looking over her glasses. She got on glasses like Sally Jesse Raphael used to wear. They not cute on TV or in person.

“If talkin’ what I gotta do to stay outta jail, guess I’ll do it. Whatchu wanna know? You can ask me anything. How long this usually take?” I don’t like lookin’ at her in her face. Somethin’ ‘bout them eyes. They dark like my baby’s. That’s who she ‘mind me of, my baby. It’s like when they look at you, they can see your heart’s intentions.

“About an hour. Sometimes longer, sometimes shorter. We could start with the basics. Just tell me a little about yourself. What do you do? Married? Children? That kind of thing. You don’t have to share anything that makes you uncomfortable, but it could help you heal with whatever it is you’re going through. It is important that you feel comfortable with me. Most of what we discuss is confidential. If I feel like you are a threat to yourself or others, I have to report it. Everything is explained in those documents that you signed. I do want to tell you that the last session doesn’t count. You were very upset and left. I want you to know that this is a fresh start. I completely understand how intimidating and scary it can be to start therapy.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. This is just different for me. Never done it before. Anyway, never been married and I got a kid. A daughter. No grandbabies but wouldn’t mind havin’ some. I work at a daycare. I like it alright. It keep me from sleepin’ on a bench. I drink. Sometimes I mess up when I been drinkin’. Especially that vodka. That answer your questions?”

Her desk is so dusty. She don’t have no pictures on the wall. Wonder why she ain’t get chairs that match each other. This room little, too. Ants couldn’t get lost.

“You work at a daycare? That’s great. You must really love children. How old is your daughter and what is your relationship with her like?”

She wiggle in that chair like she tryin’ to scratch her butt. Why she just don’t reach back there and do it I don’t know. I would scratch if I had a itch.

“She 34, will be 35 on my birthday. Had her on my birthday. She got a degree and a real good job at the library. Coulda been a teacher. Coulda been anything. Still can be. But, she a librarian. She turned out okay. Considering she mine, she came out real good. We ain’t got no relationship really. I try. She always mad at me. I get it. I know it’s my fault. I love my child. She don’t believe it, but I do. Liking her is something different altogether. She’s mean as hell. You’d be better off sand papering a dragon’s ass than to piss her off. That’s my fault, too.”

I done confused her.

“Why is she always mad at you? So you love her, but you don’t like her? Can you explain what you mean by that?” Teri uncrossed her legs and went to her desk to grab her cup of coffee.

She ain’t even ask me if I want something to drink. She got right back in that chair and crossed them boney legs again. My hints ain’t workin’. I’m coughin’ and clearin’ my throat. Still no offer of a drink. What I gotta do? Hack up sand to show her my throat is dry.

“I ain’t trying to be rude. But I ain’t ready to tell you all my business. That ain’t to say I won’t tell you, I just ain’t gonna tell you right now.” The truth is that Dream is just weird. I can’t really make sense of her. It started the day she was born. That girl would not take to my breasts. I think they call it latch or something like that. The nurses tried everythang. They couldn’t get her little ass to drank my milk. She’d scream ‘til she gagged. Could hear her throat gettin’ hoarse. It was kinda like she knew about the fools who had sucked on ‘em before her and she ain’t want they backwash. I had to give her the bottle. Gave her the bottle and she did fine.

“I understand.” She sips her coffee and look like she just can’t wait for me to finish. I wanna tell her to comb that hair. That natural shit ain’t for everybody. I tried to tell Dream that, she just made it another reason to be mad at me. It look good on her now. I’m used to it.

“Dream would fight sleep blink for blink when she was in bed with me, too. She’d cry until nothin’ came out. I’d put her in her bed, you know. It was really a dresser drawer,

but she was too little to know the difference. Would you believe that sleep would keep her for the night? Hell, maybe she ain't like me neither. She never did crawl. Just wouldn't do it. It was like she ain't wanna mess up her knees or get 'em dirty. She was a scooter. She used to love it when I tell her that story. Anyway, pieces of her diaper would be all over the carpet. I had to vacuum all the time. Mainly 'cause of the mess, but mostly because she hated the noise."

"You would run the vacuum because she didn't like it?"

Now she lookin' at me like I'm some weirdo. Bitch.

"It was better than puttin' a pillow over her face. Now, don't take that the wrong way. I ain't never wanna kill my baby. I just was never ready to be nobody's momma. It ain't her fault. I know that. I was by myself. Her daddy ain't want her. He was too busy taking care of his wife and other kids. Adream could probably tell that being a mother wasn't the job I applied for. Wasn't really qualified either. Babies have a way of knowing certain things. Dream always been smart. That's the truth. She started reading at three and could write in cursive at six. The lady next door who kept her sometimes taught her to read and write. Once she got good at those things, I didn't really have to worry about her much. She always liked to be by herself. Dream probably got that from me, too. I thought it would change when I figured out that I was pregnant. I ain't know Jerard was married. I really didn't. But, I did do that best I could by her.

I try to make it up to her now, ya know? I told her I ain't have no parents. Adream will probably tell you she know what hell look like. She probably do. She ain't never met

the devil, though. Dream think the devil is me, but it ain't. I know him. I *really* know him. I wanna tell Dream her momma's sorry. She hard to talk to. I think maybe she could forgive me if she knew what I been through." Shit. I was not trying to come in here and tell this woman all my business. It's been like forty-five minutes and I'm already about to cry. A tear ain't gonna lick my cheek though. I won't let it.

"I see. Unfortunately, it's time to come to a close. I really don't want to cut you off at this point, but I have another client. We are off to a great start. Thank you for sharing. If you can, you are welcome to make up that session that didn't go well last time. Does Saturday during this time work for you? The more consistent the visits are, the better. You can start the healing process. Do you have any questions?" She takes a gulp of her coffee and licks her faded lips.

"This Saturday? Um, yeah, that'll work. Why do you keep saying 'heal'? Ain't nothin' hurtin' me." She squirms because I'm watching her like she might steal my pocketbook.

"Mirage, everybody goes through things that are not ideal. Some of us do not know why we have certain behaviors. Often times, people use drugs, alcohol, or a combination of both to cope with whatever may be bothering them. They may do things they wouldn't ordinarily do if they weren't hurting. My job is to help sift through the behaviors and find the root. I can discuss this more during our next session. I'll see you Saturday." Her smile look real this time.

"Okay. I'll be here." This went better than I thought it would. I ain't gonna say I like it, but it kinda feel good talking to somebody. And she get paid to keep it to herself.

She gotta keep her mouth shut. It's different talking to someone who has to listen to you. Guess I'll go home and fry me some chicken and get ready for tomorrow. Damn, I don't wanna get on this bus again. I don't know why I'm even pulling out my phone. I know ain't nobody gonna come way out here to get me. Can't help but smile. She called me back. She left a message, too.

“Momma...I'll help that girl. Get one of your friends to help you text me her information. Dinner? I can come if you promise not to drink and make lots of gravy for the liver and rice. I Gotta go. I..lu..lu..like lots of gravy. Bye.” How she gonna tell me not to drink? Her ass drinks. If my baby don't want me to drink...I won't drink. I'm gonna try anyway.

## Chapter 6

Momma called me this morning to make sure I was still coming over. I told her I would. I actually do what I say I'm going to do. I'm so glad I didn't wash my hair yesterday. I know when I leave her house, I'll smell like fried food, Newports, and incense.

She knew I was coming down here. Why couldn't she just have the door unlocked? I ring the bell and she comes to the door with a cigarette dangling from her nicotine-stained lips. She opens the glass door, takes the cigarette out and smiles. I don't.

“Well, you ain't gonna smile at your momma? Quit frowning. You need to be thanking God for that baby face you got. You keep frowning like that, it ain't gonna last. Yeah, I knew you was coming. I live down here in the hood. You the one that moved out there with them white folks. I gotta keep my door locked. You act like you ain't got a key.”

She says while opening the glass door. A smile appeared, it was a tad shy of splitting the skin of her dry lips. As always, the glass is smudge and fingerprint free. Momma can't do much of anything right, but she can clean some glass.

"Hi, Momma," I say sans enthusiasm. The door closes behind me. I can smell the onions and liver mixed with the aroma of the cigarette she lit with the cigarette she just put out. The ceiling fan is slinging the smoke around. Normally, I'd start coughing and choking, but today, I simply do not feel like my usual theatrics. I just want some liver and to leave soon after.

Momma is in the kitchen and I'm sitting at the dining room table. The rooms are joined and we are within eye- and earshot of each other.

"I got that girl's information. Her name is Shawna. I just went ahead and wrote it down. Ain't no need in asking them heffas I work with to do nothin' for me. Anyway, she a good girl, Dream. I love her little boy. He love me, too. She's trying to get into a good school. Think she wanna be nurse or a doctor. Something. I told her you was good with writing. She ain't got no money. She feel bad about that. Said she'll give you some of her food stamps. I know you ain't gonna take no food stamps, but I just wanted you to know that she offered."

"Okay, give it to me before I leave."

I can't even remember the last time I have visited. I'm not going to tell her, but it's not too bad seeing her. I've only been here a few minutes, though. The house hasn't changed. Mirage doesn't do change. It's tidy as always. Her landlord still hasn't changed

the paint. I don't even know what to call that color. It looks like whatever that girl from *The Exorcist* puked up landed on her walls. Nothing goes with it. That still doesn't stop her from purchasing a new living room set every couple of years with her income taxes. The carpet looks dingy even though she has Sears come out and shampoo it every few months. If money is funny, she will take a mop and clean the carpet herself. It never looks any different. I guess there is a level of contentment achieved knowing that it has been cleaned.

"So, uh, how's things been going? How's the library? I don't get to see you no more. You always busy. At least, that's what you say. As soon as the rice is finished, I'll scramble your eggs and we can eat." Momma's nervous. It's funny to see someone uncomfortable with the discomfort they created.

"Don't forget the cheese. I want three eggs, please. Everything is fine at work. As fine as it ever will be. Did you get some biscuits?"

"Yes, Adream. I got the big and flaky ones." She wipes her hands on the dish towel. She walks over and looks like she wants to light another cigarette. I know she can feel my eyes telling her I wish she wouldn't. She doesn't. She returns the lighter, which probably belonged to someone else before she accidentally stole it, and slips it back into her cargo pants pocket. Is Momma shrinking?

"I really am busy, Momma. That job makes me tired. Talking to stupid people all day is hard. Doing it with a smile is harder."

She rolls her eyes while lighting her cigarette. She knows I'm lying about being too busy. I can see her eyes sparkle with relief, though. I didn't tell her I just don't want to see

her. That's progress. Momma's aging. Not gracefully. Gradually. She doesn't look 60, but she *could* look younger. Menthol and malt liquor will drain anybody's fountain of youth.

"Even though you ain't ask, I'll tell you. Work is good. They tryna make me a lead teacher. Not sure if I'll take it though. It come with a raise. But, you know, it's a lot of responsibility. Plus, anything can happen and I would have to be available. Anything go wrong, it's my fault. Even if I ain't there."

"Available? That shouldn't be a problem. You don't have anything else going on. It comes with a raise, too." My blood isn't boiling, but it's a few degrees warmer than it was when I first arrived. She would rather complain about having no money than take an opportunity to make more money.

"Well, I, um, I started uh, I started these counseling sessions. Go once a week." Struggling slightly, she pushes herself away and up so she can turn the fire down on the stove. She looks at me, then down, and back at the stove. She opens the refrigerator to get the eggs. Almost drops the carton. She'll do anything to keep from looking at me. Yes. She is shrinking. Her less-than-five-more-than-four-foot frame is definitely shriveling.

"That's good. It's about time." I push my chair back and see anger furrowing on her forehead. I blink and it's gone. The anger took a short excursion. It'll be back. It always comes back.

"Where you going?"

"Downstairs. I have to use the ladies' room."

“Ladies’ Room? When I get me one of those? I got a bathroom. Men can use it, too. Nobody would know your fancy ass grew up poor. And since you ain’t ask about this either, I’m still gonna tell you. My counselor’s name is Teri. She okay. She natural like you. Her hair ain’t as thick and pretty. Hers kinda beady. She ain’t got that good shit like you. She draw her eyebrows on. Anyway, you know, I ain’t one to talk to no stranger about my business.” She’s scrambling eggs and adding in lots of cheese. “I have to do 20 sessions. I got one down. It woulda been two if I hadn’t cussed her out the first time we met. She said I smelled like alcohol and I told her that might be that cheap perfume she was wearing. I was probably right. Ain’t no way she coulda smelled that beer I had on my lunch break. It had been like six hours since I drunk it.”

I shake my head and go downstairs to wash my hands. Who drinks on their lunch break? A bartender, maybe. Daycare worker, never. Except for my momma. She’s slick with it, too. She will go to McDonald’s, get one of their cups and a lid, then she’ll walk over to the convenient store, buy a beer, and dump it into her Mickey D’s cup. Her problem is not for me to figure out. Japanese chemistry would take less effort. This is one of the few basements that doesn’t have that creep factor. The washer and dryer are over in the corner and humming as always. She washes clothes every day. Her workout mat and kettlebells are next to her stationary bike. I’d gamble my savings that they have only been used by the previous owner she purchased it from. The ironing board is still up. Probably from when she used it this morning. That woman goes nowhere without a crease. She used to crease her sweatpants until one of her friends told her she looks stupid. There’s one laundry basket

filled with scrubs. The other with towels and sheets. I could be a good daughter and fold them for her. I am not a good daughter.

There's some ashes on the sink. She still prefers to put her cigarette on the sink instead of putting an ashtray down here.

“Aaayyah!”

“Girl, quit all that screaming. That cricket ain't gonna hurt you. I promise he ain't gonna bite. If he did, he'd want somethin' a lil more sweeter!”

I chuckled at that. Momma can make you laugh as long as she's not making you cry. I hurry up and washed my hands. She still doesn't have a roll of paper towel down here. Why doesn't she have lotion down here?

“I know you put paper towel in your bathroom. Lotion, too. When I make twenty dollars an hour like you, I'll think about it. 'Til that time come, dry your hands on that damn towel like other poor folks do. Your plate is ready!”

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Momma's already sitting at the table when I get back upstairs. I'm trying hard to look like I ain't chasing my breath because I'm not even close to catching it. Putting on twenty pounds makes it hard to run up the stairs. I put on eighty.

She doesn't have a plate, but she does have a cigarette. “You know I'll eat later. I get full from just cooking and smelling it.” She looks at me like she's trying to figure out something to say. “Your hair is growing. I remember when my afro looked like that. Girl, your momma's hair was all that! I ain't like it when you first cut your hair off. I like it now.

A little bit. I see a lot of girls at work talking about going natural. I still miss your permed hair.”

In between bites I utter a ‘Thank you’ and continue eating. This is another thing on a very short list that Momma does right. She can cook. I should probably act somewhat interested in her life.

“What made you start going to counseling? When I was going, you told me that was for white people and I was acting like some little white girl.” I go into the kitchen to add more gravy to my biscuits and sit back down at the table.

“It’s something I think I need to do. It’s uh, it’s time. She say I need to heal. Whatever that mean. I don’t think I’m hurt.”

“You *wanted* to go? When you said you had to do twenty sessions, I assumed you didn’t have a choice.”

She got caught in her lie. Momma gets up and opens the fridge. She gets a bottle of that nasty ass beer she loves. Cobra. Now, I can’t prove it, but I think that shit is brewed in the back of the damn store with mop water.

“I thought you weren’t drinking today.”

She sits down, opens the bottle and flicks the cap into the ash tray. “It’s my first one Dream. Damn. Is it really a problem if I have one? How’s the liver? I made extra in case you wanna take some home. You gotta bring my container back though.”

I know how women are about their Tupperware. However, this woman is worried about a Country Crock butter tub. The lids are usually torn. I'll decide after I eat if my love of liver is deeper than the disdain I have for Momma.

"Whatever. You're grown. I hope counseling goes good for you. I hope she still likes the profession after having you as a client. She has to be a glutton for punishment after continuing to see you after that first visit. Or on some mission from God."

"I know I ain't have to cuss the woman out. I feel bad about that. Said 'sorry' though." Her forehead is now adorned with wrinkles of rage. This time, *she* blinks and it's gone.

"Teri sounds like a wizard. You felt bad about something you did? I'm shocked." I am annoyed now. She has never been sorry about anything she's done to me. But she's sorry for something she did to a fucking stranger? Hell, that woman is paid to deal with that bullshit.

"Here we go. I knew it was coming. You got a full belly now. You got your strength up." She spits right before she guzzles the last few swallows of her beer. She slams the bottle down on the table and looks at me without really looking at me. I know Momma like I know the days of the week. She wants another beer. Five. Four. Three. T---

Momma gets up and goes to the fridge. I was off by two seconds. She is predictably ridiculous. She belches while taking the cap off. Now that's talent. I should see if the circus is recruiting new acts.

“Adream. I did something I ain’t have no business doing. Not telling you what it is. I did it. I was wrong and so your Momma ain’t gotta go to jail, she’s seeing a counselor. That’s all.”

“Fine.” I take the last piece of my biscuit and skate it around the plate. It is in that moment that I realize I love liver more than I loathe Momma. I want seconds and some to take for lunch tomorrow.

“You want me to make you some more eggs? It won’t take me long.” She is struggling to sip that beer. Chugging is more of her style. She’s willing to be unfashionable at an attempt to please me.

“No, ma’am. Thank you. What do you and your counselor talk about?” I say this as dully as possible. I can’t let her know that I really am interested. If she knows it’s something I want, she’d do her damndest to see that I don’t get it. I busy myself with cleaning up my mess. Thirst has taken over. But, if I put an ice chip in my mouth, I’ll bust. I decide to clean the kitchen. After I put me some food to the side and the rest in the fridge, I figure it’s time for my exit. Or so I thought. While I’m grabbing my purse she says, “You ain’t leaving already, are you?”

“No, I was going to get some lotion to put on hands,” I lied. It’s interesting how sometimes I care for her feelings and others I don’t. I wish I had it in me to completely cut her out of my life. I was doing that until a lapse in judgement had me run into her at the fucking Dollar Tree. I never go into that store. It’s primarily because of their products and the customers. I thought I was going to run in and run out. Nope. I ran right into my

momma. She hadn't seen me since I was a freshman in college. I'd been working at the library for at least a year. The silence would have never been broken if she hadn't spoken. She stepped in for a hug and I stepped back.

## Chapter 7

On the tattered and cigarette-burned couch, Femi lies snoring. Dreadlocks traipse down his face and come to a halt at his chest. One foot rests on the floor with the laces of its boot loosened. The other is draped over the arm of the couch. He managed to get the boot off of that one. His weed-induced coma is to blame for the cigarette that is dangling and burning between his callused fingers.

"Boy! Wake your ass up! You tryin' to burn down my house?" Joy screams at her youngest and only living child. Femi doesn't move. She snatches the cigarette from his hand and finishes what is left of it. "I said get up, nigga."

Joy is not a mean mother. She is fed up. While she is happy that he is home, she knows it is only a matter of time before he is residing at the Department of Corrections or in a casket. She has stopped counting how many times he'd been to the former. And the latter? That's been too-close-of-a-call too many damn times. She doesn't know exactly where she went wrong. That doesn't stop the rest of her family from reciting a saga of things she did that resulted in his being the worthless, yet handsome man that he is. She gave him too much, didn't discipline him. He started smoking at 10 and she was buying him cigarettes at 11. There was never a lock on her liquor cabinet. Once she realized her son

could drink gin straight from the bottle at 13, she started giving him a glass filled with ice. She wasn't raising a heathen. Femi would at least be civilized. He never had a curfew until his probation officer put him on one. Almost never heard the word 'no'. In the event Joy said 'no', by the time it reached his ears, it was converted to a 'yes'.

She walks into the kitchen and snatches the water jug out of the refrigerator. She slams it shut and wipes the sweat from her forehead. Hot flash. Joy mumbles something that even she can't hear. She gets a glass from the crowded cupboard and fills it with ice. While pouring the water, she hears Femi moving, but he's still snoring. She sips her water as she walks back into the den.

"Aaagggghh! Whatchu do that for?" Femi is awake.

"I didn't mean to. The water accidentally fell from my glass. You almost burned my damn house down. I done told you if you can't handle that shit you smoke then you need to quit smoking it. You getting stingy, too. You don't even leave me enough for a joint."

Femi is now sitting with both feet on the floor and is finally taking his other boot off. He balls his feet to keep his mother from noticing the holes in his sock. He's pissed, but he knows he better not show it. He would love to drop an ice cube down her back. Femi doesn't fear much. However, Joy Estelle Diallo is not to be messed with. His momma is a God-fearing Baptist woman. She'll cut you and praise the good Lord at the same time. When she's done, she'll wipe her blade off on her skirt, fold it up, return it to her bra, and light a cigarette. He stands up and pulls his locs from his face.

“You need to cut that shit. You look like Medusa. I know you ain’t found a job yet. Your P.O. came by yesterday. I told him you been looking. He know I’m lying, but he didn’t say shit. Looks like you got lucky...again. You got another P.O. that don’t care. I’ll give you credit, this is the longest you been out. It’ll soon be two years. But just like I told you the other times, don’t go back in. You ain’t never listened. I don’t know why —”

“Damn, Ma! I ain’t even been home a good hour and you already trippin’. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I’m tired. Damn.” Femi stands to stretch and pulls his hair back and knots it.

“Who you talking to? Don’t get fucked up, boy. It’s two people you got to respect in this world. That’s me and the Lord. It’s 8 o’clock in the morning. You just going to bed and people is waking up. You bet’ not be gettin’ into trouble.” She says as she starts taking rollers out her wig. Nobody sees Joy without her wig. She didn’t even take it off while she was giving birth to any of her four kids. Alopecia snatched every strand from her head by the time she was nine. Having 13 older brothers and bitterness from being bald insured that she could beat anybody’s ass who made fun of her. She would do little jobs around the neighborhood to get money for a wig. Her momma and daddy couldn’t afford one. She finally got one when she was 11. Scalp unseen since. She even has a wig to wear especially for bed time.

“Aight. Ma, I’m sorry. Can we just have a day where we ain’t beefing?” He smiles, revealing teeth that could have probably snagged him a contract with Colgate. The dimple in

his right cheek plays peesk-a-boo. It only reveals itself when he smiles just so. Instantly, Joy's wrath wilts into warmth.

“Beefing? You ain't from the Bronx, forreal. You spent one summer up there with your uncle and came back telling everybody you from New York. So, what's her name? And you better not be messing around with that damn Nevaeh. She still telling people her name is Heaven spelled backwards? Her momma sho' nuff named her right. That damn girl ain't nothin' but hell.”

She sits down next to Femi. She flings her house shoes across the room and she tucks her feet under her. She hates that couch. The pattern of flowers look like they were yanked from the garden of death. Femi and Rayon are the only ones that come back here, really. Sometimes he'll bring one of his many women to spend the night. That's rare though. Joy has made it clear, her house is not the Do Drop Inn. It wouldn't take nothing for her to fix the room up. She just hasn't done it. Maybe when he gets his own place. Nobody knows when that is exactly.

He'll be 40 on his next birthday. Femi has never had a license, but he knows how to drive. Started stealing her car when he was twelve. He's got two GEDs. He found out that inmates get time off of their sentence if they get their GED. They didn't know he already had one the first time he was locked up, so he got another one to get out early. Only to be sent back a few weeks later. The longest Femi has ever had a job was that summer he spent in New York. Her brother, Charlie, owns a drycleaners and he let Femi work there. Femi was getting into serious trouble and Charlie wanted to help his sister out by taking him off

her hands. When customers started complaining about their clothes missing and Charlie noticed his money was missing, Femi was sent back down south. That was to keep his black ass from coming up missing. Charlie Roach is not above killing his own nephew. He just didn't want to kill his only sister. She'd never get over the heartache of losing that fool. Besides, Joy never recovered from her three girls being killed by a drunk driver on their way to a high school dance. Charlie's decision to let Femi live is reversible. He knows it and Joy does, too.

“Ha! Don't be putting me on blast either. Don't be telling nobody I ain't from New York. Me and Nevaeh ain't messed around since I beat up one of her babies' daddy. The last time I was out, I ran into him at the after-hours spot. Talkin' bout he don't appreciate me playing his with his son's Xbox and eating up all his cereal.” Femi reaches in his pocket and pulls out a baggie. As if the next move had been rehearsed, Joy pulls a slim pack of rolling papers from her robe pocket. He gives his momma the bag and she rolls a joint.

“Make sure you leave me enough for a blunt. Don't make it too fat. Anyway, the nigga wanted to play tough guy. I knocked out his teeth and shit. Ain't heard from Nevaeh since. I did meet this girl named Adream. Shorty fly, too. Real pretty.”

Joy passes him the joint and with her lungs filled says, “Adream? If she ain't a stripper, then her momma damn sure was. What kind of name is that? And I know she fat.” They both laugh and choke on smoke at her comment. Even when Femi was in kindergarten, he liked the little chubby girls. They'd be cute, but they'd be fat. He don't like nobody calling his women fat, though.

“She ain’t no stripper, Ma. She’s smart, talks real proper. Graduated from college and ain’t got no kids. Plus, I ain’t never had a fat one. They be thick, but never fat. Well, Tasha was fat. Obese! She had a pretty face though. Anyway, I met Adream at the coffee shop. That was the day I was helping Uncle Biscuit move. She’s the color of cola, too.” Femi and his momma continue passing the joint until neither one of their fingers can pinch it. Joy pulls out her Kools, lights one, and gives one to him. “Don’t think you gonna smoke up all my cigarettes, either.”

He winks at his Momma. Her gold teeth gleamed as she smiled back. And with that, they both chill on the couch and enjoy their high. Joy sends up a quick yet genuine prayer for Adream. Then she thinks one for herself. Anyone who keeps the company of Femi should pray often. Always.

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“What’s good, Ma?” Femi coos as he sits in the bath tub. His head is mounted on a rolled-up towel. Fingers slick with suds scoot the mostly empty ashtray down towards his feet. The bathroom is tiny, but he lounges like it’s his personal spa.

“What’s up, Stranger? Who’s number are you calling me from?”

“It’s my house number. I ain’t got no minutes, Shorty. You the one with the good job at the library. You could probably get me some minutes.” Femi smirks. He reaches down to turn on the hot water and to add more bubbles to the plush bed of foam he is relaxing in.

“You need some minutes? I’ll get you some. Which date works better for you, the 26<sup>th</sup> of Never Worry or the 17<sup>th</sup> of Nay? I was never in that business of taking care of men. I am a ‘ride and try’ type of chick. Meaning I’ll ride and try some things with you. The operative word is *try*. If what you’re looking for is one of those ride or die bitches, feel free to exit stage left and head directly to your nearest housing project.”

“There’s that slick ass mouth. I was just playin’. Damn, you a feisty one. I better hurry up and get you a double dose of act right.” Femi is covertly annoyed. His phone hasn’t had minutes since he pissed Sasha off three days ago. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut. He shouldn’t have called her momma a meddling bitch. Even though she is. She keeps telling Sasha to leave him alone. Reese just bought him some Jordans and a LeBron jersey. His momma gave him some money to get on the bus, so he knows he can’t ask her to help him with his phone. Well, he can, he just doesn’t want the bitching that comes along with his begging.

“Hurry up and get your ass outta that tub.” Joy screams. “Damn, Femi! I gotta go downtown. Your Uncle Big Brother is getting arraigned, today.” Joy screams from the bathroom door as she yanks on it.

“Is that your mother? You live with your Momma?”

“Na, Shorty. Moms lives with me. She’s had it hard since my Pops passed. I take care of her. As long as I have a place, she’ll never be homeless.”

“Awww. That’s so sweet. Um, is that her real voice? She sounds like one of those squeaky wheels on a shopping cart.”

“Yeah, I take care of the little lady. And yeah, that’s her voice. I don’t do the Momma jokes.” He chuckles and smiles. He knows Operation Hook, Lie, and Sink Her is now in effect. He tells Adream he’ll call her back when he’s finished getting dressed. He reaches down in the water to remove the stopper and stands. His frothy frame could easily be splattered across the cover of any magazine; however, he prefers to spread out on some woman’s bed. He turns the shower on for a few seconds to do a quick rinse off, wraps a towel around his tribal-tatted waist, and steps out. As soon as he opens the door, there’s Joy standing with one hand on her hip and the other placing a cigarette between her plum-coated lips. Her blouse looks like it’s fresh off the clearance rack: wrinkled in spots and tried on by at least eight other women before it caught her eye. Her skirt is almost wrinkle-free and has a safety pin filling in for a button. It’s short enough to help her stilettos create the illusion of long legs. Her wig is perfectly mounted. She’s 75 and will not even consider the thought of purchasing a wig with gray in it.

“Really, Ma? I can’t even wash my nuts in peace? What was you yanking on the door for? You knew I was taking a bath.”

“Boy, please. It ain’t nothing I ain’t seen before. I gotta go and I wanna put on my face. Plus, this is my goddamn house. I know how to spell your fucking name and I have never seen it on my deed. What are you doing today? I’d like it if you would cut the front and back yard. I’d love it if you would rake and bag it up when you’re finished. Last time you left my damn lawnmower running and didn’t rake up shit. It looked like my damn lawn sneezed and sprayed grass all over my walkway. I paid you for it, too. I gave your no-good-

for-nothing-ass twenty dollars. That's what I get for not waiting 'til you was done. Lil' Jonathan next door would have did it for five and a piece of chocolate cake."

Joy and Femi switch places. She puts her cigarette down in the ashtray and stands in front of the mirror. Femi is now in the hallway. He wants to stand on the heater. That's how he dries off when she's not home. She'll surely get to hollering about the electricity bill that he doesn't help pay. Joy applies a streak of plum lipstick to her eyelids and smears it with her fingers. Her nails are jagged and her fingerprints are fossil-ed into the red polish that she didn't allow to dry all the way. As a general rule, her eye makeup has to match her lips exactly. Using lipstick for eyeshadow guarantees this goal is achieved.

"Okay, I don't know how long I'm gonna be," she says. "Your uncle might get some serious time off of this one. But, I'm coming straight home." She gives her wig one last smooth-over and mists it with oil sheen.

"I told you I was sorry about that. Rayon came by the house, I had to go. Forreal Ma, I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I put that on everything I love."

"Nigga, you don't love nothing but yourself. You ain't gotta lie to me. I ain't one of your women. Make sure you lock up my house when you go out. I'm leaving now. The good Lord knows I don't feel like fighting these people over a fucking parking spot. Maybe He'll bless me with one right out front. That reminds me. I gotta find some change for the meter."

"Why don't you let me drop you off? You can call me when you ready. Naw, you can't call me. I ain't got no minutes."

“Here, take this.” Joy rolls her eyes and reaches into her pocketbook for her wallet. All she has is a couple of fifties. “Damn. I ain’t got no change. Put ten on your phone and make sure your ass answers when I call you. I’m not playing with you, Oluwafemi. Don’t have me down there waiting all day. I gotta pick up Sister Evans for Bible Study tonight. And you better have my goddamn change. Hurry up and get dressed. I’ll be in the car.”

## **Chapter 8**

After being in the car with Joy for 20 minutes, Femi is craving a blunt and a drink. He loves his mother, but all she does is bitch. And that voice. Mickey Mouse has more bass in his voice. That high-pitched squeak shrieks louder the more worked up she gets. Joy removes a razor from her bra. After kissing her on the cheek and listening to one more rant about how his black ass better not forget about her, he makes his way to the Cricket store. He would have called Adream from the house and told her to meet him somewhere, but he knew that would have been one more thing for his momma to crush his balls over: making her late to court.

He parks the Buick on the curb and makes his way inside. It’s busy. Femi doesn’t mind waiting though. Time is always at his disposal. The little old lady in front of him smiles and winks. Femi being the ultimate gentlemen he pretends to be, blows her a kiss and winks back. She giggles and turns back around. After half an hour of standing in line, he is at the counter. The young lady wearing a name tag that reads Keisha can hardly look at him.

“What’s your phone number?” she mumbles.

“How you doing, Ma? This is the south. I thought manners was real big down here. If I wanted service from someone who doesn’t even greet me, I coulda stayed in New York.” He says this with a toothpick twirling in between his lips.

“Oh. Um, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be rude,” she says while finger curling one of her twists in her hand. “It’s just that I figured you was probably in a hurry and I ain’t want you to be in here any longer than you have to.” Keisha’s caramel skin is now tinted crimson. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all good. Don’t underestimate yourself though. If I was in a rush, I’d slow down just to prolong this interaction with you. But anyway, how you doin’?”

“Good. Thank you for asking,” she replies as little white drops of spittle fly from her mouth. She takes a drink from her bottled water. Most of it lands on her shirt. Femi reaches in his back pocket and pulls out his perfectly pressed hanky. He reaches across the counter and gives it to her. Kofi Diallo taught his only son to never leave the house without a hanky. Keisha giggles and looks down at her shirt. She dabs it with the hanky. Embarrassed and smitten at the same time. She doesn’t know if she is to keep it or give it back.

“It’s good, Pretty. Keep it. I would have helped you, but I’m sure there’s some law against that. So listen, I need to put some minutes on my phone. And I was wondering what kind of deals ya’ll had on phones? Mine should have been tossed a long time ago. I’m always busy and haven’t really had the chance to take care of it.”

Keisha pushes her glasses down on her nose and says, "I'm sure we have something you would like."

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Walking out of the store with Keisha's number locked into a new phone that costs him nothing but charm, he dials Adream.

"It takes you that long to get ready?" She huffs.

"Yo! Ma! Chill with that." He says while putting the key in the ignition. I had to do something for Moms. I was wondering if you wanted to get something to eat. I wanna help you maintain that thickness. Hold on, Shorty, my line's beeping."

"You done already?"

"Yeah, come and get me." Joy says. "He done beat up one of the guards and ain't gonna be arraigned today. Had me waste my time and a outfit coming down here."

"Aight. I'm on my way. I'll be there in a few minutes." Femi clicks back over, "Sorry about that. That's Moms. She need me to pick her up. Anyway, I was wondering what you was doing. Maybe we could grab something to eat or have a little drink. I really wanna see you." Femi smirks as swerves in and out of the downtown traffic.

"A drink? It's only 10:17. If you're one of those fools who brushes his teeth with whiskey, delete my number. Immediately."

"That mouth. First of all, Ma, don't come at me like that. Secondly, you seem like the snooty type. I was talking about a mimosa or a bellini with a late breakfast. You ever been to that joint, Toast?"

“Well, I apologize. I’ve heard about Toast. My friend Esther and her husband love it. What time do you wanna meet?”

“Damn. You one of those independent ones. Don’t even want a nigga to pick you up. It’s cool. Let’s shoot for noon. That’ll give me times to make sure Moms is good.”

“I don’t know you. That’s why you’re not privileged to pick me up. Noon it is. Don’t be late. I give a one minute grace period.”

“That’s a bet. I’mma holla at you in a minute though. Stay sexy, Ma.” Femi pulls up in the loading zone to pick up Joy.

She slams the door and starts talking before she can even get her seatbelt on.

“That muthafucka didn’t even make it into the courtroom! I’m sitting there and waiting. They call everybody’s name and I don’t hear them say Roach. So, I gets up and checks the docket and he’s not on there. I had to walk down to the other side of the courthouse to talk to the clerk. Anyway, they can’t have everything on the same side, that’d be too much like the right thing to do. Thank the Lord I had on my comfortable heels. So, I gets up there, and Jody working at the window. She’s real sweet. She helps me out with whatever she can when your uncles get into some shit. Anyway, she tells me they caught Big Brother with a bunch of shit. He might not get out this time. And if he do, your grandkids’ll have grandkids. These raggedy ass muthafuckas. I said a prayer for him and know that God will him through this. I’ll call Tinky and see if she need anything and help her keep a little money on his books. She a good woman, her husband ain’t shit is all.

“He had a gun and some pills on him. The car he was riding in wasn’t registered. And he ain’t been paying his child support. I ain’t putting up my house this time. I’ll write his ass and I’ll be at every court date if the Lord is willing. I’m tired of this shit. Hell, whenever I go to the prison and visit it’s a family reunion. Femi, don’t you get your ass into no more trouble. Momma tired.”

Joy takes out two Kools, puts one in her mouth and hands the other to Femi. She pushes the lighter in and waits for it to pop out. She lights hers and then gives the lighter to Femi. She continues to gripe about her family and how they ain’t no good and how she blames them for introducing Femi to the streets and those fucking pills that he loves so much. She keeps saying how tired she is and wishes everybody would get their shit together.

Femi just nods and hopes she doesn’t ask for her change. He still has the fifty, Keisha did something to where he didn’t have to give up no money. Joy is too tired to care about the money or her car. She tells Femi to make sure he’s back in time so she can go to Bible Study.

## **Chapter 9**

Lord, please let Femi show something promising. I need some good company or a distraction. It’s just that all of my friends are either shacking up or getting married. That shacking up shit is not for me though. I am a sinner, but I’m selective of my sins. I’m just tired of people asking me about getting married and popping out some babies. Apparently, I’m built to carry about six children. Some fool was surprised I didn’t have any kids and

informed me that it was a shame because my hips could help me spit out about six with no problem.

It is three minutes 'til noon and four minutes before I walk out of this restaurant. I just know he will not be on time. My Fridays off could be spent doing other things. I haven't been to the park in a while. That reminds me, I have to pick up a blue Gatorade. I just cleaned out a Windex bottle. Maybe I'll just walk downtown and spray it in my mouth.

"Looking good, Ma." Femi says. The fabric of his carnation pink polo has to be exhausted. It's enduring a vicious battle with biceps that seem determined to break free.

"Thank you. I'm impressed. I just knew I was going to order my meal to go and cuss you out while I was driving home. How are you, Oluwafemi?"

"I'm smooth, Shorty. That dress is kinda fly. I like it a lot. I hope you ain't been waiting too long. I had to argue with Moms about *my* car. Hers is in the shop and she think she can just take mines. It's good, though. I'mma take care of the little lady. I was thinking of just renting her one." The sincerity on Femi's face sinks all the sassiness I'd been storing.

"Are you ready to be seated?" The petite hostess asks.

"We are." Femi coos and the hostess' pale cheeks blossom into a rosy red.

"This way, please."

"After you, Beautiful." Femi places his hand on the small of my back and guides me as I follow the hostess. His touch has a gentle strength that I could certainly grow accustomed to. He thanks the hostess, and pulls out my chair. I really don't want to take it.

I have this thing about being too heavy for a man to push me and my chair under the table with ease. Femi does just that.

“So, I hope you know I’m real happy to see you. I mean, I been real busy with work and Moms. I ain’t had no time to put minutes on my phone. I went ahead got on a plan. But, I was making time for you, today. I did not want to go another day without looking at those eyes.”

Before I could respond, a waitress is eagerly walking our way. She looks at me and offers a cordial grin. However, the smile she offers Femi is anything but. Until this moment, I was unaware that the corners of a person’s mouth could reach their temples.

“Hello! I’m Justine and I’ll be taking care of the two of you today. Have you dined with us before?” Her tone says she is speaking to both of us, but her body language says she doesn’t give a damn if I die of starvation.

“I’ve been here before, Sweetness over there hasn’t. We’ll need a few minutes to look over the menu. We’ll start with a couple of waters for now. Thank you.” With that, Femi smiles graciously, but sends a firm message via his eyes that he is not picking up whatever it is Justine is trying to put down.

“I mean, damn. I see now we can’t go anywhere without chicks sweating you.”

“It doesn’t even matter, though. I’m here with you for one. And two, she’s white. I don’t do salt. That’ll make a nigga’s blood pressure go up. Plus, momma always told me, the only thing welcomed in her house that’s white is bread, rice, and underwear.” He chuckles at himself. I see a dimple that I’ve never seen before. I can’t help but laugh either.

I love breakfast any time of day. The rule of tongue is this: if it has biscuits and gravy listed, there is no need to look at the rest of the menu. So I didn't. Justine returned to our table a little less eager. Femi ordered my biscuits and gravy, a vegetarian omelet, and two peach bellinis.

"So, tell me, how does one go from Tumbleweed to Toast?"

"Here you go! Seriously, I mean, I use that as a way to gauge where a woman's taste is. I ain't gonna front, I done had some chicks get pumped if I let them supersize their value meal at McDonald's. Clearly, you wasn't having none of that. So, that let me know, you ain't no common broad. Don't get me wrong, you was looking fly and all. Some chicks look the part, but can't play the role. It was just a test, Ma." He removes the napkin from beneath the silverware and gives it a firm shake before placing it on his lap.

"Aight, Shorty. Tell me something. What's your favorite book? You work at a library, so I bet you got a bunch. So, tell me your favorite two books." I choke on my ice water. No man has ever asked me that. Never.

"*The Coldest Winter Ever* and *Black Girl Lost*." It came out as a whisper because the surprise had not worn off.

"For real? Yo, I love me some Sistah Soujah and Donald Goines. Donald is the man. I've read all of his books. I read the sequel to *Coldest Winter*. I ain't like it. I ain't hate it, it just didn't seem like a good sequel."

"That's what people don't understand. That book wasn't a sequel. It was a prequel. I mean, I feel like it was pitched as a sequel, but that's not what it was. I read it just because

I am a fan. There's three Donald Goines' books that I haven't read. I'll get them out of the way eventually."

"Moms loves to read. She always got her nose in a book. She hipped me to a lot of shit. Forreal, I'm open to some new authors though. Don't come at me with those love stories though. I ain't with that."

"Whatever. All women don't read that shit. I certainly don't. But, I got you. You got a library card?" Justine is returning. She is pleasant enough with me; simply delightful with Femi. She places our food in front of us without ever taking her eyes from Femi. He didn't even look at her.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" She stands with her hands clasped behind her back and eyes locked on the suave specimen sitting across from me.

"I'm good, thank you for asking. Now, ask the lovely lady sitting across me." The rosy red cheeks she had once before are gone. Crimson is creeping about her entire face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. That question was for the both of you. I'll ask again. Um, ma'am, do you need anything?" She really didn't have to fake a smile. The red lipstick she is wearing looks orange on her teeth. I should tell her that the shade on her teeth goes better with her skin tone. She's dealing with my food though. That's the one time I keep nasty retorts to myself.

"No, this will do." She obviously didn't get the hint the first time. Femi sent a memo and a press release. I like him. Yeah. I. Like. Him.

“Damn. Rude as hell. Library card? Na, I ain’t got one of those. I should look into it. Which library you work at? Wait. Don’t answer that. Let’s bless this food.” Femi reaches for my hands. I place them in his and look at the perfectly-parted maze of locs that roam about his crown as his head is bowed.

“Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. For it is the one You made. I ask that you bless this food as well as the hands that prepared it. Also, Lord, bless this new friendship. In your name, I pray. Amen.” Just as I see Femi lifting his head, I close my eyes, open them and utter, “Amen.”

“Aight, Shorty. Shoot. Let’s hear it.” He lifts his fork with his left hand and begins to eat his food.

“I work at the one in the west. Deep in the west. It’s in the middle of the projects.” I use my spoon to scoop and spread the gravy evenly. Damn. Forgot to snap a picture for facebook. Too late now, I have already marred the masterpiece with my fork. The chatter of the other patrons is soothing for some reason. I look across and see Femi struggling not to go Garfield on his food. It looks like he would love nothing more than to pick up the omelet and his side of grits and start slinging it into his mouth with both hands. I clear my throat to let him know that there’s an audience who is not liking this show.

“Awww. Damn. I’m hungry. Don’t front on me though, Mami. I know you like to eat. That ass of yours didn’t get fat from just breathing. You eat. Don’t be shy in front me, now.” He says this with his mouth full and an elbow on the table. It’s obvious that he

passed the test on chivalry, but he flunked the mid-term on table etiquette. I have never seen anyone who eats like a pig and still maintain his sexiness.

“You got it twisted. I don’t front. It’s obvious I like food. Love it. But, I remember how to eat when I’m out in public. I can see you were one of those kids whose momma had to give you a full bath and a change of clothes after eating a snack.” Bad table manners are a fixable problem. It just doesn’t have to be repaired this very moment. I just let him do him and I ate my food. I remember seeing the cover of some teen magazine when I was in like the eighth grade. It had something on it that read: To eat, or not to eat everything on your plate? Momma wouldn’t buy it for me. So, I never got the answer. I made up my own. That plate looked like it just came out of the dishwasher when I was finished. I’m so good at cleaning a plate that you won’t even hear the fork scrape. Femi’s phone vibrates. He takes it out of his pocket, looks at it, and returns it to his pocket.

“Tell me more about your Momma. Ya’ll close?” They always say you can tell how a man will treat you by how he treats his mother. I’d be single for the rest of my life and everybody else’s if men judged women by how they treated their mother.

“Moms is cool. She’s crazy as hell. That’s my heart though. Pops was killed when I was seven. He owned a liquor store and drove cabs just to make sure we ain’t want for nothing. We didn’t. Moms still ain’t hurting. She lives with me because she’s lonely. My sisters died in a car accident on their way to a Homecoming dance. That was three years after Pops. They’d just left the house, too. She been through a lot. It’s just been me and her ever since. What about you and yours?”

I try not to bring Mirage Williams up for any conversation. Well, not unless I'm paying 75 bucks an hour while lying on a sofa.

"Hmmm. Mine? Um, I don't really know what to say about her. She's got all her limbs and she can blink and breathe simultaneously. That's about it." I wish I had something else to eat. I don't talk if I have food in my mouth.

"I mean, ya'll close? She live here? Tell me something."

I drink the last of my water and then pick up my bellini and sip on that.

"If you ever do anything to piss me off, I'll take you to meet her. That'll be my payback. Um, let's talk about something else. You work in construction, right?"

"I did. I'm off for a little while though. I hurt my back real bad lifting too many bags of concrete mix. My uncles will throw me a little bread if they need help with moving or doing work around people's houses. I got a shit load of uncles on Moms' side. My father had a bunch of sisters over in Nigeria. He died before he got to bring them over here."

"So your family probably means a lot to you. Mine put the 'ass' in embarrassment. I deal with them on a 'need to' basis: I don't need to. Anyway, who's the greatest rapper of all time?" His face radiates with excitement. He nods and bops to a beat like he is reciting lyrics in his head.

"I mean, that's a tough one. How far you wanna go back? Rakim, LL, or you want someone more recent?"

"Of our generation. I'll make it easy for you, Biggie goes without saying. That's simply a given. Jay-Z, too."

“Ay, Shorty. You can roll with me any time. I just knew you was gonna holla Pac. He was aight. He wasn’t no Biggie though. Plus, you know I gotta rep for New York. Aight, since you acknowledged the two greatest, I’mma have to go with my man, Nas. He was doing some ill shit in his day.” He adjusts himself in his chair and props his head up with his right hand. His nails are short and clean, but his knuckles are adorned with scars.

The conversation between us is fluid with rhythmic breaks. I love his laugh. It escapes from the pit of his stomach, free falls from his mouth, and lands softly on my ears. It’s a contagious melody that lures me into its chorus. I’m at ease easily with him. For the first time, I feel secure in my insecurities.

“Here’s your check. And there’s no rush. Please let me know if there is anything else I can get for you.” Justine places the bill in the center and leaves before I can figure out which direction she appeared from. I’m just wondering when she’s going to remove our dishes.

“So, tell me something. Why you single? You sexy as hell. Smart. Thick as peanut butter. Your mouth is a little too fresh. But a nigga like me can fix that.” Femi says and preoccupies himself with the bill. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a fifty. His phone vibrates again. Just like last time, he takes it out, looks, and back in his pocket it goes.

“Somebody is really trying to get a hold of you.”

“Not even. I just gotta make sure it ain’t Moms calling. She wants the car for Bible Study tonight. She always making sure I don’t forget about her. Go ‘head and answer my question.”

“Well, I’m single because I haven’t found anyone who makes me want to be bothered with them on a consistent basis. I don’t have time for games. Most of ya’ll are liars. The good ones are gay, married, dead, or nonexistent.”

“Damn. It’s like that? Some nigga did you bad. That ain’t me. I’m not into games. What you see is what you get with me.” His voice was calm, eyes focused.

“Yeah. I’ve never heard that one before. Ya’ll all read from the same book of bullshit or the browse the same website of lies. And please don’t confuse this for bitterness. I’m not bitter.” I go in my purse for lip gloss and use the face of my phone for a mirror.

“Damn. Ain’t nobody running game on you, huh? I feel you though. So, what’s up? What’s on your agenda for the rest of the day?”

“I have to help this girl with her essay for college. Her baby attends the day care where my momma works. I have some cleaning to do and of course, I have to wash my hair.”

“Aww. Okay. I was wondering if I could see you later on tonight. I could drop by. We can watch a movie or just chill.” His eyes are dancing with the anticipation of a ‘yes’. It is unfortunate that they are completely off beat.”

“A movie or chilling sounds really nice, actually. I am totally down for that. Alone. I still need to feel you out before you are invited.”

“You know what, Ma? You talking all slick and shit is something I ain’t used to. I don’t mean no harm or disrespect at all, Shorty. A nigga just wants to get to know you a little better, that’s all. It’s cool. Take your time. Whenever you ready to quit playing

checkers with these little boys and start a game of chess with a man, you know where to find me. Feel me?" The softness of his face betrays the hardness of Femi's words. His feelings are hurt.

"The pleasure was yours, Boo. Enjoy your errands." Femi stands and brushes his hands down his plaid shorts.

"In the event that I do want to 'find' you, make sure you have you have some minutes on your phone so I can text you that I am indeed looking for you."

The frustration that he failed at hiding has dissipated and has been replaced with laughter.

"Aaah. Shorty, you got the jokes. I told you I got a plan today. You know what? I respect you. I understand. Real talk. Just let a brother know when you ready to really get to know me. I'mma walk you to your car so you can get on with your day."

As I walk towards him, his hand finds its home in the center of my back. He leads me through the foyer and out to my car. He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses the tips of every finger.

Femi leans in and whispers into my ear, "Now, close your eyes."

Without question or concern, I simply oblige. His body heat warms my face moments before his lips caress my eyelids. He then plants soft petals of pop-kisses on my forehead. I open my eyes and initiate a stare war into his. He looks away first.

He opens my door and helps me into my car. Before he closes it, he winks and smiles.

“You just make sure you call me, Ma.” He says and walks away.

I sit and watch him in my rearview until I cannot see him anymore.

## Chapter 10

Adream enters her apartment and kicks off her shoes. She rests against the back of the door. Inhales and exhales. Inhales. Holds and releases. Running errands was put on hold because of a mental detour. Oluwafemi: a pit stop she hadn't planned. His lips left their print stamped on her heart's memory. The gesture was sensual in its subtlety. Foreign in how it felt. Yet, there is discomfort in being so comfortable and so vulnerable with Femi so soon. A few conversations and a meal with this man has her shambling mentally. The security she finds in solitude is no longer desired. And she still hasn't busted him out about his criminal history.

She separates herself away from the door and her thoughts. She wants to think, but needs to remove the smog that is clouding her mind and emotions. Sangria and Seroquel will make everything clear. She texts her dentist to request an excuse for missing work tomorrow. April responds right away that she'll email her one. Not only does Adream hate Mondays, she's not fond of Saturdays when she has to work.

Her focus falls onto Femi. She is fighting not to call or text him. And just as she is trying to remove all thoughts of him, his name lights up on her screen. She ignores it. A comedy. That's what she needs. She needs some laughter. Her DVDS are on the bottom of her bookshelf in alphabetical order. She stops at the letter T. *Titanic* it is. That movie is

as funny as the first time she saw it in the theatres. By the time the ship hits the iceberg, Adream is asleep.

## Chapter 11

“Hey, Ms. Terri. How are you?” Here I am, spending Saturdays with a stranger I’m supposed to tell all my secrets to. That natural hair ain’t for everybody. Maybe I’ll tell her after our last session. Can’t have her telling the judge nothing bad.

“Hello, Mirage. So glad to see you. You seem like you’re in a good mood. How’s everything going?”

“It’s good. My baby came to see me. That’s a first in a while. A real long while.” She got lint in her hair. Maybe I’ll tell her before I leave. Maybe. Her ass still ain’t dusted this office.

“That’s great. How did it go?”

“It was okay. She loves my liver and gravy. The conversation ain’t nothing to talk about, really. Dream was raised on Ramen noodles and Spam. I don’t know how she developed a taste for steak and shrimp. Came in the house talking about ‘using the ladies’ room and whatnot’. She carry all those expensive purses and shit. I don’t know how my child of all folk got to like the finer things. I gave her very little and that’s more than I had to be honest.”

“I see.”

“Why you always say that? They teach ya’ll to say that in school or something? The Lifetime movies always have a psychiatrist saying, “I see.”

She laughs at that. I do, too.

“Well, that’s just a way for us to let you know we’re listening. That’s all.”

“Oh. Well, anyway. Dream was okay. I got mad and wanted to throw something at her. Her mouth. It’s always been smart as hell. I’m just glad she ain’t start bringing up the past. She always does that. And it pisses me off.” I look down at my shoes. I coulda took some soap and a toothbrush to them. They don’t look too bad.

“What about the past does she bring up?” With that question, she just leans in like she gotta know all my secrets.

“Well, all this is confidential, ain’t it?”

She shakes her head yes and that lint ball don’t move one bit. I just get up and take it out her hair and show it to her. First she flinch like I’m gonna hit her. Once she figure out what I was doing, she fine.

“Adream always says I beat her. Say I abuse her. To me, it wasn’t abuse. I did what was done to me. I ain’t never think it was abuse when my aunty hit me. I thought it was an ass whooping that I deserved for doing something I wasn’t supposed to do. I turned out okay. She swear I beat her. I ain’t do her like Aunty did me. She used those thick extension cords. The real thick ones. I used a belt on her most of the time.”

“Oh. Well, lots of people were spanked or whooped. What would you spank her for.?”

“Any time she did something she wasn’t supposed to do. But mostly for pissing in the bed. She pissed every damn night. Had to be more than once some nights because the sheets would be dripping.”

“Okay. A lot of kids wet the bed. They typically grow out of it.”

“Well, it took her 15 years before she did. She used to make me so mad. And when she’d hide her sheets under the bed or in the closet. Sometimes she’d throw them away. That would make me real mad. She would hide them in her dresser drawers. That would make the ass whoopings worse. Have my whole damn house smelling like piss. I hung up a sign in the living room: my house stinks because Adream pees in her bed.” Now she looking at me like I done lost my mind. I shoulda kept my mouth shut.

“Well, if she was getting spanked for doing something she probably had no control over, I could see why she would hide it.”

“It didn’t start off as straight-to-an-ass-beating. The first few nights I just told her she too old to be doing that shit. When that didn’t help, I used to rub her face in them pissy sheets. I ain’t wanna keep doing all that damn washing. Sometimes I’d make her lay in it for two nights.”

She just looks at me. Her leg is swinging back and forth as it’s crossed over the other.

“It’s okay, Mirage. I do not pass judgement. I do not know what it is like to be in your shoes. It sounds like you were overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do. Did you ever think about seeing a specialist or a doctor for Adream?”

“Uh. I don’t know if you know this or not, but I’m Black. You know we don’t do that. The only reason I’m here is because a White judge told me to come here or go to jail. By the way, even though you ain’t never offered, I guess I gotta ask. Can I get something to drink?”

She looks embarrassed and gives an apologetic smile. “Sure. Would you like some water? Or pop?”

“I’ll take a pop. Anything with bubbles is fine. Water don’t got no flavor. And it’s nasty.” She gets up and walks out of the office. I fight with the tears I don’t wanna let go. I start fanning my eyes and they dry up just as she walk back in with a Sprite. I don’t like Sprite. I reckon it’ll do.

“Well, what do you think your current self would tell your former self about how you handled Adreams bed-wetting?”

“Um. I guess me right now would tell me then that maybe she wasn’t being lazy like I always said. She would tell me she can’t feel it and don’t know she did it ‘til she wake up in the morning. I guess she didn’t. Adream don’t like to be messy for no reason. Damn girl love taking showers and baths. Maybe she was telling the truth. I guess I was mad, too. I wet the bed, too. I ain’t never tell Adream that though. It wasn’t none of her damn business. She thinks them whoopings I gave her was something...man, my aunty would whip me ‘til I bled. I’d have welts.”

“How do you think it may have impacted your relationship with Adream if you had told her about your experience with bedwetting?” She adjusts those ugly glasses and looks over them waiting on me to answer.

“I got my ass beat for it every time. She just don’t understand. I did everything that was done to me. No, I ain’t tell her. Dream is different. But she know I ain’t have no mother or father. All five us was bounced around from house to house when Momma and Daddy died. Didn’t nobody wanna take us in. I was young when I lost my momma. *Younger* when I lost my Daddy.”

“I understand. Have you ever told Adream that you didn’t know any better?”

“Adream should know that I ain’t know no better. She know I ain’t really have no family. She know me and her ain’t have nobody. Her damn Daddy ain’t good for a damn thing. We was both young, dumb, and full of cum. I do wonder if the kids he had with his wife feel the same way.” I’m sick of this therapy shit already. I ain’t plan on telling this woman all this. It does feel good to say some of it out loud, though.

“Maybe she doesn’t know since you have never told her. How would you feel if I gave you some homework? You may as well make these sessions useful since you’re here.”

“What kind of homework? I ain’t no dummy, but I ain’t never like school much?”

“It’s not that kind of homework. Therapy is more than just telling me private details of your life. There is work to be done in order for you to heal. Why don’t you try telling your daughter your story? Explain to her why what happened happened.” She looks at me like she really care. She might.

“I mean, Adream is real stubborn and mean, too. She gotta get that from her damn Daddy. She sure enough ain’t get it from me. Her imaginary friends were scared of her. Plus, she just came over this past weekend. It’s usually weeks or even months before I see her again. I can try. I really don’t want her hating me. I ain’t no dummy. I know my child really don’t have any reason to love me.”

“I think it is great that you recognize that and own that. All you can ever do is try. Worst case scenario, she does not receive it well. But hopefully, you can develop some peace knowing that you tried to repair the relationship. For a lot of people, admitting mistakes is not easy and that is perfectly normal. The homework I want you to do is to write down how you feel about Adream. Then I want you to write down how you *think* she feels about you. That may be very difficult at first, but I urge you to keep trying. Can you buy a notebook?”

“Yeah. I can do that.” I don’t know what I just got myself into. Trying really won’t hurt nothing. I don’t think.

“Great. I would like for you to bring the notebook with you from our next session forward. I want you to be as honest with yourself as you possibly can. I will not ask you to read it, but you can share whatever it is that you feel comfortable sharing. This was a great session Mirage. You seem to be getting more comfortable with our sessions. And it is so important for you to remember that this truly is a ‘no judgement zone’. I’ll see you next week.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

## Chapter 12

“Heeey, Momma.” Femi bends down to kiss her and she turns her head away and rolls her eyes.

“Don’t even try it. Where the hell you been at? I ain’t seen your ass since you dropped the car off yesterday. And you ain’t slick. Where’s my forty dollars? You wasn’t supposed to do nothing but put some minutes on your phone.” Joy is saying this while a cigarette hangs loosely from her lip.

“I was with my friend, Keisha. Can I pay you that forty back? I spent it.” He smiles at his mother and opens the refrigerator.

Joy gets up and smacks him on the back of his head. “You know better. I do, too. You ain’t gonna pay me pack. Don’t be going in my Frigidaire without washing your fucking hands, bitch. Keisha? I don’t know that one, do I?” She sits back down at the kitchen table and sips her coffee.

Femi goes into the fridge and grabs the milk. Again, Joy just rolls her eyes.

“I just met her. She already feeling a brother though. I spent the night at her spot. It was late and she ain’t feel like driving me home.”

“Boy, I swear, your ass got the worst case of hot nuts I’ve ever seen. Your ass is lucky you handsome. Your ass would be one lonely nigga if you was ugly. You ain’t got a damn thing to give a woman except a hard-on and a headache.”

“Damn, Ma. What’s wrong with you? I ain’t been here five minutes and you bugging.” Femi sits down across from Joy. The glass is spotted with the creamer Joy uses

and crumbs from the toast she had this morning. In a matter of seconds, a small pile of tobacco from the cigar Femi is now filling with weed is on the table. Joy rakes it into her hand and walks it over to the trashcan. She sits back down and sadness is stenciled all over her face.

“Femi, baby, what are you gonna do with your life? Momma’s tired. I keep telling you. I don’t mind you being here. I’m glad you’re here. This is the longest you been out. But, when are you going to start doing shit men do? You know, you ain’t never lived on your own. And when are you going to get a job? Your parole officer stopped by here...again. He said he knows you ain’t looking for no job. He said your ass better start volunteering somewhere or find a damn job. What are you gonna do if he pisses you? Your ass is going right back where you was. I done told you about smoking all that weed. That’s only gonna get you high for so long. I don’t want you going back to that other shit.”

“Damn! Why you gotta bring that up? I ain’t gonna fuck with that shit no more. Aight, I’mma start looking for a job. That’s what’ll make you happy? Damn. It ain’t like you broke. Pops left you plenty of money.” Femi dries the freshly rolled blunt with his lighter. He hands it to Joy and she takes it.

“Yeah, that’ll make me happy. But, you gotta be able to take care of yourself. You find you some good women, but they ain’t gonna put up with your bullshit for long. Momma ain’t gonna live forever is all I’m saying. I get tired of bitching at you all the time. Anyway, the P.O. left you the number of a church so you can start volunteering. Said if they like you, they’ll hire you. He said it’s open every day and you could do a few hours a week.

At least you would be showing some effort.” She lights the blunt and takes a long drag. With her voice coated in smoke she says, “This one you got seems pretty okay. Don’t do shit to make him start sweating you. Start looking for work. One more thing you pitch black bastard...yeah, your Daddy left *me* some money. He left it for me. I took care of your ass until you was sent away the first time. I did what the fuck I was supposed to do. You grown. Don’t worry about what the fuck is in my pockets. That’s the last time I’m gonna tell your ass, too. You use that tone with me again, I’ll cut your nuts off and play marbles with ‘em.”

This is not the best time to laugh, so he holds it in, “Aight, Ma. I’ll start looking for a job. I’ll call this place and see what they talking about for volunteering.” Femi’s phone rings. He smiles. Joy knows it must be one of his women. She goes into her bedroom, lays across the bed, and looks up at the ceiling.

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Her bedroom has mirror paneling on two of its walls. The large room has a California king-sized bed complete with a canopy. The canopy cover is sheer black and looks new even though she purchased it twenty years ago. The loveseat on the opposite wall is red with white and pink pillows. The outfit she wore to court the other day is placed neatly on the arm. The flat screen mounted on the wall has a thin layer of ash from all the smoking. She simply hasn’t felt like dusting. The door to the large walk-in closet hides the organized catastrophe within it. Stilettoes, wedges, mules, slingbacks, and pumps of every style and shade outnumber a massive amount of skirts, dresses, and blouses. Joy Diallo has

never owned a pair of jeans and only has two pairs of pants. They are sweats and only worn for cleaning the house or working in her garden. She tends her garden barefoot because she has convinced herself that her feet don't function properly in tennis shoes or flats. Even her slippers have a kitten heel.

She lights a cigarette as a lone tear trickles from the corner of her eye and puddles into her ear. The only child she has left has caused her more grief than the loss of the other three. She thinks of her babies often. They'd all be in their forties and close to fifty by now. Maybe even produced a batch of grandbabies for her to spoil. Olayinka, Okimma, and Oaisara were good girls. All they talked about was going to college and visiting Africa. Joy was raising a nurse, a teacher, and a dentist. At least that what she likes to think. It's been almost 30 years and she can still hear their laughing and bickering accompanied with her late husband's booming voice in the background telling the girls to quiet down as firmly as he could. The girls wouldn't listen because her husband was softer than Charmin. Make no mistake, that softness was reserved solely for the ladies in his life.

Joy and sorrow are quite familiar with one another's company. At least when she lost the Kofi and the girls, it was a clean break. Femi, however, just breaks her heart over and over, and over again. She could have raised Femi better. But, being a mother loses its appeal when she buries three of her children. When they lowered her sweet babies into the ground and shoveled that dirt over their caskets, they buried Joy's soul, too. It took four of her brothers to keep her from jumping into one of their graves. It happened just when she was starting to live life after losing Kofi, grief shows up unannounced as it often does and

wears out a welcome it never had. It's been hanging around ever since and clinging to her son like a Siamese twin.

Joy didn't forget about Femi while dealing with the tragedies. She just didn't think about him. Her mother kept him while she drank herself into The Pavilion. She was there for three months and hasn't been drunk since although she still drinks. When Femi came back home he was just different. His charmed stayed, but everything else left. He was no longer sweet and easygoing. His go-with-flow demeanor turned into always-go-with-no. Any request or suggestion was defied. Joy understood. His sisters would fight to do anything for him and his father was grateful to have more testosterone in the house; he contributed to the spoiling of Femi as well.

Laughter is almost nonexistent in the Diallo home and the quiet has silenced their spirits. Their family of six was now a very dull party of two and with very strong and sad possibility of becoming one. Who's gonna be left is anybody's guess. Femi lives a life without structure or purpose. He loves women and don't care if they belong to anyone else. He loves a good fight. These days though, people don't take an ass whooping like they used to. They go get knives and guns. Thank God Femi don't fight like he used to when he was a teen. When Rose, one of Joy's nieces came over with a busted lip and said her boyfriend Rabbit did it, Femi went looking for him. It was better that he did than her brother. At least Femi wouldn't kill him. He would just make him regret ever touching his big cousin. And that's what he did. Nobody saw Rabbit after that. The people that saw the fight (if that's

what it can be called) exciting and scary. A 15-year-old boy beat the sense in and out of a twenty-something young man. They said his right eye will probably never work properly.

He doesn't control his anger, it controls him. Femi never liked the counselors she sent him to. After a couple of visits, he'd be done. He preferred the streets and to hang out with his uncles who didn't mean him no harm, but they didn't mean him nothing good either. They liked the fast life and Femi loved it. If Kofi was still alive, Femi never would have been able to call the streets his home. Kofi never had any issues with Joy's brother, he stayed away. That ensure that there would always be no issues. They never would have had the chance to teach him how to shoot craps or a gun. And the pills. Those pills poisoned her son's mind. She wasn't sure that's what he was doing. By the time she was sure, he was too far gone. Poor La-La.

The first time she met La-La, Joy liked her. Such a sweet girl with the prettiest eyes. They were funny colored. Joy swore they were contacts and La-La spent the better part of 10 minutes convincing her that those were her real eyes. She would rub her eyes and put her face right up to Joy's. They'd just laugh. La-La wasn't real bright though. Poor thing didn't have the sense God gives to a box of raisins. Joy knows that's what Femi liked about her. He was smarter than she was and would do anything he asked. Femi started sneaking her into his bedroom and then he didn't have to sneak anymore. It wasn't long before she started acting all looney like Femi. They'd both be in the back room slobbering and talking to each other. Joy swore they created their own language that nobody understood but them. Then it seemed that they created their own world and they were the only two on that planet.

It was a Sunday morning. Joy woke up and had a taste for some cheesy grits, biscuits, sausage, and eggs. She put on a pot of coffee and screamed for Femi and La-La to get up so they could have breakfast. Femi came in rubbing the sleep from his eyes. A crusty river of drool stained his face.

“Boy, go wash your face and brush your teeth. Then go wake up La-La before the food gets cold. I had a good dream about your sisters last night. Your Daddy was with ‘em. They told me to tell you ‘hi’ and that they miss you.”

Femi just nodded as he walked to the bathroom. He was never a fan of Joy’s dream talks. They made her happy so he let her have that. After Femi washed up, he walked back into the kitchen and kissed his momma on the forehead.

“Thank you, Baby. Now go get that girl up so we can eat. I ain’t felt like cooking a breakfast like this in a long time. I want ya’ll to enjoy it with me.”

Femi walked in the back to his bedroom.

“Maaaaaammmmmaa!!!!

“Boy, what are you hollering about?”

“Momma, hurry up!”

Joy turned off the stove and went to see what Femi was screaming about. She wasn’t ready for what she walked into. La-La was in Femi’s bed with foamy stuff all over her face and the bedspread. Her chestnut complexion was an ashen grey. Femi was in the corner balled up with his knees to his chest. Wouldn’t move when Joy told him to call 9-1-1. Joy rushed to the girl and lifted her head. She wiped the liquid mess from her face with her

hands and then with the end of her nightgown. It was too late. Joy already knew that before she entered the room good. She said a prayer for her son, herself, and the poor girl's parents. When she walked out of the room, she looked back at Femi. He was beating himself in the head while saying, "It's my fault. It's my fault."

### Chapter 13

Femi's first day at the soup kitchen was only supposed be for two hours. He stayed for five. He didn't mind it. He flashed his smile at women who could have passed for pretty had it not been for a situation that limited them from bathing and brushing their teeth regularly. The men he greeted with indifference and was unfazed by their predicament. The kids is what got to him. He would load their plates with far more food than he was supposed to and would wrap extra cookies in napkins to fill their pockets.

Mrs. Brown, the soup kitchen's supervisor, approached Femi a few times and offered him a break. He would decline. He helped the ladies of the church clean up and put away the food. After his first hard day's work in years, all he could think about was a shower, Adream, Keisha, and a blunt. Joy let him borrow the car and gave him money to put minutes on his phone. She didn't know he was on a plan and wasn't going to tell her. She gave him the money to let him know that she was proud of him. Even if he wasn't doing much of nothing, he was doing something.

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When Femi got home, Joy was in the kitchen on the phone. He could hear her tell somebody, "Okay, well, my baby's home. He done did some work down at the church.

Helping the homeless. Let me call you back. God Bless you, Darling.” She puts the phone on the counter and clacks over to Femi to give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He turned away.

“Na, Ma, no kisses right now. I gotta jump in the shower. Feeling a little grimy.”

“Well, ‘least tell me how it went. They offer you the job?” Joy removes her apron and runs her hands down her leather miniskirt. She walks over, sits at the table and lights her cigarette. Her slender legs are crossed and she dangles her hot pink stiletto off of her foot. Femi stands in the doorway and peels off his t-shirt to reveal another one underneath.

“It was smooth. It wasn’t bad or nothing like that. Made me a little sad. Mrs. Brown is real sweet. She said her and her husband been running that place for like 30 years. I told her I’d be back. She did say that the job only pays minimum wage. Said it ain’t got a real job description. I’d be doing whatever it is they need me to do. So, I’mma do it. I think. Maybe something else will come along that pays more. Forreal, Momma, it felt good to be working.”

“Well, I’m proud of you. Keep it up. I was talking to Charlie earlier today. I told him you was working with the homeless. He told me to tell you that it’s a special kind of hell for anybody that steals from the poor. He told me to tell you don’t do them like you did him.”

“Damn! Why can’t he let that go? Shit. That was years ago. Why you even gotta tell him anything about me?” Femi walks over to his mother and takes the cigarette from her hand and sits down.

“I’m just telling you what he said. And I tell him because he my brother. That’s why. Don’t question shit I do. I figured you’d be hungry when you got back. I fixed you some smothered pork chops, rice, biscuits and peas. I made you some fresh lemonade. You go on and take your shower. I’ll fix your plate. I’m gonna go to Macy’s and maybe Penney’s. It’s a cake cooling and I’ll icing it when I get back. I made you a chess pie, too!”

“Thanks, Ma. But you know I stopped eating pork.”

“Motherfucker! Your ass was raised on ham, pig feet, pig tails, hog maws, and chitterlings. You wanna be funny acting when you got out this last time. You gonna eat whatever the hell I cook, you fickle fucker,” Joy said it with a smirk, but she was serious.

“Here you go. You say Amen, Hallelujah, and Praise the Lord with that mouth?” Femi knew this would get her going. Her voice was already squealing a few octaves higher than it’s usual annoying norm.

“Fuck you! The good Lord knows my heart is good even if my mouth ain’t. Your ass better eat. Wasting my food. Well, I’m gonna get on outta here. Don’t bother with the dishes, I’ll get ‘em when I get back. Put your dirty clothes in the washer and push the button. I already put soap and peroxide in the water. I don’t want you doing too much, I want you to rest since you worked today, son. I love you. I left you the last few cigarettes in my pack. I’ll stop and get some more on my way home.” Joy stands and places her foot in her shoe. She struts to the bathroom to fix her makeup and to readjust her new wig that came in the mail the other day. She is not sure how she feels about it. But, she just thinks

it'll be fun to try life has a blonde. She lays crisp hundred-dollar bill on the table and winks at Femi. With that, Joy leaves and he jumps in the shower.

## Chapter 14

Mirage has finally organized the basement. For the first time in a few weeks, laundry is all caught up and she's swept up the dead crickets. She makes a note to buy some more of that bug spray. She really went down there to get a box. That box is needed to start on the homework Teri gave her. She called Adream and like she expected, there was no answer. No return call either. She needs Dream to do this homework.

She found the box. Dusted it off with her hand and carried it upstairs. The box is set down on the floor by the dining table. Mirage walks over to the kitchen sink, washes her hands with the dish soap and dries them on her tattered sweats with the bleach stains on the thigh. It's exactly one minute past noon. She never drinks a beer before twelve. Mirage thinks that's what alcoholics do, have a beer with their breakfast. She is not an alcoholic. The ice cold brew is wanted *and* needed. She pops the cap and sits down, picks up the box and places it on the table.

The house phone rings and disappointment dashes across her face. A 1-800 number flashed across the caller ID. Dream still ain't called. She lifts the dented lid that has been softened by time. The duct tape used to seal it lost its grip many years ago. Right on top is Adream's birth certificate. Mirage blinks to catch the tears forming and fails. One drop from each eye splashes into gray spots on the document....

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When she first found out she was pregnant she was mad. The anger slowly faded into sadness and happiness did not arrive until the day Adream arrived at 2:17 in the morning. On her birthday. Of all the days on a calendar, Adream picked that one. She'd been to the hospital four times and they kept telling her it wasn't time. On the fifth visit, they tried to tell her the same thing. Mirage raised so much hell, that they considered sending her down for a psych eval. Before they could page a psych nurse, her water broke and left them with no other choice but to admit her.

Dream hadn't been an easy pregnancy, so it was no surprise she would be a difficult labor. About 13 hours into a suffering that Mirage had never felt, the doctors decided to go in and get her. She was a tiny little thing. Dark-skinned with a blanket of curls that seemed to be fighting for room on her tiny scalp. Her eyes were wide open. Big and bright, even in their intense darkness. Mirage had never given any thought about what she was going to call her baby. She hadn't planned on going through with this whole motherhood thing. Names are important. She surprised herself at the quick response when they asked for a name, "Adream Giselle Williams." The nurse responded, "Pretty. Anybody looking into those eyes would probably feel like they were escaping reality. Adream is perfect." She called Jerard to tell him she was here. His retort was flat and icy, "So. What are you telling me for? Don't call here no more." She vowed to herself she never would.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Mirage digs through the box. It's filled with some of Adreams favorite books. Mirage never cared much for reading, but the little old lady who lived next door always gave her children's books. She kept Adream sometimes. She's the

one who taught her to read. Once she started, she never stopped. In the very bottom of the box were journals. It was clothed in dust, but the cats on the cover were still visible. Mirage picked it up, took a deep breath, and blew. She just flipped through the pages and stopped randomly. In a pretty purple script, these words were scrawled:

*Peace, Please Ease Upon Me*

*Thought about the methods, figured out what the best is:*

*Pills.*

*I can deal with how they spill going down.*

*Pop them and drop them*

*Gulp and swallow*

*Wash it all down with yesterday's sorrow*

*Not sorry about today.*

*I wan't be here tomorrow.*

*Contrary to the beliefs of those holier-than-thou-sometimes-  
but-not-right-now Religious freaks.*

*You know...those Bible geeks  
don't think I'm heaven, but hell-bound.*

*I'm cruising, controlled release as I enter state sleep.*

*Said my prayers and I've said my swears  
Fuck it! Fuck you! I-don't-fucking-cares!*

*Do you hear me God?*

*Are you listening up there?*

Mirage knew Adream hated life because of her. She just thought Dream was talking when she'd scream, "I wish I was dead. I wish you would have aborted me. I hate you!" It's one

thing to hear your kid scream those things. But putting it in writing is something different altogether. It is forever engraved in her memory. She wept silently as she read the last part of the poem:

*I turned the other cheek to those haunting taunts  
 But I only have two.  
 And quite frankly, that's too-many-too-few.  
 What else could I do?  
 Pleading and needing attention for internal bleeding  
 Insult-assaulted, word wounds don't heal.  
 Why didn't my teachers see what my mamma and satan's bastard children did to  
 me?  
 Demons. Feeding, feasting, eating my soul.  
 They left it tattered and torn.  
 It now has a hole.  
 I'm not whole anymore.  
 My spirit is sore and my strength is weak.  
 The voiceless can talk, but we don't know how to speak.  
 Had all of this been mentioned, would you have listened?  
 The warning signs were there; you just missed them.*

## Chapter 15

The garage door is open at Rayon's house. His silver 1978 Mustang is propped up on four cinder blocks. He works on that car more than he drives it. Something is always wrong with it and not much is ever right. Femi strolls up the driveway cool and carefree as always. His locs are piled up high on his head. His goatee and mustache looked as if they were etched into his sepia skin.

“What’s up? Ain’t seen you in a minute.” Rayon says as he wipes his hands while walking toward Femi to give him a pound.

“Nothing much. Moms been riding me about getting a job because she’s tired of my P.O. popping up. I did a little work at the church. That made her happy. Came home to a good ‘ol meal. What’s been up with you?”

Rayon grabs two milk crates and flips them over so they can sit down. Rayon was Okimma’s high school sweetheart. He was in the car behind Femi’s sisters when that drunk driver slammed into them. After their deaths, Rayon took on the task of being big brother to a very young Femi.

“Nothing forreal. Ain’t been long got off work. Destiny and the girls at the movies. I just been working on this car and taking it easy. Thinking about having a barbecue tomorrow. Baby girl turning one. Gonna throw some chops, bologna, and coon on the grill. You know we ain’t really into throwing a big ass party that the baby won’t even remember.”

Rayon rubs his oil-stained hands on his smooth scalp. He debates on whether or not to remind Femi of the seventy-five dollars he owes him, and decides against. Destiny been telling him for weeks to get that money back. Rayon doesn’t *need* the money. It’s just the principal behind it. He could at least acknowledge that he borrowed it. The truth is that Destiny can’t stand Femi and she’s pissed Rayon loaned him the money anyway. She knows he ain’t shit because Femi messed with her baby sister. She still blames Femi for getting La-La hooked on pills and syrup. Rayon and Destiny don’t argue over much, but when they do,

Femi's name is sprinkled throughout the heated discussion. Rayon loves his wife and respects her wishes of Femi not being allowed in their home. However, the garage is his sanctuary and he can have whoever the hell he wants in his garage. He told her just that many several years ago.

Femi checks his phone and still hasn't heard anything from Adream since they had breakfast. Keisha been blowing his phone up, though. She's supposed to come and get him later on, take him to the movies and Red Lobster. Rayon offers Femi a cold beer and he takes it. Femi does most of the talking and Rayon starts working on his car again.

"Yo. I got a new one." He says in between gulps of his beer.

"And when don't you have a new one?" Rayon asks while digging through his tool box.

"This one is different. Chocolate. Shorty got that Mother Earth look going on. She wears shell rings and copper bracelets and shit. Her smell. Rayon, this chick ain't into no Bath & Body Works type of broad. Some of these bitches be wearing page 46, she don't do that."

"Page 46? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You know when the magazines have samples and shit on the pages. Yo! Shorty smells like, like, I don't even know. Like flowers and oils and shit. Like Africa. Her name could be Liberia or Zimbabwe. She a black queen forreal. She smart, too. Her name is Adream. And no, she ain't a stripper. She got a degree in English. She works at the library

down in the west. She's a big girl, but got a tiny waist. No stomach. And those hips. I swear they hum a tune when she walk."

Rayon laughs and says, "Damn. You sprung or some shit? Aaay! Hold up! You talking about that chick with the afro, ain't you? Gotta be the same chick. Can't be that many people with the name Adream." Rayon smiles at his friend and wipes his hands on his shirt. He yanks the dingy rag that's hanging from his back pocket and wipes his face. He walks back over to his crate and plants himself in front of Femi.

"Yeah. You know her?"

"Not like that. We take the football team there sometimes to do they homework. I know exactly who you talking about. My boy Pete tried to get at her and she wasn't having it. Shorty be having mad niggas trying to push up on her. Couple of the little fellas on the team got they first crush. All they talk about is Ms. Dream. Can't blame 'em. I done caught myself staring a little longer than I should. You know I'm a happily married man. But like Destiny say, she don't care where I get my appetite from as long as I eat home."

"Ha! I mean, I ain't sprung or no shit. We ain't smashed. But, I'm feeling her. Her mouth is fresh. I can deal with that. She's just different." Femi chugs his beer and smiles at Rayon.

"Real talk. You ain't getting no younger, man. I mean, if you digging her, let them other ones go. You already riding piggyback on 40. You what? Thirty-five? 'Bout to be thirty-six? Do something different. I ain't never known you to be out this long. Stay out. If you ain't getting no younger, your moms damn sure ain't. I done told you if you can get

your piss clean, I can get you on at the factory. I been there 22 years. Dude'll probably hire you solely on my word. He won't even do a background check. But I ain't dropping your name until I feel like you ready."

"Here you go. I'm just telling you about my new friend and you wanna make shit all serious."

"This *is* serious. Your Pops didn't die for this, man. He wouldn't want this shit for you. Your ass been jumping from bed to bed since I can remember. And you ain't never hitting a time clock in between your hops. You too young to remember. Your Pops was a smooth old dude. That man worked hard. I know the first ten years of your life was beyond fucked up. But the shit you do was not part of your Pops' dreams for you or your sisters. That shit about me 'getting serious' is your response every time I have real conversation with you. When Okimma died, I felt that shit. I ain't feel it like you or your moms, but I felt it. Real talk, I wish my momma was still here. She ain't and I still wonder if she proud of a nigga. Still do shit to make her proud even though she can't say, "You did good, son." I ain't trying to preach to you. I'm telling you now, if any one of my girls even thinks about entertaining a nigga like you, I'm going to the penitentiary. I ain't sure if it'll be for murdering that nigga or my daughter. Not that I'mma a perfect dude. But I'm a man all day. Your Pops was the closest thing I ever had to a father. Matter-of-fact, he was a father to whole bunch of us hard-headed little fools running around here. I feel like it's only fair that I share with you what he shared with me."

This is not the first time Rayon had this conversation with Femi. This also why he deals with him in small, sporadic doses. Anything he says to this fool goes in one ear, out the other, and spills onto the ground. Rayon is the only man that Femi wouldn't bust in the mouth for stepping to him like that. Femi respects him because he says it to his face. He looks up to him, too. Rayon taught him how to drive because his uncles either didn't wanna fool with him or didn't have the time. It was Rayon who gave him his first razor and shaving lesson. Rayon showed up how to put on a condom. He used a cucumber from Joy's garden.

"Damn. I get what you saying. I do. Looking for a job is on the list of shit I need to do. I just feel like if I got a good girl, I can do anything. It'll make me wanna do something. I don't know if I like her like that, but she could be the one to make me *think* about changing my ways."

"That's that shit I'm talking about, Femi. I get that you want a woman to motivate you. She gotta see you worth motivating, first. You gotta be bringing something to the table besides your fucking appetite. Not that I know Shorty like that. Like I told you, I know plenty who done stepped to her. She is on something waaaay different. Plus, our kids love her! They hated going to the library before she started there. The way she carries herself should be enough for you to want to step your game up."

"Why can't we just talk and shoot the shit? Why you always gotta start preaching to a nigga? I got Momma tripping all the damn time. I ain't really got no niggas that I fuck with

on the outside. All my boys is locked up or dead. I know I got you, but I'm saying," Femi said trying to hide his frustration. Rayon sees right through it.

"Why can't you do what you supposed to do and we wouldn't have to have these conversations. You need to be thinking about what you gonna do if something happens to your momma. You always looking fly and shit. I work and don't have the fucking wardrobe that you do. I ain't had a pair of Jordan's or Timberlands since I got married. Yet, your ass keeps a pair on your feet. Them silly ass women you be fucking with will get tired eventually. Then what you gonna do? Never mind. You just gonna find you another one. You ain't never had a checking account and ain't never kept a job long enough to file a tax return. The only thing the government knows about you is your inmate number. When the fuck are you gonna get tired of that shit?"

As the conversation is on the cusp of getting heated, it is cut short by the yellow Suburban easing into the driveway. "The Wheels on the Bus" is blaring from the speakers. Destiny parks a few feet from the milk crates they are sitting on. Femi would leave, but finds pleasure in her hating him.

Destiny's size three frame makes it hard to believe she's spit out five babies. All girls. She opens the door and out hops four little girls who all look as if they sprouted from Rayon's face. The baby girl is in her car seat sucking on her binky when Destiny unfastens the seatbelt and takes her out. She uses her foot to slam the door shut and hands Cherish to the oldest, Rayonna, and she leads the rest of her little sisters into the house. As they're walking, they all shout, "Hi, Daddy!"

Destiny's fire engine red hair is a cap of soft curls. She walks over to Rayon and gives him a kiss. She glares at Femi through her purple contact lenses and utters a soft and firm, "Fuck you" as she walks into the house. Rayon just shakes his head. If it was anybody else's bitch that was bold enough to do that, Femi would choke the shit out of her. He doesn't hit women, but he will damn sure put his hands around one's throat and squeeze just to the point of her blacking out and then let her go. He and Rayon say their goodbyes and Femi heads home.

## Chapter 16

"Welcome back, Mirage." Teri's hand is on the doorknob and she waits until Mirage is seated before she closes the door. She hands Mirage a soda, grabs her water bottle from her desk, and takes a seat. She notices that Mirage looks different. Different from the last couple of times they've met. Her face looks softer, and her eyes are easy, but they are tired. She has never carried a purse, bag, or anything of the sort into their meetings. Today, she has a dark blue carry-all that looks like it may have come from a thrift store or out of an attic.

"Thank you, Ms. Teri. How are you?" Mirage tugs at her t-shirt and wrings her hands while she waits for a response.

"I'm doing well. Thank you for asking. How are you?"

“I can’t complain. Taking things one day at time. I, um, tried to start with that homework you gave me. Dream ain’t never called me back. So, I did something else.”

Teri looks at Mirage with a gentility that hides her intense curiosity. “Okay. That’s fine. What did you do?”

Mirage looks at Teri and then down at the floor. The bag is at her feet. The dingy straps look as if they used to be white. She picks it up and places it on her lap. Mirage sticks her hand in the bag and pulls out a journal. The bag is returned to the floor and the book is now flattening the crease in her jeans as they rest on her lap.

“Well. Uh. I got to think about some things. I didn’t write nothing down. I ain’t ready to do that. The last night Dream lived in my house...that was the night I realized that my daughter was hateful. I’ll give her credit though, she don’t really like to let people see that side of her. She saves that for me. That night, I got more of it than she’d ever gave me with just a few words.” Mirage is flipping through the pages that are imprinted with fancy cursive in a variety of inks.

“Okay. Would you like to talk about it?”

Mirage nods her head and pulls out a wadded up tissue. She squeezes it in her right hand and places the left over the journal. Her leg is shaking.

“Mirage, it’s okay. We can work through whatever it is that is troubling you.”

After a sniffle and a nose rub, she says, “It’s one thang to say your baby hate you. It’s something different all together to see it in writing. ‘Specially when it’s written over and over again in different ways. Don’t matter what words she used, it all means the same thang.

She hate me so bad. In one of 'em, she say that she wished I'd had an abortion with her or that my momma had had one when she was carrying me. Either way, Dream say she never woulda been born, never woulda met me, and that woulda been okay with her."

Teri nods her head and hands Mirage more tissue.

"She was in her first year at college. Thanksgiving break. It was the first time she'd been home since she left. Just turned 17. Graduated early 'cause she was skipped a grade. That girl will never know how proud I was she went to college. I guess I could have told her. Or showed her. I ain't do neither. You better believe I told anybody that would listen, though. That was to make them jealous. Yeah, a drunk like me can have a baby to go to college and not get pregnant in high school. You know, that's usually what happens in the neighborhood we lived in.

I don't remember what my supervisor bitched me out about. Whatever it was, it wasn't my fault. I got home and was tired. Hungry. I just remember being so hungry. My mind was made up about what I was having for dinner. A bologna sandwich and some plain Lays. I get home and look on top of the fridge, and my chips are gone. She ate the last of my potato chips. I was tired. I cleaned like eighteen rooms that day. Holiday season is busy season for hotels. Had she told me she ate 'em, I coulda picked some up when I was at the liquor store right by my job. She was trynna talk, but that ain't stop me. I just started screaming at her. I told her that's why she was fat and wasn't nobody gonna want nobody that was black and fat and pissed in the bed. Being smart ain't shit if you ain't cute."

Mirage's tone is matter-of-fact. Her voice is steady in its shake.

“I can’t remember everything I said that night. I was screaming and cussing. She went to her room and grabbed the duffle bag and backpack she came home with. She was throwing anything she could grab into the bags. She ain’t have no door. I took that off the hinges as soon as she started developing breasts. She didn’t need no privacy. It was just me and her. She was stomping and glaring at me while she headed to the bathroom. She was opening up drawers and the cabinet grabbing shit.

She came out the bathroom, her hair was wrapped in her scarf. She still had a perm back then. Her hoodie was on and she was wearing her tennis shoes. I’m just looking at her. She looking at me. That’s when I saw it. Them eyes. They was darker than they ever been. That night, wasn’t no sparkle to ‘em. And they was empty. Nothing. Nothing was in ‘em. I was scared. For the first time in my life, I was scared of my child. I knew her to be kinda timid and shy. Unless she was mad. All that shy shit goes out the window when she’s mad. She’d hurt herself usually. Cut on her wrists and her stomach like those rich little white girls you hear about on the news. She didn’t do that this night. I ain’t know what to call the look on her face on that night. Still don’t know. The hairs on my arms was raised. Sweat was gathering between my fingers. Even though the TV was going, I swear I could hear a heartbeat. I ain’t know if it was mines or hers. I remember being scared to blink. ‘Cause if I blinked, that coulda been the moment that she was going to do whatever it was she was gonna do to me. I don’t like no surprises.

“I was standing in front of the door. She walked towards me like she was just taking a stroll through wonderland. Was in no rush.” Mirage licks her lips and takes a sip of her

pop while holding onto that tissue. “I moved outta her way. She passed me and opened the door. Right before she walked out, Dream looked at me and said, “I see why God took your mother from you. You wasn’t worthy of having one. God knew what you was going to be and didn’t want to do that to your momma. So He took her from you. If only He had been as merciful when it came to me.” That was the last time Dream stayed at my house. At first, I couldn’t move. Used to be if she said something smart or disrespectful, I’d smacked her in her mouth or punch her in her arms. I ain’t do nothing. For the first time in my life, I thought my child was capable of killing me. I do remember lighting a cigarette and going into the kitchen for a beer. I got one out the fridge and just when I was about to walk back into the living room, that’s when I saw it on top of the microwave.

“Saw what?” Teri asked with a furrowed brow.

“A bag of chips.” Mirage sobs and Teri hands her more tissue. Mirage rubs her hand back and forth across the pages of the journal.

## **Chapter 17**

“It’s about time you called. Damn.” Femi is sitting in Keisha’s living room. He’s just dropped her kids off at the babysitter’s and Keisha off at work. He’s eating the leftovers she fixed this morning. He drowns the cold eggs in hot sauce and scoops them up with the last of his toast and fried hot dogs. She forgot to pick up sausage at the grocery store and only had one slice of bologna. Hot dogs were the only option. They all came from a pig, so

that just had to do. Keisha said turkey sausage cost too much, so he didn't have a choice but to break his rule about pork. Not that he was firm about it anyway.

"I didn't forget about you. But can you please stop smacking in my ear?"

"Damn, Shorty. My bad. I'm mad hungry and trying to talk to you because I don't know when's the next time that'll happen. You good, though? Had me worried for a minute?"

"I'm fine. Work has been insane."

"Real talk, I been wanting to talk to you because I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come to the soup kitchen with me and feed the less fortunate. I help out sometimes and thought you would want to bring your smile to brighten their day. Was maybe thinking you might be able to do a story time or something for the kids." Femi is finished with his food and tosses his plate onto the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. He goes back into the living room and plops onto the sofa.

"Ahh! Shit!"

"What are you hollering about?"

"I stubbed my fucking toe," he lied. A Lego gouged him in his ass.

"Oh. Big baby. Are you serious about volunteering at the soup kitchen? It's something I've always wanted to do. I just haven't done anything to bring it to fruition."

"Fruition? Your proper talking ass using those big words. Go head white girl."

Femi smiles and licks his lips.

“There’s nothing white about me. And why is it that using proper grammar and using words with more than two syllables makes me white? I’ll be so glad when we as a people stop doing that shit.”

“Chill, Shorty. I was playing. Damn. You ain’t gotta get Black Panther on a nigga. What you got going on today?”

“I get off work in an hour. I swear 4 o’clock took two years to show its face today. These kids have busted out the window in the front door. Some drunk fool whipped it out and pissed on one of the computers. Then I go into the restroom and someone has smeared shit all over the wall.”

“Damn! All that doesn’t go on at the library, does it? Who cleans that up?” Femi is equally interested in his blunt as he is with Adream and her job.

“My manager cleans it up. That’s what a master’s degree gets you. I refuse. People would be disgustingly amazed with the shit that goes on at the library. No pun intended. Masturbators and pedophiles under the same roof. Free library, free clinic. It’s the same thing. Except they get to wear gloves. I could tell you some stories. Anyway, when are we going to the soup kitchen?”

“Let me know when you can do it. I’ll make that happen. What are you doing when you get off? Can I see you?”

“Um, yeah. That’s cool. Wanna go to the park?”

“Cool. What about Cherokee? Lots of trees and benches. I really just want to look at you and see that beautiful face.”

“Okay, I’ll see you at six. I want to get out of this dress first and throw on some jeans.”

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Adream is out the door and in her car right as the clocks strikes 5:01. She is happy to be out of there, but wants to know why her resume never gets any hits. She has went on a couple of interviews, but nothing ever happens after she shakes the interviewer’s hand goodbye. Every now and again, she’ll receive an email informing her that they went with a more qualified candidate. She doesn’t want to think it, but she can’t help but to think if her hair is the culprit from keeping her from getting a new job.

She parks and grabs her mail on the way in. Her house is dark. She forgot to leave the lamp on before she walked out this morning. She pulls out her phone and uses the glow from its face to guide her to the light switch in the kitchen. Her phone tells her she has five missed calls. Three of them from Mirage, one from Esther, and one was an unknown. Probably a bill collector. It also tells her that she has a voicemail. One that she’ll check only when she gets tired of seeing the notification. After a quick shower, she gets dressed, and leaves to meet Femi.

## **Chapter 18**

I love the whispers of the leaves mingling with the branches. Autumn is the most fragrant and musical season. I’ve almost convinced myself that I can smell the oranges, yellows, and reds that Crayola tries to imitate. The crunch of the crisp leaves as I walk pats on my ear’s drum. I just listen. There’s not a soul that can convince me that Cherokee Lake

is not ticklish. When the sun's rays hit it just right, the water looks as if it's laughing at the sky. There's something about this season. Everything dies so it can start all over again. If only life was like that. If only.

Femi sent a text ten minutes ago and said he was on his way. God knows I hate for somebody to be late. But, I wouldn't mind it today. With all the ugliness I've seen, I've earned the right to be selfish with the beauty of nature...and that of man. Lead me not to temptation, Lord, I can find it by damn self. And right now, at this very moment, temptation is walking directly toward me. Its gait is strong and paced. His beauty is anchored by a pair of rugged Tims, draped in army fatigue pants, and a tan hoodie. His locks are bouncing to the beat of his walk and hands are secure in in his pockets. The spice in his cologne greets me with 'hello' seconds before he appears in front of me.

His smile is accompanied with a hug that tells me that maybe he did in fact miss me. He leans in for a kiss and I quickly turn and it lands on my forehead. That spot is just as sensitive as the place he initially wanted the kiss to land. He takes my hand and interlocks his fingers with mine and we sit.

"Yo. I ain't even think you would own a pair of Jordans. I see you. You got that sporty, sexy look going on. I can dig it."

"Thank you. As always, you look like you just strutted from a photo shoot. It's good seeing you."

"What? Adream is saying something sweet."

"Don't get used to it."

“Yeah, there she is. That’s the Dream I’m used to.”

There goes that dimple again. Joggers and people with their dogs dressed for the weather sprinkle the walking trail just before us. I get lost in the water just beyond the trail. Femi snatches me from my thoughts.

“Why so quiet? I thought we was gonna catch up.” He strokes the apple of my cheek with the back of his hand and I let him.

“Well, tell me more about this soup kitchen? You don’t seem like the giving back type. No shade, you just don’t.”

“I could see how you would think that. There’s more to me than what you see, though, Ma. I ain’t your stereotypical nigga though. I mean, you probably used to them square ass niggas. And while I ain’t one of them, I’m far from a street nigga. I like poetry readings, sushi, art galleries and shit. If you would quit playing games and get to know me, you might be surprised.” His eyes are glazed with gentility. He is genuine and I make a note to quit being so hard on him. I won’t be soft. Just not as hard.

“Sushi? That’s different. And you got the nerve to call me a white girl. I can’t front. I’m glad you wanted to hang out. I haven’t done much of anything except work and sleep. This is my favorite season. I am far from the outdoorsy type, but I love trees. Don’t ask me why because I don’t know. Just do.” I look over at him and he is really paying attention to me. I reach in my bag and pull out the Windex. He is now residing in the state of confusion. He blinks and then catches me off guard.

“You ain’t sharing, though?” He opens his mouth wide and says, “Aaaaaaaaah.” I could barely pump the trigger because I was laughing so hard.

“You are crazy. Not the reaction I wanted, but I’ll take it.”

“And I wasn’t expecting that. But, I try not to be shook. I ain’t gonna lie, I was thinking I done really snagged me a fruit loop. I just need you to know I can roll with whatever. Plus, prayer works. When you turned that bottle in my direction, me and God had a heart-to-heart.. Lord, don’t let it be Windex forreal.”

“You are so silly. Since you’re down, I’ll think up some other craziness we can do together.”

“Okay. So that you means you gonna kick it with a brother again? That’s what’s up.”

Just like the last time, the conversation has a fluidity that I can swim in. Never a note of awkwardness. His touches were timed just right. He ignored his phone and when it had reached the point of being annoying, he turned it off.

“You really just turned your phone off?”

“Here’s what it is, Ma. I am focused on you. I haven’t had a chance to get to know you like I want to. I don’t want any distractions. Mom’s is cool. She’s hanging out with my uncles tonight. So I don’t have to worry about her. I really just wanna spend my time on you. If that’s okay with you?”

“It is. It’s getting cold and I’m getting hungry. I cooked yesterday and if you aren’t too good to eat leftovers, you can follow me to my spot.”

Femi's smile said 'yes' before he did. He was excited. As was I. It's been a long time since I wanted to be bothered with somebody and even longer since someone wanted to be bothered with me.

"Just in case I lose you, do you know where the Trader Joe's is on Blueberry Lane?"

"You talking about right there in that shopping center with Best buy and Lucky's? Yeah, one of my boys used to live out there." Femi is already standing and helping me off the bench."

"I live in the last building, apartment number two."

"That's what's up. I'll see you there."

## Chapter 19

Femi climbs into the car and pulls out his phone and turns it back on. Keisha has been blowing him up all night.

"Damn, Femi! Where are you?"

"Calm down with all that. I'm in Indianapolis. My uncle asked me to help him move somebody."

"Indianapolis! Femi, you said you would pick me up from work at six. It's almost seven. My momma didn't wanna come and get me. My friend had to pick me and the kids up. I had to give her my last ten to do it. Plus, my WIC is in the car and the kids need milk. I'm too tired to cook and was gonna give the kids some cereal. I gave you thirty dollars this morning. What am I supposed to do to feed my kids?"

“Calm down! I got you. I promise. This job is gonna pay me a nice little lick. I got you. Ask your friend to get the kids some milk for you or you can make that powder milk I saw in the cabinet. The kids ain’t gonna know the difference. I used to put it in my cereal when I had to stay with my granny. Forreal, if it’s cold, they ain’t gonna know.”

“Femi, no! I should be able to feed my kids what I want when I want. I done looked out for you. I give you money, I suck your dick when you ask and when you don’t, got you on my phone plan, and I gave you a key. Plus, I let you use my car. You can’t even act right. Just like a nigga. And if you was moving somebody, you coulda text me or answered my phone calls. I called you like fifteen times.” Keisha is sobbing and Femi acts like she just told him something trivial like it’s raining outside.

“Hold on, Shorty. Yeah, you look out for me. True enough. I’ll give you that. But you did most of that shit on your own. Yeah, I asked you for money this morning. Everything else you do is because you *want* to. Don’t think I ain’t grateful. A nigga grateful. You holding me down while I wait for my back to get better and my disability check to start rolling in. I wish I didn’t have to move nobody today. My back killing me, but I need some bread. There’s nothing I can do. I’m in Indianapolis taking care of business so I can get *us* some money. You just gonna have to make do. I’ll be at your house later on tonight or early in the morning. Depends on how much more we got to do. That’s all I can do. Real talk, Keisha. Just trust me. I got you. Do me a favor. Go get a warm wash cloth and wipe that pretty face. Hearing you cry hurts me to my core. Especially if I ain’t there to kiss away the pain. No tears, Baby girl. Okay?”

Femi hears the water running in the background. Through her sniffles, she says,  
“Okay.”

“That’s better, Boo. When I get back, I’ll take you and the kids to Sizzler. Deal?”

“You promise?”

“You know I keep my word. Aight, Shorty. Just chill ‘til I see you. Pat it for me one time?”

“You so nasty. I’m not doing that. I love you, Femi.”

“What? You got love for me or do you love me?”

“I love you,” she sniffles.

“I just wanted to hear you say it again. Get your rest.”

## Chapter 20

Femi parks right next to Dream’s car. He walks to the door. Just before he can knock, the door opens. She’s sexy even in a doo-rag, faded shirt that has to be three sizes too big, and leggings.

“What took you so long? I thought you stood me up. And what are you doing driving a lime green Kia Soul?”

“You ain’t never gotta worry about being stood up. That might be mom’s new car. I’m test driving it to make sure it passes my inspection before I buy it for her. I’m late ‘cause one of my cousins called me crying talking about how her dude didn’t come through and she need money to feed the kids. You know I gotta take care of my fam. I had to meet her at the gas station and gave her a little change. I’m sorry about that. I couldn’t click over

because she was crying and shit. I done told all my female cousins about messing with niggas that can't do shit for them."

"Okay. You're forgiven. Come in."

She steps aside so he can enter. She snaps her fingers and points at his boots. Femi looks over and sees her Jordans along with at least ten other pairs of shoes in the corner. He's grateful Keisha bought him some new socks the other day. The boots are kicked off with the pride of a man who knows his socks aren't dingy and have no holes.

"Damn! It smells good than a muthafucka in here. Your place is fly, too. I ain't surprised you got mad decorating skills. This joint look like it was stolen from the '70s or some shit, though. Tell me that ain't a shag carpet? Ain't them joints outlawed or some shit? Flammable as hell." He chuckles and she does, too.

"It is! You are so stupid. Come on and wash your hands. The food is almost warmed up. You want something to drink? I have sweet tea, water, orange juice, and lemonade."

"Orange juice is good. You got some vodka to go with it?"

"Maybe."

Femi washes his hands and dries them with a paper towel. He walks over, pulls out a chair and sits at the dining table. Adream lights the two candles that act as the centerpiece. She saunters over to the crockpot and stirs the beans and rice dish that she is famous for. People who hate beans love this classic concoction with the Mexican twist she gives it. She retrieves the la crema, avocado, and block of cheddar from the fridge. Femi just watches.

“Do you like avocado and sour cream?”

“Depends. What we having?”

“Something edible.”

“Here you go. I know you like good food, so I trust you. Do whatever you wanna do, Ma.”

Adream shreds the cheese into one of her smaller serving dishes, slices the avocado, and pours a generous portion of sour cream into a dish. She sets them on the table and stirs the food once more.

“You don’t even seem like the type to do this shit. You know, like catering.”

“Catering? Um, no, I’m hosting. There is a difference. I like for my company to feel welcome. Not too many get invited over here. So, you should feel special. If you get invited for a second time, you will be self-serving.”

“Believe me, I do. I really do know I’m special since you finally agreed to let me come over. It’s been a while since I’ve kicked it with a female that I’m really into. I’m digging you. Forreal.” She smiles and continues to stir and she places bottles of Sriracha and hot sauce on the table. Femi smirks at how she scoots on the carpet and linoleum in her fuzzy toe-socks. Her voluptuous frame is smothered by that too-big t-shirt. He licks his lips thinking about what is underneath.

Adream places the spoons in the serving dishes and puts the bowl of beans and rice next to them. She gets herself a bottle of water and offers Femi something else to drink. He

declines. She sits at the table and smiles. Femi does his signature wink, grabs her hands, and bows his head to pray.

“Dear Heavenly Father, we come to You both humble and hungry. Bless the hands that prepared this meal as well as those who will benefit from the labor of Ms. Adream. Again, I ask you to bless this new friendship. Allow Adream to open her heart and her arms to me. In your name, we pray, Amen.”

Femi gives her hands a gentle squeeze, releases them and in one quick move, his napkin is on his lap. He, again, is impressed. He’s never had a girl who has linen napkins. They’ve been ironed, too. Yeah, Adream is something different.

“Yo! You made this? Moms would tear this shit up. I might have to get the recipe and make it for her.” Femi is smacking with both elbows on the table.

“Ugh. Slow down and stop talking with your mouth full.” Adream is playful and adds two slices of avocado, a teaspoon of sour cream, and a sprinkle of cheese.

“Have you ever had Sriracha? It’s got a kick.”

Femi nods his head ‘no’ and she squirts just teardrop-size on his food. Femi mixes everything up and tries. His overstuffed cheeks smiling give her all the approval she needs. They eat in silence mostly. This is fine with Adream. It means her food is good. She has named herself Chef-Boy-R-Diva. She is not confident in much, but cooking? She knows she can throw in the kitchen.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

“Yeah, it’s in my bedroom. Make a right as soon as you get in the door. The light switch is on the left.”

Femi walks into her bedroom and sees the bathroom. He turns on the light and steals a glimpse of her bedroom. The top half of the bed is covered in pillows and stuffed animals. It’s just as coordinated as the living room. He goes into the bathroom and closes the door. Femi always snoops in a woman’s bathroom. You can tell a lot about a woman by what’s in her medicine cabinet. He’s surprised at all the pinks, greens, and yellows in the shower curtain. He didn’t take Adream as the bright colors type. His nose has been introduced to a different fragrance with almost every step he takes. Even though he can’t identify them, he’s liked every single one.

He looks in her shower and sees endless bottles of different shampoos, conditioners, deep conditioners, baby oil gel, and body washes. He opens the closet and sees towels and washcloths folded neatly on the first shelf. They match the shower curtain and rugs. The second shelf has two baskets filled with more bottles and razors. The top shelf has bleach, detergent, disinfectant sprays, and sponges. The cabinet under the sink had only three items: toilet paper, tampons, and soap. He’s seen a smaller stock at Wal-mart. Two different types of toothpaste and a bottle of mouthwash are on the sink. The toothbrush is resting in its charger and dental floss is next to that. He is satisfied with his findings. He flushes the toilet and washes his hands for effect. She seems like the type who listens to see if somebody washes their hands. He looks in the mirror and winks at his own reflection. He walks out and sits back down at the table.

“Are you okay? I thought you went for a swim.”

“Na, Baby. Them beans went straight through me.”

After they eat, Femi helps her rinse and place the dishes into the dishwasher. He even looks into the cabinets for containers to put away the leftovers. While Adream is washing out the crockpot, he wraps his hands around her waist which is tiny in comparison to the width of her hips. He nuzzles his nose into her neck and kisses her just behind the left ear. She giggles like some ticklish virgin and raises her shoulder to her ear. He inhales the myriad of fragrances that he could not identify if he tried. He just knows Adream smells good.

“Boy, stop! What are you doing?”

“Just trying to show you some appreciation. I think you like it.” He then plants a kiss behind her right ear. This results in another giggle, much heartier than the first.

“Forreal. Stop.”

Adream looks at him with a face that betrays her request. He turns her around to face him. She looks up into his eyes and he pulls her close. He kisses the top of her head and enjoys the softness of her hair caressing his nose, pulls away, and uses his thumb and pointer finger to lift her chin.

“This is what it is. I’m feeling you. I like you, I ain’t felt nothing worth feeling in a long time. Let a nigga in. I’m a good dude. Aight?”

Adream nods her head and stares into his eyes. She loses the stare contest again. She turns to finish washing the crockpot. Once it’s placed in the drain, she washes her

hands, and rubs lotion on them. She makes a note to herself to put a new bottle of lotion on the sink. She's almost out. Femi is sitting on the sofa and making a fruitless attempt at looking comfortable. She has had that sofa for a couple of years and it still hasn't softened up. Adream gets some vodka from the fridge. Thankful she stopped by the store to stock up just before she came in tonight. She retrieves two glasses and pours orange juice into both. She only pours vodka into one. With the drinks in hand, she joins Femi in the living room.

"One screwdriver per your request." She hands him his drink then walks over to her favorite chair and sips her orange juice.

From the look on Femi's face, she may have made it a little too strong.

"Shorty, you trying to get me drunk so you can have your way with me? Women can be rapists, too."

"Boy boo! You can't rape the willing."

"Yeah, you right about that. You could do whatever you wanna do with me."

They both laugh and Femi pats the cushion next to him. Adream obliges. But first, she reaches under the sofa to retrieve the two cushy pillows she keeps hidden. She will not be uncomfortable on her own couch. She hands Femi one. The remote that should have been on the table was on the couch between her and Femi. As if he lives there, he places his drink on the end table, props his feet up, and turns on the TV. Adream scoots herself closer and rests her head on his shoulder. Femi stops flicking the channels when he sees Ice Cube and Chris Tucker sitting on the porch.

“Yo! This is my shit! You like *Friday*?”

“It’s not my favorite. But, I don’t hate it.”

Femi laughs at the movie like it’s his first time seeing it. She laughs some, too. In between the jokes he’d kiss her on her forehead or bring her hand to his lips, kiss the tips of her fingers, and the inside of her wrist. After getting used to the strength of the drink she made, he guzzles the last half. Dream is nodding off and just as Craig hits Dee-bo over the head with a trashcan, Adream is sleep.

Femi goes into her bedroom and tosses the stuffed animals on the floor and throws pillows next to them. He pulls back the covers and gives the fitted sheet a tug to make sure it’s secure. He goes back into the living room and makes sure the door is locked. He scoops Adream up and carries her into her room, slowly. She’s heavy, but he can handle it. He lays her gently on the bed, and covers her up. He walks around to the other side, pulls off each sock with the other foot, and takes off his pants and lays them across the foot of bed. He takes off his hoodie and long-sleeved shirt and lays them on top of his pants. He climbs in wearing only his boxers and pulls Adream close to spoon her. He inhales the scent of her and the bedsheets. He kisses her forehead. Her snore is a white noise that begs him to join in her slumber. He does.

## **Chapter 21**

I can’t believe I lost it like that in front of Teri. She was nice about it. Didn’t make me feel like I was stupid for crying. Was so worked up though we didn’t even get to talk about the journal like I wanted to. She said we can do it next time. I ain’t read that journal

in a long time. Tried to forget about it. Teri said revisiting it may be helpful. Said if I understood Adream better, I might be able to understand myself. She told me to think about asking Adream to come for a session. Told her I'd think about it. I try to convince myself that I ain't thinking about it. Truth is, that's all I think about. Don't understand why Adream need to come to these sessions. She won't do nothing but make me look worse to Teri. I already look bad. She ain't never said it, but I know.

I saw Shawna the other day. She said my baby was so nice. She said Adream didn't even make fun of her for writing or spelling stuff the wrong way. Dream ain't like that though. She loves helping people, she just don't want people to know she love helping people. She said my baby look just like me. We have the same smile. She don't show it often, but when she does smile, nobody would ever think there was anything wrong in the world. I just said, "Thank you." I hope that child didn't tell her that. Adream don't wanna admit she looks just like me. She built like a coca-cola bottle. I'm a coca-cola, too, but I'm built like the can. Dream got that little waist and those big hips and thick thighs. I used to make her get on the scale every day when she was younger. She was always chubby and bigger than the other kids. She grew into her size though. Plus-sized with a flat stomach. Even with a body like that she always felt like she wasn't pretty enough. I guess I could have made her feel different. Another something I failed at.

I done called her. She ain't called me though. Can't do nothing but keep trying. I wanted to tell her I ain't had a beer in almost two days. I ain't quitting. I just want her to know I don't have one every day...even though I want one all the time. I finally got that

journal Ms. Teri told me to get. It's just blue and spiral. Nothing like Dream's. Now, I been sitting her with a pen in one hand and my cigarette in the other. The only hand moving is the one with the cigarette. It ain't that I don't know what to write, I'm scared of what I will write. Ms. Teri said it's hard for people to admit they mistakes. I reckon I'm no different. I'm no dummy either. I got my GED in Job Corp and passed it without studying. That was just filling in some bubbles, I ain't have to write. Here I am, soon to be 57 and don't know how to start a sentence off. Okay...what's something that I wanna say to Adream? Could I start with that? Should I start with that? I scribbled 'sorry' and that's the best I can do right now.

## **Chapter 22**

Joy pulls herself away from her flannel sheets. She walks into the kitchen to start the coffee maker and thanks God for allowing her to wake up this morning. She is grateful to have the house to herself on a day like today. If he were here, she and Kofi would celebrate their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Maybe she would have convinced him to take a European cruise or maybe a trip to Hawaii. They talked of travel often, but when the kids came, those talks happened less often until they didn't happen at all.

Kofi came to the states when he was six. His mother and father sent for him when they had gotten settled. By the time he met Joy when he was 18 and she was 15, there was no trace of an African accent. Joy remembers thinking he was ugly because he was so black. He would come into the grocery store where she was a bagger. She was always friendly, but equally feisty and this is what attracted him to her. He asked her out every time he saw her.

She always said 'no', 'hell no', or 'go to hell'. Regardless of the response, he would just laugh. One day he didn't ask and Joy was pissed. She had grown accustomed to his smile. It was also nice to have someone pay her any attention. Here she was at 15 and didn't have eyebrows and sported a wig that screamed: I'm a wig! It was difficult to read the expression on her face because she didn't have eyebrows. Kofi talked to her like she was beautiful. To him, she truly was.

She remembers saying, "Ain't you gonna ask me?"

"A man can't handle his heart being broken 20 times. I've asked you 19 times at this point and I will not give you the last little chunk that's left." He spoke softly, deliberately.

"Fine. Don't ask. But, I know you're thinking it. That's good enough for me. So, yes."

Joy officially had her first date. One would think having 13 older brothers would get in the way of a girl's love life. But, her brothers were too busy running from the law and chasing women to care too much. They did tell him that if he makes her cry, they would purchase his momma the most expensive black dress they could find at the thrift store. They figured if they we're going to kill Kofi, that was the least they could do for causing his mother's pain.

He courted Joy for three months. Dinners where she could order steak if she wanted or lobster or shrimp. Such a luxury was impossible growing up in a house 16 people. They went to the drive-in almost every Friday. One of his friends owned a little hole in the wall and he'd let both of them in knowing they were too young. If he was unable to take her

to school because of work, he would definitely be there to pick her up when the last bell rang. One morning, Kofi called the house and told Joy to put on a dress and that he was on his way. When she got in the car, he pecked her cheek and started driving. Joy would ask questions and he would just raise his hand to silence her. He parked in front of the courthouse and told her, "Today, you will become my wife."

She smiles at the memory and wipes her eyes. The only man to ever love her. To ever touch her. Not that their marriage was perfect, nothing and no one's is. But, perfection is the only thing it could be compared to. Their relationship was never in the realm of just being okay, surpassed being good, and soared beyond great. So perfect is what she had to call it. That man owned a laundromat and a store. That's what paid the bills and padded their savings. He drove cabs to pay for movies, weekend getaways with or without the kids and any other extras. Joy's job was to take care of him, and in taking care of him, she was taking care of herself. The kids came and that was tacked onto her short, yet important list of responsibilities. He always said he would take care of her. Kofi kept that promise even after his death.

Joy readies herself. She bought a new wig just for the occasion. A short and sassy one that was red with blonde highlights. The red leather miniskirt was picked up from the cleaners two days ago. The grey cashmere sweater she ordered arrived last week. She polished her wedding ring last night before going to bed. The ring is a simple band. Kofi wanted to buy her a new one once they were more stable, but she declined. She loved that ring and a new one would not have the same sentiment.

She tightens the laces of her knee-high boots, careful not to put a run in her pantyhose. After applying a burgundy shade of lipstick to her lids and lips, she grabs her purse, car keys, um, and walks out the door. In the car, she looks in her rearview mirror and sighs at the sadness looking back at her. She starts to the car and coasts down the quiet street.

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After purchasing hot cocoa from the vendor on the corner, Joy finds *the* bench. Thankfully, no one is sitting there. She places the urn just so it's almost touching her thigh.

"Here we are, Baby. They've really built it up since then. I ain't know that first date was gonna lead us to becoming an us." She picks up the urn and runs her fingers across its etchings:

Kofi Oluwafemi Olgun

January 1, 1943 – December 21, 1985

A loving husband and doting father who will forever be missed.

Joy returns the urn the bench. The waterfront park downtown is alive with the music of the trolleys' bells, pennies clinking in the fountain and kids making wishes, and the laughter and conversations of couples taking a stroll. The air is cool. Crisp. She inhales deeply and pushes back tears. She fires up a cigarette and takes a deep drag.

"Hey, Boo. That's what the young ones say these days. I'm doing okay. I could be better if you was here with me. Some days are harder than most others. I wanna thank you for visiting me in my dreams, though. It's real nice when you bring the girls with you. That's what helps me get up some mornings. The good Lord knows I wanna give up

sometimes. All the time. I miss you and the girls so much. Even though Femi's home, I'm still lonely. Thank God I had the good sense to have you cremated. Had I put you in the grave, you'd be rolling over and into somebody else's 'cause of what Femi has become. I can't figure him out. The only thing he got from you was his charm and skin tone. Everything else had to be from my side of the family. He's just like his uncles and they don't want a damn thing to do with him.

"I don't know what it's like in Heaven or how often you get to see God. If you have easy access to Him or if it's by appointment only. However the hell it works, can you ask Him to work on Femi? Feel like my prayers ain't working. Kofi, he is everything we never wanted him to be. The only thing he done right is he ain't got no kids. I don't know what to do. We both took it hard when you left. We was trying to heal and was doing okay as okay can be when that fucking drunk killed our babies. I had convinced myself that I forgave that man, but I guess I ain't. He be up for parole soon, I reckon. And you know I'mma be at that courthouse to make sure they keep his ass where he's at.

"I guess it would be easier to grieve the dead if I wasn't so busy grieving my only living child. He's just a fuck up, Kofi. The only good thing I can say is that he been out close to two years. Still ain't working. Well, he works, but it ain't a job. He be working these women that's as smart as they are dumb. I been praying that he don't start with those pills again. Ain't no way I can deal with him slobbering and talking to hisself. Taking shit outta my purse and stealing and wrecking my car. Taking my jewelry and pawning it. He

done did that twice now. I can't do it. I ain't doing it, Kofi. I told him, if it's a third time, I promise I was gonna cut his ass. Ain't nothing changed, I still keep my blade sharp.

"You'd sure enough be proud of Rayon, though. He paid you some attention. Got a house full of girls. Got himself a real cute wife. She don't care for me much because of our son. I understand it though. I think about La-La sometimes. I'll say this, Femi didn't make that girl try those pills and shit. And he damn sure didn't make her love them. She was a sweet girl. Just loved our son more than she should have and didn't love herself enough. Anyway, Ray got two houses. Rents one of 'em out. He did good. That's the son we shoulda had. He still comes by and checks on me. I see more of him when Femi locked up. Cuts my grass and run to the store for me. Never takes my money. I offer. Sometimes he brings his girls down. That's not often though. I don't think Keisha likes him to do it. I know he tries to talk to Femi. That's like talking to a deaf mute. He just don't get it. Me and you worked so hard to get him. We was screwing every night and almost every morning. Sometimes, you'd come home on your lunch. Didn't think I would have to work so hard to keep him. You just had to have a son.

"Kofi, I need you like I never needed you before," she says, now sobbing. Her eyes are clenched tight and her hand is rubbing the urn, "Please ask God to take care of Femi. Help him and lay His hands on him. I want nothing more than to see you Kofi. You and the girls. But, I don't wanna leave Femi until I know he's gonna be okay. Ask God to let me make it that long. Please ask Him. Beg him if you have to. Dr. Taylor said there's nothing more he can do. Help me, Kofi. Help me. Or help him. Helping him would be

helping me. I don't get him. He is lazy. So lazy. That's partially my fault. I gave him so much because I thought it would keep him from going to the streets. I was wrong. His parole office is at the house more than Femi is. I lie for him. I don't know why. But, I do. Kofi, just ask God to protect our boy."

She reaches in her coat pocket and pulls out the handkerchief that Kofi used to wipe away his tears when Joy said, "I do" all those years ago. She crosses her legs, sips on her hot cocoa, and sobs.

### **Chapter 23**

"Good morning, Pretty."

"Hey. What time is it?" My mouth is dry and I'm not quite ready to greet the day.

"Almost seven." Femi stands and stretches. His tattoos dance gracefully on the silky canvas that is his skin as they expand and contract back to their normal size.

"You got an extra toothbrush and wash rag?" Femi says this as he is walking toward the bathroom. His locs are swaying in the sunlight that is beaming onto his back from the tiny space between my curtains.

"Yeah. The washcloths are in the closet and there is a basket on the middle shelf with toothbrushes and travel-sized toiletries."

"Toiletries? Yeah, I could get used to your snooty ass." He looks back with a smile, but it's too early for me to muster up the energy to return one.

I hear the closet door creak and then the faucet running. Reluctantly, I leave the warmth of my bed that is easily holding me captive. I walk into the bathroom while pulling out my wedgie.

“I have to pee.”

Femi turns with a mouth full of toothpaste and points at the toilet. “Nothing’s stopping you. Handle your business.”

I never thought I’d be the type to use the bathroom in front of my husband, so I definitely never thought I’d be comfortable going with someone who is not even a boyfriend. But I did. When I was finished, I gently bumped him with my hip so I could wash my hands. He leans in before I can protest and pops me on the cheek with a Sensodyne-coated kiss. I flicked water on him and wiped my cheek. He just laughed. He grabs a hand towel to wipe his face and walks back into the bedroom. I brush my teeth and join him. He puts on his clothes as if it is a theatre performance. It is nothing unusual for a man to put on a show while getting undressed. When did a man getting dressed become so fucking sexy?

“Aight, Shorty. Obviously, you ain’t the type to cook your man breakfast in the morning. So, I’m about to roll out.”

“I don’t mind cooking breakfast for my man. When my man is present I will act accordingly.” It’s too early for smiles, but sarcasm never gets a rest. There’s that dimple.

“Yeah, aight. So, when can I see you again? It felt real good when I was snuggled up against you. And your snore is mad cute.”

“I do not snore.”

I open the bedroom door and walk past the kitchen into the living room with Femi trailing close enough behind to grab me by my shirt and pull me so that my butt crashes into his thigh. He lifts the tail of my headscarf kisses me on the back of my neck. His other hand is contouring the leggings that have a death grip on my flesh. I fail at trying to walk away. In one breath, I am turned and pinned against the wall. Its coolness chills the heat that is flowing through me. Femi places his hands on the wall, one on each side of my shoulders. His face is so close that I can feel his eyelashes graze my cheeks as he blinks. My composure is slipping away from me one kiss and two breaths at a time.

My bottom lip is trapped between both of his. He nibbles and releases. Brushes his moist lips on my chin and underneath. He takes his hands from the wall and lifts my shirt to just below my breasts. He looks at me as if pleading for permission. There was no protest and he proceeds to trace my stomach with his tongue.

“Don’t move.” He says while slipping my leggings just below my hips and positioning himself on his knees. He trails his tongue across the top of my panties. His fingers slide the lace away from my bikini line. He traces the space where my thigh meets my pelvic area with a softness I have never experienced. My brain is sending reminders that I should breathe. Just as I’m getting familiar with inhaling and exhaling again, I go into a panting frenzy as he nuzzles his nose into the closely-cropped, coarse curls that cover my mound.

“Stop! Please. Stop.”

I tear myself away from the wall and pull up my leggings. Femi stands and licks his lips.

“You’re serious?” Femi says with a smirk while his eyes are fixed directly on mine.

“I’m not ready. You didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t. I’m just not ready.”

“Okay. You’re sure I ain’t do nothing wrong? What? You didn’t like it?”

He’s sincere in his questioning and is approaching me with uncertainty. I can’t move. He hugs me once more and grabs my hand. I walk slowly with him towards the door. He bends down to put on his boots without lacing them. When he stands, he strokes my cheeks with the back of his hand and walks out.

## Chapter 24

“Hi, Momma.”

“Where you been at? I been calling you. I tried to type you a text and I don’t know if you got it or not.”

“I’ve been busy Momma. We had somebody quit and my shifts have been crazy. I’ve been working splits. I’m not ignor—,”

“Whatever, Dream. I, uh, was thinking maybe you could come over. I found some stuff you might not even know you had. I wanna talk to you about something, too. I was thinking maybe you could come over and we could watch a movie. This bootleg guy stopped by the daycare the other day. I got one of your favorite movies. You probably done forgot about this movie. But I didn’t.”

“What movie is it?”

"I ain't telling. You coming over or not?"

"Today, Momma? And I don't know if I can stay for an entire movie."

"Well, I think you will once you see what I got. What about some fried chicken, macaroni, and broccoli? You can make some Kool-Aid. Or you can have some Hawaiian Punch. You know I keep me a jug of that."

"Fine, Momma. I'll be there after I take a shower."

"Dream?"

"Ma'am?"

"I miss you. A lot."

"Okay. I'll call you when I'm on my way."

"Don't forget my containers, either."

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I'm slipping. A dimple, some tattoos, and a New York accent almost got Femi tickets to experience Adream. I am not ready. I like him. Too much but it's still not enough. His hands are calloused, but I couldn't feel their roughness as he caressed my skin. The way he held me last night was different, too. His arm was tight around my waist, but loose enough for me to reposition myself. His phone kept going off. We both pretended like we didn't hear it. I was awake long before he knew it. And here it is twenty minutes after he's left and I'm still wishing that he'd knock on the door so he could finish what didn't even get started.

My morning started off with a man in my bed and now the evening is guaranteed to end in dread. I should have told Momma I didn't feel good or I was going to do my hair or count the fibers in my carpet. Anything except a 'yes'. I take my time shaving and showering. I'm mad as hell I forgot to pick up some lip buffer the last time I was at the mall. I used sugar and olive to rub back and forth across my lips. My hair looks frozen in an untamed state. I swear its softness would make cotton boll over with jealousy. I can see wisps of gray doing the hokey pokey in my head. When they first started popping up, I'd name them after some of those damn kids that come into the library. Now, there's just too many. I'm not dyeing or plucking them.

I slather myself in lotion and mentally prep myself for the daunting task of finding something that fits. Leggings and an oversized shirt will have to do. I change purses and head to the door. Just as I'm locking it, my phone vibrates. Femi is sent to voicemail. I walk to my car and snatch the note that's pinched between the glass and the windshield wiper. The penmanship is precise and perfect:

I'm feeling you and wanted to feel you. You can't blame me for that. Sorry if it was too much for you. And I'm sorry it wasn't enough for me. Femi.

This negro is a professional. I'm gonna have to step my game up in order to deflect his bullshit.

## **Chapter 25**

Femi walks up the steps and kicks a ball away from his path. It rolls into grass that seems to have no knowledge that it should be green. Or at least some shade of it. He smiles

to himself as he thinks about the smoothness of leaving Dream that note. Anybody can send a text message. He tosses the big wheel onto the porch. Before he can get out his keys, Keisha bursts through the door and meets him. She has taken her braids down and Femi wishes she wouldn't have done that. She's almost bald. With the braids, she could be sitting on the benches in the ballpark of prettiness. Without them, her ass ain't even in the parking lot.

"Where the fuck you been? And don't tell me you been with your uncle. You think I'm stupid?" Mascara is caked in rings around her eyes. Her falsies are hanging on by eye boogers. There's a crusty stream of drool stuck to her face from where she soothed herself to sleep while sucking her thumb.

"Good morning to you too, Love." Femi says this with a warmth and smoothness that even finest bourbon couldn't imitate. "I told you where I was when I talked to you last night." He walks up to the door and she doesn't move aside until he pecks her on the forehead.

Femi sees the kids sitting on the couch eating cereal out of cups. He says hello and they say the same without taking their eyes off of Jerry Springer. He goes into the kitchen and Keisha is right behind him. He stops just so she can run into him.

"Shorty, chill. And watch where you going." He opens the fridge and takes the water jug out and drinks directly from it. Keisha smacks the bottom of the jug so that it splashes and splatters on the floor, Femi, and her.

“Don’t come in my fucking house and act like everything is okay. It ain’t. I’mma ask you again, where the fuck you been at?”

Femi looks at her while pulling both his hoodie and shirt over his head. In the two seconds that his face was hidden, a look Keisha has never seen before forces the hair on her neck to prickle. His jawline is clenched, glare locked. Femi says a whole lot without saying a single word. Keisha gulps and walks into her bedroom. She plops down on the mattress and rakes the piles of synthetic hair on the floor. Femi walks in bare-chested and furious.

“Don’t you ever in your fucking life do no shit like that. The little temper tantrum was cute until you got me all wet and shit. I told you where I was. Your ass been crying and shit for no damn reason. Your ass coulda got in the car as soon as I got here and got the milk. The WIC is still in there,” Femi says with his New York accent taking a dive and his real one revealing itself. She doesn’t notice.

Keisha’s voice is trembling almost to the point of inaudibility, “I’m sorry. I’m just mad. Shit’s fucked up. Real fucked up. I had to put water in they cereal so they would have something to eat. I tried the powder milk, Zoom-Zoom gagged. I told you they daddies don’t do shit for them. I told you that. Then, you come in here smelling like lavender or patchouli or some shit and still trying to tell me you been with your uncle. I wasn’t even thinking about the WIC. My boss called me this morning about people’s phone bills. We got audited or something and they been watching everything I do. The way she said it, like they mighta been watching it for a while now. They wanna know why I credit so many people’s bills. I called your ass plenty of times this morning to see when you was getting on

the road and you wouldn't pick up the fucking phone." Keisha sobs as a snot bubble forms and bursts. Her breasts are sitting in her lap. One of her ashen legs are tucked under her. The other is stretched out rocking back and forth.

Femi pretends to listen as he opens and closes drawers that are missing knobs. He's looking for something clean to wear and can't find it. He looks at Keisha and does a once-and-twice-glance over at her bedroom. The same pizza box has been sitting on top of her TV since they first started kicking it. He wanted to toss it a while ago, but wanted to see how long she'd keep it there. Today was the day that it was going in the trash. Almost-empty pop bottles are on the floor by her bed; it's actually a mattress and a box spring on the floor. She's been waiting on Femi to buy her a frame since the first night he stayed over. He'd said it right after she looked up at him with what could have been a smile if her mouth wasn't filled with his semen.

A plastic bag is hanging on the door knob. It's on the verge of freefalling and spilling all over the floor. In the event that it does, the carpet would simply welcome it to mingle with the cigarette burns, playdoh, bubblegum, and other unidentifiable stains. Zoom-zoom's dirty diaper is on the corner of the bed. He's three, about to be four, sucks the two fingers between pointer and the pinky, and still drinking from a bottle. Femi doesn't know his real name. Neither does Zoom-Zoom.

"Are you listening to me, Femi?"

Femi snaps out of his trance, looks at Keisha, and continues his search for clean clothes. He has never stayed more than two days at a time. That's the most he can tolerate the filth.

"Where's my clothes? I know I left some jeans and a hoodie over here?"

"I don't know what you're talking 'bout." Keisha lies. The truth is that his clothes are soaking in a bucket of bleach-water in the bathtub. Keisha is tired of Femi's bullshit. The first time she called him, he invited himself over, and she welcomed him into her home and in between her thighs. To her, Femi was a good man. He didn't have any kids and he worked in construction. Well, that's what he'd told her he did before his back went out. He'd explained that he wasn't used to being broke and she felt this was her cue to show him that she could in fact take care of her man and help him get back on his feet. Any extra money she had she gave to Femi. He didn't even have to ask. She'd never sold her food stamps before, but started when she got Femi as an extra expense.

Keisha stayed in her room while Femi tore up an already destroyed house looking for some clean clothes. She'd been by herself for so long. Jayvion had been gone for three months, thus she welcomed his company. Even if he wasn't being sweet like he used to be when she first met him in the Cricket store. She convinced herself right after she had Alize that nobody else would want her. Her curvy figure had expanded to the shape of a barrel after having three kids. Her face was still cute, but she knew her beauty stopped at her neck. Keisha made sure her face was always the focal point. Braids and sew-in weaves imprisoned her scalp almost always. She never could grow much hair no matter what she did.

“What the fuck is this shit!” Femi shouts as he tosses a bucket into the hallway. Its liquid contents, and a pair of jeans and a hoodie fling onto the wall and slide down into an umbrage of orange mess. Nobody would ever guess that those clothes used to be black.

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Bitch! You know what it is. You fucked up my clothes because I was out trying to make some money? You so fucking insecure that you wanna fuck up somebody’s shit?” Femi’s coolness has morphed into a rage that he tries to avoid.

“Stop all that damn screaming and cussing! My fucking kids are in the living room.” Keisha is crying for more than just the current situation. The origin of her tears can be traced back to every man she’s ever shared a bed with.

“I don’t give a damn about you crying? What about my shit?” Femi is walking towards Keisha with a slow and deliberate gait. Keisha backs up until she can go no further. Femi is centimeters from her face. He can smell yesterday’s funk and today’s fear seeping from her pores.

“I’m. So. Sorry.” Keisha’s throat is dry and as she whispered these words, her eyes screamed them. Femi held her gaze for a few seconds longer and backed away a few steps.

“What are you going to do about my shit you fucked up?”

“I’ll get you some more. I got the number to the booster I got those from. I’m gonna call him. I’m really sorry.” She tries to reach out to touch him and changes her mind when she sees the look on his face.

“Do you wanna get the WIC outta of the car? I gotta make a run.”

Keisha is too scared to protest. She wants to remind him that that's her car, she makes the payment every month, and keeps up with the insurance most of the time. Not him.

“Where you going?”

“You want the WIC or not? I can drop you at the store and you can walk back. I'mma give you 10 minutes to wash your face, put on a hat, and put on some clothes. You ain't ready, I'm gone. While Keisha is getting ready, Femi puts his slightly-damp hoodie back on. He checks his phone and has no missed calls or text messages. Maybe that note wasn't as smooth as he initially thought. He really doesn't have anywhere to go, but he needs Keshia to know that she ain't running shit. Besides, once he gets Adream on his team, he can quit fucking with Keisha altogether.

Femi walks out to the car and climbs in. Shortly after, Keisha scoots her way to the car in those raggedy-ass house shoes while wearing an equally-raggedy rag tied around her head. Once she's inside, she focuses on the tiny scratch in her windshield. To avoid looking at or talking to Femi, she thinks of the little baby bird that slammed into the glass sometime last summer. The scratch is in the corner, so getting it fixed has never crossed her mind. She can feel the heat from his side gaze and pretends to ignore it.

“You ain't gotta pull all the way into the store. I can get out right here. What time are you gonna be back? I was thinking about taking the kids to the park or something. Get 'em out the house.”

With his jaw clenched, he says, “When I get back.” She blinks, swallows, opens the door, and gets out. Before she can wave or give him the finger, Femi speeds off.

## Chapter 26

Mirage is standing in the doorway and scoots over just enough for Adream to squeeze through. Mirage closes the door and locks it.

“I am a guest and like to be treated as such.” Adream kicks off her shoes and sets her purse on the table. As usual, the house is clean. The living room table has two sparkling ashtrays on each corner. In the center, are three crystal elephants that are joined at their raised trunks to support the glass ball that shattered, but didn’t break when Mirage threw it Adream for rolling her eyes. The smell of fried chicken, cigarette smoke, and Sex on the Beach scented incense blend into a fragrance that reminds Adream of the handful of good memories she had with her mother. She grabs the remote before she plops down on the couch. She grabs the blanket that is draped on its arm and covers herself.

“You ain’t no damn guest. I hope you ain’t come over to sleep. I told you I got your favorite movie. Look on top of the DVD player. You can eat whenever you feel like it. It’s ready.”

“I don’t feel like getting up.”

Mirage walks past Adream to get the DVD that’s in a little plastic jacket. She drops it on Adream’s lap and goes into the kitchen. As she reads the smudged markings on the cover, she suppresses a smirk: *What About Bob*. That’s the movie she would watch when her momma would be too drunk or too tired (maybe a little bit of both) to fix her breakfast on

the weekends. She almost let a chuckle slip when she thinks of Bill Murray saying, "I sail! I sail!"

"I don't like this movie any more. Watched it too much when I was little."

"Awww. Forreal? I thought you would love that. When I was flipping through the bootleg man's book, and I saw that...it made me think of you. We ain't gotta watch it. Go on and take it with you. You might change your mind." Dream drops it into her purse and starts thinking of how she can get dinner over with and get home to watch her favorite movie.

"You ain't gonna fix you a plate?" Mirage says, flatly.

"I'll eat in a minute."

"Okay. You forgot about my containers, didn't you?"

"I did. I'll buy you a couple of tubs of butter and when you use them up, you'll have two new containers. How's that?" Both of them are surprised of the other's chuckles. The suffocating tension that is usually present when they are together thins in its density just a bit. Both of them breathe a little easier.

Mirage goes into the hall closet and retrieves two shoe boxes. She places them on the table. Adream looks at the Reebok logo and is instantly reminded of high school. Her freshmen to senior year consisted of a navy, white, and tan dress code. The boring ensemble could not be complete without a pair of Reebok Classics. She is snapped out of the memory by Mirage planting herself next to her on the couch.

“I been doing some cleaning and found a lot of boxes with your stuff in it. When you left, you left a lot of stuff here,” Mirage states meekly.

“Surprised you didn’t throw it away.”

“I thought about it. I got to the point of dropping them in the trash and got them out.”

“Damn. Never knew you to have a conscious.”

Mirage clears her throat and gets up to go to the kitchen. She checks the food out of habit and not out of necessity. She grabs a beer and sits down at the dining table. In need of a cigarette, a sense of relief calms her as she spots a half smoked one in the ashtray. Once it’s lit, she has the courage to continue the conversation with Adream.

“I do. There’s a lot you don’t know about me. And that ain’t your fault. I can say that now. I know what I did and what I didn’t do.”

“Who’s your therapist? She should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.”

“Do you have to give a smart ass response to everything I say? Damn. I’m really trying. And it’s hard. This shit is so fucking hard for me and you just won’t make it easy,” Mirage says with tears that she doesn’t even try to stop from escaping.

“Fine. Talk.”

“Adream you gotta know that I didn’t want shit to be like this. I swear for God I didn’t. But, you know, I didn’t have nothing to look to that would show me how it’s supposed to be done. I ain’t have no mother or father. I can’t even remember what my momma looks like. Shit, I was only like 5 when she died from kidney disease. I think that’s

what they said it was. Daddy died playing Russian Roulette before I was born. So I ain't know what to do about no baby. All I'm saying is I been trying to make it right. I know I can't undo the fucked up shit I did. Can't you let me try, though? I want you to go and see Ms. Terri with me. She been giving me homework. It ain't like what they give you in school. It's stuff to help me deal with shit and to understand some shit. That's why I been going through all this stuff of yours. I read some of your stuff."

Adream goes to the kitchen, washes her hands, and fixes her plate. She warms it up in the microwave. She wipes the counter even though there is no mess. She opens the fridge and looks longer than she intends to and finally decides on a glass of ice water. She picks at lint that she wishes was on her shirt. She does anything she can to avoid looking at Mirage. This conversation should have happened years ago. Or even better, this conversation would not be necessary if that so-called innate motherly instinct that all women are supposed to have kicked in the day Adream was born. She finally looks over at Mirage and sees something she have never seen in her mother. Remorse.

She joins Mirage at the table, and without having to ask, Mirage puts out the cigarette. For the first time, the silence between them is not awkward. It's peaceful. Both find delight in this feeling and simply enjoy it. Together.

## **Chapter 27**

"Yes, can I get --"

"Go ahead and pull up," Jason says. As I take my foot off the brake I realize just how pathetic I really am. But I don't feel pathetic enough to stop taking my fat

ass to Wendy's every morning. It's a different kind of shame when they recognize your voice and you don't have to place your order because they know what it is. A large iced coffee and a sausage and egg biscuit is how I start my shift. Jason smiles as he always does and hands me back my card. Without being told, he throws away the receipt because he knows that I don't want it. When Jason hands me the bag, I wink to say thanks. He responds, "See you, tomorrow."

As I pull out of the drive-thru I give myself the same speech I always do. *You need to stop that shit. It's ridiculous. It doesn't even taste good all the time. Your credit cards are damn near maxed out and so is your waist.* These thoughts stop when I pull into the parking lot and morph into thoughts of disdain. Why don't arsonists burn down libraries? Not all of them, but this one and maybe the one where Marsha works. I'd put some money on their commissary if they burned that one down while she was in it. Marsha's the old manager of a branch I used to work at. I've worked at 8 different branches and have hated them all, the reasons for hating each one are as different as the branches themselves.

I punch in the code to disarm the alarm and turn on the lights. A cardboard box is kicked out of my way. The flick of the light switch startles the small family of creepy residents that the exterminator cannot seem to kill. As long as I don't take them home with me, I'm smooth. The smell of the musty rag the (un)cleaning crew used to wipe down the counters smothers the aroma of worn leather bindings, old glue and paper. Waddling my way to my office, I make a mental list of what Joanie is

going to gripe about: the receipts in the recycle bin should not be balled up before they are tossed in the bin. Instead, they should be dropped straight into the bin because it holds more if the papers are not crumpled; someone hung next week's schedule with scotch tape instead of putty; there are two pens without tops in the pen holder, and the pump on the hand sanitizer is not perfectly aligned with the center of the label on the front of the bottle. Before plopping down into my chair, I added a few more pieces of scotch-tape to the schedule, removed a two tops from pens, wadded up blank sheets of paper the size of golf balls and tossed them into the bin, and turned the pump completely to the back of the bottle and unscrewed it slightly. I'll do anything to hurry that aneurysm she's determined to give herself nitpicking over stupid shit.

It's Thursday. Story time day. Since my bedroom possesses the cure for AIDS, I'm sure this office is the cause of it. Shit. Is. Everywhere. It's an organized madness that drives my officemate insane. Thus, it will stay that way. The original patterns I use for crafts are tacked onto my bulletin board. Every card, picture, and blade of grass that any kid has ever given me is stuck to the board as well. Any book that I considered and didn't use has never made it back to its home. It's living quarters are now on, under, or beside my desk. Today's theme is all about bold colors, shapes, letters, and fun. Kathryn Otoshi's *One*, Herve Tullet's *Press Here*, and of course, Bill Martin's *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* will be performed with an enthusiasm reserved only for little people. The door slams and I hear the clack of

her heels just before they are hushed once she hits the carpeted common area and stops in the doorjamb of my office.

“Good morning, Adream. I am so glad that you’re feeling better. I was so excited to wake up and not see a text from you about not feeling well. So glad you’re here,” Joanie says as she chugs the green concoction in her Mason jar. She always thinks she is the only one who is aware of her sarcasm. If it was any other day, I’d start coughing until I puked and pissed on myself and leave her no choice but to let me go home. Before the sentence completely escaped her mouth, I’d be backing out of the parking lot and turning the corner on two wheels headed to Marshall’s or Ross. But today is not any other day; it is Thursday.

“Yes, I was surprised as well. Will be even more surprised if I’m feeling good tomorrow.” And with that, she turns on her heels that are wearing those vegan shoes that cost a hundred bucks and are as durable as wet toilet paper. She was so excited when they arrived. I signed for the box and before I could set it down, she snatched it from my hands and skipped to her office. Not a gallop, but a full-on skip. They’re brown. They go with everything, especially those Muppet Baby hands that are tinted orange from all the carrots she eats. The branch won’t open for a couple of hours. That’s plenty of time to eat breakfast, make my cut outs, practice my finger rhymes, check email, and get something else to eat before it’s time for me to create the illusion that I’m one of the happiest people breathing.

My iced coffee has way more calories than it does caffeine. I never could drink it black like Momma does. That has to be the universal beverage of serial killers and terrorists. It's just nasty. My email has nothing interesting in it. It would be great if they would use emails for the monthly Children's Meetings. They could honestly be summed up in a line or two. But noooo, these people who love what they do, or who are better at pretending that they love it better than I am, host a stupid meeting every month. It is never less than three hours and they're mandatory. And stupid. Did I say, stupid?

As I waddle into the common area and turn on the laminator, our clerk Jonathan prances in. He's still in the closet with the door locked and bolted. It seems like everybody knows he gay except him. He's cute...in a way that only a 21-year-old can be. He's not quite handsome enough to strut down the runway. But he could do print for Old Navy, maybe The Gap even, but not quite cute enough for Banana Republic. His hair screams to anyone within eyeshot that he is of Italian heritage. Beautifully black and alluring in its contrast to his forget-me-not-blue eyes. One is guaranteed to remember them forever. Simply striking. He gives me an air kiss and proceeds to do his daily tasks of emptying the book drop, organizing the circulation desk, and working on the "books requested" list. He has just the right amount of OCD to be effective and not annoying. His presence is usually overlooked by most of the staff. However, his absence could never go unnoticed. Even if it aspired to like mine often does.

“Darling, would you like for me to set up the room for you? You are far too pretty to do such a mundane task,” he says. His perfectly pressed oxford shirt is buttoned to the very top. His Adam’s apple is pleading for freedom. Khaki Dockers are pressed and have obviously been tailored to accommodate his Ken-like physique. The five-o’clock shadow that presents itself around 3:45 shows no sign of its future appearance. The scent of his Le Male cologne makes me consider running outside my race. Then I remember that he’s gay. And not black.

“You know what? Can you just help me with set up?” I pull down my dress that is always riding up my ass. I made sure my tights were free of holes and runs this morning. For some reason, I try to put forth a little more effort on Thursdays. The kids don’t care. They are still at that stage where everybody is beautiful or cute...even when they’re not.

“Of course,” he says with his confident yet unhurried demeanor. He gently removes the stack of books and the cutouts I’m carrying from my arms. We both walk into the Story Time room. It’s not as nice as the ones at other branches. The tables hold the signatures of precocious little toddlers who were obviously not fond of scribbling on paper. The carpet is clean enough. It’s business-office-gray. The chairs are nothing fancy. Their only purpose is to give you another option besides sitting on the floor. The television was donated by our Friends of the Library Foundation. This was a total shock me. I’d stamped them as the **Completely And Utterly Useless Foundation**. Once a year, they’ll bring the staff some meat tray and

donate some used books for our kids and think we're supposed to put on lip gloss and plant the shiniest kiss on their asses. Imagine my surprise when they did something that was actually helpful. The TV is compatible with the laptops that are issued to all Children's Staff. I didn't put on lipgloss, but a touch of chap stick when I told the old biddies 'thank you'. The kiddos love the T.V. and the slideshows I create.

Johnathan has taken the care to set the chairs in a semi-circle and laid down the rug that the little people sit on. The books are placed in a colorful display. He even fluffed the pillow before placing it on my chair. We chat about his plans for visiting Florida in a couple weeks with his church for a singles retreat. He also tells me about the new position that was posted on the company site. He's considering applying for a Library Assistant job and wanted to know what my thoughts.

"It's Main, right? I saw that position the other day. I remember saying a quick prayer for whoever applied and got the job. They're real different down there. They created the term micromanage."

"You think I shouldn't do it?" He asks with concern etched into his face.

"I'm always about people getting paid what they're worth. The truth is that you do way more than most librarians in this system and you're just a clerk. I think you can totally do what the job requires and then some. I just want you to know what it's like down there. The director is as fascinating as

earwax and just as unnecessary. The children's staff are really cool and know their shit. A few of them any way. You'll learn a lot from them. A couple of supervisors are really helpful and supportive. The others aren't worth mentioning. But I will. Stacy has two faces and you can't trust either of them. I caught her talking about me at a meeting. I didn't put it on my resume, so her ass did know: I read lips. She's fake and phony and never on time for anything. She got a promotion. For what and to what, I don't know. No one is sure of what she does.

I definitely think you should and could do it. It's a great stepping stone and if it were a better library system, it would create a lot of opportunity. Since it's a horrible library system, opportunity is only delivered via unicorns and fairies."

Jonathan's chuckle says that I said too much. He looks graciously mortified at my candor. "I'm not trying to discourage you. I don't want anybody coming into this like I did. Young, green, and dumb! The first two years were so perfect that it seemed like something Disney created. Nobody told me that your contract has a clause that's written in invisible ink. You must take abuse from these patrons. It is perfectly okay for them to break your car windows or to piss on you literally and figuratively. The higher ups won't even offer you a towel to wipe yourself off with. They all seem to have developed a nasty case of amnesia from when they worked the floor. And because they don't have to deal with the bullshit, they expect you to you roll around, splash in it, and love it. Definitely apply for the position. But as soon as another one becomes available at a branch, apply for that one. It may not take you

long. People are always moving up or moving on with this place. It's mostly the latter though. I started as a sub and every branch, almost everybody was looking for other jobs."

"Thank you for telling me the truth. I just think it's what I do anyway, so why not get paid for it?" Jonathan's face is unreadable. The fear that had appeared was gone. He jingles his keys and turns to head out the door. While looking back at he me, he smirks and says, "It's show time."

A couple of minutes later, I can hear the clink of the door unlocking. The muffled pitter patter of little feet stomping the carpet fill the library. These are my toddlers, masters of gibberish. Aspen marches into the room just like he does every week: full of energy and oozing with cuteness.

"Dood mooning, Mizz Deem," he says while pushing his bangs away from his eyes. His mother, Charli walks through the door with her twins, Kiran and Keegan holding her hands and Caspian strapped to her chest. Lily Rose is in her belly, at least that's her name as of right now. It's changed from Dusty Marie, to Meadow Valley, and last week was Navy Sunshine. Charli is super cool and extra fertile. She absolutely loves being pregnant. Her big belly looks like an accessory to any outfit on her. It just goes. She moves with grace and is fluent in a happiness and peace that is foreign to most people. She is usually one of the first families here.

Her hair is swept up in a purposely messy bun. The flowy skirt she is wearing elongates an already lengthy-not-lanky frame. Her camisole is paired with a simple, blue button-down that's open. I imagine this is for the convenience of feeding. When she first started, she asked would it be okay to breastfeed. I told her a hungry, screaming baby is never okay and to go for it. I also explained that if some inbred Jed had something to say about it to direct them over to me. Ever since then, we get a little chit chat in before story time. The expertly-tweezed crescent moons above her eyes give her face a softness that is inviting to anyone who glances in her direction. Charli is barefaced and beautiful.

Caspian has a vice grip on the binky that is always in his mouth. In the event, that he does not have the binky, there is no leaving the house. A few weeks ago, Charli explained that she got a tiny peek into hell's window. She lost his binky, and naturally, he lost his mind. She purchased an insane amount of binkies to guarantee it never happened again. I have one in a Ziploc back in my desk drawer. She directs her troop onto the carpet. And they do it. They sit 'crisscross applesauce' without being prompted. If Mary Poppins was a yogi, she'd look like Charli: smelling of jasmine and patchouli, and chanting namaste instead of singing supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. The rest of my little people march in.

As parents, grandparents, and nannies situate their kiddos, I hear 'hello' and 'good morning' attached to the handle of my name being pronounced in baby jargon. I get a few hugs and lots of sticky kisses. We start promptly at 9:30. After our

ABCs, counting to 10 forward and backward, and three stories, I'm already beat. Before we start our craft, I turn on the bubble machine and let them do The Chicken Dance while chasing bubbles. They know the routine and once the buzzer goes off, they know it's time to sit at the table and turn on their listening ears. While the kids are making an aromatic mess with the shaving cream and mirror, the parents chat amongst themselves and I make sure no one puts their hands in their mouths. I praise Emma for making a smiley face and ask if she can draw a circle. She does. We both clap and smile at this accomplishment. Shea smiles and points at his masterpiece. What it is, I don't know. But I share in his happiness. The dimple in his left cheek intensifies his already insane amount of cuteness. Shea only has one dimple, his big brother Donovan owns the other one...it's in his right cheek. He's a big boy and goes to school now. I see him whenever his teacher calls and requests a story time at his school.

## **Chapter 28**

Adream lights another candle. The lavender one isn't fragrant enough to smother the smell of the chili cooking in the Crockpot. In a bowl, she tosses in a heap of cornmeal and a couple of tablespoons of flour. Before she adds the sprinkle of sugar, she puts on a pot of water and turns the knob as far as it will go. Her kitchen is little, but functional. It is also the least coordinated room in the house. She prefers to let her cooking speak for the kitchen. There's no need for her oven mitts and dishcloths to match. They'll be splotted and splattered with grease and get burned on the edges anyway. A jalapeno is finely

chopped and added to the cornmeal mix. Just as the water breaks into a boil, she splashes some into the bowl and stirs quickly. When the mixture achieves the desired viscosity, she sets it aside. She pours a nominal amount of olive oil into her treasured cast iron skillet. Before she can turn the knob to heat it, the doorbell rings. Adream washes her hands and hurries to the door to open it.

Before her stands a young lady who can only be described as darling. Her smooth, toasted-chestnut skin glows on her round face and her eyes twinkle with a nervousness that is not uncommon when meeting someone for the first time.

“Hi. I’m Shawwna.”

Adream smiles with a warmth that few ever experience.

“Of course you are. I’m Adream. Come on in and take your shoes off, please.”

Shawwna steps in and reaches to shake her hand. Adream looks at her as if she has given her the finger.

“You are from the south, right? A hug is custom,” she says as she closes the door. Adream reaches and initiates a hug and Shawwna enjoys the embrace of a stranger. When she pulls away, the twinkle of nervousness in her eyes has drifted into a sparkle of relief.

“You can look at me and tell that food is definitely a friend. So, I made some chili. It has sausage in it, but I did put some aside in case you didn’t eat pork.”

“I eat everything,” she says. The slight gap between her two front teeth adds to her adorability. Her petite frame tells no one that she’s given birth. She has a little pudg that the old folks would call ‘baby fat’.

“Take off your coat and toss it on the chair. The bathroom is through that door and to the right. Have a seat and we’ll eat before we start on your essay. And don’t be shy. It’s just me. I’m nothing special and look scarier than I really am.”

With each word spoken, Shawna surrenders to the easiness of Adream and her mannerisms.

“You don’t look scary forreal. You look just like your momma, though. Except, you’re um, a lot more girly than she is. I ain’t trying to sound mean or nothing.”

“I’ve heard that a couple of times. I’ve done everything from squinting, crossing my eyes, and standing on my head. I can’t see the resemblance at all. And I know my momma looks straight up butch. I’ve heard it before and said it myself.” Adream washes her hands and stirs the chili. She turns on the stovetop to warm the oil.

“Do you like hot water cornbread? I had a taste for it this morning and decided to make some.”

“I love cornbread. My granny always told me it’ll make me thick and give me a butt. It ain’t never happen, though. I only got this little belly because of my baby. Your apartment is too cute. I ain’t never been in nobody’s house where the furniture don’t match on purpose. I mean, it looks good and everything, I just ain’t never seen nobody who don’t have the whole set if they can afford it. It look like you can definitely afford it. This is real different. It’s weird in a fly kinda way.”

“Thank you. I think,” Adream jokes. She knows exactly what the girl is trying to say. She grabs an avocado and cuts it in half. Out the corner of her eye, she can see Shawanna’s face frown up. Before she can ask ‘what’s wrong’, Shawanna answers her.

“Um, what’s ‘at?’”

“An avocado. I call it green gold, though. You don’t have to eat it, but at least try it.”

“I don’t know about that. What it taste like?”

“Creamy heaven. It is so good with chili. You’re in for a culinary experience.”

At this, Shawanna laughs and seems to be completely comfortable at this point. They talk and chit-chat while Adream fries the cornbread. In a decent-sized bowl, she adds the sliced avocados and fresh cilantro, then places them on the table. After scooping the fried-perfectly cornbread cakes onto a plate covered with paper towel, she places them on the table.

“How much time do you have?” Adream asks as she continues to prep for the meal.

“I got a lot of time. I’m a real bad writer. So I figured it would take me some time to get it right. My baby daddy’s momma got the baby. She loves him and keep him whenever I ask and that ain’t often. I mean, I had him. It’s nobody’s fault but mine. She always help me, though. I think she feel bad her son don’t do shit, I mean stuff for my baby. You need me to help you with getting the food done?”

“I just need you to wash your hands. There’s some hand soap and lotion on the kitchen sink. It’s ready.”

“I’ll just use the bathroom. I gotta pee, anyway.” Shawwna goes to the bathroom and by the time she returns, Adream has put chili in their bowls, cornbread on their saucers, and sweet tea in the mason jars. Shawwna sits down and looks how everything is set up. She usually eats out of Styrofoam plates and bowls at her house.

“I ain’t never seen that much perfume and lotion before. I wanted to smell some of it, but didn’t want to touch your stuff without asking.”

“You could’ve. I’ve always liked fragrance. Maybe when we’re finished, we can smell some and I’ll see what I haven’t worn in a while and give it to you.”

“Okay!”

Adream watches as Shawwna tries the cilantro and avocado with her chili. With the first few chews, she looks unsure, but by the time she swallows, she is convinced that Adream is a better cook than her grandmother.

“This is so good!” Shawwna has a mouthful of food when she makes this declaration. She notices that Adream is using one hand at the table and tries to remember to do the same. She tries to mimic the way Adream covers her mouth when she talks and is still chewing her food.

“Momma told me you want to be a nurse.”

“I do! I didn’t really know what I wanted to do before I had Malachi. But, when I got pregnant, it was the nurses who helped me more than the doctors. They were so nice and I started thinking about it then. After my water broke and I was in the hospital, them nurses did everything they could to help me. I ain’t really have nobody there with me.

That's when I made up my mind that that's what I wanted to be. My momma ain't never really been around 'cause she couldn't be. My Daddy took care of me til he died. He died from cancer when I was 11. Granny been taking care of me since then. She getting old though. So, I gotta make sure that me and my son is straight. To do that, I gotta make something of myself. I've always made good grades. I love science and biology, so why not? The only class that I really have a hard time in is English."

"Well, you're ahead of most with having a dream and a plan to achieve it. You want some more of anything? There's plenty of cornbread and chili left. There's more tea in the fridge. I can give you some to take home if you'd like."

"Forreal? Yeah, I would like some of this to take home. You are just like your momma! She's so nice to me. Like real nice. Always has been. I remember when I first walked into the daycare to ask about openings, the cost, and stuff. I still had on my school uniform. The other ladies working there just looked at me like I was some kinda fuck up, oops! I mean mess up just because I was so young with a baby. Not your Momma, though. She ain't never treat me no different cause I was 14 with a baby. Malachi loves her! He throws a fit if she ain't in the room when I take him in."

"Really?" Adream asked without trying to sound too surprised. She didn't want whatever she thinks of Mirage to rub off on the girl.

"Girl! Yes! Malachi don't really fool with the other ladies. I don't blame him, either. Anyway, one time I ain't really have no money for diapers. At first, when your Momma told me I ain't have no diapers in his bag, I lied and told her I forgot. She told me to make sure

that I didn't forget next time. Well, the next day I told her I forgot again. Your momma just said okay. Well, when I picked him up later that day and got him home, I was cleaning out his bag. There was a twenty in little zipper part. I know your momma put that in there. I just remember crying. Ms. Mirage don't know me like that to be putting no money in my bag. Ms. Dream, I will never forget that. My granny is on Social Security and I can't really work as much as I need to because I gotta stay up on my grades. We ain't got a whole lot. I ain't never tell your momma that I was really broke that time. I ain't have nothing. Granny had been in the hospital. I had to take cabs to see her and stuff. I ain't know how I was gonna get my baby some diapers. I didn't wanna ask his granny because she do enough as it is. His daddy probably too busy taking his pants off to jump in somebody else's bed. So he ain't got time to dig in his pockets to give us some money. I just don't wanna be bothering people. Malachi is my mistake, nobody else's. But, that twenty might not mean nothing to some people. It meant a whole lot to me and my son."

"First things first, you can't call him your mistake. You just had a little hiccup. It happens. You were not the first girl to get pregnant while she's in high school and you damn sure won't be the last. Don't listen to those statistics about how young mothers drop out of school. That doesn't have to be you. Momma told me you are one of the best mothers that comes into that daycare. Having him is not going to stop you from doing what you have to do; it just may be a little harder than it initially was going to be. Or, it could be a motivator to make sure you become a nurse. There's more than you depending on you."

“Thank you for saying that, Ms. Dream. Your momma is like a guardian angel to me. Sometimes I be wishing she was my momma. I be wondering if my momma ever talk about me like Ms. Mirage be talking about you.”

“Please stop calling me that. Dream is fine. Um, my momma talks about me?”

"All the time! When I was thinking about going natural, she told me how pretty your hair was. She said your afro is real, real big. She told me about how when you was little she didn't wanna do your hair because you had too much. Said she had to drink a couple of beers before she got started. I can see that you got a lot of hair. It's thick. Real thick. Don't even look like it's real.

“When I started telling her I wanted to go to college, she told me about how you got scholarships and stuff. Didn't pay nothing for college. That you got a English degree. I been trying to work with Malachi to make him real smart. Ms. Mirage told me that you started reading when you was like two or three. I want my baby to be smart like that. I read to him every single night. It don't matter how tired I am. We ain't got that many books. But I use my library card.

“Anyway, I never forgot that your Momma told me you was a writer, so that's why I asked her if you would help me with this paper. She told me how busy you always are. So she don't really get to talk to you like she want to. But she told me she would try real hard to ask you about helping me. She told me you ain't gonna want my food stamps. But, I still wanna offer them again.” Shawwna's bowl was almost empty, but she was snacking on a

piece of cornbread as she talked. The girl's hands moved as fast as her mouth. She was talkative and Adream welcomed the conversation.

"No. I do not want your food stamps. Those are for you and your son. The fact that you offered is enough. So why don't you go ahead and get your papers out. My laptop is already set up in the living room on the table. While you're doing that, I'll clean up, fix your food to go, and we'll get started. Okay?"

"I can help you if you want me to."

"No ma'am. You're here to work on that essay. And that's the only thing you'll work on in this house."

Shawna went straight to the laptop. She did as much cleaning as she could before darting to the bathroom, closing the door and sliding down it. She didn't know what to feel. Deep breaths and a little rocking side-to-side didn't help. One more breath and hard push to lift herself from the floor, she gets up and splashes some cold water on her face. She grabs a towel from the closet and pats her face. Before she walks back into the kitchen, she swallows hard sending whatever it is she's feeling down into the pit of her stomach. Just before she reaches the stove, she realizes that she'll puke those emotions up later on that night and deal with them.

## **Chapter 29**

She slams the door right after waving to Shawna and making sure she got in her friend's car safely. She stomps to the kitchen and opens one of the lower kitchen cabinets and grabs a bottle. The bottle is slammed down and she removes the paper and untwists the

cap. She grabs one of her fancy glasses and fills it with crushed ice. She pours the pre-made Long Island Iced Tea in the glass and is careful not to fill it to the brim. She adds a shot of bourbon to cut the drink's sweetness. At least that's what she tells herself. She goes into her bedroom and opens the door of her nightstand. Her fingers fiddle through ink pens, paper, and essential oils before finding the pill bottle. Wrong one. She digs again pulling out the wrong bottle three more times. Finally. She dumps two Lortabs into her hand and walks back into the kitchen. And within 30 minutes of taking the pills and guzzling one glass and halfway through the other, is numb.

“Who the fuck wants Mirage as a mother? Huh? Hmph. How come she treats Shawwna better than she ever treated me?” She asks herself this as spins slowly in her chair. “She put 20 dollars in a fucking backpack? For some reason, her trifling ass couldn't put it in an envelope. She didn't send me shit when I was in college. Nothing. I'm up there in that damn dorm room with 6 dollars to my fucking name. She never once called and asked if I needed anything. And she knew I wouldn't call and ask her for shit. But she can give a stranger who ain't nothing to her some money for diapers?”

She sips as she looks around her apartment and thinks about how she could be way more fucked up than she is. *Mothers like hers typically have kids who are sluts and have babies at a young age, right? Mothers like Mirage raise girls who drop out of school or turn into drug addicts and alcoholics, too? Or they become prostitutes addicted to drugs and alcohol. Watermelon. No watermelon. She said I can't have watermelon. It has too much water in it. Don't want me pissing up my mattress. No watermelon. A girl has to have a Daddy to have Daddy issues. Doesn't she? Maybe I do have Daddy*

*issues. I want some watermelon. Maybe that's why none of my three boyfriends worked out. That's probably why I lost my virginity like I did. Last year in college on Keith's couch. It was my first time being asked over to a dude's house. I didn't even like him. He was cute enough. A Kappa. Light-skinned. A blunt and nibble on my lobe was all it took for my panties to drop. The high from that cheap ass weed lasted longer than his two pumps and one stroke did. He'd see me on campus and scream my name. I'd walk right by like I didn't know he was calling me. I need some music. Yeah, music makes everything better.*

is drunk almost to the point of delirium and is a sloppy, sobbing mess. She walks over to the bookshelf where her iPod dock sets. She presses the button until it lights up. She scrolls too fast and the letters blur. She manages to find what she's looking for and puts the 'repeat' function on one of her favorite songs. It will play all night. As Mariah Carey's raspy voice belts from the speakers, she moves to the sofa and drapes the throw over her body. Off key and tone deaf, she sings along: *Standiing alone...eager to just....believe it's good enough to be what you really arrreeeee...but in your heart...uncertainty forever lies...and you will alhwaaaays beee somewhere on the outside...*

moves around brick-like sofa until she finds a position that makes her feel less nauseous, she dozes off for only a few minutes when her phone buzzes and wakes her up. Mariah is still singing the song that got through middle school. She sings as she gets up wobbly and wild-eyed, looks for it, finds it, and tries to pretend she is sober when she answers.

“Hel...lo?”

“What’s good, Bluegrass?”

“Don’t no...*Blue-fucking-grass* live here. You got the number. Wrong. Wrong number. You know what I mean.”

“Dream? Umm, you aight? It’s me. Femi.”

“Are you aight? You ain’t never called me no Bluegrass before,” she slurs.

“And your snooty ass ain’t never used the word ain’t before. You sound funny saying it, too. Didn’t know somebody could sound proper using slang. What’s wrong? You don’t sound like my favorite girl.”

With the phone trapped between her shoulder and cheek, sniffles and drags slowly to her bedroom. She gets down on her knees and pulls a shoebox from under her bed. Finding what she wanted, the box is slid back under the bed. She drops the phone trying to get up. It’s picked up and she uses the bed to pull herself up from the floor.

“I’m okay,” she explains, slightly out of breath. She grabs a jacket and heads to the door. She slips on her house shoes that are for outside only and scoots herself out the door. Her breath is visible and dissipates as quickly as it’s expelled.

“Don’t lie to me, Mami. You got me over here worried and shit. You drunk? I know your square ass don’t do no hard shit. Or soft shit. Hell, I’m surprised you drink. I can come over if you need me to.”

"Nooooooooope," walks outside and pulls a Newport from its box.

"Not drunk yet just. Yest juts. I mean, you know. Why me? Why all this shit gotta happen to me?"

"Dream, what happened? What's going on?"

"Nothing. Nothing is going on in my life," says as she presses the red button to end the call.

She stands in the crisp and frigid air and enjoys her secret pleasure. stood as still as possible while shivering and smoking. Tears fell as she drew on the menthol-flavored tobacco and blew it out her nose slow and easy. She shuffles back into the warmth of her sanctuary and locks the door. The faint smell of chili is still lingering. Her drink is where she left it; watered down in the sweaty glass she paid 75 cents for at the thrift store. After adding more ice and tea, she goes back to that orange concrete slab and sits. Her body wants to succumb to the liquor and Lortabs, but her mind refuses to yield.

*I hate her. How does she tell somebody all this good shit about me and never said it to me? She didn't help with one scholarship application. Pitched a bitch and a half because I needed her information for my FAFSA. Hollering about it ain't none of my fucking business what she makes. None of my teachers know what she looks like. No chaperoning field trips. Ain't never made it to a conference. I'm a third-grade Spelling Bee champ! I bet her ass don't even remember that. I beat that fifth grader. Brandon? Brad? I don't know. But, I know the word was nickel. I got to pick a sweatshirt or a five-dollar certificate to buy*

*something from the bookstore. I picked the sweatshirt...I used to wear it with stretch-pants. The ones with the strap on the bottom. Thought I was cute, too. Rocking those generic-as-fuck Payless shoes. Wore those in middle school, too...it's one thing to be fat, it's another to smell like pee every day, but what you should never do is wear cheap shoes. Cried in the bathroom stall until Mrs. Palace caught me.*

*Palace, yeah, I always said I was going to have a palace. A big house with servants and a Lamborghini. Ms. Palace, my favorite teacher. She thought I was smart. She probably wouldn't think it now. Drunk and slobbering and shit. Crying for no fucking reason. Ain't done nothing with myself or my life. Working for a library. A job where people think you do nothing. They don't know nothing about being spit at or having books thrown at you. They ain't help me pay for that taillight one of those little shits busted. My job is one where I don't do nothing, though. No husband. No prospect. Femi! Femi called me tonight. Femi-Femi-Fo-Femi-Mi-My-Ob-Femi! Chocolate drop.*

's thoughts exhaust her into a deep, drunken sleep.

### **Chapter 30**

I know Ma is gonna bitch if I ask to use her car. She gonna be mad if I just take it while she sleep. Fuck, I'll let her ass be mad. She'll get over it. I should get some flowers or something when I'm on my way. She seems like the type that likes that kinda shit. Maybe Walgreens got some. Where the fuck is Ma's purse? I hope it ain't in her room. Ain't no way I can get them keys without waking her up. Got it. Everything that has ever been lost can be found in Ma's purse. Who needs all this shit? Everything is in here except the damn

keys. She ain't gonna miss these three twenties though. She might notice four, though. Let me put one back.

"Why you in there making all that fucking noise, Boy?" Joy's voice shrieks through the house.

"Sorry, Ma. I ain't mean to wake you up."

"I musta dozed off for a minute. Guess that was some good weed. Why you moving all that shit around? What are you looking for? Do me a favor and bring me my purse."

"Aight. Make sure you got some clothes on. Ain't nobody trying to see all that."

"My body better than them fatties you be messing with, muthafucka! Your daddy loved it."

Ma always cracking jokes. I better hurry up and take her this damn luggage she call a purse before she get the hollering and shit.

"Boy! Bring me my goddamn purse! Bitch! Don't be making me wait when I ask you to do something."

"Damn, Ma! What I do to you? I'm coming."

“You ain’t done nothing, Baby, but damn. I don’t be asking you for much. Momma’s sorry. I don’t mean to be nasty. I just didn’t feel like getting up to get my cigarettes.”

“My bad. I need a favor, Ma.”

“No, I ain’t giving your black ass no more fucking money. The bank is closed. ATM don’t don’t mean Always Try Momma. Your ass need to get a job. You black, son-of-a-cock-sucking-whore.”

“You my momma.”

“Your ass know good and damn well you saying that shit because you ain’t close to me. I’ll knock your muthafuckin’ head off.”

“Who gonna take you serious with that voice, girl? Forreal, Ma, quit making me laugh. I wasn’t gonna ask you for no money. I need to borrow the car and before you get the cussing, I ain’t asking just to be asking. Something is wrong with .”

“Besides her name, what else is wrong with her?”

“She ain’t sound right when I called her. Crying and shit. I mean, I don’t know her that good, but I know her good enough to know something ain’t right.”

“You really like this one, I reckon. Ain’t never seen you take no interest in nobody, but yourself, really. You gonna let me meet her?”

“We ain’t there yet, Momma. I mean, I like her. She just making it hard for a nigga. I ain’t never had to go through no shit like this. You got something to do tonight?”

I don’t know why she just don’t take that damn wig off and scratch her head. She just pats the hell out of it. I don’t think it ever scratches the itch because she’s always doing that fucking patting. Looking like a mental patient. I should tell her to let her damn scalp breathe, but that’ll guarantee I can’t borrow the car and she might throw something at me. Stilettos hurt. I still got the scar on my neck from the last time she threw one. Perfect-fucking-aim. And she gonna call me a another bitch or a son-of-a-cock-sucking-whore. She can make some cuss words up. Then get mad when I laugh at her. If Mickey Mouse was a sailor, he’d sound like my momma.

“I ain’t got nothing going on tonight, but that don’t mean you can keep my car all night. If I wanna get up at three in the morning and look at it, then that’s what the fuck I wanna do. I say that to say don’t keep my fucking car out all night. I got half a tank of gas. So don’t think you gonna be cruising either. Hell, I don’t know for sure you going where you say you going. Your truth ain’t *the* truth.”

I swear if I ain’t really need to see Dream, I’d just say fuck it. So I’mma let Ma talk all the shit she wants to as long as she gives up the keys.

“Yes, Ma’am. I’ll call you and let you know when I get there and I’ll call you when I leave. I just need to make sure she’s good.”

“Okay. The keys is on my dresser. Make sure you drive careful. You know you ain’t got no license and you don’t need the cops pulling you over. Don’t take no weed with you either. I ain’t bailing your ass out. I love you. Turn out the light and get the fuck outta my room. Tell your little lady friend I’ll be praying for her and that God loves her. Tell her prayer take care of everything. Tell her about my Women’s *Bible* Study we got.”

“Aight, Ma. I’ll tell her. I love you more. I’mma have my phone on. Call me if you need something.” I can see she got her cheek turned for a kiss. I kick some of her shoes out the way to get to her bed and give her a quick peck.

“You need to put some Vaseline on them dry ass lips. Your momma love you, so them crusty lips ain’t bothering me none. But they damn sure gonna bother her.”

“You got some hot jokes tonight, don’t you?”

If my momma ain’t nothing else, she’s funny as hell. She’ll say some shit to your face, and it’s usually way worse than what she’ll say behind your back. I don’t know what I’d do without that one right there. She fronting about not bailing me out, though. Fronting hard. She ain’t never let me sit in jail. If I’m on the run, she’ll make me a hiding spot in case the cops just wanna pop up and surprise a nigga. Her ass will tell me I’m fucking up, but that don’t stop of her making sure I’m straight. She’ll bitch and grunt about it, but she still do whatever I ask. Shiiit, she ain’t gonna let nobody else talk bad about me, though. She shot Uncle Biscuit in the hip one time for talking too much shit. That’s my real ride or die right there.

I swear to God. My mother is cleaner than the Board of Health, but keeps the dirtiest car. Cigarette butts and gum wrappers and pop bottles. A chicken bone, Ma? There really is a chicken bone in the passengers seat. If the fibers of a paper towel are left on the kitchen table she'll pitch three bitches. That's my momma. Keisha calling me again. Shorty just don't know she done messed the fuck up. I'mma let her ass think I'm completely done. I ain't though. Shit, if I ain't got a life jacket, a boat, and a paddle, this nigga burns no bridges. My ass better call her in a few days. I can't be without a phone. Fuck. Guess I need to call her. Need to bait her ass just enough to make her think she got me hooked.

"Yo. What's good?"

"Hey."

"Tell me what's up. I got some shit to take care of."

"Why you gotta sound like that?"

"Keisha, say whatever it is the fuck you gotta say. You fucked my shit up and think that shit's okay."

"That's why I'm calling. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry and thank you for dropping my car off."

"You ain't sorry. You never shoulda did that shit. I ain't did nothing for you to fuck with my shit. And you had me step outta character."

“I know. I know. I’m mad at myself. You right, Baby, I never should have did that. Just come back. Please. Zoom-Zoom miss you to you. He be walking around the house hollering Meeemmi! Where are you Meeemmi? Momma, where Meeemmi doe?”

“Tell the little dude hi for me. Tell him his mammy fucked this up. Not me. You did this shit Keisha. You. Stop the fucking crying. Your ass wasn’t crying when you was pouring bleach on my shit. That shit was brand new. I pay good money for my shit. Don’t think you ain’t gonna pay for that shit.”

“Damn! You act like I killed you or something. And you act like it ain’t lightweight your fault. Your ass don’t answer your fucking phone. Ever. I call you all the goddamn time and you don’t pick up the phone. I mean, I can’t help but think you seeing other bitches. I love you, Femi. I always tell you that. I know you ain’t gonna say it, but I know you love me, too. I feel it. I just be getting insecure sometimes. And I get jealous. I know that shit. I’m working on it. But can you please come and see me. I mean, you dropped my car off and put my keys in the mailbox. You ain’t even come in and say nothing.”

“Yo. I gotta keep myself away from you right now. I can’t fucking look at you. You know a nigga got love for you and the kids. That was some foul shit. I told you, my uncle be needing me sometimes. I be working. You the only Black woman I know that complain about a nigga working.”

“I know. I believe you. But you be talking about all the work you be doing, but I don’t see you after you work. And I don’t ask you for nothing. No money. I be taking care

of you and trying to buy you stuff. You ain't never done that for me. I be asking myself why do I even care or what you be doing for me. I love you. But why? I don't even know. I love you so much, but you really ain't doing shit for me!"

"Aight, stop crying. Forreal. Stop crying. You know the situation with my moms. That got a nigga stressing. Medicine bills and shit piling up. She can't get around like she used to. She sick, she be needing stuff. Any extra money I got goes to her. You know she always gonna come before any broad. Moms been in the boxing ring with cancer. She in remission right now. Cancer ain't no weak bitch. Just when we think we done knocked it down, that shit pop right back up. She ain'tgot her strength and shit up. I mean, I can't really do nothing for you like I want to. I feel bad about that. I mean, you look out for a nigga. You a chick that like to take care of her man. A nigga love that shit about you. But wildin' the fuck out because I ain't answer your calls. That's some shit. I shoulda been better about answering and shit. My focus is getting money for momma. Keeping my head clear and making sure she good. We ain't got nobody but us. I try to spend as much time with her as I can. Shit, ain't none of us promised tomorrow."

"I understand that Femi. You ain't never told me it was that bad with your momma. You don't really tell me shit. I know you gotta take care of her. I just feel like since I'm taking care of your phone bill and you on my plan that you would want to talk to me. At least make it a point to call me or something. I know I be blowing up your phone. I be missing you, though."

“You right. I need to do better. I’ll give you that. Aight. Check this out. I ain’t as mad as I was, but I’m still mad than a muthafucka. Just give me a couple of days to get this shit outta my system. I gotta go to Walgreens. Moms needs her meds filled.”

“Bye, Femi. I love you.”

“I know you do, Baby. Get some rest. We gonna work through this. I’m sorry for losing my cool and shit.”

I ain’t shit. I don’t know no other nigga that would lie about his momma having cancer. My ass ain’t shit. Smooth though. Shit, she sound like she was about to cut a nigga off. Can’t have that. I might shoulda let her though, but I need that phone bill paid. I gotta keep her on my team. I already know ain’t gonna take care of a nigga. She might be the one that get a nigga to act right, though. Them lips alone got me thinking about settling down and getting married or something. Have some kids. Moms would love that shit. All the niggas in the hood would hate my ass more than they already do. Let me snag a chick like Dream and make her mine. Need to figure out how to keep Keisha though. Fuck her real good the next time I see her. She’ll be straight for a few weeks.

Damn, Shorty cute. Fuck! The light just turned green. That’s what my ass get for thinking about Keisha. Too busy thinking about her dusty ass and I’m letting potential sponsors get away and shit. She was cute. Won’t He do it? God is good. Shorty going to Walgreens, too. Shiiit. Let me look in this mirror right quick. I’m just a fly ass nigga. Some of these bitches still sweating them yella niggas. That ain’t never stopped me from pulling

chicks. She a red bone, too? I need one of the them on the team. Might have to fatten her up though. She ain't weighing in. She need to be a little thicker for me. Them light-skinned broads be thinking they the shit though. I don't know if she one of them types or not, but with an ass like the load she's carrying, she can think however the fuck she feels. Damn. I'm ridiculous. Ain't no such thing as too many women, but I wouldn't know if one would be enough because I ain't never had just one. Dream might be changing that shit. Might be. She ain't changed it yet, though. She driving an Audi, too. Yeah, I'll be pushing that in a few weeks. She just don't know it yet.

"Let me get this door for you, Ma." Shorty don't wanna smile. "Damn, your man got you mad like that? Something as pretty as you should never have a frown. If you want me to change that, I can. And will if you let me." Yeah, she smiling now.

"I know I ain't the first girl you done used that line on." She's walking and pretending like she ain't interested. She'd never get nominated for an Oscar. I ain't even gonna tell her she's a horrible actress. Mami feeling me.

"I ain't never used that line on a girl. I like women. And you fit the bill. You all woman." As I take my hands and pull my locs into a knot, I see her loosen up. "So what's up? I'm Femi. You gonna tell me your name? Can I get a phone number? Email address? Smoke signal? Something so I can stay in touch with you. I'm kinda pressed for time. My mother is kinda down, so I stopped in here to get some flowers and a teddy bear."

"Awww. That's sweet. So sweet. My name is I ain't falling for your bullshit. You sexy to be so dark, though. Have a good night." Shorty just played me. Hard. It's good though. I can't be mad. I'd raise my daughter to recognize game, too. Then, as she walked away, she turn around and wink at my ass. Now she laughing. Fuck. Daaaamn. I can count on one finger how many times a chick done told me no. Fuck her. It's good, though.

What the hell? Why is it so crowded in here? First of the month. Dream gonna like this bear. She gonna have to love it because she ain't getting these flowers. This bear is almost ten dollars. Them roses is fifteen. She'll be aight. She can't miss what she ain't never get. I'll get a card. Yeah, Dream might love a nigga for bringing a card. She look like the sentimental type. Probably got shoe boxes under her bed holding on to the sweet shit anybody ever gave her. She probably hold on to movie tickets and napkins that one of her dudes used to wiped his mouth kinda shit. Yeah, she definitely that type.

### **Chapter 31**

is spooked by the beating on her door. She jumps up and clenches her shirt as if it can paralyze the jump in her heart. The beating continues and she finally walks to the door and looks out the peephole. She sees a dark so black that she wonders if her eyes her actually open.

"I can hear you breathing. Open up the door, Ma."

"Give me a few minutes to wash my face. I know I look a mess."

“That ain’t even an issue. It’s cold out here and I need to lay eyes on you. Open the door. It ain’t like I’m gonna take pictures or nothing.”

Dream hesitates then does just as Femi demanded. When she opens the door, Femi kisses her on her forehead. He walks in and places a small bag on the floor. He quickly kicks off his boots and throws his coat onto the couch. It lands on the arm and seems to hesitate before deciding if it should fall to the floor. It does just that. Femi leaves it. He looks at and realizes that he really doesn’t have anything to offer her. Until now, until her, he’s never wanted to offer a woman anything. And leave it to to still look pretty with puffy eyes and gray rivers that have dried on her face. As he locks the door and turns back to her, he notices that a tear has crept down to the crest of her cheek. He uses his thumb to halt its journey. He pulls her close and she entombs her face into his shirt. As he massages her back, her sniffles subside. The thick mass of kinked curls tickle his nostrils. Gently, he pulls her away. Softly yet securely he holds her chin between his pointer finger and thumb. The dried up snot does not stop him from kissing her on the tip of nose. He reaches into his back pocket and does not find a hanky. He pulls his undershirt up to wipe her face. gives the shirt a tug and blows her nose.

“Damn. I wasn’t ready for that. I must like you. You just blew your nose on my damn shirt. It’s good. I’m worried, though. It’s October and my baby got February face.” Femi’s voice soothes.

"February Face? When I'm sober we'll talk Shakespeare. I just wanna sit down."

"Aight. We can do that."

Femi places a hand on each side of her waist to help steady her step. As they get closer to the table, reaches for her glass. Femi grabs it with one hand and uses the other to aid her in sitting down. Femi strolls into the kitchen and pours the drink down the drain. He opens the fridge and grabs a bottle of water that's half full. When he gets back to the living room, is sitting upright, but her head is tilted back against the cushion. Femi loosens the cap without removing it and hands it to her.

"Here. Drink it." Femi plants himself next to her. His denim is cool as it presses against her thigh.

"Thank you." takes a sip and unintentionally slams the bottle onto the table. Her head is down and the facade she usually puts on has been placed way in the back somewhere out of her reach. has no quick quips or her usual sassiness.

"I got something for you."

tries to smile, but can't. Her eyes are too dim to shine with surprise like they normally would under regular circumstances. Femi walks over to grab the small bag and is back on the couch before she even realizes that he left her side. He pulls out the purple bear and hands it to her. She still can't smile, but her eyes flicker with grace. He leaves the card in the bag and sets it on the table next to the bear. He grabs the wadded-up blanket lays it across her lap.

"Yo. Ma. I done died a hundred times seeing you like this. Can you tell a what's the matter?"

"Everything. Nothing." wipes her mouth and then grabs her stomach. Before her mind can comprehend that her stomach can no longer hold its contents, it is splattered all over the blanket. The black and white stripes are beneath a glob of brownish-red chunks. The smell of her own stomach acid mixed with the alcohol is more than her nose can handle. She pukes a few more times into the blanket. Femi gives her back a few gentle strokes before going into the kitchen, wetting a paper towel with cool water, returns to the couch, and pats her face. When he thinks she's finished, he grabs the blanket and secures the liquid mess. He takes the blanket into the bathroom and drops it into the tub. He turns on the warm water and then checks on . She is sitting on the couch hunched over. He goes into the kitchen and takes the trash can from the cabinet and places it to the left of her.

"Aight, Sweetheart. I'm gonna rinse this blanket out and then I'mma come and take care of you. Just holla for me if you need me. That trash can is right by you if you get sick again. Can you do something to let me know you heard what I said?"

After she gives a weak nod, Femi struts back into the bathroom. pukes a few more times before she feels like her rear end is going to vomit. She makes it to the toilet a millisecond before whatever didn't make it out the front end slips from her backside. Femi wrings out the blanket and gives the tub a quick scrub.

"Get. Out. Please. Femi. Now. It stinks in here. I'm soooo sorry you seeing me like this. I'm always fucking some shit up. Just fuck up. That's me. That's ." Femi debates on whether or not to respond to her comments and decides not to. He moves the bathroom trashcan closer and walks out.

"I'm leaving the door open so I can hear you holler. Let me know when you finish and I'll help you get cleaned up."

Femi walks out of the bedroom and notices the box of Newports on the bookshelf. He smirks at her secret before he helps himself to one and steps outside to give his nostrils a break. He pulls out his cell phone to call Joy. He starts talking the instant he hears Joy take a breath to cuss him out for not calling.

"Don't even say nothing, Ma. I got here and she is not doing good. She puking and shitting and drunk off her ass. She was crying when I got here. Shorty ain't doing good, Ma." Femi takes a pull from his cigarette.

"Muthafucka! You lucky. I was ready give your black ass a good cussing out. Tell her to keep praying and I'll pray for her, too. Tell her God can take away her pain." Joy says genuinely. Femi muffles a chuckle when he thinks about how his momma can raise all kinds of hell and praise the good Lord in between breaths.

"I already know. At's why I ain't even let you get started. I love you. I'mma get back in here and take of her. I'll be home. I ain't stopping nowhere when I leave here."

"Okay, Baby."

Femi finishes his cigarette and flicks the butt. He walks back in and slams the door. He can smell the bathroom before he gets to it. is still sitting on the toilet and is hunched over. He takes the blanket and it gives it another wring and drapes it over the door. He plugs the drain and runs some warm water.

"Baby girl. Baby girl."

looks up slowly and lets her head fall back to its initial resting place.

"Aight. I'mma take real good care of you, but I need you to help me a little bit okay?"

"Mm-hmmm."

Femi stands in front of her. He places an arm under each of hers and lifts her up. When he's certain she won't fall, he flushes the toilet.

"Girl. You dropped a load didn't you? So look, I wanna give you a bath, but we gotta you get you wiped first."

says nothing. She reaches for the toilet paper and stumbles. Femi holds onto her firmly and steadies her. He is generous with the toilet paper he wraps around his hand.

"Baby girl, I need you to lean towards me a little bit. I'm gonna try and get a good swipe and be done with this."

She does as she's told. Femi had to do a few quick swipes. After a few flushes, he eases her back down on the toilet. He washes his hands three times before he lifts up again and helps her out of her clothes. He checks to make sure the water is not too hot and helps her in the tub.

"Is it hot enough? Your ass got a thousand bottles of bubble bath and body wash. I ain't know what to put in the water. Which one you want?" Femi's eyes scan the shower caddy and reads the labels of the bottles. *Good Morning Sunrise. Sensual Black Currant Vanilla. Soothing and Calming Lavender with Eucalyptus.* He decides on the Sleepy Time Tea body wash. He looks down and seems to be fine sitting in the water saying nothing. He grabs a washcloth, dips it into the water and squeezes the gel on it. A thick lather forms and with the care used for infants, he lifts her right arm.

"Nooooo. Not that washcloth. You gotta use the colored one. The white one is for myyyyy ooh-ooh."

"Your ooh-ooh? You a grown ass woman, it ain't been a ooh-ooh since you was like 10. Your ass is drunk, but you can still give orders."

Femi smiles as he wrings out the rag, sets it on the edge of the tub and grabs the other one.

"Are there any other orders Your Flyness?"

She looks up at Femi and both start laughing. “Dove. Dove all over my body pleeeeeeaaasse. Annnd then, we can rinse and use the Tea. No, no tea. Just clean. Up. Me. Please.” Femi washes . She flips the handle and the tub starts to drain. Like a kid on a roller coaster, she raises her hands up in the air. One cue, Femi helps her stand.

“Stay right there. Ain’t trying to fall.” She pulls the curtain and turns on the shower. “Move. Don’t. Gotta rinse off. I don’t take baths. It’s like stewing in your own gravy.”

“Girl, if you don’t get your ass out of this tub. You splashing water and shit everywhere. I don’t mind taking care of your think ass. But this drunk diva act ain’t where it’s at.” Femi snatches the curtain back and turns off the water before even processes what he said. He snatches a towel off the rack.

“Yo. The towel I grab is the one you using. A nigga ain’t got time to be color coordinating shit to please your ooh-ooh.”

His actions do not match the tone of his voice. Femi is soft and gentle with every pat of the towel as he dries her off. He helps step out of the tub and ushers her into her bedroom. He lays a towel down and tells her to lay on it. does what she is asked.

“How’s your stomach, Pretty?”

Femi hits the light switch. The lamp in her bedroom is too dim. He walks over to the nightstand that holds even more body products. Lotions of scents he’s never heard of and some he won’t even try to pronounce. *Ylang Ylang and Sandalwood. Sweet Basil. Bergamot*

*and Coriander. Gardenia Garden. Sweet Rose. Lavender and Vanilla. Sleepy Time Tea.* He grabs that one.

“It feels better. My head hurts. I’m thirsty. Tired. Eyes hurt.”

“Slide up some. Just relax. I’m gonna take good care of you, Shorty.”

lies with her eyes closed and places her chin on the top of her hands.

“You gonna tell me what’s wrong witchu?” Femi pumps the nozzle several times and rubs the lotion between his hands to warm the lotion before applying it to her shoulders. The black butterfly emblazoned on her right shoulder seems to drink the lotion right up. He trails his finger across the word **continue**; that marks the trail of its flutter.

“What does your tattoo mean?”

“Exactly what it says...I should have put it somewhere where I can see it...don’t feel like doing that anymore.”

Femi works his way down to the small of her back where he finds a kanji symbol just to the left of her spine.

“Damn. I never woulda thought you had some tats. Maybe one. No more than that. Tell me what it means after you tell me what you meant by what you just said. Don’t feel like doing what anymore?”

“Never mind.”

“Never mind nothin’. I done wiped your ass, cleaned your guts up, and gave you a bath. That gets me an answer to any question I ask. Tell me what you meant.” Femi continues to caress her back and continues to her calves and then her feet.”

“Just tired, I guess. Leave it at that.”

“I’ll respect that. For now. Do me a favor and turn over.”

Femi gives the sheets and towel a tug to smooth them out. He pumps more lotion into his hands just like before. He starts at the top of her shoulders and rubs the slopes of her breasts. The Her nipples salute his touch. In slow, circular motion he uses his two fingers to trace her areolas and trail the tiny stars permanently stamped onto her skin. He lifts one breast at a time and rubs lotion in the crevices. On her forehead, he plants his signature kiss and smears the lotion on her stomach. He recognizes the kanji symbol in the corner of her triangle: **heaven**. The creases where her thighs meet her bikini line are not ignored. Neither are her shins and the tops of her feet, her soles, and in between her red-painted toes.

“Stand up, Mami.”

does and for the first time really looks into Femi’s eyes. As natural as a blink, a breath, or the scratching of an itch, she walks into him and wraps her arms around his waist. As if the space between his pecks was carved just for her head, she rest it there. His hands trail their way down the curve of the rolls on her back and stop on her cheeks.

“A nigga done dreamed about the day of seeing you wear the fuck out of your birthday suit. Real talk. And trust me, you rocks the hell out of it, Ma. I’m loving it. All of it. All of you. Your skin softer than anything a rough as nigga like me ever got to touch. I ain’t never felt nothing like that. I guess all that shit you buy is worth it. I ain’t never fronted how I feel about you. I ain’t know I felt this much. A nigga’s heart been hemorrhaging since I talked you on the phone. Then I come over here and you got February face and shit. It bet not be no other nigga got you going through this. Come on, talk to me. Fuck. That’s the least you could do. How you gonna keep secrets from a man that just wiped your ass?”

He grabs her hand and leads her back to the bed. The towel is thrown on the floor. He then removes his pants and shirt before asking, “You hungry? Thirsty? Need something?”

“Some water. Thank you.”

## Chapter 32

I’m in the bed with this man with no clothes on. Me. Miss-I-don’t-wanna-get-naked-in-front-of-a-blind-person. And here I am. Maybe the alcohol has me thinking that he looked like he enjoyed the view. I can’t understand why. The only place I don’t have stretchmarks is my eyelids. At the rate I’m going, that’ll happen, too.

“Yo! Whatchu over there thinking about, Pretty?”

“Nothing.”

“Aight, we gotta set some rules. You can’t be lying to me. I know all kinds of shit bounce around in that head of yours. I told you I’ll leave you alone about the shit you don’t wanna share. That’s temporary, though. But take it from me, it ain’t good to keep shit to yourself. That shit weigh in on you. I know it’s hard dealing with shit when you by yourself. I got a big ass family and been lonely all my life. Real talk, you can’t get to the glitz and glam without going through the grit and grime.”

“Read that somewhere? So, what weighs in on you?”

“Damn. I’m trying to have a real conversation with your ass and you making fun of the way a nigga talk. I ain’t no word wizard like yo ass. But I know some shit. I’m being real and expect the same. And this ain’t about me. You ain’t called me and I didn’t sound like myself. You ain’t never had a conversation with me that made you worried. Which, truthfully, I don’t know if you would ever worry about me. Shit. You don’t let a nigga know if you feeling him or what. Hell, until tonight, I ain’t even think shit got to you.

“You won’t let me in. I’m trying. I don’t play about my emotions and shit. I’m to a point now where I wanna know if you have a good day, a bad one, or if you won a dollar from a lottery ticket or if somebody cut you off on your way to work. I wanna know everything about you. What you look like when you happy so I can make that happen. You ain’t no fake or phony or nothing, but I feel like this is the only time I’ve really seen you.

Seen more of you than I wanted to see...shit and vomit, and I know your prissy ass would not take care of me like I took care of you, tonight.”

The lonely part of me wants to believe what he’s saying. The horny part of me needs to believe it, but the rational part of me wants to throw his ass out of my house. He hasn’t done anything...yet. His ass ain’t told me about his record, but I’ll wait on that. And it’s not really fair that he pay for the emotional debt that other asshole left me with. It’s not fair if he’s going to leave me with more of it, either. I don’t remember which fool had the nerve to tell me his daddy told him to always mess with a big girl because they have low self-esteem and put up with anything. That negro was disappointed. I quit messing with him because he blew his horn instead of walking his raggedy ass to the door to pick me up. I treat myself way worse than I’d ever let somebody else treat me.

“Femi, you have to understand I have been by myself for a long time. I’m not even sure if it’s by choice or not. I used to be pretty. There was a time when I had a date almost every night of the week. Weight gain causes the loss of everything: confidence, cute clothes, and gentleman callers. I feel like if a man is interested in me, he’s really not. He thinks I’ll take care of him or he just wants somebody to keep him warm. Or he that he’ll never starve fooling around with a fatty. So, I have to be careful. Don’t front like you didn’t try it. And it was probably because I’m a big girl. You--”

“Let me stop you right there. Used to be pretty? You ain’t as smart as I thought you was. You still pretty. That don’t change because you gain weight. Your ass still turn heads.

Before you busted your ass in that coffee shop, I noticed you. And I wasn't the only one. You probably ain't paying attention to what's around you. I already know if I take you out somewhere I better be ready. Yeah, I did try to see what I could get away with. Every man does that. Once I figured out you wasn't having none of that, I was cool."

"Shut up! Let that go. Everybody falls, it's just a little harder for me to get back up. Physically and metaphorically."

"There you go talking like you got an English degree. Forreal, I was checking you out. I was never one of those niggas that was scared to step to a chick. That ain't never been me, but when I saw you, I already knew I couldn't use my regular lines on you. You look like you carry a bullshit detector in your purse. Once I had your attention, that don't mean I ain't gonna *not* try some shit. Don't forget about them eyes. A nigga was gonna step to you, but when you fell, I had to just do it faster than I was planning. Talking to you on the phone and hanging out with you confirmed what I thought. You way different from any broad I've ever kicked it with. Like I said, I tried to see what I could get away with. Trying to get you to let me come over and shit. You can only get away with what somebody allows you to. Most women let me have my way...and then there's you. I ain't had a girlfriend in a minute."

"Now look whose lying. I know your ass got somebody you sliding in and out of. You walk around like you King Sling Ding-a-ling."

“I been here during this whole conversation and you have, too. When did I say I ain’t been getting no ass? I didn’t. With all the shit in this world, guns, drugs, car accidents, plane crashes...why in the fuck would a nigga want to die of blue balls? That’s a completely preventable death. I prevent it regularly. Shit, you ain’t trying to be mine.”

“You know you’re stupid right? I'm surprised you didn't try to prevent it with me.”

“Serious. I’m serious, Pretty. So tell me what I need to know about you. Something you ain’t never told me. You got a big family? What do you do for fun? Tell me about your job. I see what you do for secret. Got me one of those Newports.”

As he turns on his side and props his head up on the pillow, I can’t help but think God was just showing off with this creation. His skin is the darkest brown could be without being black and it compliment my tan sheets as if they were supposed to be paired. I can see the deodorant balls trapped in the net of his hairs. Femi’s locks are splayed over the pillow and onto the sheets.

“My family would be big if I dealt with any of them. It’s just me and my momma. I had an uncle I was close to, he moved back to Tennessee. Fun? What’s that? I work 44 hours a week most weeks. I used to love my job and never called in. I had so many vacation days that I would sell them. Now it seems like I’m not there more than I am. I don’t really do much. Read sometimes, not as much as I used to. I used to travel a lot. Ever since they started charging people for two seats, I’m scared. That’s something I haven’t told anybody.”

“Your ass overthinks some shit, don’t you? Even though I ain’t never been on a plane, I know you can fit into the seat. I knew you liked to read, we talked about that. *The Coldest Winter Ever* is your favorite book. I remember that. That reminds me, you ever read *White Lines*? It’s by Tracy...Tracy Brown, I think. That’s a good book, I think it’s better than *Coldest Winter*. Yo, if you wanna read it, I’ll reread it with you. Plus, I need a library card. Whatchu think about that?”

“Let me make sure I understand. You would read a book with me?”

“Yeah, and we can go to Starbuck’s to talk about it. My treat. But, you gotta go to the church and volunteer with me like you promised. Maybe I’ll take you over to my momma’s. She can throw down. Just think about it.”

### Chapter 33

“Hello, Mirage. Welcome back.” Terri says to me. She looks like she learning to take care of that nappy ass hair. Maybe if I ever get Dream in here for a session, she can help the woman out. She a nice-looking lady and all. That natural ain’t for everybody, though.

“Thank you. I see you got the pop out without me having to ask for it. I appreciate that. Means a whole lot.”

I’m being a smartass, but she still smile at me. She still ain’t dusted. Maybe I can find a way to get her to do that.

“Let’s do a check in. One being the best day and five being the worst, how are you feeling now?”

“I’m alright, I guess. Work is work. Dream is still my nightmare sometimes. No, let me change that. She can be a nightmare. She ain’t been answering my calls forreal. She did meet with the girl from work and helped her with her essay. I’m a 3 I reckon. HUUUHH-huh---choooo!”

“Bless you. Allergies?” She grabs the box of tissue on her desk. It look like that institutional tissue. That hard shit they give to inmates and school kids.

“The only allergy I know of is dust.”

“Oh. I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t give my office the attention that it needs. I will try to do better with that. I don’t too good with housekeeping. In my office or in my home.”

“Thank you.” I pretend to look down at my shoes so she can’t see me smile. When I look up, she has a clipboard sitting on her lap. She think I don’t remember when she told me she don’t take notes, but that she records everything and writes shit down later. I reckon my shit was too much of a load to carry, so she want some insurance in case it’s too heavy for her and it breaks her down. I like that she writing stuff down, make me feel like she really listening to me. “What are we gonna talk about, today?”

“Is there anything you want to make sure you discuss?”

“Not particularly. I been doing some thinking. A lot of thinking if we being honest. ‘Bout me, my life, Dream and a bunch of other shit. Her journals really make me think. You think people sometimes don’t get along because they too different?”

“Hmm. It’s highly possible. I think it can be difficult for people to find common ground depending on what the differences are and whether or not the people are willing to set aside those differences.”

I reckon I should still be grateful she got me the pop and I ain’t have to ask for it. But damn, how long ago did she set it out? It’s warm. I ain’t gonna say nothing.

“Whatchu mean by that?”

“Well. Typically, say one person loves and another person loves pink, but hates purple. That does not mean that those two people will not get along. That is something that most would consider trivial or as an issue that does not matter. And then, you have people who are best friends yet have different beliefs that range from religion, politics, race or anything and they can set that aside and still be friends. There’s also people who cannot form friends with opposing beliefs or they are friends and discover those beliefs about one another and it can end the relationship. So, differences may or may not be an issue in a relationship. Why do you ask?”

“Okay, well, can I just talk? And when I’m finished you talk? I wanna get it all out.”

“Sure. These sessions are yours and I want you to get something out of them.”

“I been thinking about my baby. We both real different. The only thing we ever shared was my body. Once she came out of it, we ain’t have nothing in common. She

wanted more. I wanted nothing more than what I had, but would have appreciated less if I had to. Hell, I did appreciate less. She wanted books and music and that shit they call culture. Been watching *Jeopardy!* ever since she learned how to work the T.V. I wanted beer, cigarettes, and my rent paid. I'm a tomboy. Basketball. I played basketball. She ain't have no interest in it. Nothing that had anything to do with sports. She prissy as hell. I'd take her to the park and she'd sit on the swing with her legs crossed. So, we stopped going. Playing well with others ain't never been her thing, neither. She ain't mean or stingy. Just don't like to be bothered.

I'll give her that, I ain't never really have to worry about her getting into shit. There was that one time she got into my bag a weed I left sitting out. I woke up and she sitting her just eating it like it's parsley or something. But, I could sit her on the floor with some crackers, a cup of juice, and some blocks. Be so quiet sometimes I forgot she was there. If she was clean, she was cool. But Goddammit! If it sprinkled while we was outside and a drop of water hit her, I had to give her a bath and put new clothes on her. In the summer, I ain't have to spank her, I'd just tell her I was gonna make her go outside. Damn girl can't stand to be hot. Even in winter. You know how you put your baby in a snowsuit in the winter time? To keep 'em from catching a cold and to keep 'em warm. Whenever we got to wherever the hell we was going, I had to drop everything and get her out of that snowsuit. It was a London Fog one. If I ain't get her out of it fast enough, hell would freeze, thaw, and refreeze just in time for the start of World War III. Got it on clearance at Bacon's. Bacon's is something like a Macy's. I think Macy's bought 'em out. I paid almost a hundred

dollars for it. It was blue and cute. She was cute. Chocolate and pudgy. My baby was juicy. Real cute. People used to pinch her cheeks when I'd be out with her. They stopped that shit after she got her first few teeth. Everybody would ask me to put to her in a contest or something. I ain't real big on taking pictures and capturing the moment. An old lady told me a long time ago, when you take pictures, it takes a piece of your soul with it. She always ate good. Love fish. Anything that swim, really. Vegetables, too. The list of what she like is way longer than the foods she don't like. Mashed potatoes got her the first real spanking. I fixed her plate. She had to be one or almost one. I scooped 'em up in her spoon. The purple one, she wouldn't eat off no other color. Shoved it in her mouth and spit it in my face. That ain't what pissed me off. The little fat thing grabbed two handfuls, flung it in my face, and knocked the plate from her high chair. Had the nerve to growl at me. That's when I knew she was a nut. After I cleaned both of us up, I laid her little ass across my lap and gave her some real good taps on them legs. She cried for a little bit and then rolled her eyes at me after she stopped.

"I worked. People can say what they want about me, I worked. I took care of me. Took care of us. Dream won't tell nobody that, though. Like I said before, she my strawberry child. Sometimes sweet, sour, blah, or downright nasty. Depends on the season and the reason. It was me and her. That's all. A little two-bedroom apartment. I kept it clean and all. She ain't go hungry. She may notta' had what she wanted to eat, but she had food to shove in her mouth. My baby always been husky, so she can't never say she starved. That run in our family though. They tell me my momma was bottom heavy and real little at

the top like . I ain't got no memories of it because she died when I was too little to pay attention to her face because I didn't know there'd be a time when I ain't know what my momma look like. Anyway, like I was saying, I ain't never had much, so I felt like I was doing something if I had a little more than nothing. Not Dream. How she developed a platinum credit card taste being raised on a food-stamp-robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul budget ain't never made no sense to me. When she did talk to me, she'd tell me she was going to be rich and have diamonds and maids. Butlers. Chauffeurs and some other shit I can't even pronounce.

“She wanted more of the world and less of me I reckon. We didn't snuggle or cuddle. I was never that type. Sometimes I was. She too young to remember that and I'm not old enough to forget. It wasn't often. Sometimes I'd look at her and think about how something so perfect and pudgy was mine. I'd get lonely sometimes when she was sleep and I'd wake her up. Them eyes of hers. They really something to see. You can get lost in 'em or trapped. Girl got a glare like nothing you seen before. Anyway, if it was cold, I'd turn on the oven and its door. House would be warm in five minutes. It was cheaper than turning on the heat. She love telling folk how I didn't do this and I didn't do that. She never told nobody that I didn't make her shovel snow or take out the trash. She ain't have to do that. I did what I could with way less than I had. She wanted an education. College was always something she talked about when she was little. She stopped talking and I stopped listening. Or it mighta been the other way 'round.

“She made good grades, never gave her teachers no real trouble. ‘Cept one. What was that woman’s name? Ms. Chavez I think it was. Her math teacher. I know my child. She don’t like you, you gonna know it and everybody else will, too. Damn woman called me on my job all the fucking time. The other teacher in the classroom, Mrs. Palace, loved Dream. She tried to keep them two away from each other. I don’t know where she was when Dream told that lady she don’t know how she got to be a teacher since she can’t seem to blink and breathe at the same time. That was her first and last suspension. I don’t play that shit. You know. She got a smart ass mouth. That much I know she got from me. But, too many people died for the right for black folk to go to school and learn with them white folk. She had to write a letter and say she was sorry. Made her clean the whole house with a toothbrush. Other than that, she did real good in school.

She won the spelling bee in the second or third grade. I can’t remember. Anyway, I forgot about the damn thing. I couldn’t have made it anyway. Her school was too far out. The principal called and told me that she won. My baby was the spelling bee champ. Said she beat a boy in a grade higher than hers. I told everybody at work about it. I was working at the dry cleaners then. My boss let me off early that day. I went to the store, got me a beer, her a chocolate milk and caramel cupcake. It wasn’t much, but I wanted to do something. When I got home, I put everything in the refrigerator. Cooked her some liver and rice. That girl love her some liver with lots of onions. She stormed through the door and cut her eyes at me. I asked how school was and she just said it was fine. Right after she

threw down her backpack and slammed her door, I threw the cupcake and milk in the trash. Fixed my plate and threw the rest out in the trash, too.

“Like I was saying, we was different. She said she was gonna get her a degree and she did. I got me a trade when I was in Job Corp. Got my G.E.D. My trade was in wood work and can’t carve shit. I can’t create nothing. I reckon I created . She’s something. Ain’t she? Even though I ain’t nothing?”

Ms. Teri sips from her cup. Must be tea because I don’t smell coffee. She speaks just as she puts the cup back down, “I think that’s a bit harsh to refer to yourself as nothing. No one is perfect and we all take different paths. There is nothing wrong with a trade or not going to college. That wasn’t the path for you.”

“Yeah. I know that. I wasn’t finished talking. That was a um, what’s that word...rhetorical question. Before you interrupted me, I was gonna say I knew when I was real young that I wasn’t gonna be nothing special. My teacher told me that. Right after momma died. I think I kinda gave up. I was like seven or eight when she died. I was fighting all the time and quit doing my work. One of my teachers told me people’s mommas die all the time and that I wasn’t the first little girl to lose a momma and that I needed to get over it. When my daddy died, she told me that I need to be thankful that I had one because too many black kids ain’t never met they daddy. I guess when that conversation didn’t give her the results she wanted, she told me that it didn’t matter anyway, I probably ain’t gonna do nothing but get pregnant and get on welfare. That’s what my kind do. Who say that to a little kid? Especially a teacher. She part of the reason I don’t like white people anyhow.”

“I mean, coming here got me thinking about some shit I did and a lot of shit that I ain’t do. Kinda figured out what you mean when you say I need to heal. Been through some shit I ain’t never really told Dream. Ain’t never told nobody. I thought about telling you, but I ain’t ready just yet. Just be ready when I am. You can talk now.”

Ms. Teri wrote down some stuff before she started talking. She keep playing in her hair. That shit look dry. I’d be careful if I was her. Look like if too many of them hairs rub together they might start a fire. I’m a make a point to ask what she puts in her hair. Ms. Teri look like she need some help. She helping me, so I reckon I can help her.

“Well, you shared some really deep and insightful thoughts today. That means you are doing the work. I’m proud of you. You know, therapy is not easy. It makes you step outside of what you normally do and step into things that may make you uncomfortable. It is important that you celebrate this accomplishment. I am very proud of your progress. With each session, you open up more. We have made great progress since I our first encounter. I completely understand that you may not be ready to discuss things that have been painful and traumatic for you. Just know, that when you are ready, we can talk about it and possibly find a way for you to have closure.”

“Thank you. I really want Dream to come. You know, I don’t really know how to talk about how I’m feeling when it comes to her. Unless I’m mad. I can tell her and show her that. I just can’t bring myself to show her that I do feel other shit besides anger. Dream is the kinda person who will use your pain against you if you hurt her. She real vindictive at times. I mean, I know some of that is my fault. All of it might be. In my day, raising kids

didn't come with no book. Now they got all kinds of shit to give advice on raising kids. I can tell a new momma whenever they come to the daycare. They wanna talk about what the book says about how we need to treat they kids. I gotta keep it professional and can't tell their asses that them books ain't no one size fit all. Every parent different just like every kid is different."

This warm ass pop is making my throat dry. I still ain't gonna say nothing, but if she do it again, she gonna hear about it.

"So you really do like kids. That's great. Some people don't have the patience to deal with kids who are not theirs."

"Well, I was different. It look like I got patience with everybody's kids 'cept my own. wasn't easy. There's just always been something about her. I don't even know how to put it into words. I guess for the most part, it was really just us. My brothers, two of 'em live here for a while. Then they moved back to Tennessee. That gave Dream some other kids to play with. She was good with her cousins. She'd go and stay the weekends over. One of her aunts started being a bitch to her when she graduated from high school and started college. Some of us don't like to see nobody do better than them. Jocelyn is one of them people. Me and her ain't never really get along, but we tried when we had to. Her boys was real heathens. But they was close to Dream. Whenever they'd get locked up, she'd write letters. She wouldn't send they asses no money though.

"I stopped Dream from going over there because Jocelyn was fucking mean to her. That's my child, I ain't gonna let nobody just hurt my baby. Me and her had some words.

My brother, Johnny, tried to get us to get along. We just couldn't do it. I was telling him how his wife started treating my baby. He told me flat out, she just jealous. None of her boys were his. He claimed them as his though. Johnny ain't have no kids. Me and brother shoulda been closer than we was. You know, we'd been through some shit together. He was the one closest to me in age. Younger than me, but acted like he was the oldest. We got into a real bad falling out and ain't really been the same since. I miss him."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Not today. That'll take me back to a place I never should have been. Nobody should ever have to be there. We'll talk about that when I'm ready. What do you report to the judge?"

"The judge gets updates. The notes I take are generally specific. I don't give explicit details about what is shared. The judge will know that you are doing what you're supposed to do and trying really hard. I imagine that the progress you've been making will continue. That's exactly what I'll tell the judge. Is there anything else you want to talk about before we leave here today?"

"Naw. I done told you more than I ever told anybody. So, I'll see you next week. Maybe I'll have with me."

### **Chapter 34**

Femi walks into the house. The darkness and quiet is welcome. The smoke from Joy's chain-smoking left behind its stale ghost. He opens a window and becomes annoyed with the breeze and its lack of presence. While he knows Joy is gone, he still makes sure that

he has the house to himself. He kicks off his boots, pulls his hoodie over his head, and throws it over the chair in the kitchen. Out of habit and not hunger, he opens the fridge, scans it, wants nothing. He goes into the bathroom and starts the water. As he drops one of Joy's bath bombs into the water, he smirks at the cussing out he'll get once she notices it's gone. Once the tub is filled and the water is turned off, he rolls a blunt, and grabs ashtray with a half-smoked cigarette in it. Naked and numb, he steps into the water and plops down. He reaches for the blunt, then leaves it where it is.

Seeing drugged, drunk, and delirious has him regretfully reminiscent. He's says little about La-La, but thinks about her more than he'll ever say. Hindsight will always have the clearest vision. There's no distractors or debris. The shouldas, couldas, wouldas, didn'ts, don'ts, shouldn'ts are luminous and radiant. Hindsight has perfect vision.

He thinks of his first time. The sweetness. Coasting slow and wondering how often he could feel this. When it was more than his hundredth time, it was her first. She was scared. He never was. Fear was his only fear. He didn't want it and to his knowledge he'd never had it. He never counts being afraid of Joy as fear. That just means he ain't stupid. He'd heard others talk about fear, he's never experienced it firsthand. What was there to be scared of? The red thickness of this liquid lady. Cherry. Poured it into a cup, it's too thick to even splash. He licked his lips and smiled at La-La. She wasn't interested in potions or pills until he introduced them to her. Anything he asked, she did. If Femi said 'jump', she'd ask 'how high?', 'for how long', and 'into what: a river, ocean, or tar pit?' He took a sip to not only assure her that it's okay, but to ensure that he got more of the potion than she did.

A stingy and greedy bastard is what was and is and always will be. He knows now what he didn't know then. He had a habit. That fucking hindsight.

“Kiss me.”

She did. And then licked her own lips. La-La was scared, sure enough. She took the cup from his hand and chugged it just a little. Careful not to let it spill on her crisp, white Chic jeans. She handled it like she would a drink from her grandfather's bottle of Hennessy: sneakily and fast. It was almost like the Dimetapp her mother used to give her. A little more medicinal, not quite as sugary. Definitely not grape flavored. It was only cough syrup. Just cough syrup became just cough syrup and a pill. Popped one or two after Femi popped a few. Ain't nothing sexy about slobbering all of yourself. Unless you're La-La. She thought anything he did was sexy. She considered his addiction to her, liquor, and Zanax as an asset to his repertoire of romance that he seemed to keep stocked. He left notes in her locker and carried her backpack whenever he was at school. Many a busted lip was given if he heard any of the boys call her fat or ugly. He'd mugged a few girls upside the head for laughing at her when she walked down the hall. Depending on how much he won from a dice game or if he was able to steal money out of Joy's purse, he'd buy her lunch. Maybe stop the by store on his way to school and pick her up some candy. La-La, short for Keila, wasn't ever considered smart, but she tried. Nobody would say she was the brightest crayon in the box. She was the crayon that some badass little kid would break, peel the paper from around, chew on it a little bit, and then color with it. He was her first and only. He'd lied

and said that she was his first. A lot of girls walked around with grins on their faces because he'd told spoon-fed them the same sweet bullshit.

If La-La had half the IQ of a cigarette butt, she would have known Femi's purpose in this world was pain: its cause, effect, marring, and scarring. Sixteen, sucked into to drugs and stuck on stupid and utter fuckery. Her liking for the high developed into loving it and then living for it. She had no intention of dying for it. But she did; in Femi's bedroom. He can still see her gurgling and gagging, gasping for air and fighting futilely. Not sure of what to do, he slid down the wall and pulled his knees to his chest. The color drained from his face and dripped down and out into a yellow puddle on his bedroom floor. He remembers Joy telling him to call 9-1-1. He sat there saturated and sobbing, beating himself in the head. The paramedics shouted at him and Joy's rough hands smacked and scratched his face to bring him to.

The now-cold bathwater freezes his thoughts and frees him from them briefly. He doesn't either bother with the act of bathing. He drains the tub and steps out. Femi looks beyond the freckles of toothpaste splatter and observes his hairline, and a mustache of precision with etched hairs that frame his ashen lips. He inspects his skin and thinks of all the tragedy he's had in life: the death of his sisters, father, and his momma's spirit. His granny had told his momma to take him to talk to somebody. Joy wouldn't have any of that. White people don't need to know her business. She could take care of her own son. He remembers waking up in the middle of the night and hearing Joy walk through the house after hearing the clinking of ice against her glass. Or the faint cries of his father's name after

she finally made it to sleep. Some nights, she didn't make it to the bed. She's never been a big woman. Maybe 110 pounds, depending on the weight of the wig she was wearing. After the first time he picked her up off the floor and put her in the bed, he didn't count. He knew there'd be more. He'd get close enough to inhale her perfume and the whiskey that escaped her pores. He'd lie next to her for a few minutes and kiss her on the cheek. After he removed her heels and pulled the covers over her, he'd leave.

He'd go to his room and pray like his granny taught him to. After years of not seeing any answers he stopped. Only to start again the first night he was locked up. Mornings were rough for a few years after his daddy died. The scraping of a spoon against the cast iron skillet Joy used to scramble eggs was replaced with sounds that came deep from Joy's stomach and spilled into a bucket or the toilet. If she didn't make it, it was on the floor. He never said anything, just grab the mop and cleaned it up when she was in the bathroom. The smell of bacon didn't linger as often as the fumes from bleach and Pine-sol. His uncles would stop by, say hi to him, but their focus was on their baby sister. Nobody asked if he was okay or did he need something. Anything. Nobody said shit. If it wasn't for his granny, he knows he'd been a bigger fuck up than he already is. Femi's imagination wouldn't allow him to think of the tragedy that could be. By the time he was 16, he'd experienced more heartache and tragedy than most people in two lifetimes.

He climbs into his bed and thinks about and how he has thought about telling her the truth. Not about everything, but some things. Most things? Maybe he could be more honest with her than he has with anybody else. With her, he's not quite comfortable, but he

is at ease. What is he supposed to tell her? He has a record yet there's no record of a work or credit history? Does he tell her that he found her stash of pills? She slept and he snooped? Does he tell her that she should hug him and give him a pat on the back, some dap, and a kiss because he didn't take any of those pills even though he wanted to? Does he tell her that his New York accent is as strong as the front she puts on that she's secure and comfortable with herself? He knows he just can't tell a woman like that he's donating his time to the church so he won't be forced to give his time to the state of Kentucky? Answerless questions battle within his brain until he has no more energy to let them fight it out. He doesn't even hear Joy come in, thus he can't hear the ice clinking in her glass.

### **Chapter 35**

Joy walks up to the counter and signs in. She greets her favorite receptionist and cuts her eyes at the other one. She wants another cigarette, but doesn't want to go back outside. She smoked four on the short drive to the doctor's office. Her headache reminds her that she drank entirely too much last night. She had nightmares and dreams. Kofi and the girls stopped by, they had a picnic on the beach. Femi showed up bloody and begging for a sandwich. He had been shot and Kofi was trying to do CPR. La-La was there, too. Joy just can't remember why or what she was doing.

“Mrs. Olgun, Dr. Taylor will see you now.”

“Thank you, baby. If I don't get to see you when I come out, you have a blessed day. Tell that other witch that was just here to kiss my bony, black ass.”

“Mrs. Olgun! You are always misbehaving. And thank you for wishing me a blessed day. My husband loved that friendship bread you brought us. He ate most of it.” Joy can never remember her name, but the pudgy little white girl is always so friendly and cheerful whenever she answers the phone.

“Tell your husband I’ll make him another one. You don’t be eating too much of it, I know you be watching your weight.” Joy turns to walk way before the sting of her comment shows up on the young girl’s face. The clacking of Joy’s stilettoes can be heard walking down the hall. She is oblivious to the run in the back of her hose. There’s a ring on every finger and two on each pinky. Her gnarled up hands rival the gaudiness the Las Vegas strip. She woke up early this morning to paint over her chipped and broken nails. She couldn’t find her file, so she made due with her teeth. Joy brushed and gargled twice before she left, last night’s rum was still hanging around after she brushed the first time. Today’s wig is blonde and stops just at her waist. The green dress was ordered from Finger Hut months ago and she’s just gotten around to wearing it. The tag she forgot to yank off dangles from the bottom of its sleeve like a bracelet. In her mind, she is always dressed better than anyone she encounters. In everyone else’s mind, it’s obvious she has put forth an effort in appearance. She is greeted by a nurse she’s never seen before. She goes through the motions of getting on the scale, her blood pressure checked, and her temperature taken: 103.14, 120/67, and 97.2. She doesn’t remember what her stats was during her last visit.

“Dr. Taylor will be in with your shortly Mrs. Olgun. Is there anything that I can get you while you wait?”

“No, sweetheart. Thank you. Actually, can I get some aspirin or Tylenol? My head is hurting.”

“I’ll let Dr. Taylor know. He’ll be in with you shortly.”

The stench of sanitations stings her nostrils. The posters on the walls are outdated, but still look new. As she waits for the doctor, she grabs some Band-Aids and cotton balls and drops them into her purse. She adds a few tongue depressors to the worn pleather bag, she doesn’t know what she’ll need them for, but if she does, she’ll be prepared. She pumps two globs of sanitizer into her hands and rubs them together viciously. She sets her bag next to the sink and rubs it aged, purple pleather with one hand and runs the other over the straps. She has other purses, but this is the first one that Kofi bought her. Once they got better established, he bought her Dooney & Bourkes and Coaches, the real ones, not the knockoffs he’d sell at his laundromats. He’d beg her to throw that one away, she just wouldn’t do it. She couldn’t. He tried, though. And when she found the purse in the trunk of his cab, he didn’t get no ass for a week.

Just as she is walking back to sit down, the doctor walks in. The only thing that makes these visits somewhat tolerable is that the good doctor is fine. He’s not as dark as Kofi was, but close.

“Hello, Mrs. Olgun, how are you?”

“Sweetheart, I done told you to call me Joy. You done seen what I look like naked and what I look like on the inside. You seen parts of me my own husband ain’t seen. Shit, I mean, excuse me, if that ain’t intimate, I don’t what is. I think we oughta be on a first name basis. Well, you can call me by my first name. I’ll call you Dr. Taylor. You did a lot of schooling to get that title. In my day, I ain’t see too many Black doctors. Wouldn’t none of ‘em as cute as you. But uh, I’m doing good, honey. You?”

“I’m well...Joy. Thank you for asking.” He forces that smile that all medical professionals seem to have. He looks down at his clipboard and back up at Joy. He sits down in the chair and his pants hike up his legs to mid-calf. His paisley print socks remind Joy of the dress she saw in the Spiegel catalog. She’ll order it when she gets home.

“Well, ain’t no sense in beating around the bush, just give it to me. Tell me what I already know.”

### **Chapter 36**

Well, I’m gonna need a hat. Maybe a pretty wig. Definitely gotta get those pearls outta the safe deposit box. Shoes ain’t gonna matter much, but I imagine I’ll get me a pair of those, too. Make sure I get him a suit. A real nice one. Something he’ll be able to wear to a job interview or court. Lord, let that boy be okay.

### **Chapter 37**

The now-cold bathwater freezes his thoughts and frees him of them. Briefly. He releases the drain until the tub is almost empty. He turns on the hot water for a refill and grabs one of Joy's lavender bath bombs. Now, she's down two. That's a triple the cussing out and maybe a cup or an ashtray thrown at his head. He chuckles at the anticipation of being called all kinds of funky-dick-niggas and blue-black-bastards while dodging whatever Joy can get her hands on. As he slides down and presses the balls of his feet against the porcelain, hot waves wash over him. As they settle, he does, too. He grabs the bath pillow that is suctioned to the wall and uses it to prop his head up. With wet hands, he grabs the almost whole cigarette in the ashtray from the shelf that holds the towels. He doesn't know how long it's been there. Joy lights cigarettes and forgets them and lights another one. There's a roach in the ashtray, too. He smokes that first, then the Newport.

He thought about calling Keisha. He'd sent her a text earlier to make her think she still mattered...even though she never really did. All he texted was: **sup**. She responded with Xs and Os and emojis. To keep her from calling, he sent one last text: **at hospital with momma tyt**. She sent one more emoji that looked like it was blowing a kiss. After an eyeroll and a gentle toss of the phone onto his pile of dirty clothes he laid back. In between drags he thought of his life. The inhaled drew in thoughts of , the church, and of course, . On the exhaled, he expelled the masses of mess he's made: pills, prison, La-La.

The first time he went away, he sneezed, farted and it was over. It was just a petty theft, he got community service and probation. He spent a night in juvenile hall. A couple of his cousins and some classmates were in there for similar or worse crimes. Joy had to pay

\$500 in restitution. She didn't trip too much about the money. She wanted the judge, probation officer, and the world to know that money wasn't gonna take no food out her mouth or her son's. And more importantly that she didn't have to make a payment arrangement to take care of it. He remembers her bragging to some of her friends about how when she dropped the check off, she did a flip of her wig, flipped them the finger, and told them that her bank account always has a bunch of zeroes after the comma.

The second and the last time was long. It could have been shorter if it wasn't for bullshit. The bullshit that permeates from the prison walls, seeps into the air, and eventually absorbs into the inmates' skin. Frustration, rage, and hopelessness are as contagious as panic. And equally lethal. The last time he was locked up, taught him that hindsight has such perfect vision that a person with bifocals, trifocals, and laser eye surgery would still be considered blind. Niggas can't see straight until they can see what has already happened. A nearsighted boy can never become a farsighted man.

Femi couldn't see beyond his own fingertips. Consequences ain't never a part of his consciousness. It is this and this alone that led to 43, 200 seconds in solitary confinement. It was this that caused him to pick up and throw an inmate halfway across the dining hall because he accidentally touched his napkin. The floor caught him and the inmate caught all 178 pounds of Oluwafemi Diallo. Left fist, right fist, left, left, right, and both feet to his face and body. He was too quick for correction officers to fix what had been broken: nose, jaw, ribs, and teeth. Femi left the poor felon with a concussion that didn't have the decency to erase the memory of who did that to him. Nobody else could forget either. Shaun was

scared of him after that, too. The guard would no longer slide him cigarettes or allow him to slide in and out of her mouth. He could've snitched, but that would have been admitting that he messed with a white girl *and* that he was a snitch. And he wasn't about to do that.

Joy would make her way down to see him every weekend. Every visit, she'd talk about how she's tired of making the three-hour drive and accepting calls that cost ten bucks each, two times a week. Femi would just nod and say 'yes ma'am'. As tired as she was, she never missed a weekend, pressed '1' to accept every call. His commissary was taken care of on the first of the month with the rest of her bills. Seeing her every week made the time almost bearable. Almost.

### **Chapter 38**

"Oooh, darling. What has you in a trance like that? You're looking quite fetching, by the way."

Jonathan pops his head into my office. If those eyes were on anybody else, they'd come across as cold and sinister, but paired with his lashes and peachy flesh, nothing but sincerity and warmth waltz within them. It's just the two of us today. Evyn called in because her kid is sick. It's a chilly Sunday afternoon and they are already lined up at the door. I can hear one of the patrons beating on it. She does that every Sunday and never have I ever let her ass in a minute before we open. Sundays are overtime and the four hours we're open feels like a full shift and then some.

"I didn't even hear you come in. How are you?"

“Okay, so we’ll both pretend like I didn’t ask you a question. I’m well. This place is hell, but it’s a little more bearable when I’m working with you. Evyn text me and let me know she wasn’t coming in. Said something about this stray cat she has that won’t stop bleeding from its rectum or vagina, she is not quite sure which one. I never know with that girl. You know she caught a raccoon and tried to keep it as a pet. She has yet to learn.”

Within the short 15 minutes before we open, the books from the drop have been checked in and flung onto a shelf. They are sorted into children’s, non-fiction, fiction, or whatever category they belong, that way, when the pages arrive tomorrow, they can go straight to work. Jonathan logs on the computers and I set up the register by exactly 12:59. I don’t even look in the direction of the door until it’s a few seconds after 1:00. Of course, it’s the usual crowd that’s always here. The man who almost knocks everybody down to get to a computer so he can check his okcupid and craigslist accounts. Even if he is one of the last ones standing in line, he is the first one on a computer. He always ask for help spelling words or getting into his accounts. Has the audacity to get mad at me when he forgets his passwords. The truth is that he couldn’t get any ass if he was a proctologist. His profile picture is somebody else's. I am currently looking at the receding hairline that is almost touching his neck, but the pic on his account is of a man with hair and muscles. Whatever. Not my business.

“I need a moment of silence! My queen is in the building. Hello, My Majesty. How are you?”

“You’re being loud. This is a library.”

“Okaaay! Ugh, who peed in my girls oatmeal this morning? I have missed you, my favorite cup of coffee with just a hint of espresso.”

In walks Wu. He prefers to be called Japan even though his family is from Beijing. A legitimately certified diva. His lips are the perfect shade of yes-I’m-sexy-but-you-can’t-have-me red. His head is a billow of curls that he could not achieve naturally, so he wove it in. The tips of his silver nails have been carved into little daggers. His petite frame is quite the contradiction compared to his personality that leaves an imprint long after Japan has left the room.

“I’m good. I’m glad to see you. How have you been? How’s those ACT scores and have you made a decision?”

“Girl, ugh! The first thing you wanna do is talk about school when I show up. So, we’ll get this out of the way. I got a 33 on my ACT. The test is not required to get into the schools I want, I just did it to appease the doctor and the judge who created me. I mean, anybody can learn to check a pulse or put on a black robe while sitting on a bench. Creating something as fabulous as moi is quite the accomplishment. I have narrowed it down to Parsons and F.I.T. Just let me tell you this, I have no intentions of ever ripping the runway, it was be shredded and dissolved when I’m finished with it. And the thick chicks will not be neglected. Enough about me, how are you darling? You need to quit playing and let me get

those eyebrows. And as you know, they are supposed to look like sisters and not twins, yours are looking a tad Siamese-ish. Get that together.”

“Wu.”

“Japan.”

“Pardon me, Japan. Oops, hold on.”

“Paradise Free Public Library, how can I help you?” I wink at Japan as he pulls up a chair. His legs are crossed as if that is their sole purpose. His sweatpants and stilettos are a combo that can’t quite be called disastrous, they are weird enough just to get some rave on the red carpet.

“So, I just want to make sure I understand you correctly. Your son turned in a school library book by accident. You don’t remember the title, the author, and have no clue what it looks like and you want me to find it?”

Japan is rolling his so hard that it almost looks like a seizure. He does a little dance while using his middle fingers as props. I can do nothing but shake my head at him.

“Ma’am, whenever we encounter a book that belongs to a school, we send it to the Main Branch. They have a department that is dedicated to getting books back to their—

“Ma’am, I apologize to inconvenience you, but you are asking me to find something that neither of us knows what I’m looking—

“Yes ma’am. Please feel free to contact upper management. They have master’s degrees are more educated than I, thus they can probably find a book without a title, author, or any other pertinent information. Please have a nice day.”

“Okay, onto my favorite patron. Before I forget, it’s in appropriate to hold up the middle fingers in a library setting.”

“Is it not inappropriate to call a Queen and ask her stupid questions? I gotchu, Queen. I gotchu. That’s okay, when I make it big, you will be escorting me to Esther and Paris. I’ll create some kind of job for you. I just think it’s awful that you have to entertain commoners.

“I have a list of books I want you to reserve for me. Yes, I’m fully capable of doing it myself, but how else would I get the opportunity to mingle with a muse?”

Japan reaches into his latest Chanel purchase and hands me a list of books on the history of couture. The pink paper is scented and smells like roses. This kid. As I look up the titles, I can see him out the corner of my eye applying a fresh coat of gloss. He uses his cell as a mirror and blows himself a kiss. This kid.

“Okay, it’s done. Give me one sec while I go log this computer back on.” I waddle over to the station where some idiot couldn’t simply log off, she had to shut down the computer. She left somebody a pile of sunflower seed shells to clean up. That somebody is not me. Just as I’m pushing up the chair, I look over and a man is looking at booty pix. His

right hand is on the mouse and the other is not visible. Not today, Lord. Please not today. I walk a little closer and his hands are in his pants. His breathing is intense, his trifling ass is panting. Fuck!!!

“Excuse me, Sir. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“I’m finished anyway.” He takes his hand wipes it on his shirt and walks out the door. I fucking hate this place. After putting an Out of Order sign on the computer screen *and* chair, I do a quick walk around to make sure nobody needs help spelling youtube or needs help remembering that a dot goes before com or org. I can see the bottle sitting right by my computer. A vanilla Starbucks frappe. Somebody loves me.

“You know I love you, I was in Walgreens right before I stopped in here. They had them on sale. I gotchu, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you. So, what else is going on?”

“Girl, you know, nothing really. Getting ready for the summer. I signed up for another sewing class and I think I can talk the folks into letting me spend a few weeks in New York. One of my cousins has a condo there. She’ll be in London all summer. Keep those fingers, eyes, and toes crossed for me. Ooh, honey! A grumbling stomach is not a fashion statement. I’m going to grab me someth---ooh! Okaaay. Yes. Girl, look at this walking this way. I need to let him know what’s up!”

No sense in looking in that direction. Like always, his cologne announces his presence before he arrives. His attempt to not smile is completely useless. His locs are piled up in a bun that is purposely messy. His beard and goatee are fuller than usual, but no less neat. The legs of his sweats pulled up midcalf. His hoodie announces that it was manufactured by Nike. His smooth gait demands the attention of anyone with eyes. Just as he stops at the desk, Japan smiles, at me or Femi, I'm unsure. I'm not asking. As he makes an exit, he switches his narrow hips with more deliberation than usual.

“Surprise, Cutie.”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

“I came up here to get me a library card and to see that face.”

“Grab one of those forms and fill it out. I need your I.D.”

“Damn, you all professional and sh- I mean stuff. I kinda like it. Another phase of

.”

“Umm hmm. How’s your Sunday?”

“It’s good. Did a little work at the soup kitchen and shot straight over here. Don’t forget that you owe me some of your time. I talked to one of the ladies about you doing a story time for the little people. She was down for it.”

“I know I owe you. We’ll pick a date if you have time.”

“I always have time for you. I’m feeling this whole college kid look you got going on. Didn’t know ya’ll could wear jeans. So, what’s your plans for today? You cooking? Going out? Let me know what’s up, maybe I want you to pencil me in.”

“I hadn’t even thought about dinner. I need to go to the grocery store. I’ve been laughably lazy. My house is a mess. I need to do laundry. Wash my hair. If days were like 28 hours long, I’d be good.”

“Aight, so check it. Ya’ll close at five, right? After you finish making my card, I’ll check out some books and hang around here. I’ll be your chauffeur. I got a full tank of gas and an empty schedule.”

“Are you serious?”

“As serious as those grays popping up in your head.” He laughs at himself and I follow suit.

The rest of the shift is more eventless than I’m used to. A few questions and a couple of reboots on the computers and that’s it. Johnathan would check in occasionally, but he was as bored as I am. I’m sure he welcomed mundanity of the day as well. He’s been working on resumes and cover letters to get out of this place. Every time our gaze met, his eyes were asking a thousand questions about Femi. My smile was the only answer offered at the time. His eyes and the slight upward curl of his lips let me know that the silent question session was not over.

### Chapter 39

Lazy fucker. He coulda folded these clothes that's been here for about a week. He ain't good for shit. Take it easy, Joy. Lord have mercy. Just take it fucking easy. At least learn how to do that before you leave this place. This house is too fucking quiet. Shoulda worn my some different heels, these espadrilles don't make no noise, could probably hear an ant belch. I ought to save these clothes for his ass. Hell, that's what I been doing and he ain't done it yet. Where's my cigarettes? Lighter? Shit, Joy. Deep breaths like Dr. Taylor said. We gonna take this one day at a time. Today, I just wanna get me a cigarette, take a couple puffs from the joint Femi left me, and get these fucking clothes done. The burnt, bow-legged bitch. Oh Father, I know you got me. Whatever Your will. Whatever that may be. Just take care of my child. Please take care of him. He don't do too great with me, so I know he won't do good without me. This basket sure enough heavy. Your couch needs a good dusting, Joy.

I don't know what it's like to be my child. Shit, I lost my husband and my three girls. Femi lost his daddy and three sisters. I reckon my grief was no greater than his, but I was the momma. I shared a body with those girls, I gave my body to Kofi. Gave my body to him damn near every night, a few times a day sometimes.....Lord, have mercy! No wonder I'm still grieving him. Sorry, Lord. Anyway, when they died, it killed me too. Femi watched me die. I would have saw that he died too, if I had paid attention. I could have taken the bottle away from my mouth occasionally, said hi to the boy every now and again, or fixed him his favorite breakfast. What is to become of a boy who has the love of a momma,

daddy, three sisters and faster than the second hand moves on a clock, they all gone? What was he supposed to be except what he became? A man that ain't willing to love because he is too familiar to love being yanked away instead of it sticking around. He can't do right because I did wrong. Life did him wrong. I won't tell him that, ain't gonna tell my brothers either.

My baby was hurting like I was, but his grief dressed up in anger. My grief was naked and obvious, unashamed and free. Plentiful, too. Had enough of it for me to give to all my brothers and their wives to help me carry it. I ain't never ask him was he okay. Did he wanna talk? Or need to. Thank the Lord for Momma. She lost her grandkids, but made note she didn't lose all of them. Femi was her baby more than he ever was mine. And that's saying something. I loved my son since I popped him out. Spoiled him way too much. The nurses in the damn delivery ward spoiled him, too. Shoulda known his ass was gonna be trouble from minute-one on earth. I know them peckerwoods ain't seen nothing so black, so beautiful. Little fucker ripped me frontwards and backwards at 3:02 in the goddamn morning. Sorry for using Your name in vain, Lord. You know my mouth ain't never lined up with my heart.

Twelve perfect pounds he was. Three of them pounds had to be hair. They wasn't lying about heartburn means your baby gonna have a headful of hair. I remember asking the doctor if fire extinguisher came in a pill form. I tried baking soda, ice, praying, ice, ice, and ice. Nothing worked. Then we get his little ass home. He demanded all attention be on him. And we supplied it. 'Specially them girls. He was they little baby doll. That boy ain't

sleep by himself til the girls died. Ain't never been one to be like being by himself. Always need somebody even though he act like he needs nobody. That boy is a walking contradiction. That little nigga was the kissing and hugging machine. That's when he smiled all the time, even when he was sleeping. My momma used to say angels was whispering to him. She always said he was special.

My momma liked boys. Loved 'em, I reckon that's why she had 13 of 'em. Femi may as well have been her 14<sup>th</sup>. After everything happened, he stayed with her and I stayed away. Like I always said, that boy been spoiled rotten and rancid since the day he was born. Rehab made me rehash the bad news phone calls, the smell of the hospital, and the blank, unreadable face of the doctor when he finished with the surgery.

Okimma was the only one who survived the crash. Even though it was only for a little while. Came into the world fighting and left it that way, too. I can't recall what happened after the doctor sucker-punched me with those words. I woke up in the house that used to be my home. It takes certain things for a house to qualify as a home. I didn't know of those qualifications 'til mine didn't qualify anymore.

#### **Chapter 40**

The Olgun house feels less like home than it usually does today. The silence is bland yet blaring. Joy sits on the couch and staring at the letters etched into the urn. Tears trek down her face and free-fall onto her collar bone. The sadness arrived like the dreaded relative you didn't know was coming and left just as quickly, like it had been thrown out on its ass. In its place, a smile appeared within Joy's spirit. Her Kofi. Fairytale princes looked

like villains when compared to her Kofi. She chuckled at how he never asked her to marry him. He just called and told her to get ready. Make sure she was wearing a dress. He picked her up and took to the courthouse. Heatwave's "Always and Forever" was playing on the radio when he put the car in park and looked at Joy.

"Come on here, girl. You taking my last name. Today."

Because 'Fuck you' and 'hell no' were typically her customary responses to just about everything, she said it while checking her lipstick, fluffing her wig, and holding Kofi's hand as they walked into the Justice of the Peace. They said their 'I dos' and did just that. That robber took her husband, but he didn't get those memories. She didn't recognize her own laughter because she hadn't heard it in so long.

He was her first for everything. She figured she wasn't his first of anything except marriage. She didn't ask, though. No point in knowing. If he was mad at her, she'd walk around like she didn't care, even though she did. She'd put on a little more lipstick, a wig with longer hair, wear skirts hemmed a little shorter, and her heels a tad higher. She'd go to the grocery store and stay gone longer than she needed to. She needed him to know what it was like to not have her, even if for a little while. And like Novocain, it always worked. By the time she returned, he'd be happy to see her. Kisses planted all over face, and the lust would grow. Sometimes, she couldn't even put up the groceries before he'd scoop her up and carry to the 'love lounge' as he called it.

Now, if Joy was mad at him, that went a whole different way. The 'love lounge' would be shut down and out of commission. She'd tell him: Muthafucka, you'll die of desert dick before you get to go swimming in this river again. He'd laugh at first, then get to begging. It was never major stuff: he forgot to pick up eggs, her dry cleaning, or didn't take her car to be filled up. Joy Diallo does not go to the gas station. No lady should ever have to pump gas her daddy always told her. Her brothers or Femi, if he's out, keep her tank filled to this day. Kofi was the love her laugh. He could make anything funny and get her smile when she didn't want to. When the kids would make her crazy, he'd surprise her with a weekend to Gatlinburg or Indianapolis. He'd never go further than that without their kids. It'd give Joy a break from their bickering and them a break from her bitching. Everybody was happy. That was Kofi's purpose in life. The creator and keeper of happiness.

If he had a bad day, that was for him to know and nobody else. Just sweet. He was so kind, nothing like the men she grew up with. Her daddy was nice enough, to his baby girl and nobody else really. When the word heathen was invented, her brothers had to be the inspiration. Kofi was nothing like her brothers, but they managed to respect one another. They weren't close, but they weren't distant. They chatted it up at family gatherings, but that's about it. Kofi gave her the one thing she'd never had, comfort within herself. She came close to showing him what she looked like without a wig. He stopped her. She remembers the stinging in her eyes as she slipped her fingers in between the wig and her forehead. Kofi told her if she couldn't do it with a smile, that he didn't want her to do it at all. That was that.

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With every punch of the bag, Femi imagines his own face, Kofi's, the robber's, and the drunk driver's. People have survived gunshots before. Kofi could have, too. He left him and his sisters. He didn't try hard enough. That punk ass robber shoulda been a man; only a coward shoots somebody in the back of the head. Kevin Belchir, the driver with no license claiming he swerved to avoid a squirrel and slammed into his sisters. Every time he goes up for parole, Joy is right there telling them why his ass needs to stay locked up. His family explains why he should be freed: he'd never been in trouble before, he had a career as a computer analyst and a young boy who is now a man that doesn't really know his father, and a bunch of other bullshit. Olayinka, Okimma, and Oaisara died before they could get the braces taken off their teeth, go to prom, or break somebody's heart. Femi's had a broken heart since he was five. And just like he has no memory of the sounds of his sisters' voices or his father's, he can't remember when his heart was whole.

While he doesn't remember falling asleep on Kofi's lap when Joy couldn't calm him down, the picture on the mantle convinces him that he remembers the day that picture was taken. Femi wasn't a momma's or daddy's boy, really. He was everybody's boy. Never allowed to cry for more than a millisecond. Fishing trips and going to the bank to deposit the money from the laundromat aren't vivid, but a collage of snapshots that he could never make sense of. No matter how hard he tries, he can't recall meeting Rayon. He's always

been around. He remembers hearing Joy tell some of her girlfriends how when Kofi would give her money to buy clothes for the kids, he'd give her extra to make sure Rayon got stuff, too. Kofi would shorten his cab shifts to be at Rayon's ball games, elementary, and middle school graduations. Rayon used to tell Femi that story until he realized Femi didn't like hearing it as much as he liked telling it. Femi would smile, but was always resentful that Rayon had experiences with his father that he never would.

The tragedy of Kofi's death bruised October 28<sup>th</sup> more than 20 years ago. The wounds seem to be healed the other 364 days of the year. But at midnight, the start of this dreadful day, those wounds burst, bleed, and ooze with whatever emotion is fit for the moment. However, peace could never bring itself to seep from said wound.

## Chapter 41

“Your ass spent thirty dollars on two chunks of cheese? Forreal?”

“Mr. Diallo, when are you going to let that go? Your ass been cussing and fussing since we left Whole Foods. I’m making grilled cheese tonight. It’ll change your life, trust me. I like how you dropped those avocados in the basket.”

“Yeah, I like it, so what?” There’s that shady ass dimple that shows up only when it feels like it. “What you looking at, Pretty? Come here.”

“Ugh, I gotta put up the groceries.”

"You be frontin' mad hard. Your thick ass was just a giggling and smiling when we was in that expensive-ass grocery store. Don't think I ain't see them White people looking at us. At first I was thinking it was 'cause we Black, but then I realized it was because they was jealous. The men wanted to be me. Hugging, rubbing, and kissing on this thick, juicy, big booty cutie. A milk-chocolate statuesque Goddess. And them broads wish they had a sexy, chocolate muthafucka like me. Perception is everything Mami. At first, I really thought I was gonna have to act a fucking fool in that store. Shit, I'd hate us, too. Now like I said, get your thick ass over here."

Before I can pretend like I'm not going over there, he slips he walks up to me and pulls me by the waist of my jeans, right at the button. He leans onto my dining table and I lean into him. His breath glazes over my face. On an inhale, he gently nibbles on my bottom lip and then the top. Just as I convince myself that I'm going to fall back and crack my skull, I fill the fingers of both hands marry at the small of my back. He pulls my hoodie over my head and tosses it to the floor. Right before I can start cussing about throwing my shit on the floor, he places shushes me with his right pointer finger and lightly presses it against my lips.

Kisses contour my left shoulder, up my neck, over my jawline, to the front of my chin and trail off down my neck, and down my right shoulder. I shudder and stutter my breaths and my words. With every inhale, I swear I could feel the oxygen filling my lungs and spilling into my veins. With every exhale, my inhibition escaped and took my logic with it.

## Chapter 42

What the fuck does her ass want, now? Her ass probably mad because I didn't respond to her text message. If I didn't respond to the first five, I ain't gonna respond to the rest.

nigga, you ain't slick. You loving ...but i'mma love this nightmare

## Chapter 43

He's gone. He left her with a layer of last night's sin stamped on her skin. Every inch of the 1600 thread-count are stained with secretions and indiscretion. Her journal is on her lap, ballpoint in hand, and she pens that man onto the page. is a giver of things, thoughts, and time. Spoken words, she'd give those to a deaf mute, but written words, thoughts made tangible is given to a special few.

lyric

i tried

to write you a love poem

but my fingers went idle

right after

i thought of the title:

*my soul's song*

a sassy jazz symphony

tap dances the rhythm of me:

za-zoot-pop-patter

bing-ratta-tat-bop-ping

beats box

til they drop

pick back up

stop and

start drummin',

now hummin'

as if your thumb's

strummin'

my heart's strings

Four years, eight months, and three days suddenly seemed like six seconds. Thirty-eight minutes of pleasing, teasing, sucking, fucking, touching, ceasing than easing into her flooded the almost five-year drought. And in exactly three weeks, 504 hours lust will dress-up and pretend to be love, and then 24 hours after that, love will exhaust itself and strip down to what it really is: loathe. She'll hate Femi. But she'll get over that. It won't be like Princeton. Nothing will ever be like Princeton.

this is perfection's harmony.

your precision

fiddles me, tickles  
ivory-caressed flesh.

laughter in b flat.

hold me  
breaths echo  
golden oldies:

*i guess you saay,  
what can make me feel this waay*

shh.

listen. just wait...  
the cadence of your patience  
fades into kisses  
high notes  
in perfect pitch.

let's vibe to this.

i'm high on this,

on you.

coasting on crescendo

i tried  
 to write you a love song,  
 but my fingers went idle,  
 right after  
 i thought of the title:  
*my soul's poem*

#### Chapter 44

“Hey, Baby. Ain’t really heard from you. I hope you ain’t forgot about my containers. I hope you okay. I was, I mean...been thinking a lot about you. Well, let me get on off here, I don’t you don’t really like checkin’ your messages. Dream...Baby, I uh, I love you. Your momma means that. I really do. You think about what I asked you?”

Mirage has the TV on. She’d usually be stuck to the couch with a bottle glued to her hand watching the game. They interrupted the broadcasting for some breaking news she didn’t care to know about. She’s vacuumed, washed and folded her scrubs, picked and rinsed the greens, and popped the cap on a Colt 45. She thinks about lighting a cigarette and just doesn’t want one. It’s not often this happens, but it does happen. Some days she doesn’t smoke or have a beer. And on those days, she lounges with potato chips and Lifetime. *The Teacher’s Secret. My Husband’s Other Life. The Minister’s Wife has a Boyfriend.* The

titles always give away the plot, but she watches anyway. Hoping one day they'll surprise her. In 20 years, this has never happened. Today is no different. Well, a little.

She's missing . Especially since Shawanna came in the other day telling her that she got into the program Dream helped her write the essay for. Shawanna said she sent Dream a text saying thank you. But she didn't get a response. Mirage thinks it's nice to know that Adream doesn't just ignore her. Mirage lights a cigarette that she doesn't want and starts some dishwasher. The scent of Clorox mixed with the Dawn dishwashing liquid reminds her of being a little girl, down in Lascassas, Tennessee.

Her great aunt, who was closer to being awful more than anything that resembled okay and definitely nothing great, Lucy Mae gave Mirage the job of getting the eggs from the chicken coop. She hated those chickens. After being pecked a couple of hundred times and having half-a-dozen eggs in her basket that lined with old rags, she'd run at a speed that would allow her to get away from those fucking birds without cracking the eggs. The last and only time she went back into that shack of a house with some busted eggs was the last. Aunt Lucy Mae made Mirage pick her switch. She had to pick two more after she broke the first one kicking and swinging her legs.

When her aunty was cooking, she'd keep a bucket of sudsy water with a splash of bleach to wash as she cooked. She told Mirage: don't nobody want a woman that can't cook, and no man damn sure want a woman that's a nasty cook. She showed Mirage how to fry chicken, make biscuits from scratch, and her famous recipe that's now called an

Arnold Palmer. Mirage started adding vodka to it when she about 15. Aunt Lucy Mae could fry some chicken. Couldn't do much more of anything else outside the kitchen. She knew it and explained this to her niece. A niece who wasn't a burden until Lucy Mae's brother died. The family fought over who was taking all those damn kids in. Nobody wanted them and the fighting didn't do nothing to resolve it. So, they put all the kids' names in a bowl and Lucy Mae got Mirage.

“Ya know, girls like me and you ain'ts got no choice but to be able to throw down in the kitchen. We ain't what folk call ugly, but they ain't calling us cute either. You got your daddy's boxy frame. The only thing that curves on you is your nose. You got cursed with a nigga nose. I did, too. So we gots to be able to cook. That's how I snagged your uncle. That's how you gonna snag your husband. You can read and do yo 'rithmetic, so you ain't no dummy. You got a fancy name that ain't nobody else got. That's 'cause your daddy ain't have the good sense to marry somebody from 'round here. He had to get him a redbone from Chicago.”

Mirage was used to people saying shit like that. Shit that she held as truth. It was not disputed. She was a nappy-headed heffa with a nose that screamed nigga just like the rest of her features except for her somewhat light-skin. In the instant Mirage ever thought for a minute that she was cute, Aunt Lucy Mae would have told her otherwise. That instant never came. It was nothing but boys in their small town. They taught Mirage how to shoot marbles, pool, and hoops. Mirage's height didn't stop her from being a decent ball player. A

point-guard that could make the middle school and the high school team she would eventually quit.

Living with Aunt Lucy Mae wasn't what one would call a living. That's for damn sure. Kids weren't to be talked to or listened at as her aunty explained. If she wasn't talking to her about how to cook or clean, she wasn't talking to her at all. *Use vinegar on glass. Baking soda and peroxide in the laundry. Use cold water to treat dark stains and hot for the light ones. If you ain't got no toothpaste, baking soda is just as good, and if you ain't got that, salt is better than nothing. No matter how po' you is, you better keep some clean drawers and socks without holes in 'em.* When those lessons weren't being given, it suited Mirage fine. She would rip and run with the boys. When she was home, she'd make sure to keep it 'quiet enough to hear ant cough' like her aunty preferred it.

In this moment of remembering her misery, she realizes that she only did to Dream what was done to her: the bare minimum with ridiculous loads of unnecessary bullshit. She treated her child the way her aunty treated her. Mirage didn't know how not to do what was done to her. She had never seen anything different, so couldn't tell the difference between being a good momma and not so good one. She'll never call herself a bad mother. It's not something she thinks: it's something she knows. Every woman got secrets and she is no exception.

## Chapter 45

Princeton was as alluring and intimidating as the school he was named after. Beautiful. If you can look past the light-skin and the curly hair that had zero kink. His lineage had to consist of house niggas only. Smart, articulate, and gentle. A child prodigy of sorts. Perfect scores on the SATs, accepted into every school he applied for and offered admission to others of which he hadn't even considered. In an effort to prove his blackness, he graduated from an HBCU for undergrad; Ivy League for Masters and Ph.D. Chemical engineering. A scientist in both life and love. There was no gray within him, it was simply black and white. A *Bible* worshipper and certified, stamped, and sealed religious freak. He and had a tacit agreement: do not discuss religion. The nonverbal agreement was reached when she informed him that because the 'good book' doesn't contain the scripture *Princeton, thou art an asshole* that he is completely unaware of how much of a jerk he could be. The words stung and pierced a part of him that would never fully heal and when was being sweet and gentle, he'd still hold onto the unkind words. A sensitive spirit he was, much like .

Where her fragility was protected with thorns, his was guarded with a wall of poison ivy. Not completely impenetrable, but one would ponder if the rash, itching and scratching would be worth the effort. For , it was. Trips to Paris and England, an Alaskan *and* Hawaiian cruise. Impromptu road trips where they would seek out nature and restaurants with a Zagat rating. Princeton paid for it all and it never cost her the effort of stepping out of her panties or dropping to her knees. Mr. Saved, Sanctified, and Secretive had sworn off sex. He hadn't engaged since his sophomore year of high school. He wanted to wait until marriage to 'do it' again. Sporadically, he would talk about he didn't want a wife because

women are unpredictable and irrational. He watched episodes of *Snapped* to validate his beliefs.

was okay with this. It took some getting used to, but sleeping in different hotel rooms and cabins on the same trip was weird. He was weird. For her, there's no better attribute than walking to the off-rhythm beat of your own drum. She loved that he was a gentleman. She loved him. Despite his flaws, they could be overlooked simply because he was kind and smart. Borderline genius smart. The true definition of it. Funny. Absolutely hilarious, more than any other insanely judgmental Christian she'd ever encountered. On paper, he was everything could want in a husband, most women would want in a husband. Princeton had money, lots of it. He'd squeeze a dollar bill until Washington was blue in the face. His philosophy was to spend money on experiences and not things. He was never one to just spoil her, but her birthday and graduation from grad school were instances where he spared no thought or money to show his fondness of her and her accomplishment.

*I love you* was stated explicitly twice. No less than a million times had he sent text messages that read *I heart you*. She was never coy about those three words and when she said them, he'd reply with a ditto. Holding hands and touching were always initiated by , but never rejected by him. His chill demeanor was the anecdote to her random moods and intense expression of feeling and emotion. Princeton was the calm before, after, and during any storm she was not strong enough to endure. When he became a storm she could not find refuge or shelter from, she got swept up in the floods, hail, and debris. Three days observation in a mental institution couldn't take the agony of break up and her breakdown

would haunt her for weeks after her release. Princeton loved her, but he was incapable of loving her the way she wanted him to. His romantic love was secure and sacred. Its recipient was the reverend of the church Princeton loved so much. She was angry, but it dimmed in comparison to the hurt. The hurt is what prevented her from telling the reverend's wife.

## Chapter 46

“Just tell me that you liked it.”

“Why do you need to hear me say it?”

Femi smiles and thinks of writhing, wiggling, and giggling from the touch of tongue. It's universally known that women are capable of two orgasms: a real one or a fake one. He's sure he's had some fake it, but he's certain did not. If he's honest with himself (which he usually is, way more often than people give him credit for), he's never cared if any girl got hers as long as he got his. His night experiencing was the first time he had ever put a woman's pleasure before his own. It wasn't a quickie, but he exploded faster than he had intended.

jumped up before he could break his temporary paralysis had passed. He uttered her name and told her to get back in the bed. She did. Every order he gave, she obliged.

*Lay back. Relax. Slide down. Kiss me. Don't apologize, do what you need to, but I need to leave with every*

*dreadlock I came in here with. Open her up. Quit playing. I wanna see it.* Her soft moans with every flick of his tongue excited him all over again.

“Come on, girl, tell me you liked it. Loved it. Love me. Tell a nigga something.”

responds with the same bashful laugh she had as his fingers entered in and out of her. His tongue caressed every crease and crevice. Places that he’d deny he licked if she ever spoke them out loud. He demanded that she open her eyes and look at him. Femi ain’t with that Hollywood shit where you close your eyes because shit feels too damn good. He needed her to look at him as she was escaping and succumbing to the ecstasy that he was giving her and had only given to her.

“Well, aight, I see your ass really is all shy and shit when it comes to sex. But a nigga ain’t never gonna forget how you was humping my face and yanking my ears.”

“Now see, you do too much. Why you gotta say all that?”

“Why can’t you say all that? Why can’t you say, ‘Femi, I like how you sucked on my pu—”

“Stop! You know I hate that word. It’s so vulgar.”

“Girl, you a grown ass woman. Fuck it, fine, why can’t you just tell me you like how I savored your va-jay-jay? Is that proper enough?”

“You are so nasty.”

“You like it, though.”

They both laughed, Femi reminded that she is supposed to meet him at the church to volunteer next Saturday. After a few more minutes of one-sided sex talk, he told her to have a dream as sweet as his. She told him he was corny and hung up the phone. He licks his lips and is slightly disappointed that every trace of was washed away. He chuckled at her prissiness. She looked disgusted when she tossed him a washcloth and toothbrush and he tossed it the side. He told her he wanted to keep her juice on his face a little longer.

Being with took his mind off of Keisha’s raggedy ass sending a cryptic message. He tried calling her, but she sent him straight to voicemail. He thought about leaving her message, but instead thought a quick ‘fuck it and fuck that bitch’ and hit the end button. He sent Rayon a text asking him to go ahead and put a word in for that job at the factory. He made sure to put a ‘forreal forreal’ at the end of the text so Rayon would know he was serious. got him doing shit he never thought he’d do. Licking her ass crack is the first, really trying to get a job is the second, and he ain’t approached no other broad since that chick checked his ass at Walgreens. He went into Joy’s bedroom to tell her that his black ass is really trying to do some good shit, but she was sleep. He was too excited for himself that he didn’t even see the bottle of whiskey on the nightstand.

## Chapter 47

“Hello, Mirage. It’s good seeing you?”

“Thank you. How you doing?”

“I’m well, thank you for asking. Let’s do a quick check-in before we get started. On a scale of one to five, five being the highest, how are anxious are you?”

“Um, I’d say a four.”

“Okay. We can address that. Where do you want to start?”

“I don’t know, really. I been calling my child. She ain’t answering. The girl she helped with the essay said she ain’t answered her text. So I feel kinda good knowing I ain’t the only one she ignoring.”

“I see.”

Mirage looks around the office and sees that she finally got around to dusting. Those fake sneezes really did help.

“I can’t smoke in here, can I? Don’t answer that, I already know I can’t. Anyway, I was doing some cleaning and stuff and thinking about different stuff. Some about Dream, a lot about me. You know, I ain’t never really thought much about my life and how I grew up. I think I just kinda ignored the past. If I’m being real honest, my childhood was pretty fucked up. really don’t know what a fucked up childhood is.”

“Well, would you want to tell her about it?” Teri takes off her glasses, jots some things down and looks back at .

“She so caught up in her own so-called pain that she prolly ain’t never thought I had any. I get it, though. Dream think I’m just some mean old bitch. Um, I gotta go to the bathroom.” Mirage jumps up, runs out the door, and slams it. Teri grabs the box of tissue and places by Mirage’s chair. Just as she sits down, there’s a knock.

“Mirage, it’s not locked, you can just walk in.”

The door opens and in walks a beautiful stranger with familiar eyes.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Yes ma’am, am I late? Momma said her session starts at two.”

“Your mother is in the bathroom. Please have a seat.”